

Street Photography 101: An Introduction to Street Photography

by Eric Kim

This book is the distillation of knowledge I have learned about street photography during the past 8 years. I want this book to be a basic primer and introduction to street photography. If you're new to street photography (or want some new ideas) this is a great starting point.

Everything in this book is just my opinion on street photography, and I am certainly not the foremost expert on street photography. However I can safely say that I am insanely passionate and enthusiastic about street photography– and have dedicated my life to studying it and teaching it to others.

Take everything in this book with a pinch of salt, and don't take my word for granted. Try out techniques for yourself; some of these approaches may (and may not) work for you. Ultimately you want to pursue your own inner-vision of street photography. There are no “rights” and “wrongs” in street photography– there is only the way you perceive street photography and the world.

Below is an overview of some of the chapters I will cover:

- Chapter 1: What is street photography?
- Chapter 2: Why street photography?

- Chapter 3: What to look for when you're shooting street photography
- Chapter 4: How to overcome your fear of shooting street photography
- Chapter 5: Lessons I've learned from the masters of street photography
- Chapter 6: Street photography equipment, technical settings, technique
- Chapter 7: Street photography exercises
- Chapter 8: Conclusion

Now let's jump straight into it :)

Chapter 1: What is street photography?

Dear reader, welcome to “Street Photography 101”. I will be your “professor” for your course (you can just call me Eric).

If you're reading this book– you're probably interested in street photography.

But before we talk about *how* to shoot street photography– we must talk about what street photography is (or how to “define” it).

Personally I hate definitions. I think that definitions close our minds to possibilities– and every “definition” is ultimately one “expert's” opinion on a topic.

Therefore for the purposes of this book– I want to purposefully define street photography in a very loose and ambiguous way. Personally, I don't think there is a definitive "definition" of street photography. However, this is how I would define street photography:

"Street photography is documenting humanity."

That is it.

I don't think that street photography has to be shot candidly (although most photographers do). Many of the master street photographers have often asked for permission when taking photos of their subjects. Some of these photographers include William Klein, Diane Arbus, and even Henri Cartier-Bresson himself (some of the photos he took in Spain is staged).

I also don't think that street photography necessarily has to include people. The best street photographs are often photos of people– but you can shoot street photographs of technically anything. I have seen great "street photos" that don't contain any people. However, I think street photography needs to show "humanity".

I also think that street photography should be photographed in a public space– but then this is a bit confusing as well. I think you can shoot street photography in the subway – but then again technically, the subway is not always a "public" place. I think you can shoot street photography in the mall, but once again– a mall can technically be a "private" place. I have also seen tons of great street photography done at the beach or even in the woods.

I therefore think that almost anything can be street photography. But the question shouldn't be: "Is this street photography, or isn't this street photography?" I think the question should be, "Is this a good street photograph, or a bad street photograph?" And **my definition of a "good" street photograph versus a "bad" street photograph is whether the image has strong emotions, and reminds me of humanity (in one way or another).**

Technically a long-exposure cityscape photo of skyscrapers can be "street photography" – although I think those photos are just boring. Photos of just cafe chairs can also be technically considered "street photography" (human beings use chairs and thus remind us of "humanity") but depending on *how* you shoot it– the bigger question you want to ask is if this is an interesting/memorable/meaningful photograph or not.

I think most people enter street photography because they are interested in photographing people. And therefore for the purposes of this book we will focus on how to make photographs of strangers (in mostly public places). For example, if you kicked down a stranger's front door and took photos of them taking a shower– that probably wouldn't be considered street photography (that's breaking in). But then again if you took photos of strangers through their windows – would that be considered "street photography"? That is up for you to decide. Personally I would.

So once again, don't give a flying fuck if your photos are considered "street photography" or not. Just focus on trying to make meaningful, memorable, and emotional photographs wherever you are. Most of us live in cities, so by definition– most of the photos we take are "urban" and in the streets.

So how would you define street photography for yourself? You can write it here:

For me, street photography is
_____.

Chapter 2: Why street photography?

So let's get to the next chapter– *why* street photography?

I think in life we often go through the motions without really asking ourselves the important questions of *why* we do what we do.

So for you– *why* are you interested in street photography? This is only something you can define for yourself.

For me, I shoot street photography because I am genuinely interested in human beings and society. I studied Sociology as an undergraduate student at UCLA, and for me street photography is just a way to document humanity (except instead of writing down notes in a notepad, I'm using my camera). So essentially for me, I consider myself a sociologist with a camera.

Also I love street photography is because it forces me to step outside of my comfort zone and interact with strangers (and the rest of the world) in which I normally wouldn't. Like the rest of us, I spend far too much time in front of a screen and trapped inside my apartment. Street photography gives me the opportunity to get out of my damn apartment, to roam the streets, go on thrilling adventures, enjoy nice coffees (at cafe's in-between

shooting sessions), meet other passionate street photographers, talk to strangers (I normally wouldn't talk with), explore unknown neighborhoods, and work hard to make a powerful and emotional image.

Street photography for me isn't just photography. It is a way of life. Street photography gives me the chance to be more adventurous. Street photography helps me appreciate the beauty in the mundane and ordinary. Street photography helps me express my feelings of the world through my photographs. Street photography makes me feel more fully alive.

Before I personally discovered street photography, I was quite shy to strangers– and not so interested in exploring. I would be the guy who would spend 10 minutes dicking around in Google Maps instead of just asking an adjacent stranger for directions. I would be the guy who would treat baristas and cashiers as robots– and never ask them “How is your day going?” I was the guy who would awkwardly look at his feet when in the elevator– instead of being the (sometimes even more awkward) guy who strikes up conversations with strangers.

I would say street photography has helped build my confidence. My confidence to interact with strangers. My confidence to take a photograph of a stranger (without permission). Confidence to start my own business (teaching street photography workshops full-time, and blogging). Confidence to really speak my mind with my girlfriend and partner Cindy. Confidence to travel the world – places outside of my comfort zone.

I honestly don't think there is any type of photography more interesting and challenging than street photography. There is so little you can control in street photography. **The only two variables you can control are**

where you stand, and when you press the shutter (credit to David Hurn from Magnum).

I also love the thrill and serendipity of street photography. Because you cannot control all the variables when you're out shooting on the streets—sometimes the photographs we make are happy surprises. When we're shooting on the streets— we're never 100% sure how the photographs are going to turn out. As Garry Winogrand once said, "I photograph to see what the world looks photographed."

Street photography has also changed how I see reality. Before street photography, I wouldn't appreciate the small things of everyday life. I would just live my life in tunnel vision, totally oblivious to the world around me. But now, street photography has helped me slow down. I appreciate the small joys of everyday life. I enjoy the laughter of a child. I enjoy the old man enjoying a coffee at a cafe. I enjoy moments in the rain when people are jumping over puddles (I know, cliché— but still lovely).

So what thrills or interests you about street photography? Perhaps you can share it with us below:

"I love street photography and shoot street photography
because _____."

Always be questioning *why* you do what you do. This will continue to give you more focus in your life— more energy, and more purpose.

Chapter 3: What to look for when you're shooting street photography

So okay– you want to shoot street photography. Now what? What exactly should you be looking for when you're out on the streets? Where should you shoot? What should you focus on?

Well first of all, I recommend shooting street photography in an area where there are lots of people. If you are a fisherman, it makes no sense to go fishing where there aren't a lot of fish. Go to where the fish are.

So for many, this can be a downtown area. Starting off street photography in a downtown area can be advantageous because you can get swept up in a crowd– and feel less self-conscious about shooting street photography.

Here are some techniques you can work on in street photography:

1) Juxtaposition

So one of the basic and most fundamental techniques in street photography is “juxtaposition” – meaning photographing an image in which two elements are directly side-by-side (and contrasting one another).

For example, if you see a scene in which you have an old person– try to also take a photograph of a kid next to them. You can also juxtapose colors– photograph people wearing red jackets against green walls.

Another juxtaposition can be a photograph of a fat man next to a skinny person.

2) Gestures

Another street photography technique can be trying to capture gestures on the streets. I think that the best street photographs are generally the ones in which the subjects have interesting hand-gestures, facial expressions, body language, and postures.

Why do gestures make good street photographs?

Well, with gestures, you can get a better sense of the emotions a person has– and you can get a sense of how that person feels.

For example, if you took a photograph of a man slouched over a table, with his hand covering his forehead– you can get a sense of angst and stress.

If you took a photograph of someone covering their face from the sun– the person looks much more dynamic and energetic. Hand-gestures are often much more interesting than just photographing people with their hands by their sides.

3) Emotions

I think for me the most important element of making a strong and memorable street photograph is to capture strong emotions.

How do you capture emotions on the streets?

Well– you can start off with capturing gestures, body language, and facial expressions.

But ultimately I think that capturing emotions on the streets requires a certain amount of empathy. Meaning– you have to emotionally connect with the subjects you photograph on the streets.

I will talk about this a bit more later– but I think that the best way to shoot street photography is with a prime-lens (a lens that doesn't zoom) that is relatively wide (I recommend 35mm for most photographers, full-frame equivalent). This allows you to get close and intimate with your subjects – and I feel that **with physical proximity comes emotional proximity**.

When you see certain scenes, sometimes you can feel a certain mood. Whenever you see a scene, which evokes some certain emotion from you– don't think too much about it, and just photograph.

Also during the editing process (when you're selecting your best street photographs) – edit with your heart. Ditch the photos that lack emotion and soul. Keep the ones that you can empathize with as a human being.

4) Street portraits

Another popular type of street photography is “street portraits”. The idea is that instead of photographing a scene, you're focused on an individual person you find interesting.

There are some people who will argue that “street portraits” isn’t street photography– but I call bullshit. I think that street portraits can sometimes be the most emotional and powerful type of image– as what is more interesting than a human being? As babies– we are genetically hard-wired to be interested in the faces of others. Apparently if you have a white piece of paper with two dots side-by-side and another dot directly below it, babies mistake them as faces (that is why babies are so drawn to electrical outlets).

So if you are a street photographer that is interested in faces– I recommend trying to photograph people you find interesting. First of all, you can start off by asking for permission. The best strategy is to just approach a person and be totally honest. Tell them that you find their face interesting, and that they look like they have a great story. Chat them up a bit– and perhaps you can ask them, “Oh– if you don’t mind, I love your look– do you mind if I made a photograph of you?” Most people are actually quite happy to be photographed– and after taking their photograph, even offer to email them the photograph.

Approaching strangers and asking them to take their photograph takes a lot of courage– and it took me several years before I was able to get rid of that heart-thumping emotion when approaching strangers. But now, I don’t feel that anymore.

Why not? In the past I assumed that everyone hated having their photographs taken– and would subconsciously show my nervousness to the stranger (who would feel creeped out by me, and wouldn’t want to be photographed).

However now I have realized that most people are actually okay with having their photograph taken. Therefore I now assume everyone wants to have their photograph taken– which means I show a lot more positive body language, which makes people trust me more.

But we will talk a little more about how to build your confidence and overcome your fear of shooting street photography in a little bit.

5) Geometry/architecture/composition

Another approach you can take in street photography is to photograph people with nice backgrounds and compositions.

When I first started street photography, I was absolutely terrified to photograph strangers without their permission (or to ask them to photograph them).

Therefore I started off shooting street photography more from a distance. I tried to make the subject small, and tried to make images in which the background and architecture was the primary focus.

So what you can do is the following: create an interesting composition, and wait for the right subject to enter your frame.

This is what Henri Cartier-Bresson did for many of his photographs (see his famous “Bicycle” shot).

You can do this also by looking for interesting leading-lines in your photograph, and just wait for the right person to be at the end of that leading line.

When looking for geometry and nice compositions, look for diagonals, curves, triangles, and good separation of your subject from the background. Don't be afraid to also tilt your camera, and have fun with your compositions.

Another common mistake many street photographers make is that they only make one photograph of a scene, and move on. This is an amateur mistake. Rather– you want to “work the scene” and take many different photographs of a scene that you find interesting (10+ images if possible).

Chapter 4: How to overcome your fear of shooting street photography

Overcoming your fear of shooting street photography is one of the things I write the most about– and even offer street photography workshops on how to conquer your fear of shooting street photography. Needless to say, this is the most popular course I offer– and the topic that most street photographers are interested in.

In the past (around 4+ years ago) I wrote: “Street photography is 80% balls, and 20% skill”.

A lot of people misconstrued this quote– thinking that what I meant was that street photography was all balls (and skill wasn't involved).

But rather what I meant to say was this: I think that when you're starting off, 80% of the difficulty of shooting street photography is just overcoming the fear of photographing a stranger without his/her

permission. I don't know about you– but personally I have missed hundreds and thousands of shots over the years because I have been afraid to take a certain photograph– that could have been an amazing street photograph.

So basically– if you want to be a good street photographer, you first need to build up your confidence as a street photographer.

If you are deathly afraid of shooting street photography– I want you to start off with the “5 yes, 5 no” assignment.

What is this assignment?

The concept is this: For an entire day you have to approach a bunch of strangers, and ask for permission to make a photograph of them. And your assignment is to get 5 people to say “yes” and 5 people to say “no.”

So if you're already got 5 people to say “yes” to being photographed– you need to purposefully try to get 5 people to say “no” as well. So try to purposefully look for the 5 scariest mofos out there who you don't think would want to be photographed.

The reason I think this assignment is good is because (you will discover) – most people don't mind being photographed (as long as you ask them in a nice and non-creepy way). Not only that, but getting rejections can sometimes be harder than you anticipate.

Once you're comfortable approaching strangers and getting rejected, I want you to start practicing photographing people without permission. What you can do is this: take candid photographs of people without

permission, and keep clicking until they look at you. And once they look at you, rather than pretending that you didn't take a photograph of them and running away– **I want you to look directly at them, smile, and say “thank you”.**

The power of a smile is incredible to disarm people, and have them feel comfortable (and happy) around you.

Don't feel bad or guilty for having a fear of shooting street photography– it is totally human. We are hard-wired to be risk adverse– meaning we want to avoid conflict. In today's society, to take a photo of a stranger without permission can be considered creepy and socially awkward.

We also predict the worst-case scenarios; we imagine getting punched in the face, having our camera broken, and having the cops called on us.

But that almost never happens. The worst that happens 99% of the time is that someone gives you a dirty look, someone might curse at you, or call you a creep.

But at the end of the day– you're probably interested in street photography because you are a humanist. You generally care about and are interested in your fellow human beings. It takes a unique and empathetic person to be interested in street photography.

A lot of people ask about the ethics of street photography. Is it okay to photograph people who are homeless? Is it okay to photograph people who might look ugly/overweight? Is it okay to take photographs of children?

A topic on ethics is a tricky one. Ultimately you want to follow your own heart. Everyone has a different code of ethics– don't dictate what others think is "right" or "wrong". Rather, follow your conscience in a way, which allows you to sleep at night.

Personally, I have the golden rule: "Photograph others how you would like to be photographed."

For example, if I were homeless and looking in pretty bad shape– I wouldn't want to be photographed. Therefore I generally try to avoid photographing the homeless, destitute, or mentally unstable.

If I do want to photograph a homeless person, I will generally approach them, ask for permission, and do so in a kind and genuine way.

Furthermore, I personally don't mind being photographed (in-fact, I love having my photograph taken) – so I have no qualms of photographing others.

If you yourself don't like being photographed, it will be very hard to overcome the barrier of photographing other people. Therefore if you really want to build your confidence in street photography, you need to start off being comfortable being photographed. Do onto others as you would like others to do onto you.

On invisibility

There are sometimes cases where you want to be a little more "stealth" when you're shooting street photography. In these cases, it is good to have some sort of "invisibility cloak" when you're on the streets.

There are many different ways to be more “invisible” when shooting street photography. Here are some tips and techniques you can use:

1) Don't make eye contact

If you don't want to be noticed when you're shooting street photography—don't make eye contact with your subjects. If you don't make eye contact with your subjects, they are a lot less likely to notice you photographing them.

So what you can do instead is pretend like you're photographing something behind someone. You can look at your subject through your viewfinder when you're framing a shot— but after you bring down your camera, keep your eyes fixated on something else.

2) Get really close

Ironically enough— the closer you are to your subject, the less likely they are to notice you photographing them.

Why is that?

If you're really close to someone (let's say within an arm length's away) you are so close to them that your subject will assume you are photographing something else. After all— who in their right mind will photograph a stranger at such a close distance?

This is why I also recommend shooting with a wide-angle lens (28mm–35mm), because you don't have to aim your lens directly at your subject.

3) Keep your camera up to your eye

When you're shooting street photography, the key thing that gives away the fact that you photographed someone is the motion of bringing up your camera to your face, then dropping it.

Therefore try this instead: keep your camera glued to your face (eye through the viewfinder) and even after taking photos, keep it up to your eye.

Try this assignment also: go to a busy downtown area, and walk through a stream of people. While you're doing so, keep your camera glued to your face, and walk while pointing your camera at different people (pretend like it is a video camera). Most people will try to dodge your camera, and others will just ignore you.

Start off this assignment by not taking any photographs. Simply aim your camera at people. If someone yells at you, they have no case. After all, you didn't take a photograph of them.

Once you start getting comfortable walking around in a busy crowd with your camera glued to your face, start to make photographs. But every time you click the shutter, don't drop your camera. Keep it glued to your face.

Another variant of this strategy is that when you're shooting on the streets and you see an interesting subject coming towards you, bring up your camera to your face, wait, and once someone enters your line of vision, then click. And once you click, don't drop down your camera from your face— keep it up (therefore your subject will assume you photographed something behind them).

4) Crouch down

When you're shooting street photography – another good tip to be more invisible when you're shooting is crouch down really low.

This works for several reasons.

First of all, when you crouch down you're not directly in the field-of-vision of your subject. Secondly, when you crouch down and take photographs looking up, people can assume you're just taking photographs of buildings or the scenery.

5) Work a street corner

No, not like a prostitute– but like a street photographer.

If you're in a downtown area, find a busy street corner (where there are a lot of people coming in and out of the scene) – and just plant yourself at that corner.

Pretend like you're just a lamp pole, and also keep your camera glued to your face. As people walk into your line of vision, make photographs.

The good thing about working a street corner is that you have people coming at you from all these different angles. And also very interesting– people who are coming from one corner of a street don't know the other people coming from the other corner of the street. When people “collide” by intersecting on a street corner, sometimes interesting gestures, interactions, and facial expressions occur.

This is also a good technique— as shooting on the streets and walking around all day can be very tiring, and not the best use of your energy.

To see good examples of street corner photographs, see the work of Joel Meyerowitz.

Why do you want to be invisible?

I know these techniques sound a little bit sneaky and mischievous— perhaps even disingenuous. And they are.

If you are a street photographer that doesn't like to be noticed— these are great techniques and tactics for you to use.

Ultimately any approach in street photography is up to you. Whether you feel comfortable using them or not is your personal judgment call. But I still wanted to share these techniques, which have worked very well in terms of being invisible on the streets.

But honestly, what is the big deal of being noticed when you're shooting street photography?

Perhaps one issue you have is that you don't want to be noticed because you want the scene not to be "affected" in any sort of way. You want to photograph a scene without disturbing it or altering it.

In that case, my recommendation is just to be really fast when you're shooting. If you shoot too slowly, people start to notice your presence.

And honestly, you will always alter a scene (either consciously or subconsciously) simply by being there. By standing in a certain location, you will obstruct the flow of people in some way, and no matter how hard you try to be stealthy— people will always notice your camera (or the fact that you're awkwardly standing somewhere without moving).

I have actually found out sometimes being caught shooting a street photograph results in a more interesting photograph. Some of my best street photographs are the ones where the subject notices my presence, and looks directly at me (or into my lens). This creates a much more emotional and connected image— there is a saying “eyes are the windows to the soul.”

My friend Thomas Leuthard has a technique in street photography (to intentionally get eye contact in his shots). He does the following: he holds up his camera to his subject and takes two shots: one shot of the subject looking away, and another shot of the subject looking directly at him. If you see Thomas shooting in real-life, it can feel very unsettling to see how long he waits until the subject looks directly at him. But it is a technique that makes his images much more connected with his subject— as there is the eye contact.

To sum up overcoming your fear of shooting street photography and being invisible

To sum up— overcoming your fears of shooting street photography is one of the biggest barriers you must conquer in order to make interesting street photographs.

Personally, I never want to eradicate my fear of shooting street photography.

Why is that?

I want to harness my fear for the positive. Overcoming your fear of shooting street photography simply means that you don't let the fear of shooting street photography prevent you from clicking the shutter.

Whenever I see a scene that suddenly makes my heart race, my hands turn clammy, and sweat to pour down my back– it is my body subconsciously telling me, “Eric– that is an interesting shot, you must take it.” Any photograph I am afraid to photograph is a telltale sign that it is an interesting scene worth being photographed. If it wasn't– why would I feel afraid?

So use your fear and harness it for the positive. You will never 100% conquer your fear of shooting street photography– but why would you want to? Fear is a thrilling emotion– that helps some of us who are adrenaline junkies.

Fear in street photography is also what makes it hard. If it weren't for the fear of shooting street photography– it wouldn't be as challenging or fun.

And when it comes to being invisible– honestly it is pretty overrated (in my opinion). If you want to be invisible when shooting on the streets, avoid eye contact and pretend like you're photographing something else. But often time that feels creepy, and feels wrong to me. But then again– there are a lot of times that I don't want to be noticed photographing (let's say in an airport) – and I do use these “sneaky” maneuvers.

Ultimately at the end of the day, follow your heart and your own line of ethics.

But don't let the fear of shooting street photography get in your way. Know that you're doing a good thing shooting street photography– you're capturing beautiful moments, telling stories, and living life more fully.

What is wrong with that?

An exercise

So as an exercise, write down the list of things that you are afraid of in street photography– and write down how you think you can overcome them.

My fears of shooting street photography:

a) _____

b) _____

c) _____

d) _____

e) _____

f) _____

g) _____

h) _____

i) _____

Chapter 5: Lessons I've learned from the masters of street photography

On my blog, I've written a lot of lessons I've learned from the masters of street photography. I think without a past, we have no future. We need to study the history of the greats that have come before us, in order to become better photographers ourselves.

Here are some distilled wisdom I've gained from the masters of street photographers, and common traits/patterns I've seen they possess:

1. Be persistent

I think one of the most important attributes for a photographer to have is persistence. Without persistence, you can never overcome adversities, and continue to work hard in your photography.

As a photographer, you will always suffer a lot of setbacks that are difficult to overcome.

Not only that, but you will also face a lot of dips in terms of motivation and inspiration. This is natural, and part of the photography process.

Know that the best bodies of work often take years and decades to create. Many of these master street photographers started similar to us. They didn't have a "style", a "following" – nor were they famous.

Many photographers' only gain fame and acclaim after decades of working hard in their photography. It is easy for us to look at the success and think that their success was merely "overnight". However that isn't the case. Their success was built on principles– that they built a foundation for themselves (studying the masters that came before them), lots of "deliberate practice" (shooting whenever they could with intensity and focus), as well as getting honest feedback & critique from their peers.

There is a principle called the "10,000 hour rule" in which it takes us about 10,000 hours before we can truly become a "master" of anything. Therefore as a photographer, know that you need to really put in the hours to become great. There are no shortcuts.

So in street photography, always be persistent. Always have your camera with you, and try to take at least 1 street photograph everyday. I know that we all are "busy" in our lives– but if you truly want to become great, you need to always be shooting as much as you can.

That time you spend being persistent in street photography doesn't necessarily have to be the time you're actually out shooting. You can spend that time looking and studying the work of the masters, you can spend that time getting honest feedback & critique on your work, or even offering feedback & critique on the work of your peers.

When you feel like giving up, sometimes it is good to take a break and re-evaluate why you're shooting street photography. During these dips of

motivation, perhaps you should purposefully leave your camera at home—and then feel the frustration of when you see a good street photography opportunity (but you left your camera at home).

For me, I found the best way to overcome dips of motivation is to just keep shooting. I find that when I have a camera around my neck and in my hand, I start to see more interesting things around me. And the more I click, the more inspired I feel. It is like I'm warming up my street photography engine (the more I click).

So when you're not feeling inspired— just shoot more.

2. Ignore the haters

All of the really great street photographers in history have had a lot of critics and “haters”. In-fact, I think the more critics and haters a photographer has, the more successful that photographer is. After all, if you were a nobody, you would have no haters. The more popular, well-regarded, and famous you become— the more “haters” will come out and call your work “overrated”, “shitty”, or a slap to the art world.

Many great street photographers took decades of facing criticism before getting recognized for their work.

For example, Japanese street photographer Daido Moriyama was criticized for shooting on a compact film camera when everyone was using fancy Leica's and SLR's. Not only that, but he processed and printed his photographs in a way that they were overly-contrasty, overly-gritty, out-of-focus, and technically “imperfect.” This was during a time when it was in vogue to have your photographs have extreme clarity, little grain, and

with perfect tonality and sharpness. Daido chose to go against the grain– and now several decades later– he is greatly admired as being one of the fathers of modern Japanese photography.

William Eggleston is another great example of a photographer who had a lot of critics. When he first exhibited his photographs at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City– he was one of the first photographers to have color photographs exhibited. At the time, color photography was regarded as being “vulgar” and only for amateurs taking holiday snapshots. Black and white was the only “real” artistic medium for a photographer.

Therefore when William Eggleston exhibited his work, tons of critics called his work amateur, horrible, and a slap to the face of the photography world. Many petitioned to have his work removed from the walls, and said it was the worst exhibition that the MOMA ever exhibited.

However several decades later, many regard William Eggleston as one of the fathers of modern color photography. They now praise the way he sees colors– and now he is one of the most famous living photographers in the world.

Essentially you want to listen to your own inner-voice, your own inner-vision. You want to shoot what genuinely makes you happy and excited, and disregard what the “haters” say. Whenever you are doing anything innovative, you will always be criticized and judged. After all, it is always easier to follow the status quo in photography (rather than pave new ground).

3. Be consistent

Most of the greatest street photographers in history have been quite consistent with their photography. Rarely do they deviate from their working methods. Rather, they try to keep their cameras, lenses, film, and technique consistent in order to master it. Once they master their technique, they can approach different types of project and subject matter. But once they've mastered their technique, and subject matter—then they can try to branch off and experiment doing different things.

For example, Henri Cartier-Bresson famously shot his Leica and (mostly) his 50mm (on black and white film) his entire life. He consistently made images and refined his craft and vision according to a painterly-aesthetic. To him, composition was everything. And with consistent equipment (his Leica and 50mm) he was able to really hone his vision— and know what his photographs would look like (even before bringing his camera to his eye).

Henri Cartier-Bresson stuck with this working method for several decades, before he decided to retire from photography and devote his attention to drawing and painting. And we are left with an amazing body of work by Henri Cartier-Bresson, in which he captured the world with his unique vision all around the world.

Alex Webb is another great street photographer who has been remarkably consistent with his working methods. Although he started off shooting black and white film, once he switched to color street photography—he has never turned back. For several decades, he also shot with a film Leica, a 35mm lens, and Kodachrome slide color film. He created a signature style by shooting multi-layered, complex, and vibrantly colored images. He applied this working method in the Mexican border, in Haiti, in Istanbul, and even in America.

Alex Webb is certainly still one of the most famous color street photographers. Thousands from all around the globe appreciate his work— and even though Kodachrome film is dead, he is still producing work (now working with a digital Leica, but still working in color and in his signature multi-layered style).

I think in art and photography it is very important to experiment. But at the same time, too much experimentation leads you nowhere. Too much experimentation is like having a ship constantly spinning in circles— with no clear destination in mind.

I know that personally from my experiences, having too many cameras, too many lenses, too many different types of film, and too many options is detrimental to creativity. Sometimes as photographers, we blame our cameras for preventing us from being creative. Rather— it is the opposite. In today's society of abundance, most of us own several cameras and lenses, which prevent us from really unlocking our potential. Why? We are spending more time and energy worrying about what camera to shoot on the streets with, rather than getting to know one camera and one lens really well.

So if you want to be more consistent with your street photography, I highly recommend trying to stick with the “one camera and one lens” philosophy for at least a year. By getting to know one camera and one lens really well— you will master your equipment, and you will have no “choice anxiety” when it comes to leaving your house and shooting. You will begin to see the world with that certain focal length, so you can frame and compose your photographs accurately (without even bringing your camera to your eye).

Also try to stay consistent with the type of subject matter and projects you shoot. I think if you want to become a truly great street photographer, you should focus on just shooting street photography (leave the pretty landscapes and flower macro photographers to your brother-in-law). For me when I started shooting street photography– I knew that I wanted to improve my street photography (as it was my passion). Therefore I made the conscious effort to *not* shoot all the other types of photography I was shooting at the time (landscape, macro, wedding photos, baby photos, etc.). To become truly great in street photography– you need to be obsessive.

I also think it is good to be consistent in terms of where you like to shoot. I rarely see any truly great photographs come from photographers who are constantly traveling. I think rather than constantly traveling, getting to know one area, one neighborhood, one city, or one country really well is better than always jumping from one place to the next.

4. Combine your outside interests

I think another interesting trait from the master photographers is that they aren't only interested in photography. They are also interested in other fields and other forms of art.

For example, Lee Friedlander was not only interested in street photography– he was also highly influenced by jazz music. This helped influence the slightly offbeat style of his photographs, as well as the edginess of his images.

For Henri Cartier-Bresson, he wasn't primarily interested in photography– drawing and painting inspired him the most. Therefore his

street photography was just a combination of his interest in art, combined with photography.

Elliott Erwitt is a photographer who has a great sense of humor. You can see his humor come out through the funny images that he makes on the streets.

So think about other things that you are interested in and passionate about. If you're interested in architecture, perhaps you can make your street photographs combining people and architecture. If you're interested in painting, perhaps you can make your street photographs "impressionist" and focus on a certain mood and feeling. If you're into humor and comedy, try to make your street photographs funny. If you're interested in psychology or sociology (like I am) – perhaps you can make your street photographs that analyze the human mind and the way they live their lives in society.

The greatest innovations and sources of "uniqueness" are taking two separate ideas, and combining them in a novel way. Everything has technically been "done before" – but not everything has been done before by you. You are a unique individual, with a unique life story, and unique experiences.

Make your street photography personal. If you want to become a really great photographer and stand out from the crowd, ask yourself: "What do my street photographs tell about myself? What makes my street photographs different from others? Can people tell that I took these photographs– if so, why, and if not, why not?"

5. Work on projects

The last trait that I see the master street photographers follow is that they generally work on projects, books, and exhibitions (rather than just single-images for Facebook, Instagram, or Flickr).

If you want to truly say something with your photography, you need to work on a series or a project. Like a book– could you imagine telling a good story with just one page or one chapter? The same is with photography– you need several images, a certain sequence, edit, and narrative to tell a good story.

Working on projects are much more difficult and challenging than just capturing interesting single-images. Working on projects takes years, sometimes decades to accomplish. With a project, you need to have a strong idea for a theme, you need to edit and sequence your photographs tightly, and you need to present your work in a way that represents the contents of it.

To work on a street photography project, think about an issue, a community, or a place that interests you– and which is important to you.

The most important part of working on a street photography project is that you also want to make it personal. You want to give your own unique voice and vision of a situation or an idea– rather than trying to follow what others have done before you.

So what are you passionate about? What interests you? What do you genuinely find “interesting” to photograph? What would you photograph everyday if you had the chance?

For a street photography project, you can photograph a certain subject matter (people wearing suits, dogs, elderly people). You can photograph a certain neighborhood (a downtown area of your city, 4 blocks within where you live, or different cities within your own country). You can photograph an emotion (happiness, depression, angst). You can photograph a social issue that is important to you (politics, homelessness, education).

If you want to learn more about street photography projects, you can read my other free e-book: “The Street Photography Project Manual”. But before you do that, write down some ideas that you have for street photography projects below:

My street photography project ideas

a) _____

b) _____

c) _____

d) _____

e) _____

f) _____

g) _____

Chapter 6: Street photography equipment, technical settings, and technique

So a question you probably had was this: “Okay, so I’m interested in shooting street photography– but what camera, lens, and technical settings do I use?” Don’t worry– I got your back. In this section I will try my best to share all of this information with you.

What camera should I shoot with in street photography?

So to start off, technically any camera for street photography is fine. The great thing about street photography is how open and democratic it is. You don’t need an expensive camera to shoot street photography, nor do you need great image quality or sharp lenses to make great photographs. In-fact, sometimes I find grainy and gritty photographs to have more character than clinically sharp and perfect images.

As a general rule of thumb, the smaller your camera and the lighter your camera, the better. Why? Generally the bigger your camera is, the creepier you will look. Not only that, but the heavier your camera is, the less likely you are to carry it with you everywhere you go.

Remember the golden rule: **Always have your camera with you.**

I generally favor small and compact cameras such as the Fuji x100-series cameras, the Ricoh GR compact cameras, the Olympus Micro 4/3rds

cameras, Leica's or rangefinders (if you can afford them), and even iPhones.

How do I setup my camera for street photography?

In terms of shooting street photography, here are some technical settings I recommend:

a) "Set it and forget it"

"P" mode, ISO 1600, center-point autofocus

If you aren't a technical photographer, and you're more interested in capturing emotions in the streets (than fumbling with your settings)– you can use this "set it and forget it" setting.

Generally the idea is that in "P" mode, your camera automatically chooses your aperture and shutter-speed for you. So you don't have to worry about changing these settings when shooting on the streets.

By shooting your ISO at 1600 (even during the day), you generally get faster shutter-speeds (which prevents blurry images), which helps you capture those "decisive moments".

With autofocus, just stick it to center-point autofocus (which makes it quicker and more accurate).

The upsides of this setup is that you don't have to fumble with your settings, and 95% of your shots should come out fine. The downside is

that you don't have as much technical control, and you might lose some shots to the autofocus of your camera not working well.

But if you have a camera with really fast and accurate autofocus, I generally recommend this setup.

b) Zone-focusing

- For manual-focusing cameras, especially rangefinders*.

Another good way to shoot street photography is to “zone focus” – the basic concept is pre-focusing to a certain distance and then shooting with a relatively small aperture (f/8-f/16), which allows you to have a deep depth-of-field.

So if you've ever shot street photography and missed photos because the autofocus of your camera was too slow, this technique is for you. Also “zone focusing” is best used for rangefinders (like Leica's).

So these are some basic settings I recommend for “zone focusing”

- Aperture-priority mode (Av/A mode)
- ISO (1600–3200) – yes, even during the day
- Aperture: f/8
- Lens focus: pre-focused to around 1.2 meters (roughly 2 arm lengths away)

The basic idea is that with zone focusing, you set your camera to aperture-priority mode, a high ISO– which allows you to have a fast shutter speed when shooting street photography. During the day at ISO 1600, you

should have a shutter speed faster than 1/2000th of a second in the sunlight, and around 1/250th of a second in the shade (which is the minimum shutter speed you want for sharp photos).

The question I am asked the most is, “but if I shoot at ISO 1600, won’t my photos look all grainy?”

To answer that— your photos won’t look that grainy (if your photos are well-exposed, high-iso isn’t really a big deal). Not only that, but your photos will be sharp.

Some people ask whether they can use Auto-ISO and simply set their camera to a minimum shutter speed (like 1/250th of a second). I personally don’t recommend this, as it means your camera is *always* shooting at 1/250th of a second. You ideally always want the fastest shutter speed possible (ideally a shutter speed faster than 1/1000th of a second). Therefore manually setting your ISO is a better option.

Furthermore, realize that zone focusing only works when there is good light. It will work during the day, but not at night when it is dark. When you’re shooting street photography at night and want to shoot quickly, you only have two options: shoot with a high ISO (1600+) wide-open (f/2.8, f/2, etc.) or shot with a flash (you can still shoot at f/8).

Another common misconception: if you shoot street photography with a Leica, you don’t want to shoot street photography wide-open during the day. The Leica (and other rangefinders) were designed to be shot at f/8 so you could intentionally get everything in focus. This allows you to shoot really quickly when you’re on the streets. Essentially you should pre-focus your lens, bring it up to your eye, and then click quickly.

Also note that zone focusing works best with wide-angle lenses. Ideally you want your lens to be a 35mm or a 28mm. 50mm can work okay as well, but the longer your lens is, the less depth-of-field your lens has. Therefore if you're shooting at f/8 on a 28mm lens, you have more depth-of-field than shooting f/8 on a 50mm lens. Therefore if you're shooting with "zone focusing" on a 50mm, you might want to use an aperture of f/11 or f/16.

Also here are some helpful rules-of-thumb when it comes to shooting with "zone focusing":

First of all, you want to be good judging distances. If you are standing on one side of the sidewalk and looking at the other side of the sidewalk— do you know how far that distance is in meters or feet?

To be really good with zone focusing, you want to be good at your distances. Here are some rules-of-thumb:

- .7 meters (1 arm-length away, also conveniently the minimum focusing distance on a Leica. If you're shooting with a Leica lens with a tab on the bottom of the lens, the tab is turned 45degrees to the left).
- 1.2 meters (2 arm-lengths away. If you shoot with a Leica lens with a tab on the bottom of the lens, that dead center).
- 2 meters (3 arm lengths away. If you shoot with a Leica lens with a tab on the bottom of the lens, the tab is turned 45 degrees to the right).

Another practice you can do when you're just sitting at home or out in public is this: look at things a certain distance away from you and guess

the distance. Then pre-focus to what you think the distance is, and check how correct (or incorrect you are).

Also some useful distances to gauge:

- The distance from one side of the sidewalk to the other
- Half the distance of a sidewalk
- The distance from one sidewalk to the other side of the street

Also depending on what prime lens or focal length you use, you want to know how your framing looks like at certain distances. For example on a 35mm lens, I know that at .7 meters (shooting vertically) I will shoot a chest-up photo of a person. On a 35mm lens at 1.2 meters (shooting vertically), I shoot their chest up. On a 35mm lens at 2 meters (shooting vertically), I capture a full-body shot of my subject.

How to carry your camera

The most important thing when you're out shooting street photography is always have your camera on and ready to shoot. I recommend turning off the LCD review screen, which causes you to "chimp" (check your LCD screen) while shooting– which is a distraction when you're shooting on the streets.

I personally shoot with a neck strap, others like using a wrist strap. Use whatever is comfortable for you.

I also recommend using small messenger bags when you're shooting on the streets, so you can have quick and easy access to your camera.

How to shoot on the streets

When you're shooting street photography, I recommend not running around like a madman– but to enjoy yourself. Enjoy the walk, and walk at a comfortable pace. Don't feel you have to hunt the shots, be relaxed and let the shots come to you.

Generally in terms of time of day– it is best to shoot during golden hour (sunrise and sunset). This is when the light is the best, and when you will get beautifully illuminated subjects, and epic shadows.

Furthermore, I recommend generally when you're shooting in a sidewalk, walk on the curbside, and shoot towards the buildings. This allows you to have fewer distractions in the background. When you shoot into the street, you will get lots of distractions like cars, trees, and distracting poles.

Furthermore, I personally like to shoot with a 'street photography buddy' (one friend I like to shoot on the streets). Sometimes I will be in small groups of 2–3, but anything more than that makes the streets too crowded. Personally I like to shoot in small groups as they give me motivation and confidence.

But then not everyone I know likes to shoot in a small group. If you prefer to shoot by yourself– that is totally cool too. You just have to know what your style is and personality type. If you're more extroverted (like I am), you will benefit shooting with another street photographer. If you are more introverted, you might prefer shooting alone (to Zen out by yourself).

I also personally get tired after walking for an hour or hour and a half (vigorously looking for shots). Therefore if you're out and feeling tired, stop by a cafe, get a coffee, tea, drink of water, or have a small meal. Shooting street photography shouldn't exhaust you so much that you don't enjoy the process.

Furthermore, the lighter you pack when you're out shooting, the more productive and happier you will be. The more stuff you bring, the slower you will be when shooting on the street, and the more tired you will become.

Not only that, but I personally find that when I'm out shooting street photography with a big bag— I end up over-stuffing it.

So when you're out shooting (if you need to bring a bag), bring the smallest bag possible). Also if possible, the best camera bag is no camera bag (just stuff some extra film or batteries into your pockets). And when you're shooting on the streets, I am a huge proponent of the “one camera, one lens” philosophy. The last thing you want to do is dick around changing your lenses and camera when you're shooting on the streets. You want to focus on shooting what is in front of you.

In terms of music— I know some street photographers who like to plug in their headphones and jam out when shooting on the streets. Personally if this works for you go for it. I know this helps some people feel less anxious when shooting on the streets.

But the downside of shooting to music is that you don't hear stuff like oncoming traffic (don't get run over), and you might also miss out on

interesting conversations that could lead to interesting street photographs.

This is also a bit random, but I find shooting on an empty stomach very unpleasant. Try to eat a small bite before shooting (enough to appease your appetite, not enough to make you feel full). When you're feeling tired, always drink a lot of water and have a shot of espresso or sip of tea if needed.

When you're shooting on the streets, you might wonder where you should go. Personally my recommendation is just follow your curiosity. Don't always take the same route when you're shooting (it will lead to boredom and burnout). Rather, try to explore different places for novelty, and to keep you fresh and recharged.

Also needless to say, shoot with a comfortable pair of shoes. This is probably the best investment in terms of photography "gear" you can make.

Chapter 7: Street photography assignments/exercises

So if you're new to shooting street photography and need some challenges to try out, here are some to get you started:

Assignment #1: The .7 meter (1-arm-length) challenge

One of the most frightening things in street photography is to get close and intimate with your subjects. There is a quote by famous Magnum photographer Robert Capa, “If your photos aren’t good enough, you’re not close enough.” I feel this is a great way to describe street photography—generally the closer you are to your subjects, the more intimate your photos feel, and the more connected your viewers can make with your subjects.

So for this challenge, pre-focus your camera to .7 meters (minimum focusing distance on a Leica), and for a month you’re only allowed to shoot at that distance (about an arm length-away).

So if you’re shooting on the streets, you will be forced to interact and talk with strangers (if you want to shoot that close).

Also by shooting that close and keeping your camera at .7 meters, you will get more comfortable being at a close proximity with people. The more you practice shooting at a close proximity, the less awkward and strange it will feel.

Assignment #2: The 5 “yes”, 5 “no” challenge

I mentioned this assignment in overcoming your fear of shooting street photography section— but the concept is quite simple. For an entire day, you are going to approach a bunch of strangers and ask them to take their portrait. The goal is you need 5 people to say “yes” and 5 people to say “no”. Keep shooting until you get all 5 “yes’s” and all 5 “no’s”.

This will force you to be persistent with your fear of approaching strangers, and learn how to better deal with rejection.

Assignment #3: The 10 “no” challenge

This is an offshoot of the 2nd assignment, but essentially you approach a bunch of strangers, and try to get 10 people to say “no” to having their photographs taken.

I think this is a great assignment because in street photography we often have a huge fear of rejection. But in reality, the rejection itself isn’t so bad.

So quickly try to get 10 people to reject you. Purposefully approach 10 unfriendly/scary looking people. You might be surprised how difficult it is to get 10 people to say “no” at once.

Assignment #4: The “no overlap” challenge

Another assignment you can try in street photography is to take a bunch of photographs and try to not have your subjects overlap. Overlapping subjects in street photography is one of the biggest distractions.

So when you’re shooting, try to put enough white space between your subjects, the background, the trees in the background, the cars in the background, or any other subjects.

By trying to not have your subjects overlap with distracting elements in the background, it forces you to be more conscious about making cleaner backgrounds.

Assignment #5: The 1000 photograph challenge

Some street photographers don't shoot enough when they're in the street. They will go an entire day, and be so intimidated and shutter-shy, that they only shoot 20 photos in an entire day.

To overcome this problem, you purposefully try to take 1000 photos in one day. This forces you to "work the scene" and take multiple photographs of a single subject, rather than just taking 1 photograph and running away.

Assignment #6: Smile, wave, "thank you"

For this assignment you're going to shoot street photography candidly and without permission. But once you are caught photographing a stranger, your assignment is to simply look straight at them, smile, wave, and say "thank you".

This is one of the best ways to disarm people, especially if they feel intimidated by being photographed. Not only that, but smiles are contagious.

Assignment #7: Talk to a stranger

This is an assignment you can do (even when you're not shooting street photography). For an entire day, try to talk to every stranger you pass or interact with.

You can start off with small chat– ask people how their day is going, what they think of the weather, or any other current events. The more

comfortable you are interacting and talking with strangers, the more comfortable you will be photographing them.

Assignment #8: The elimination assignment

One of the biggest problems a lot of street photographers face in their work is having too much clutter in their frame.

So this assignment focuses on trying to eliminate more and more from your frame– until you are left with the “essence” of the scene.

Start off by shooting a scene, and every shot afterwards try to eliminate even more from the scene. So if you take 10 shots, each step try to remove more and more clutter from the frame. This might mean stepping closer to your subject, or positioning yourself (crouching, taking a step to the left or right) to remove distractions from the background.

Assignment #9: Look at the edges

Another assignment you can pursue is looking at the edges of the frame when shooting street photography.

When the most of us shoot street photography, we become tunnel-visioned. We only focus on the center of the frame, and totally disregard the edges.

So for this assignment, don't look at the center of the frame when you're shooting– focus on the edges when you're shooting.

This assignment will help you a lot with making better frames, filling the frame, and having less clutter.

Assignment #10: The “telephone pole” assignment

The idea of the “telephone pole” assignment is simple: find a busy street corner, and simply perch yourself there for 30 minutes–1 hour.

The idea is that you will be like a telephone pole, and totally blend in with the environment. People will start ignoring you, and you will feel much more at ease photographing strangers. Not only that, but you will realize that most people don’t mind being photographed – especially if you are stationary (and they are walking into your frame).

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Thank you very much for reading my “Street Photography 101” book– an introduction to street photography and a primer.

While this book isn’t complete with all the information regarding street photography– it is certainly a strong starting point. Down the line, I hope to either add to this book (or continue producing different books on street photography).

Remember that street photography isn’t just taking photos in the streets– it is a way of life. Street photography is a way for you to live life more fully, more vividly, and gives you the opportunity to engage with others and the world.

Street photography is something that has transformed my life for the better– and I am sure that it will help you as well. Street photography will make you more confident, make you more adventurous, and help you appreciate the beauty of the mundane and everyday aspects of life.

If you’ve enjoyed this book, please share it with a friend. Also this book is “open-source” – meaning that it is free to distribute, you can edit it, remix it however you see fit.

To conclude, all information is useless unless you act upon it. So I encourage you– take up your camera and hit the streets! Don’t let fear get in your way– the streets are waiting for you.

More street photography e-books

If you want to learn more about street photography, I recommend reading my other free e-books:

1. [31 Days to Conquer Your Fear of Shooting Street Photography](#)
2. [The Street Photography Project Manual](#)
3. [The Social Media Blackbook for Photographers](#)

Let’s connect

If you want to learn more about street photography, or just say hello you can connect with me below:

- [Blog](#)

- [Facebook](#)
- [Twitter](#)
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Conquer your fears and meet new peers

If you're interested in learning more about street photography, conquering your fears of shooting street photography, and want to meet other passionate street photographers– I would love to have you at one of my upcoming street photography workshops. You can see [my upcoming street photography workshops](#).