

EDITORIAL

Are scars beautiful? That depends on the beholder doesn't it. Scars invoke the memory of difficult moments. One could make the argument that society tries to avoid scars. In the first world a lot of women try to keep the scars of time away through the use of cosmetics and or surgery (now even men do) suggesting that they –the wrinkles– reveal age and ought to be something to vanish. However men are more willing to offer their scars as proof of having survived under duress, it's debatable that it exemplifies their maleness.

How our likeness appears within a picture is at times a difficult discussion. We all want to put the "best spin" on what we perceive to be the best "angle". I believe this is a very legitimate attitude, but it is not always well understood. That is because sometimes the subject is really mistaken as to what makes him or her "look good". Again, there is no universal correct response to such an issue either. No one can assure that presenting ones' scars (or wrinkles) is going to lead to anyone's approval; the ultimate measure is how does the subject feel about it all, regardless of the end result.

The struggle seems to be between the photographer and his creative impulses and that of the person depicted in the image. In more advanced societies the rights of the person photographed are protected through the use of "model release" forms which insure that the person in the image is actually comfortable with the photograph, before allowing it's publication.

But what happens to all those less protected by a legal system where there is no recourse? Photographers have traditionally traveled throughout the world considering it their God given right to imprint their film with anyone's image regardless of what his or her opinions about the subject might be. I have myself participated extensively in this double standard of asking permission when the circumstance demanded that I do, and neglecting to do the same towards those who were less understanding about the photographic process. I am not proud of this lopsided process, but the truth is that this is what has happened and most probably will continue in the future, as much as one would like to avoid it.

At stake in this debate is our freedom as photographers vs. the individual rights of those depicted. Freedom as in creative expression or documentary responsibility. There are no easy answers. Imagine a photographer documenting the atrocities perpetrated in a war zone. I can imagine that asking for permission to make pictures would be the last thing on his or her mind. Or what about photographing someone walking on the street. Is that a space that belongs to the public domain? And therefore asking to make pictures does not make sense, or are there exceptions to such situations.

For photographers, the argument has been that “if I asked”, the photographic moment (decisive moment ?) would have been lost by the time I could have received permission. But in all fairness this argument is not quite as solid as it sounds, because there is no difference between the “photographic moment” which could have been lost when it happens in the first world to one in a third world situation. If photography can still be carried out within the framework where strict approval is required in the first world, then one also has to make the effort in situations that might be more relaxed about such questions. It’s about justice, isn’t it?

To take a short cut is very tempting for a photographer. Why ask for permission when it is not strictly required? And the answer is rather simple. Because when possible the courtesy of “asking rather than grabbing” is seen over the world as the preferable choice. The question then becomes, do we need or want to be courteous all the time? In a perfect world the response is quite obvious. That leaves the other half of the question unanswered, what about in an imperfect world, what should it be? I know, “grabbing” is unavoidable in an imperfect world. For instance in photojournalism, a scenario could be: while I would ask for permission, my competing colleague already grabbed the image. Solution? As in all such cases, there are no fast and easy answers. To establish rules that are universal would be sheer folly as the diversity of how the image making process goes is too diverse to come up with one dimensional rules.

So let us get back to requesting permission to publish, which is not always possible, as in good conscience one can say that sometimes it is impossible to locate the people in an image. Also there are situations where the simple participation of the person or persons in a picture is tantamount to an informal “model release”. This occurs as when a friend allows another to make a picture of her or him, or a relative participates willingly in the ritual of picture taking. One also has to recognize that many of the issues around “model release” have less to do with the issue of satisfying the person’s control over their image, than with sheer economic issues of making money out the sale of a picture.

Most recently with the advances of digital technology I have been able to show those I photograph the results right away. My camera even has a small monitor to show the picture as soon as the shutter is pressed. I show the picture, and my subjects either like it or not, and we continue with our visual explorations. The subjects are hesitant when looking at themselves, no one seems to like how they look (and neither does anyone like how their voice sounds) and very often they are not quite sure as to how they really feel about the image. The photographer’s reassurance becomes very important during those moments of anxiety when a gaze is exchanged, suggesting the question: “ I don’t look good in that picture, do I?”

Yes, you look great ! Remember scars are the evidence of life. There are other scars however that are not external, and for the thoughtful photographer these can be seized as well. The challenge is to enter those spaces mostly with permission.

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