

Not A Guide to Street Photography

Contributed by Brian Webb
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A couple weeks ago, almost off-handedly, one of the administrators at the yard said that I should write an article on how I shoot street. Apparently, he thought that there are people out there who might find value in such a thing. "Give me a week!", I ignorantly boasted, then set about the task of organizing my normally random thoughts into something cohesive. It didn't take me long to realize that such an article would be all but impossible for me to pen. I mean, I know and use the technical aspects of the medium, which are well known and I won't go into here. I also commonly utilize some specific techniques, which I will go into a little below. However, the use of these techniques aren't consistent or ubiquitous to my work, so including them as absolutes in a "how to" guide on how I shoot street would be somewhat dishonest. And yet as I look through my work there is a consistency to it. There is enough of a consistency that even on the rare occasion that I do something completely different, like change from black & white film to another medium, the photograph still somehow "fits" with my other street work. The "why" is the most important point that I want you, the reader, to take out of this article. And it is the last point I will make. First, let's go over the easy, more formulaic stuff. These are techniques I use commonly and find helpful in getting the image recorded.

Lets start with hyperfocus. This is undoubtedly the one technique I use most often. If it's bright enough that I know my shutter speeds will be good enough, I throw my lens to f/5.6 or f/8 and leave it there. Bigger apertures then that really don't give me sharp focus close enough and smaller apertures soften the image, which ruins one the reasons I prefer the film medium: sharp grain. I tend to use hyperfocal technique for 2 reasons, one practical and one artistic. From a practical standpoint there is nothing else faster. You don't need to wait for AF to lock on to your subject, hope it "picks" the right subject, or fidget with your lens in any way. You just compose and shoot. Moments pass in fractions of a second so being able to save a few milliseconds makes a difference. From an artistic point of view, hyperfocus can give the image layers and serve to record interactions that you didn't realize were there when you took the photo. This makes a good segway into scale-focusing, of which hyperfocus is a subset. If you are in a confined space, such as a side alley, room, or pathway at your local street market, why not pre-focus your lens to cover that limited space? There's no point in having anything outside of those limits in focus and you get the same speed advantages as hyperfocal technique. Another thing I like to do is find a background first, then wait for an appropriate subject. Backgrounds such as over-sized poster adverts or interesting graffiti-filled walls can add to the depth of an image or give it additional impact. Obviously, the key phrase here is "wait for an appropriate subject". Just photographing anyone that passes randomly in front of the background will only produce a mediocre image. There needs to be a subject that compliments or, even better, juxtaposes well with the interesting background you've staked out. Patience is a virtue.

What about shooting from the hip? Isn't this the best way to get candid photos? No, and the simple proof is that people will occasionally ask me if my photographs were shot from the hip because of their candid nature. You don't need to shoot from the hip to be candid. People are just as likely to notice you taking photos from below as they would if you were shooting through the viewfinder. In fact, you are much more likely to receive hostility if you are "caught" hip shooting rather than just "seen" taking pictures. The most important reason that I don't hip-shoot... well, that is related to my last point. The way I am able to get candid without resorting to the randomness of shooting from the hip is I simply become part of the environment. This doesn't mean that I use some kind of hide, like wildlife photographers, or I camouflage myself as a local. It means I walk into a scene, camera in-hand or hanging around my neck, and stay around long enough that people become used to my presence and start to ignore me. Then I start taking pictures. You are more likely to get good photographs more consistently if you pictures are composed deliberately and not left up to random chance.

Now on to my last point and to what I believe to be not only the most overlooked component of street photography, but also the most important. Pretend that I'm Robert Redford and you're Brad Pitt. No, I'm referring to the movie *Spy Game* and not some fan fiction porno fantasy. It's the cold war and we're sitting in an anonymous-but-classy cafe in an anonymous-but-fashionable European country. I'm giving you the most important lesson in spycraft. Learn how to read a room. Learn how to see a scene and evaluate it for subject matter: interesting faces, physical or conceptual juxtapositions, and other elements of visual interest. Learn to be judgemental and critical of these elements so that you can narrow your focus to the most interesting. Learn to be predictive of these elements so that you are there with the shutter open when the right ones converge. You'd be surprised at how alike people's behavior is given the same variables. Spend some time without a camera just practicing seeing. Practice until it becomes natural, like breathing. You breathe, don't you? Then take the camera back out and take photos as unique as the way you see. {mos_fb_discuss:1}