

Lesson 1

Theory of Street Photography

What is street photography? It's not about any specific subject or location, but rather it's based on a philosophy that is freed of the constraints, rules, or preconceptions of other creative forms such as painting, drawing or printmaking. It's an effort to develop a uniquely photographic visual language that balances form and content and makes a complete statement within each picture's borders.

That, in a very small nutshell, is the conceptual aspect of street photography, and we can get into that more in the class forum if you are interested. But this course will be dealing with street photography on a more practical level.

Street photography is about anticipation, observation, reflexes, and knowing the technique cold. It is about walking into heavily populated areas where there's a lot going on and finding a visual order amid the chaos that only exists within the borders of the image.

Furthermore, right now, street photography is *hot*. It's all over the Internet, with groups on Facebook, Flickr and elsewhere devoted to this aspect of photography. There's a lot of good work out there, but there's also a lot of misunderstanding of the nature of street photography. One of the benefits of this course—besides (hopefully) making you a great street photographer—is that your work will stand out when you share it online.



A moment in time that will never exist other than as this photo: What do these two people have in common (besides holding items with the images facing them)? Nothing!

But I found them in the hustle and bustle of 7th Avenue and caught the moment. In the blink of an eye, that moment was gone. This is the challenge of street photography.

In many ways, street photography is the antithesis of the preconceived images that Ansel Adams shot. But one thing that street photographers have in common with Ansel is that you must absolutely master exposure and processing/printing (either darkroom or digital, depending on your preference) in order to succeed.

To paraphrase my teacher, Garry Winogrand, it's the photographer's responsibility to faithfully reproduce how the camera saw a given piece of time and space. Therefore, proper exposure is essential. First, let's talk about cameras and technique.



I took this photo with a Ricoh GR, a pocket-sized camera with an APS sensor and 28mm (equivalent) lens. This little camera is super fast, very quiet and unobtrusive. He never actually knew I took this picture.

What Camera Should I use?

The best camera for street photography is the one you have with you, NOT the one you left at home. It is even possible to take street photos with a smart phone, although this wouldn't be my first choice because it lacks of control over focus and exposure, and is ergonomically clumsy for a street photography environment. DSLRs are OK but tend to be larger and you run the risk of calling attention to yourself with a bigger camera. The good news is that in the last few years a new class of cameras has emerged that combines the best of digital image capture with the size and responsiveness that make them very "street" friendly.

While the ultimate street photography camera is still the Leica M-series (more about that later), you might want to start off with a less expensive option that is a good street photography tool. Here are several criteria that I recommend considering when deciding on a camera for street photography:

1. **Size and weight.** It should be small and unobtrusive. Don't go for eye-catching colors (some cameras are available in red or other bright colors that call attention to themselves; avoid these). Do look for cameras that are small enough to handhold for extended periods.
2. **Manual exposure and focus.** Most digital cameras have manual focus and exposure modes. Look for cameras that make these features easy to use and don't force you to go through menu items to find them since this technology is distracting.
3. **An eye-level viewfinder.** Whether it's an optical, hybrid or electronic kind, an eye-level viewfinder lets you scan the scene and quickly put the camera up to your eye to take the picture. An LCD screen may not display a good enough image, and it forces you to hold the camera away from your face. It makes you look like you're taking a picture, which as you will learn, is not conducive to successful street photography. Electronic viewfinders have improved to the point where I can recommend them, even in relatively low-cost cameras.
4. **A good sensor:** Look for a camera with at Micro Four Thirds, One Inc, APS, or Full-Frame Sensor. These will deliver optimal image quality at ISO 100-800 or higher. The bigger the sensor, the better the image quality. For street photography, the ability to shoot at ISO 800, 1000, or even 2000 lets you use action-stopping fast shutter speeds, It is therefore important to have a camera that can capture high quality images at these ISO settings.
5. **A wide-angle lens.** The vast majority of street photos are shot with 28, 35 or 50mm lenses (actual focal length or 35mm equivalent); a handful are shot with even wider 24 or 21mm but that's about it. 35mm is the most common. One of the advantages of shooting with a wide-angle lens is that it provides you with greater depth of field, which lets you clearly capture the action at different distances within the same shot. Whether you use an interchangeable lens or fixed-lens camera, look for this focal range.

Right now, in 2015, cameras I've used and recommend for street photography include: The Ricoh GR, Fujifilm X100 series, Fujifilm X-T1 and X-Pro 1, Sony A6000, and Panasonic Lumix GX7 are all excellent compact cameras for street photography. However...

If you can afford one, get a Leica

The BEST camera that money can buy (and you'll need a lot of it) is the Leica M with a 35mm or 28mm lens. This camera is all manual and is hand-made to precise Leica standards. Leicas have been the camera of choice for street shooters since the 1930s and the current digital version is outstanding—although a camera and lens can easily cost between \$8,000 and \$10,000. If you prefer film, there are plenty of used Leicas on the market that cost much less than their digital counterparts. If this is way out of your range, see the recommendations above.

But the REAL reason Leica M-series cameras are outstanding is the focusing system, the likes of which you can't find anywhere else. When looking through the Leica viewfinder, it doesn't blacked out at the moment of exposure, as it does with a DSLR or compact camera's digital finder. Leica lenses have a tab on the focusing ring, so that you can focus by feel, a technique I call "tab focusing." When the tab is at 6:00, you're focused at 10 feet; when it's 7:00, you're at 15 feet and at 5:00 you're at 7 feet, and so on. With practice, you can quickly adjust focus a split second before shooting and get your subject in focus.

`<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/AHKnPTLxBXI" frameborder="0" allowfullscreen></iframe>`

Watch this video if you're interested in learning more about Leica by travel photographer Mark Wallace. (Also, check out the shout-out to yours truly at the 10:50 mark.

Tab Focusing with or without a Leica

You can sort-of emulate tab focusing on non-Leica lenses. Here's how: Focus to about 10 feet away, then place a small piece of gaffer's tape on your lens's focusing ring. You can use this similarly to a tab and focus by feel, just like you would with a Leica lens.

Tab focusing takes practice! Part one of your first assignment is to stand in your room with items placed at different distances, and do tab focus target practice until you start feeling comfortable. Move around the room, focus/aim and shoot. Keep at it until you're



getting fairly consistently accurate focus. You don't have to be perfect yet, but remember, on the street, everything moves fast, so quick anticipatory pre-focusing needs to be second-nature.

Precision tab focusing: Using the anticipatory pre-focusing I was able to pinpoint focus in this image, deliberately leaving the arm in the foreground fuzzy, a couple of seconds before I grabbed this moment.

Exposure basics: The Sunny 16 Rule

I prefer selecting my exposures manually, and I recommend you try this yourself. When you leave your camera on Program mode you are at the mercy of its often-inaccurate whims. To have full control over your image, you need to learn some exposure basics.

So, let's say you're shooting at ISO 800, and you're outside taking pictures. All you need to know is the "Sunny 16" rule, which is that on a bright sunny day, the exposure is (Shutter speed=ISO) at f/16. In this case, that means 1/800 sec at f/16. Since you're shooting fast-changing scenes, you want the fastest shutter speed possible. Choose 1/2400 sec. at f/8 (if available, or round up to the nearest speed).

Now you move across the street, and you're in the open shade. That's typically 2-3 stops less than bright sunlight. So, it would be 1/800 at f/8.

Now, it's gotten hazy out, and the sun is barely visible and the sky is mostly cloudy. That's 1 stop less than full sun, or approximately 1/1600 at f/8. If it's very cloudy, threatening to rain, again it's 2-3 stops less than bright sunlight, or around 1/800 at f/8. If it's late in the day, make that f/5.6.

One thing that will make your life easier is to choose an ISO setting and stay with it. I recommend ISO 800 because it will allow you to capture more action and minimize camera shake. If you shoot in the shade, you might want to bump up to ISO 1000, 1250, or 1600. Test out each of these speeds to see how much digital noise you get at each setting.

When shooting on the street you'll find yourself shooting action at different distances from the camera, so it's important to have as much depth of field as possible. That's one of the reasons I recommend using a wide-angle lens, at least 35mm, to start. As you get comfortable with your shooting style you may want to change your focal length.

For instance, I shot at 35mm for 15 years before changing to 28mm lens, and that's what I'm using now. I also spent several years only shooting with a 40mm lens. The point is to really get to know one focal length. Changing focal lengths frequently is like moving back and forth from Tennis to Ping Pong to Badminton. You'll simply get confused and will end up constantly struggling to readjust. (I went to tennis camp as a teenager, and one of their most important rules was: no Ping Pong! ☺)

Anti-composition: How many rules of composition were broken here?



A few thoughts about composition

Here are a few thoughts about photography in general that will (hopefully) blow your mind a bit.

“A photograph is a literal description of how a camera “saw” a piece of time and space.”
--Garry Winogrand

Anything can be photographed in any manner, and there are no preconceived rules about what a photograph should look like.

The challenge here is to *unlearn the rules of composition*, because they don't necessarily apply here. We are, as a group, exploring a way of looking at the world that does not necessarily relate to previous creative forms. We are looking to find order in



chaos and aren't bound by previous conventions in order to find it.

I will give you one compositional suggestion, which is to shoot with some vertical reference near either side edge of the frame. You don't have to worry about straight horizons. *This is not a hard rule, just a suggestion.* Don't worry about finding it while shooting, but keep an eye out for vertical references as you edit this week's photos.

What to photograph

Photograph anything and anyone that interests you, doing anything that you feel is visually exciting. For the purposes of this class, I highly recommend photographing areas that are densely populated with lots of pedestrian traffic, because this will provide you with more interesting visual problems to solve.

Street Photographer's shooting techniques

When I was planning this class, I was concerned: how can I transmit the technique of actually going out in the street and approaching people? Describing the experience in words, I feared, would not be enough. When I learned street photography, much of my education came from watching Garry Winogrand shooting on the streets of Lower Manhattan. How could I replicate this experience for you? YouTube to the rescue!

Here are a bunch of videos of street shooters in action. Take a look at how these three photographers shoot

Jeff Mermelstein

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/uuXcm35m50Y> frameborder="0" allowfullscreen></iframe>

Garry Winogrand:

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/TI4f-QFCUek> frameborder="0" allowfullscreen></iframe>

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/-Zk1nkZ3-kE> frameborder="0" allowfullscreen></iframe>

Joel Meyerowitz

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/5Qjym5uliDw> frameborder="0" allowfullscreen></iframe>

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/KDSGWy1CU78> frameborder="0" allowfullscreen></iframe>

As you watch these videos:

- a Notice how they hold their cameras, approach their subjects and the amount of actual interaction they have with the people they're photographing.
- b Watch the expressions on their faces, their body language, and in fact the entire attitude and presence (or non-presence) they exude.
- c Note the similarities and differences in their approaches.
- d Try their "moves" yourself when you go out and shoot.

How you approach your subject is a big topic, and we'll tackle it in greater detail in the coming weeks. But this is hopefully a good start.

Next week:

Street photography and the law; what if you're 'caught'?; non-confrontational approach; looking at good examples of street photography; the Winograb—the best way to hold a camera for street photography; discussion about form vs. content.