A Guide To Street Photography

By Michael Ernest Sweet
Introduction

StreetPhotography.com was founded in 2016 and our mission is a simple one - to inspire, educate, and encourage street photographers, from all levels and backgrounds, to strive for their very best in terms of photographic production. We here at StreetPhotography.com then aim to showcase and promote that work - the very best in street photography today.

This guide, a “quick start” guide to street photography, is meant to be a primer for those looking to enter this exciting genre. This guide may also be of interest to those with more experience as well. However, what this guide is not is a comprehensive or objective accounting of the vast world of street photography. It is not meant to be a final word on the subject or a complete reference. Rather, this guide is merely meant to put forth some of the basic considerations in the genre and provide some useful feedback on those points. Put another way, this guide is intended as a starting point - some food for thought as you go forth, camera in hand, and begin (or continue) your journey as a street photographer.

The opinions expressed herein are just that, opinions. This guide is based on my decade of experience working in street photography. I’ve aimed to provide accurate reflections based on that experience, but also recognize that opinions vary and not everyone will agree on all points. Fair enough. Also, enough said. Enjoy the read!

Michael Ernest Sweet
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Looking At Photography

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I find it odd when I read guides about making photography that there is a profound lack of discussion about “looking” at photography. The looking is as important, if not moreso, than the making. When I refer to looking at photography, I mean both as the artist that has made the image, perhaps while in the process of editing, as well as the spectator of an image, perhaps in a book or hanging on a gallery wall. The act of looking at photography, authentically, is a process that is in decline, largely due the influence of social media - a phenomenon that has harmed photography as much as it has helped it. Most photographers do not intend for their images to be displayed for mere seconds at sizes smaller than our credit cards. Indeed, it would be a very unique body of work if this were the intent. Yet, social media are “forcing” us to consume art in this undesirable and unintended way. Does it have an affect on the art and our seeing of it? Absolutely. The small size does not allow us to absorb the visual impact in a meaningful way, and the viewing for mere seconds, often, does not allow us to see at all. Run some experiments, you will find that most people don’t actually “see” what they are looking at on these platforms, and read the accompanying captions even less effectively.
“Take time to really look at, see, and “read” photographs carefully.”

So what do we do? Well, I suggest we slow down. Take time to really look, see, and “read” photographs carefully. What all is there to be seen? Additionally, I think we should move away from regarding social media platforms as the “be all and end all” of photography. Surely your work is worthy of more than a momentary glimpse akin to what resembles a peephole view and then a little tap (or not) of a “like” button? If your images are intended to be seen on a wall, get them on a wall. If you want your work to live in a book, get it in a book. If you want it in a museum or a gallery, work on that angle (bless your heart). Save your energy (and your work) for the right home, the right medium, and the right moment. Don’t allow your ouvre to be a two-inch-by-two-inch nine-second-glance on a phone by someone on the loo.

Am I nuts? Maybe. But I would really encourage you to think over what I’ve said here with care. You, we, all of us, we drive the experience of art by what we are willing to accept and what we’re not willing to accept. If you want the future to be a hustle to produce for a social media grid, then feed that machine. If you want something different for the future of art, and your work, then keep the tiny screens and indiscriminate (often bought, in one way or another) likes in sharp perspective. And remember, take your time to really look at photographs the way you would hope others will do so with yours. With this in mind, we have presented the pictures in this guide as full-page images without the distraction of text. Take your time, really read the images and enjoy all they have to offer.
What Is Street Photography?

“A definitive definition of street photography is hard to nail down. There is much debate.”

Must street photography capture a decisive moment? Must a person be present in the frame? Must the photograph have been made on an actual street? All good questions. However, as this guide is designated as a “quick start” manual, I will keep things relatively introductory. That’s not to say that we shouldn’t attempt to nail down, exactly, what is involved in the practice of street photography, even though I am reminded of some quote about the laughter of the gods.

There are several concepts that surface and resurface in nearly all definitions of street photography: candid situations, public places, and a human element. Wikipedia, for example, has settled on the following, more elaborate definition:

“Street photography, also sometimes called candid photography, is photography conducted for art or inquiry that features unmediated chance encounters and random incidents within public places. Although there is a difference between street and candid photography, it is usually subtle with most street photography being candid in nature and some candid photography being classifiable as street photography. Street photography does not necessitate the presence of a street or even the urban environment. Though people usually feature directly, street photography might be absent of people and can be of an object or environment where the image projects a decidedly human character in facsimile or aesthetic.”
“Some people suggest there must, in fact, be people in a street photograph.”

I’ve cited the full text here as it really does help us to gain a more nuanced understanding of this photographic genre. I also like the Wikipedia definition as it allows for a street photograph absent of a person. What they do seem to require, though, is the inclusion of a “human presence”. This is often a sticking point in real-life debates about what constitutes street photography.

Some people suggest there must, in fact, be people in a street photograph. Many people require a “decisive moment” - a moment in time that cannot be repeated - whereas simply photographing a vacant playground swing set, which can be easily replicated, is not always accepted as street. I personally adore street photography that lacks people but still manages to evoke human energy and emotion. Yes, some of my own street photography is lacking a human figure, but we can also look to the masters like Daido Moriyama, for example, and see this kind of street photography as commonplace. Indeed, the photograph here by Robert M. Johnson sets forth a highly compelling example.
"If the photo is candid and is in the street, it is likely a street photograph. When we remove one or both of these elements things become less certain."

I do agree with the idea of public places and candid situations as being central to the street photography aesthetic. If the photo is candid and is in the street, it is likely a street photograph. When we remove one or both of these elements things become less certain. For example, what about a candid photograph of a person in a shopping mall? Is it street photography or mere “candid photography”? What about a rural environment? When we leave decidedly urban areas (where much of the “classic” street photography has been made) we enter into even muddier waters. Let us consider the following scenario:

Imagine yourself photographing in the rural areas of Ireland. There is a field with a cow and a fence. Is this street photography? Most people will likely say no, at least at first blush. What if the cow enters the foreground, really close to the camera, and the fence is peculiar in nature with a stray barbed wire, for example? Still not convinced. Let’s remove the cow and add an old car with a broken rear windshield - maybe an abandoned farmhouse also. Are we getting closer? I believe so. Although, as you can see, street photography is difficult to pigeonhole. Many writers of street photography guides merely say the definition is open or difficult, mostly because they are copying other guides (a problem in itself). Hence, I wanted to try and illustrate more carefully why there is actually very real issues that arise when one tries to define the genre. Subject matter and situation are critical elements of a street photograph, unquestionably, but they are also, simultaneously, the most complicating factors too. Adding to this
complexity is the fact that many genres of photography sneak up upon, or even cross over into, street photography. Documentary, photojournalism, portraiture, and even fine art photography, all often contain elements easily classifiable as street photography.

Returning to the issue of candidness, we also encounter some undisputed masters of street photography, like Vivian Maier, who almost certainly negated the candid element by acquiring at least tacit consent from many of her subjects. In this way, even the neat qualifier of “candidness” is seemingly not a deciding prerequisite. In the end, like many others, I have to admit that any definition of street photography is, perhaps, still evolving and must remain open for debate. And yet, most of us know it when we see it.
A Very Brief History Of Street Photography

“Perhaps it is the 35mm camera, and no particular photographer, that is the legitimate founder of street photography.”

When one attempts to corner a concise history of street photography inevitable problems arise. For example, there is much debate around who first discovered street photography. Was it Daguerre? He was one of the first to photograph out-of-doors, but should we consider that “street”? If we look closer at his intentions we see that the outdoors was merely a natural place to focus one's lens. More likely than not, he was merely searching for brighter light. Atget also does not hold up well under intense scrutiny. Atget photographed in the streets but he was most concerned with documenting, not street photography per se.

Next, we come to a relative unknown named Paul Martin. Paul Martin is certain to be considered a pioneer in the genre having made candid photographs in and around London in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Martin used a cloaked camera to hide his intentions and enable “candid captures” with a large-format camera. Later, in the early 20th century with the invention of the 35mm “compact” camera, photographers like Brassai and Cartier-Bresson would work the streets with greater ease and, ultimately, come to be more widely known as the fathers of the genre. However, both Brassai and Cartier-Bresson worked in a very careful and deliberate manner. Though many of their images may indeed be “candid”, they are nothing if not carefully constructed. There is no doubt that these men were instrumental to the
founding of street photography. Yet, they seemingly founded a particular school or movement within a wider genre. Much later, in the second half of the twentieth century, figures like Robert Frank, Garry Winogrand, and Bruce Gilden would give rise to the more intense, close-range (and even intrusive) photography we most associate with the genre in contemporary times.

Indeed, people, such as those named above, were instrumental in developing the genre of street photography, but other stars also needed to align. One such critical element was the 35mm camera. The first relatively obtainable 35mm camera for standard consumer use was the Leica I, released in 1925. The ease of use and portability of the Leica I was undoubtedly a motivating factor in bringing photography to the streets. The impact of this moment for street photography is akin to the release of the smartphone and its impact on general snapshot photography. The smartphone truly brought photography not simply to the masses but literally to every human being with a mobile phone. So much so, in fact, that our primary language is quickly shifting away from the written word and becoming predominantly visual. The 35mm camera was as revolutionary in bringing photography to not only much greater numbers of people but also to amateurs and to those working outside of the studio. Perhaps it is the 35mm camera, and no particular photographer, that is the legitimate founder of street photography.

Again, one could write at considerable length about the history of street photography. Rather than do so here, I will leave you with this very brief abstract. What may be useful is for you, the reader, to further investigate each of the names mentioned here and read more fully about their individual contributions to street photography. The main point I wish to highlight is the fact that street photography is not a contemporary phenomenon. There is a complex and rich history to the genre, a history that should be familiar to all those who practice under its name.
The Camera

“Gear, as in camera gear, is not that important or interesting to me. Big cameras, small cameras, old cameras, new cameras, phone cameras… as long as they work for you, they are good enough. Gloves, shoes, hats, suntan cream and waterproof coats on the other hand can make or break your day.” - Matt Stuart

The camera, or gear more generally, is a major concern of most novice street photographers - a worrisome trend. My advice, keep it simple. Many newbies to photography, especially street, seem to believe they need to own a Leica to make great photographs. Leica really does love you guys! Leica has done a superb job of leveraging their heritage and marketing this angle. Yet, as any seasoned photographer will admit, it is not the camera that makes good photography but rather the photographer herself. Think about DigitalRev’s cheap camera challenges on YouTube. In case you’re not familiar, they are short segments where an accomplished photographer uses a cheap camera to produce compelling photography. I’m not suggesting that everyone should use a cheap camera to make street photography. Quite the opposite. The Leica Q, for example, is a great fixed-lens 28mm camera and is used by many good street photographers. The point here, really, is that you don’t need any specific type of camera. You can use everything from a $5 disposable to $25,000 Hasselblad. What will make your photography good is you and not the Leica slung around your neck.
“Save your long lenses for portraits and birds.”

I, personally, would still recommend something small and discreet when it comes to a street photography camera. This is one of the greatest advantages of cheap cameras - they are small and no one suspects the person behind them to be a serious photographer. There are also good “middle ground” cameras out there as well. One that immediately comes to mind, that I have used for years, is the Ricoh GR series. While not exactly a cheap camera, it can be had for under $1000. The GR retains a compact and unassuming footprint while also providing a very sharp 28mm fixed lens. Olympus and Fujifilm also make some good compact cameras suitable for serious street photography. One of the things to be most conscientious of is the camera’s focusing speed. You will need to be fast on the street and waiting while a camera struggles with focus will prove both unsuccessful and discouraging. Finally, while some street photographers do in fact use DSLR cameras and long lenses, I would strongly advise steering clear of this kind of setup. Not only will you be conspicuous, but your photography, if made with a long lens, will be lacking a narrative. A wider lens allows more of the scene to enter the frame and therefore helps fill out the story. Save your long lenses for portraits and birds.
“Whatever camera you decide to use, learn how to use it fully and properly. Know your camera. Make it submissive.”

Whatever camera you decide to use, learn how to use it fully and properly. Know your camera. Make it submissive. You should also try and stick with one camera for as long as possible. Each camera has its own aesthetic element and it shows in your work, whether you like it or not. If you are constantly changing cameras and lenses, it will show. Updates to the same camera line are usually okay, but changing brands, for example, usually affects the visual signature. This bad habit of always changing gear will make it even more difficult for you to achieve your own successful signature style, but more on that later. Just trust me on this one - constantly changing your gear works against you in the end. And, it will also quickly soak up whatever money you might make in street photography!
Film Versus Digital

“Film photography slows you down. This may, in fact, be its greatest benefit.”

Another consideration when it comes to gear is whether to use digital or analog equipment. That is, whether to shoot digital files or analog negatives. There is no right answer here, but there are several things to consider. First of all, both formats have their advantages and their drawbacks. Let's consider each in turn.

Film photography slows you down. This may, in fact, be its greatest benefit. You are forced to learn how to make good photographs by learning the basics of composition, exposure, timing, etc. You are also shooting blind - no screen to check and see how things are going (although Leica is soon to start charging extra for removal of the screen). In this way, you will learn how to make good photographs and to trust your instincts. Film also offers solid archival benefits too. Although open to much debate, I still believe analog film stock to be a more stable archival material than a bunch of ones and zeros on dozens of hard drives. Finally, film has a unique look. Although this look can be simulated digitally, it's just not quite the same. If you love the look of film, shoot film.
“With all analog cameras age is becoming a factor and you will, ultimately, buy them at your own risk.”

If you want to experiment with analog photography there are a lot of good choices for street cameras. Some are increasing in value and becoming harder to acquire, while others are readily available and are a great value. A few top recommendations would include: the Rollei 35; the Contax T2/3 (great cameras but beware some parts for Contax cameras are becoming scarce and repairs are very costly, so the high price tag may not be prudent); the Olympus MJU II (fast, cheap, sharp; the Leica M6 (M4 is good also, but does not have a meter and it is a rare bird who will not miss one. The M7 is another option, but it relies on electronics, which are not known to be particularly robust), the Ricoh GR1V (beware of broken LCD screens and noisy motors - a sign of impending doom), and the Minolta TC-1 (finicky but a favorite with the likes of Araki and Frank). With all analog cameras age is becoming a factor and you will, ultimately, buy them at your own risk. The Fujifilm Klasse is a more recently-made (2006-07) 35mm compact. These may be harder to find in North America, but they are great, solid cameras with a good, sharp lens.
“Analog photography is expensive to process, even when you do it yourself, and the chemicals are decidedly environmentally unfriendly.”

Digital has the edge when it comes to street photography because it allows for endless experimentation and mistakes, both of which are a significant part of the genre. Digital also more easily allows for generally easier and more affordable post-processing. Post-processing can be an important element of carving out a personal signature, and when you have full control right on your desktop things are just simpler, cheaper, and more consistent. Analog photography is expensive to process, even when you do it yourself, and the chemicals are decidedly environmentally unfriendly. Unlike analog photography, digital equipment tends to become outdated more quickly and will cost more in the long haul. A Leica M6 is a solid investment - your grandchildren will be using it. A Leica M10? Perhaps not as clear of an investment. However, when you consider lab fees, chemicals, film stock, paper stock, etc., against computers, hard drives, new digital cameras (every 4-5 years), etc., neither one is particularly more expensive than the other.
“As you can see, there are convincing arguments for both digital and analog photography. My opinion is to go with digital and, if compelled, play with analog from time to time on the side.”

As you can see, there are convincing arguments for both digital and analog photography. My opinion, however, is to go with digital and, if compelled, play with analog from time to time on the side. As someone who has straddled the fence between the two for a decade, this is the conclusion at which I’ve ultimately arrived. Remember, good street photography is, to a certain degree, a matter of chance. By sheer math alone shooting more (within reason) means more good photographs. Using digital will allow you to work without the constraint of a shutter count or expensive processing fees. If you really want to archive your work on film stock there is a great US-based company, Gamma Tech, which will transfer your digital files to analog negatives. I’ve used Gamma Tech many times in the past and they do great work. You’ll think you shot the Tri-X yourself!
Finding Your Voice and Becoming You!

“I have been taking photographs for over fifty years and during this time I developed a style that is referred to as Ballenesque. My aesthetic evolved, layer by layer, predominantly inspired by the images I created. It takes time, hard work, commitment, imagination to find the path, the road that takes you to a place that you never expected to be, where ones work genuinely stands out from anything else.” - Roger Ballen

One of the most important elements of achieving success (or even genuine notice) as a street photographer is the ability to establish a strong personal signature in your work. You work needs to look like your work and no one else’s. This is crucial. Although this may sound easy enough it is, in reality, incredibly difficult. Developing a signature style and vision for your work is a complex process that involves a number of factors and considerations. Let’s look at a few in turn.
Color Versus Black and White

“Defining a successful signature will be difficult enough without adding additional challenges like alternating between color and black and white.”

Whether you shoot in color or in black and white, you should stick to one or the other. Alternating between the two will only confuse your viewer by starkly disjointing your work. This is not to say that you cannot do one long-term project in monochrome and then another, later on, in color - you can. I have. What I don’t recommend is shooting in color one day and then black and white the next. Unquestionably, some people will argue with this point. Fair enough. However, I’m sticking to my argument here.

Defining a successful signature will be difficult enough without adding additional challenges like alternating between color and black and white. William Eggleston is known for his color photography, Robert Frank for his black and white. When we think of Meyerowitz, we think color; William Klein, black and white. Fred Herzog, color! Pick one! Remember, one is not better than the other, they are just different. Both black and white and color have been thoroughly established and accepted in street photography. I tend to believe that most photographers have a slightly better eye for one or the other - find out which one you master best by experimenting and seeking knowledgeable feedback.
Composition

“While knowing the rules is a great thing, breaking them is often even more compelling.”

Composition is another important element in developing a signature style. Using my own work as an example, I get in close and frame my subjects at severe, haphazard angles. I like to have my subjects bleed off the edges of the frame to add energy and tension. This has become an immediately recognizable element of my style. It means that my work has also become polarizing - most people love it or hate it - but at least they recognize it. Other photographers might like to always have a foreground and a background composition, and work to make those balance and speak to one another. Some photographers like a lot of negative space in their images, while others still like to fill every square inch of the frame with subjects and action. There is no magic recipe here, nor am I suggesting that all of your images should follow one rule of composition. What I do mean to impart is the idea that one should consider their compositional habits as part of their signature. Additionally, there are many so-called “rules” of composition in photography. While knowing the rules is a great thing, breaking them is often even more compelling. When thinking about your style, think about your composition.
Focal Length

“I only use a 28mm. I know the lens and I know my camera. I can shoot with my eyes closed and know, pretty much, what’s in the frame.”

The focal length you chose will also add to your signature. I only use a 28mm. I know the lens and I know my camera. I can shoot with my eyes closed and know, pretty much, what’s in the frame. Other focal lengths, such as 50mm or even 35mm, while being more “classic” are harder to work with without a viewfinder. Each of these will also give your work a different look and feel. 35mm is the most commonly used focal length in contemporary street photography because it allows for enough narrative in the frame, while also permitting the photographer to keep some distance from their subject. 21mm is often found in street also but will require you to be incredibly close if you wish to center in on a single subject. Daido Moriyama often used a 21mm, especially in his older work. 35mm is the lens of choice for William Eggleston, for example. 50mm lenses are often referred to as “standard lenses” because (in 35mm film format) they provide a close approximation to what the human eye sees. Henri-Cartier Bresson famously used a standard lens. Some argue that the 40mm lens is the sweet spot for a “do-it-all” lens. 40mm was a popular fixed-lens focal length on many vintage-era 35mm compacts. Give it a try - it’s a more unique focal length these days. Finally, longer lenses can, in fact, be used for documentary/street work. Steve McCurry is known for working with longer lenses.
Again, I don’t mean to suggest that you must select one focal length and then never change it. However, be aware that focal length is easily read in photographs by experienced photographers and will become an inevitable element in your signature. If you are constantly changing your focal length, you are constantly changing your signature. In general, I recommend a shorter focal length for street photography. 35mm is a middle ground. This may seem uncomfortably short for some beginners, but I would really discourage becoming too comfortable on the street with very long lenses. This habit will only engender your fear of getting in close and capturing the energy and narrative of a scene.

**Cropping**

To crop or not to crop, that is the question. I used to be of the thinking, like many street photographers, that one should not crop. Get it right in the camera or live with the results. I still think there is something to be said for this approach. And, remember, one of the things that will read in your work if you crop is your changing focal length. So, there is some wisdom in the idea that if you shoot with a 28mm your finished photographs should read as 28mm photographs. On the other hand, I do think there are certain situations where cropping is fine and even necessary. For example, if an otherwise good photograph (or even great one) were usable except for a small area that needs cropping, then I say crop! Crop if it will save the image. Cropping can be the x-factor missing in a lot of images.
Flash

“Most of the time the flash is a choice, an element of style. Flash adds a look, a feel to the image that some photographers like and others don’t.”

Rarely do we need a flash in street photography. The one exception might be for nighttime street photography. Most of the time the flash is a choice, an element of style. Flash adds a look, a feel to the image that some photographers like and others don’t. Again, my only point is to highlight how using flash will add to your signature. A flash easily reads in your photographs. I use flash sometimes and not at other times. Sometimes I just simply need the light. You don’t have to stick to always on or always off. However, always on could be a strong element of a signature when used correctly and in combination with a number of other elements. The one thing to remember is that using a flash on the street is not very discreet. You will, undoubtedly, attract attention when you use a flash. Some of this attention might be confrontational also. Again, something to think about as you work toward defining a signature. Spyros Papaspyropoulos, a Greek street photographer, is a great example of someone who masters flash in the street.
Subject Matter

“One common issue with subject matter in a lot of contemporary street photography is that there isn’t any.”

Although there are countless elements that come into play in a visual signature, one critical one is the subject matter. What you shot will, ultimately, also become an identifying element of your signature, whether you like it or not. I did a lot of my early work on the beach at Coney Island and those images have come to represent me in the minds of a lot of viewers. The sheer quantity of images I made on the beach allowed that subject matter to become representative of my street photography. So, think about what subject matter interests you and to what subject matter you have the best (or perhaps most unique) access. You don’t have to restrict yourself with subject matter, by any means, but if you do it will certainly help nail down an identifiable signature in your work.

One common issue with subject matter in a lot of contemporary street photography is that there isn’t any. Too often I see street photographs that are masterfully edited in Lightroom or Photoshop but lack any engaging content or narrative. There is no story in these photographs, just a show of lights and shadows. Ultimately, this kind of photography will surely not survive the ages because it does not speak effectively about any particular human moment. Pretty photos are not, necessarily, good photos. Beauty is, as they say, skin deep.
Know The Masters and Your Contemporaries

“Learn art history before you propose your own work as art.”

Part of finding your own voice and signature in your work is knowing (intimately) the work of your contemporaries and their voices, as well as that of the masters too. You need to study the work of others! I cannot stress this point enough. Too many times I have spoken with a beginning street photographer who is eager to show me their “unique” work only to see something that I have seen before. This really is a thing and it really is preventable. Learn art history before you propose your own work as art. This will, frankly, save you a great deal of embarrassment. For example, I was recently in a room full of young, eager, amateur street photographers, one of whom was showing his work on a screen. A particular image resembled Saul Leiter’s work, but no one in the room knew of Saul Leiter. This despite the fact that everyone is making photos from under awnings these days. That was Leiter guys! If nothing else, when you go to copy something you’ve seen, know what you’ve seen and who made it prominent! You can like or dislike the work of others but you need to know it.
So, who should you study? Well, there are many, many names, but here are a few (in no particular order) to get you started:

Saul Leiter  
Robert Doisneau  
Bruce Gilden  
Mary Ellen Mark  
Lee Friedlander  
Daido Moriyama  
Mark Cohen  
Richard Sandler  
Jill Freedman  
Elliott Erwitt  
Alex Webb  

Henri Cartier-Bresson  
Weegee  
Vivian Maier  
Walker Evans  
Garry Winogrand  
Diane Arbus  
Helen Levitt  
Joel Meyerowitz  
William Klein  
Robert Frank  
Fred Herzog
“We have too much of the same; be different.”

The preceding list is only a starting place, many, many other photographers are waiting for you to discover them. This is just an initial and essential list. Begin here. These people are real masters, without dispute. Know their work in your sleep, it will make you a better photographer. After this, go out and discover some of your contemporaries. Who else is shooting in your city? What does their work look like? Be generous and kind with both your attention and your generosity toward other photographers and their work. Even if your don’t like someone’s photography forming a community with your contemporaries is important.

Additionally, look to other types of artists for inspiration also. For example, film directors (Woody Allen is good, Bernardo Bertolucci is good), painters (any of the masters, mid-century artists are useful), and even musicians (you might begin with the great article by Marian Schmidt in the education section of StreetPhotography.com). Learn aesthetics (in an academic sense) and understand what motivates artists to make art the way they do. This is a much better and more productive approach to making good street photography than merely looking at the street photographs of others and then doing that. We have too much of the same; be different.
Finding A Home For Your Photography

“Both galleries and publishers are overwhelmed with aspiring artists. This only gets worse when it comes to the street photography genre, as street is even more saturated and is among the most difficult work to sell.”

Some photographers like to make photographs just for the pure joy of clicking the shutter - for the chase. Some photographers are purely in the pursuit of making art. Many others, like myself, photograph for the love of both - we are practicing our vocation. As such, we also want our work to be seen, to have an audience, or to even be collected! Within this second category there are two main ways of gaining an audience and getting your work out there - prints and books. Many photographers aim to engage in both. Others might work primarily in one and not the other (for example, I’m primarily a book photographer). Whatever option you choose, it won’t be easy. Both galleries and publishers are overwhelmed with aspiring artists. This only gets worse when it comes to the street photography genre, as street is even more saturated and is among the most difficult work to sell. But don’t be discouraged; there are options.
“While approaching traditional galleries and publishers is a possible route to success, I’d recommend that you have a plan B.”

While approaching traditional galleries and publishers is a possible route to success, I’d recommend that you have a plan B. That plan B for a lot of artists these days is to “go it alone” and either show or publish outside of the traditional route. For example, there is a collective of street photographers in NYC (The New York City Street Photographers Collective) that exhibit directly to the public by pooling their resources and renting pop up space. They’ve enjoyed much success.

When it comes to publishing there are endless options for self-publishing these days. While it’s true that once upon a time self-publishing held a stigma, that attitude is quickly fading. There are many, many reputable artists that self-publish these days and do so quite successfully. I’m especially a fan of handmade artists books produced in small numbers. These books are in themselves works of art. If you do want to produce a more traditional photography monograph, self-publishing options through a company like Blurb are excellent. Blurb even allows you to crowdfund through a cooperative venture with Kickstarter. With a successful Kickstarter campaign, and Blurb’s offset printing route, anyone can produce a quality monograph.
“Showing or publishing work that is premature may work against you in the end. Let your work mature.”

Whether your work will ultimately find its home between two covers or on someone’s wall, I encourage all new street photographers to be patient in working toward this goal. Showing or publishing work that is premature may work against you in the end. Let your work mature. Produce a large body to select from before mounting a big project like a book or exhibition. This way you will be sure to be showing truly great work and not simply the work you had on hand. A well-done first self-published book or co-op exhibition can lead to bigger and better things too! Be patient, good things will come to those who wait (and have good work).
Take Your Camera Everywhere!

“If only I had my camera,” is an all too common lament, even among the most serious and seasoned of photographers.”

If only I could follow my own advice! I live in New York City and I often do not take my camera with me. As a result, I am always “seeing” photographs that I am unable to capture. “If only I had my camera,” is an all too common lament, even among the most serious and seasoned of photographers. Learn now to take your camera (or at least “a” camera) with you everywhere. If you normally shoot with a big heavy camera, then you might want to also invest in a good pocket (but dedicated) camera to take on the fly. iPhones are good in a crunch, but they just are not ideal for street photography due to their clumsy interface and lack of fast control. A good compact camera for a “take everywhere” camera is the Ricoh GR series. Get the latest and greatest model, if you want, or try a slightly older model to save some money. No GR is a bad GR. However, older models have much smaller sensors (although the GRD IV has faster focusing - literally zero lag - than even newer models). Get what works for you and your style of photography, but not having a camera with you is a decidedly bad idea.
Think Before You Shoot, But Not Too Much!

“Shoot digital like you would shoot film.” - Bob Straus

Good street photography is a little different than good lomography, so the “don’t think, just shoot” rule doesn’t quite apply. However, I believe that one can overthink their street photography to the point of holding back their growth also. In other words, be adventurous and experimental. Be spontaneous too. But don’t just hit the sidewalk with a trigger finger in hopes of getting a good shot in a thousand, either. While this “machine gun” approach will, undoubtedly, provide you with some results, eventually, it will not help engender good photographic skills. For those of us that are a little “older” one of the best pieces of advice we’ve ever heard is, “shoot digital like you would shoot film”. That quote comes from Bob Straus, a seasoned professional commercial photographer who has worked for almost every major band name you’ve ever heard of! It’s good advice. It implies that you must learn how to make a good photograph in your camera - how to frame, light, expose, etc. Some novice photographers take refuge in their machine gun photography by pointing to Winogrand. Yet, Winogrand, properly understood, did not merely shoot everything and anything and then hunt negatives to find good photographs. Winogrand was simply fast. His mind, his eyes, his shutter finger - they all worked in sync and with a unique physicality, which resulted in a vast number of exposures. There was, as the saying goes, a method to his madness. Generally speaking, shooting a 1000 images to make 1 good photo is a poor method and doesn’t say much for your skill as a photographer - how would you have survived the analog era?
Keep It To A Minimum

“Some of the best street photographs I’ve seen over the years are the ones that are packed from edge to edge with action and narrative.”

Some of the best street photographs I’ve seen over the years are the ones that are packed from edge to edge with action and narrative. They are busy photographs. You might, for example, think of the classic shot of the man falling that Joel Meyerowitz captured in Paris, France in 1967 (below).

Yes, busy pictures can be compelling, but the other end of the spectrum, uncluttered and simple photographs, can also produce some dazzling results. Siegfried Hansen, a German street photographer, comes to mind as someone who masters the minimal and was at the forefront of this contemporary movement in street photography. Jonathan Higbee, a New York City street photographer who was undoubtedly influenced by Hansen, makes amazing photographs by keeping things very minimal by employing lots of negative space. When things are getting hectic on the street and your images are too busy or too cluttered give minimal street photography a shot. Look for that negative space. Look for something small and simple to feature in the frame. You might be pleasantly surprised by what you can make when you start excluding (rather than including) thing in your images.
Stand In One Place - But Also Move Around!

Some photographers primarily work by staying in one place and waiting for people to walk into the frame. These photographers look for an exceptional backdrop and “set up the scene” and then wait for the final x-factor (a person) to enter the shot. This is a completely valid way of shooting street photography and can result in some terribly good photographs. For example, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Doisneau often worked in this way and achieved fantastic results. Photographer Philip-Lorca diCorcia did just this in Times Square to capture a candid portrait of a man. That man sued, however. The resulting New York Supreme Court decision, Nussenzweig v. DiCorcia, is a landmark decision for artistic rights. This case is worth looking up and reading. If you are going to give this method a try, finding a good background or “scene” is key to making it work. After you find a “good spot” you will then need patience, in spades!

Moving around is also a popular method employed by street photographers. This is likely the more prevalent way of shooting street. Many street photographers that immediately come to mind worked, primarily, in this way - Winogrand, Meyerowitz, Gilden, Moriyama, etc. They were always on the move, on the hunt, looking to “enter” a scene and capture a photograph, rather than being content to wait for it to form in front of them. However, I am sure they all worked in the other method from time to time as well. Because, in the end, a mixture of both could well be what will provide the most consistency in obtaining good results. Mix it up. Stand in one place but also move around.
Shoot From The Hip!

“The topic of shooting from the hip often raises a lot of controversy among photographers.”

The topic of shooting from the hip often raises a lot of controversy among photographers. More traditional types don’t appreciate the haphazard, leave-it-to-chance approach, while others, less stoic in their approach, like the unpredictability that often results. Again, my advice is to experiment and try both in your search toward finding your own signature. Be mindful of one thing - shooting from the hip need not merely refer to a perspective, i.e., shooting “at hip level”. Always shooting at eye level reads in your pictures - as they are always from one perspective. Shooting from the hip also refers to shooting without the aid of a viewfinder. So you can shoot from the feet, the shoulders, or from the end of your arm too! The idea is that you just don’t bring the camera to eye-level, as this almost certainly will raise attention with your subjects. Shooting with the camera positioned at other levels, however, will mean that you often cannot use the viewfinder. The exception would be the discreet use of articulated screens, which can make shooting from the hip a little more precise of a game. Play around, try different things. The real point here is that you should experiment with composing a photograph by “feel” and not sight. Knowing your camera and lens (especially your focal length) intimately will allow you to master this technique. Another good reason not to get caught up in GAS (gear acquisition syndrome) and buy a new camera every week!
 Shoot At Night!

The streets have a completely different feel at night. Go ahead, try it out and see if you like it. People are less aware of street photography at night, at least in some ways. In this way, candid photography might be easier. You can hide in the shadows! However, you do have some additional challenges with light. If you are up close and moving quickly you may need a flash, which surely will be more circumspect at night. However, it is also possible to make a lot of good photographs at night without a flash. For example, Sally Davies, a New York City street photographer, is widely known for her inner-city nighttime photographs. Cameras today are quite good at handling low light and if you shoot in black and white it will be even more forgiving. Don’t be fooled into thinking you need a fancy medium format digital camera to get good photographs in low light. I shot a whole project in Montreal years ago on very high-speed analog film using a Leica M6 and a fast lens. It worked beautifully. The work has a very unique mood present in the frames as a result. Experiment!
Turn Off The LCD!

“While chimping is not a bad thing in itself, certainly useful in commercial photography, it is not ideal on the streets.”

I say turn off the LCD for a number of reasons. Firstly, it will help you get out of the habit of chimping (checking your photos on the LCD after every shot). While chimping is not a bad thing in itself, certainly useful in commercial photography, it is not ideal on the streets. I’ll come back to that in a minute. Secondly, your LCD screen signals that your camera is on and will, undoubtedly, attract unwanted and unnecessary attention. Chimping on the streets also draws additional attention to the fact that you are making photographs and may invite your subjects to inquire about what you are doing, or if they were captured in your shot. Finally, chimping engenders a lack of confidence in your photo taking abilities. Be confident. Practice making good photographs (in camera) and being confident about what you’ve captured. In other words, remember as Bob Straus said, shoot digital like film - it makes you a better photographer. Don’t worry, there will be lots of time in the evening (or whenever you get back home) to look over all the photos. Doing so on the street only means you are “missing” something you could be photographing.
Pre-Focus Your Lens!

“Shutter lag can be deadly in a decisive moment.”

Depending on the camera you are using it may be possible to “pre-focus” your lens and thus allow you to rely less on the autofocus system. Autofocus is getting better and better all the time, but many cameras still experience lag in taking a photo. That is, there is a delay (sometimes a rather significant one) between when you press the shutter and when the camera is actually ready to record the image. Shutter lag can be deadly in a decisive moment. It is for this reason that many street photographers prefer rangefinder cameras (such as the Leica M series) over other types of cameras. However, many other cameras offer workarounds and some, like the Ricoh GR, offer focal presets - adjustments where you can fix the focus of the autofocus lens at a predetermined distance. If you want to try out the “Leica rangefinder” feel without committing thousands of dollars you could try the Yashica Electro 35. It has a surprisingly sharp lens and will allow you to make use of hyperfocal settings. The only issue with the Yashica (other than the fact that you must use 35mm film) is that they are getting old. When searching for one on eBay I would recommend paying a bit more for one that has had a recent service and a battery conversion. A final consideration is the use of smaller sensors, which are more forgiving with focus. Everyone is caught up in “sensor size” these days but, unless you are making billboards, the issue is mostly academic.
Edit, Edit, Edit!

“You’re only as good as the worst photograph you publish.”

In a recent interview with StreetPhotography.com, photographer Carl Corey stated that “you’re only as good as the worst photograph you publish”. Indeed! I have often heard others advise photographers to delete nothing, keep everything. I think this is total nonsense. I shoot 100 photos in a typical day out on the street and, in the end, I keep just 4-5. I’m very, very picky. What do I need all the other stuff for? It will only clutter my drives and make me indecisive about what to print, show, and publish. Be ruthless. Cut the crap out from the beginning. A truly good photographer will, if lucky, be known for 15-20 images at the end of their career. Work to find and see those images now and then to promote them and find truly good homes for them to establish a legacy. Stay focused. Cut much of the rest of the junk loose, even though a lot of it will be “good” photography. Focus your energy on “great” photography. I also recommend not posting photographs on social media immediately after you make them. Let your work sit, rest, and mature a little before you decide to show it (if you decide to show it). Again, aim to show only your best stuff. This is as critical as having your own recognizable look. And remember, as I learned the hard way, everything you put on the internet will stay on the internet. All of your work in public view, from the beginning to the end, will make up your image as a photographer. Be cautious and take control of your professional image from day one.
Ask Permission?

“Street photos do not need to be candid but they usually are.”

Like shooting from the hip or through the viewfinder, asking permission is largely a matter of preference. Don’t listen to those who say, “If you ask permission, it’s not street photography”. Not true. Street photography does not need to be candid but it usually is. There are definitely times when asking permission will be the only route to getting a particular photograph, which, in the end, will be a great street photograph. So do it. Ask permission when the situation warrants this tactic. Would I make a habit of asking permission on the streets? No, I wouldn’t because I think, eventually, this way of making photographs will drift your aesthetic significantly away from what we have come to know as traditional street photography. But the odd photo, no problem. Recognize, too, that there is a difference between “staged” street photography and street photography that is made with “tacit” permission. Vivian Maier, for example, often made her photographs with tacit permission - her subjects were aware of her and her camera and “cooperated” in the making of the image. In the end, use your judgment. The photo below, by Johnny Mobasher, is a great example of what one can get when they ask!
The Law

“Candid street photography in many countries can result in a serious offense. It can also lead to merited civil suits.”

Now, despite my having read law at college, I am not a member of the bar and I am not, to be clear, dispensing legal advice. However, I do want to say this: candid street photography in many countries can result in a serious offense. It can also lead to merited civil suits. France and Germany, for example, take this issue quite seriously and you’d be well advised not to find yourself in front of a magistrate. Normally the legal issue concerns the distribution of the photograph and not the actual “making” of it, but this is not always the case. There are good resources available on the internet for street photographers concerning the laws of various countries and jurisdictions and I strongly advise you to seek them out. Even if you intend to break the law, knowing that you are doing so is wise. The United States is one of the most liberal jurisdictions - we even tend to allow one to photograph into someone’s home through an open window, for example. Arne Svenson has done this very thing and made absolutely stunning photography too! The first amendment and its very liberal interpretation in the United States has, if nothing else, allowed for some great street photography. In the end, knowing the law (whether it is on your side or not) and being prudent and respectful are the keys to avoiding serious trouble.
What If You Get “Caught” By A Subject On The Street?

“Be kind, be genuine, and be prepared to lose your image.”

Some photographers (especially in America) will say you should stand your ground. Never delete anything, for example. I say it’s not worth it. If someone approaches you and initiates a conflict over the fact that you’ve photographed them, just delete it. Unless of course you can talk them down and arrive at some mutual agreement that allows you to keep the image. In the end, you are photographing people, which is a violation of privacy whether seen as such by the law or not. Put yourself in their shoes! Would you just blindly accept someone sticking a camera in your face and taking photos of you? Common sense and human decency are paramount. Be kind, be genuine, and be prepared to lose your image. After all, even if the law is on your side, it would have to be one seriously good photograph to warrant a day in court (look up the hourly fees for barristers) or a broken nose (doctors charge even more).
Be Overt, Not Covert!

“Once you begin to act covertly you will project a certain aura about you - people will begin to suspect you of something because you are inviting them to do so.”

My advice is to be open and honest about what you’re doing when you are photographing on the street. A lot of advice aimed toward beginning street photographers seems to engender (whether intentionally or not) a sense of covertness. Be a ninja! I’ve even suggested some of it myself - keep the LCD off, for example. But there is a difference between not attracting attention and hiding what you’re doing. Once you begin to act covertly you will project a certain aura about you - people will begin to suspect you of something because you are inviting them to do so. What you are doing is not shameful or immoral (legal issues aside) - you are making art. That is (or should be) your prime directive. So be open about it. Go forth and make art! If you project that sense of purpose alongside a dose of confidence, and a dash of respect, you will likely be fine. I use a 28mm and photograph mere inches from people and rarely encounter an issue.
Social Media?

“People think they make good photographs because their friends and the village idiot tell them so on social media.”

Whether or not to show your work, widely, on social media is more about your ultimate intentions than anything else. If you are aiming to score a book deal, then I’d say keep most of your work offline. I know from experience, as I am primarily a book photographer. I know publishers and I know they are not interested, largely speaking, in publishing a book of photography that is readily available all over the internet or that is familiar and has been widely seen. After your book is out (or your exhibition has taken place) then you may freely post the work. If you don’t care about things like book deals and gallery exhibitions, then, by all means, post away! Just know that posting all of your work will diminish the already low chances of attracting traditional gallery and publisher attention. They want fresh work.

Another thing about social media worth bringing to light is its nature as an echo chamber. I’m sure we are all familiar with this effect by now. Essentially, you are showing your photographs to the same people over and over again. You are also collecting likes from the same people over and over again. I get it, there are some exceptions. I also understand that social media outlets can be powerful platforms in terms of gaining exposure and even selling prints and books.
“Popular and good are not the same thing.”

All this considered, I’d encourage you to maintain perspective. Show your work beyond social media and try to get varied and wide feedback to help you grow as an artist. Seek out portfolio reviews by professionals or galleries (although don’t pay a fortune for the pleasure). Believe me when I tell you I have seen absolutely worthless photographs receive hundreds or even a thousand “likes” on social media. In fact, it is one of the most repeated complaints I hear from gallerists and art critics is that, “people think they make good photographs because their friends and the village idiot tell them so on social media.” Again, just maintain a healthy perspective - popular does not equal good. Also, beware of how and where you sell your work, especially prints. If you sell a print for $100 at a street fair then it’s a print that was “bought on the street for $100”. If you sell a print for $1800, then it’s worth $1800. You, largely speaking, will be the biggest factor in determining the value of your work.
There are many books and magazines that street photographers (beginning and seasoned alike) should be familiar with, but I cannot list every worthwhile publication here. Instead, I will list a few that I personally enjoy. This is especially true of the magazines. And, while speaking of photography magazines, I have to say that they are disappearing quickly. Think of our dearly departed *Popular Photography*! Print publications (especially art publications) are very tricky to keep in the black ink. Many of those that are thriving are, largely speaking, one giant advertisement. While ads can be informative (one sees what a particular gallery is exhibiting, for example) they are of limited use when learning about the aesthetics of street photography. Here are a few magazines that are still in print and still publish actual photography and editorial content.

**Print Magazines:**

*Black and White Magazine* (Expensive but collectable)
*Photo Life* (Based in Canada but available internationally)
*Photograph Magazine* (Ad heavy with some good content also)
*Amateur Photographer* (oldest weekly photography magazine, first issue in 1884)
*Aperture* (A bit snobby but often has good content)
*Digital Camera* (Good for how-to content as well as great photography)
*British Journal of Photography* (Depends on the issue)
Main Barber, 1968 © Fred Herzog, 2019, Courtesy of Equinox Gallery, Vancouver
Books:

When it comes to monographs there are so many to select from! It seems there is a new street photography book almost daily (and that’s just from Daido!) and I cannot cover even a sliver of them here. With that in mind, I will list just twelve books that I own, which I also feel are a good beginning for the study of classic street photography. There is a mix of both color and black and white photography here as well as a variety of styles and approaches.

Here Are Some Great Books To Get You Started:

*The Americans* by Robert Frank
*Capa in Color* by Robert Capa
*Grim Street* by Mark Cohen
*Life Is Good And Good For You In New York* by William Klein
*Labyrinth* by Daido Moriyama
*The Man in the Crowd* by Garry Winogrand
*Uncommon Places* by Stephen Shore
*American Photographs* by Walker Evans
*A Beautiful Catastrophe* by Bruce Gilden
*Eggleston’s Guide* by John Szarkowski & William Eggleston
*Revelations* by Diane Arbus
*Modern Color* by Fred Herzog
Films:

When I say “films”, I actually want to cover quite a bit of ground. I will list a few documentaries about photography that I think are worth watching, as well as a few movies that deal, more generally, with photography. The documentaries will have a certain educational quality to them, while the movies are simply more for entertainment.

Documentaries:

Garry Winogrand: All Things Are Photographable (PBS Masters)
William Eugene Smith: Photography Made Difficult (Available on YouTube)
Imagine: The Colorful Mr. Eggleston (Available on YouTube)
The Many Lives of William Klein (Available on YouTube)
Leaving Home, Coming Home: A Portrait of Robert Frank (Available on YouTube)
Henri Cartier-Bresson: Pen, Brush & Camera (Available on YouTube)
Duffy: The Man Who Shot the Sixties (while not street photography, I think it is well worth watching for all photographers, available on YouTube)
Fill The Frame (Forthcoming from photographer Tim Huynh)
William Eggleston in the Real World
The Salt of the Earth (Not about street photography, more documentary, but worthwhile for all photographers to see. Covers the work of photographer Sebastião Salgado.)
Smash His Camera (A documentary about a paparazzi photographer, worth watching.)
Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Impassioned Eye
I also recommend a series of videos on YouTube called “Contacts”. They are not easily found, unfortunately. But trying searching for “Contacts photo series” and when you find one it should be easier to find the others. They are a series of older videos that are narrated by the photographers as they look over their contact sheets. You will know you have the right series when you hear the first person narration by the photographer in question. For example, there is a two-part episode on French photographer Sophie Calle that is truly fascinating.

**Movies:**

- *Blow Up* (1966) directed by Michelangelo Antonioni
- *Eyes of Laura Mars* (1978) directed by Irvin Kershner
- *Rear Window* (1954) directed by Alfred Hitchcock
- *Pecker* (1998) directed by John Waters
- *One Hour Photo* (2002) directed by Mark Romanek
- *Proof* (1991) directed by John Madden
- *Fargo* (1996) directed by Joel and Ethan Coen (While not about photography, one can learn a great deal about visual art from the stunning cinematography in this film.)
- *Kodachrome* (Predictable but good)
Conclusion

“There is nothing easy about making good street photography, and becoming known for your work is that much harder again.”

In conclusion, developing a competent street photography practice is a matter of patience, fierce individuality, incessant experimentation, and wholehearted dedication. There is nothing easy about making good street photography, and becoming known for your work is that much harder again. This is an arena with a lot of competition and jealousy, despite a good dose of collegiality and camaraderie also. Be prepared to go it alone and be frustrated, as well as to be supported and encouraged. It is a rollercoaster my friend! What is most important, in the end, is that you are enjoying the ride. You got eyes. Grab your camera and go get’em!
About the Author

Michael Ernest Sweet is a Canadian writer and photographer. He is the author of two street photography monographs, *The Human Fragment* and *Michael Sweet’s Coney Island*, both from Brooklyn Arts Press. Michael has been awarded a Canadian Prime Minister’s Award and a Queen’s Medal for significant contributions to Canada. His work has appeared widely including in such magazines as *Popular Photography*, *Black and White*, *Digital Camera*, *Leica Camera*, *F-Stop*, *Eyeshot*, *HuffPost*, *The Village Voice*, *Photo Life*, *Progresso Fotografico*, and the legendary *Evergreen Review*, among others. Michael lives in New York City. Follow at www.MichaelSweetPhotography.com.
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