

ALEX COGHE

The Street Photographer Quick Start



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## A definition

Un-posed, un-staged photography which captures, explores or questions contemporary society and the relationships between individuals and their surroundings. In simpler words: People in candid situations in public places.

It's a genre of photography that comes from reportage, specifically from straight photography that was a kind of documentary photography. We can affirm street photography is part of documentary photography, but different from photojournalism for motivations and aesthetics.

## What is Straight Photography?

It was a photographic movement that reproduced in an objective reality without the aid of any technical implementation. It had its neuralgic center in the United States, in relation to the spread of documentary photography.

“Anything that can alter the picture automatically makes the shot less pure and therefore less true.”

Among the most important photographers that may be associated to this movement:

Lewis Hine

Alfred Stieglitz

Paul Strand

Walker Evans

Helen Levitt

Dorothea Lange

## The crystallization of street photography

We begin to talk about street photography only in the 60s. In fact we can talk that his birth occurred in New York with freelance photographers in the front line such as Lee Friedlander, Joel Meyerowitz and Garry Winogrand.

We can then speak of genre that was born in the '60s breaking away from reportage to become a branch of photography with particular aesthetics and motivations, and a new approach. In many cases, Street photography brings yet typical elements of pop culture of the '50s and '60s, where the Big Apple continues to be model city the ideal location for street aesthetics. Street photography is the snapshot of urban life seen on the street in his everyday life and in all its aspects: irony, tragedy, unpredictability, beauty and even cruelty.

The images of this photographic genre are the mirror of society, the people who compose it, captured during the life of every day somewhere keen eye for the nuances of the human comedy that is in progress in public spaces. Being a street photographer means being in tune with life, perceive the moods, smells, colors, live it with intensity and then trying to represent it only when it is absorbed.

The “genetic” father of Street Photography is Henri Cartier Bresson.

Real father of Street Photography: Robert Frank with the book “The Americans”.

The Godfathers can be considered Lee Friedlander, Joel Meyerowitz and Garry Winogrand.

Not all photos taken on the street can be considered street. Indeed we can speak of aesthetics for this street. It is not just a fact of decisive moment. Often the photographer in the street is focused to document the energy and representing a story taking a snapshot of the moment, a moment captured with instinct and the eye, the ability to see what the others are not able to see.

If street photography was a kind of music would be jazz. Or rock 'n' roll. Genres that have their improvisation.

Despite we are used to associate the genre with black and white so much street photography today is in color. Joel Meyerowitz began shooting in color in 1962.

We can talk of 2 different languages: with black and white tend to focus on the essence of the shot and the story. In this sense the black and white is more simple and often can solve some problems.

Street Photography uses the raw approach of straight photography from which derives. Street Photography is unstaged photography, a challenge of the photographer with himself, an attitude, a state of mind. Street Photography is a reflection of every day life through the eye of a photographer able to document the ordinary capturing the decisive moment, or what others don't see.

To give a comprehensive definition of street photography is not easy. You might begin by saying that it is a photographic genre, more precisely a kind of reportage. Street photography is indeed a snapshot of urban life on the street observed in his everyday life and in all its aspects: the irony, tragedy, unpredictability, cruelty and even beauty.

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

If you search on the web for articles concerning the history of street photography you have the impression that they all start from the origins of the “genre”, ranging from straight photography to documentary photography and reportage.

Correct, but if i ask you to give me an exact date corresponding to the origin of this photographic type, what would you reply?

I believe that real street photography was born in the '60s, in the years when in an emblematic city such as New York City (universally recognized as the capital of the genre by Joel Meyerowitz e Markus Hartel) there happened to be an intense re-evaluation of reportage. Lee Friedlander but especially Garry Winogrand focused on the unconditional capture of images of city life (famous is the portfolio entitled “New York” of 1963).

In perfect continuity with reportage and the new born street photography, Leica accustomed a fetish camera to capture scenes containing subjects that were unconsciously photographed, without giving any importance to the preparation of the scene or posing of the aforementioned subjects.

Winogrand, Meyerowitz and Friedlander took an huge quantity of photographs (in the order of several hundreds of thousands), gaining a trustful and economic support by the Guggenheim Foundation; in terms of exhibitions, they were both frequent guests of MOMA, in particular in 1967 – together with Diane Arbus – with the exhibition entitled “new documents”.

Street photography mixes with pop culture, and this is true to the present day where often pictures that obtain the greatest success are those that remind us of the mythical era, maybe even simply by a pair of sun glasses framed in white or by the face of an aged woman with fluffy hair (always rarer to come across nowadays).

This is also the reason why street photography is often in black and white. Something to reflect upon...

And street photography, in my opinion, has the need to maintain a certain level of aesthetics, leaving the freedom of language to anyone who has the possibility to explore other moods and mental facades, even towards the most futuristic of beings.

But street photography will always inevitably take source from the pop culture, because the city and metropolis is pop, the ideal jungle (although not the only one) figuring as perfect location for snapshots by the street photographer.

Street Photography is a genre that can't be too constrained because it would limit it. But some pickets are needed to understand what we're talking.

we can say that the subject must be the man and his interactions with the environment but street photography is not only this.

The concept goes further and extended to everything that becomes part of everyday life of man, by interacting with him at various levels. Hence we can speak of street photographs that include animals, as well as objects, as long as they can, while not showing it, to suggest and evoke the presence, existence or the human hand.

## A MATTER OF AESTHETICS

I consider the aesthetics of Street Photography the soul of the shot. We think for a moment that a particular happening takes place in a street and that two photographers photograph this moment. One of the two is a street photographer, the other a Reportage photographer. The trained eye of the street photographer will photograph the scene with a particular aesthetic and approach, the landscape photographer with another vision.

The point is: why? A Street Photographer focuses on details that other photographers do not see: this can be certain conditions of light, a particular association, a contrasting element, a bizarre element in the scene that captures the attention. The street photographer is focused on telling a story, possibly through a striking content.

The Reportage Photographer will do the same photo perhaps documenting the scene, but without some surreal element. It is a different approach to the medium Photography. “I could make Street Photography also on the moon”. This is a statement that I repeat often to my students: we can make Street Photography everywhere, also in our house. And, on the other hand, not all the shots taken in the street are Street Photography.

So to make good and relevant street photography we need to get familiar with certain aesthetics and a mental approach.

The problem with Street Photography is that it is impossible giving a comprehensive definition of the genre. Like we have seen in the first lesson is not enough that a photo is taken on the street to be called street photography: a bike in the street is not SP, the facade of a house is not SP, a staged portrait is not SP...

Street Photography is unstaged photography, a challenge of the photographer with himself, an attitude, a state of mind. Street Photography is a reflection of every day life through the eye of a photographer able to document the ordinary capturing the decisive moment, or what others don't see. I consider this genre personalistic and absolutely tied to the experience of the photographer. This is because a lot is based on what meets the photographer on his way.

I consider the collective of street photographers in public an important reference point for understanding the SP. On perfect context of formal photography we could even speak of bad photographs. The aesthetic beauty is not a priority of the SP, a priority is the content. We could speaking also of snapshots, but in a sense absolutely photographic and not like "snapshot taken by a tourist". This difference can sometimes become apparent only to a trained eye to SP. Remember that:

It is fundamental understanding the aesthetics and the motivations of street photography because this allows us to have a real focus on the genre, to understand the motivations will affects our approach and how we are taking pictures;

Each photographer of course has his eye, a personal approach and technique and this affects the aesthetics of his photography;

Bruce Gilden is deeply different by Alex Webb. So like Martin Parr and Joel Meyerowitz;

There are photographers more focused on eye contact or portraits, others prefer great locations and the interaction of the subjects with the environment, always documenting the human condition;

There are photos more complex, requiring a deeper knowledge of the genre;

Street Photography as our society is in constant change and we, as photographers, need to be sensitive and aware of the need to continue to study and being updated.

## THE APPROACH

The Street Photography is maybe the most difficult genre of photography. But it is a way to take photo and personal observations and statements, which can be fun and rewarding. Practiced by legendary photographers like Henri Cartier-Bresson, Garry Winogrand, Robert Doisneau, Robert Frank, Helen Levitt, and Elliott Erwitt, the street photography is a form of photography candid which however challenges the rules of composition and technique.

Street Photography also involves getting close to people. Shooting photographs of strangers in public places requires a bit of courage, quick reflexes and basic camera equipment. To do this kind of photography with success we must be on the scene, to be part of it, not a usual distant observer. The street photography is about telling a story in a single frame cleverly anticipating the actions and interactions. It's about seeing the visual puns, the serendipity, and the incongruities of humor in a confusing world. It is the ability to capture that unique and particular moment.

## STARTING WITH STREET PHOTOGRAPHY

To become a real street photographer means accepting to enter into a long process of study and dedication. In my experience as a street photographer and photo trainer I can say that we need to live this way to make photography as an attitude and lifestyle. We should accept the idea a street photographer can not turn off the switch and being always ready to document a story in front of our eyes.

It is a long term process but I can recommend some things to do to speed up or facilitate this personal journey:

- Before you even start with a camera document yourself: books and the internet are your allies. After all these years in-public is still the “first contact” website I recommend to my students. If you don’t know the masters, google: Henri Cartier Bresson, Helen Levitt, Joel Meyerowitz, Garry Winogrand, Lee Friedlander, William Klein, Robert Frank. You have already a good start-up.
- Without stopping to document yourself you need to start to go out with your camera. What camera? Any camera is OK, also your mobile phone. But I recommend you to start with a camera allowing you manual settings. Try also a film camera: it is a great school if you have serious intentions with photography and the ideal condition to create a solid background.
- In first instance go easy: use billboards to create juxtapositions and you will get invisibility photographing people in profile. Go to Downtown and prefer areas crowded with tourists.
- Observe always a lot and learn from your errors: keep any picture. Don’t delete anything. In front of the monitor of your computer also the bad shots, those completely wrong can help you to understand and not repeating in future the errors. You can read the exif data to learn. You can do this also with the pictures of other photographers: flickr can be a great opportunity for this.
- There are a lot of exercises you can do directly on the street: you can decide to stay in a corner where there is a lot of persons crossing. You can photograph a showcase, improving the composition and looking for the eye contact, better when you start because there is a mirror between your subject and you.
- Use one camera, one lens. You don’t need something more than this: a 35mm lens or a 28mm lens is sufficient, believe me. And a fixed lens is a great “teacher” if you want to learn about composition.

- You can decide to use only JPG if digital, or using just a roll, ASA 400 for example. Remember less is more, always to improve as a photographer.
- Stop to think about gear and to the next camera. Street Photography is not about the camera but about the ideas and the ability of the photographer to capture a moment with a story. I know cameras are beautiful toys and nothing wrong with to be as a child when you buy a new camera, but stop to be obsessed with this. It is better to save money for books and new destinations where you can photograph.

## THE GREAT MESSAGE FROM THE MASTERS

Garry Winogrand, one of my favourites, is famous for having exposed three rolls of Kodak TRI-X black and white film (but also color) on the streets of New York City every day of his life. This means 100 pictures a day, 36,500 a year, a million every 30 years. Winogrand died relatively young in 1984 leaving more than 2500 rolls of film exposed but undeveloped, 6500 rolls developed but not proofed, and 3000 rolls proofed but not examined (a total of a third of a million unedited exposures).

A street photographer takes a lot of photographs and as street photographer we don't need to have fear to take a lot of photographs. The editing will make the rest and our personal story as photographers. With digital this is still easier.

I could make other examples, like the Japanese Daido Moriyama and Nobuyoshi Araki. The message is shoot, shoot and shoot.

## TECHNIQUE

The classic advice for street photographers consists of choosing a moderately wide-angle (28mm on a full-frame camera) lens to a camera, setting the ISO to a correct high speed depending by the camera and lens (I use 1600 on my Leica to simulate in digital the TRI-X film aesthetics), and pre-focusing the lens. Pre-focusing? Yeah, I mean Zone Focus.

I recommend you to read this guide to zone focus I published on my blog:

<http://www.alexcoghe.com/a-guide-to-understand-and-using-zone-focus-for-street-photography/>

Street photographers traditionally will set the lens at its hyperfocal distance but remember that this distance depends on the lens focal length and the aperture. With a fast film and a sunny day, I will probably be able to expose at f/16. With a 35mm lens focused to, say, 9 feet, subjects between 4.5 feet and infinity will be acceptably sharp : "acceptable" means "if the person viewing the final photograph doesn't stick his eyes right up against it. f/16 is a way to go many times with my Leica in a sunny day due to the fact I will use the camera as a snapshot camera, but I am aware to change the settings depending by the changes of the light conditions.

When you start many of the pictures will be ruined due to poor focus, subject motion, bad composition, shutter lag . Don't feel bad at all: it is pretty normal.

TO START

[http://www.in-public.com/information/what\\_is](http://www.in-public.com/information/what_is)

<http://nickturpin.com/words/undefining-street-photography/>

STREET PHOTOGRAPHY COLLECTIVES

<http://www.in-public.com/>

<http://www.street-photographers.com/>

<http://www.burnmyeye.org/>

<http://www.thatslife.in/>

<http://calle35.com/>

<http://noise-collective.tumblr.com/>

<http://www.spontanea.org/>

<http://www.seconds2real.com/>

<http://www.public-life.org/>

<http://www.stratacollective.com>

<http://www.streephers.com/>

<http://strange.rs/>

<http://eyegobananas.com/>

## MAGAZINES

<http://streetreverbmagazine.com/>

<http://www.theinspiredeye.net/>

<http://www.burnmagazine.org/>

<http://www.americansuburbx.com/>

<http://streetphotographernotebook.tumblr.com/>

## VARIOUS RESOURCES

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Street\\_photography](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Street_photography)

<http://www.nonphotography.com/streetphotography.html>

<http://invisiblephotographer.asia/>

<http://streetphotographynowproject.wordpress.com/>

## BLOGS

<http://www.sevensevennine.com/>

<http://blakeandrews.blogspot/>

<http://www.beyond-obvious.com/>

<http://blog.leica-camera.com>

If your street photographs aren't good enough, you're not living the street enough.

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Do you like this book? You can buy the guide to street photography on my official website:

<http://www.alexcoghe.com/download/the-street-photography-guide/>

And I published recently another one, focused more on aesthetics and approach:

<http://www.alexcoghe.com/from-the-street/>