

Revisiting Street Photography



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by Pedro Meyer

Four years ago, this very month, I wrote on the topic of "street photography". I was disheartened then with the problems related to making images on the street. Be those in conjunction with the security of the photographer or his equipment and the sheer refusal of so many people to being photographed. Many of you wrote us sharing your views on this matter, some disagreed but most of you did find equally discomforting experiences.

We also received considerable comments on the lack of interest of Galleries and Publications for this genre of photography. It also seems that the number of you making pictures on the street has reduced in numbers judging by the Portfolios section in ZoneZero, in contrast to the high numbers of the long standing tradition of "street photography" done in the past.

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Out of a total of 480 Portfolios, published in ZoneZero, only 49 have images one could consider as "street photography". We have therefore decided to do something about this, by creating in the Portfolios area, an entirely new section, dedicated solely to the genre of "street photography". Something which looking back, we should have done already four years ago.

I am glad to report, that all is not lost as some of us had felt. I have just been to Madrid, in Spain, and my experience of photographing on the street there, contradicts entirely what I had stated back in 1999, and what many of you had come to believe as well. Not only did I feel safe photographing on the streets there, obviously taking the needed precautions one would take in any major city in a contemporary world, but the people were inviting and totally at ease with the notion of having a camera pointed at them. Even photographing in the streets of Mexico City, has become somewhat safer. Technological developments since 1999, have also introduced some new variables that are quite interesting. For instance, the more recent digital cameras have the ability to expand their ASA rating to much higher ratings than before, providing us with a very good degree of low level light sensibility while at the same time having relatively little image noise. Then there are some new filters for noise reduction, also contributing mightily to making low level light photography a very reasonable option. So the quality of what the image can look like has been considerably expanded. The speed and reaction of digital cameras has been improved considerably, something that is quite essential to street photography. You can hardly capture the quintessential "decisive moment", stylistically so linked to street photography, if your camera is never there ready for you when you need it.

Well, today with higher sensibility, higher quality of image information, and greater handling speed, we are ready to see a significant growth in this sector of photography that has been largely abandoned. But the good news do not stop there. We have also found a plethora of potent new digital cameras which are very small and unobtrusive, while retaining some of the traits of larger cameras,

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making the possibility for making pictures on the street something less of a security issue as one can carry them in one's pocket and bring them out only when needed and under conditions that do not invite aggressions.

As to the publication of the images of street photography, some have complained there is no market for them. That Galleries are not interested in showing them. Well that is not entirely true. I have received numerous press releases telling us about shows that are related precisely to street photography. (the Paul Kopeikin Galley in Los Angeles, by sheer chance, being the latest one www.paulkopeikingallery.com)

The possibility of printing these pictures to large formats, is something that also eluded most of us who had the traditional dark rooms in the past. Now with digital cameras, we can also go to larger format printing, which is something well appreciated in the Gallery circuits.

In addition to the possibility for making your work seen through the Gallery circuit, sites such as ZoneZero are bringing the work of street photographers, to audiences world wide, in numbers that would have been only dreamed off before. No traditional Gallery in the world has the possibility to offer the exposure to such work that it can garner through sites that are visited in large numbers over the internet.

We are at the threshold of new paradigm changes in photography, and as with everything else in the world, the term adaptation seems to be the driving force. Street photography has undergone a rather dark period for some years, and I believe that we are going to enter a new one with substantial changes in this direction.

However, there is one major issue that I still have pending, and that is the notion of the "decisive moment", the more I come up against it, the more convinced

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I am that we have to move on and understand that all the attributes that have been attached to the so called decisive moment are nothing but romantic notions pertaining more than anything to an era belonging to the birth of the 35 mm camera. The assumption that we can actually see all the elements within the frame of the so called "decisive moment" is just a whole lot of nonsense. It does not serve well to educate photographers under such fictitious aspirations.

The image I have shown here, although I am the author of it, would never lead me to suggest that I could have seen all the wonderful things to come together in this image at the moment of actually clicking the shutter. To take credit for this, would simply be wrong, there is no way I could have seen the simultaneous realities of all those visual planes operating in parallel. Of course, one can argue the very Zen idea of perception, that I did not have to see it all, in order to see it all. That I saw everything with my third eye. That I saw with my intuition, and so on. Well fine, let us suppose this all could be true, but then why does this not happen every time when I go out to photograph? after all, my intentions are no different from one day to the other. If I have developed the skills that served me so well on day A, why would they elude me on days B,C, D and so on?

I would say it has to do with luck, above all. So, yes you also have to have luck in finding and making good images. But how does one teach "luck" to students? You see what I mean? If artistic performance is to be measured largely by the contribution of luck, I think we are missing something very fundamental. The "decisive moment" is a very flawed concept of image production, that has done a lot of harm to a lot of photographers who have seen their efforts vanish into thin air, as they seldom were able to find the images that would stand up to such an unrealistic expectation, of being able to see all the parts of the image within a fraction of a second, in order to make them all fit and coincide marvelously at the time of triggering the shutter. It just does not happen that way.

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This notion of the “decisive moment” has also been one of those burdens that street photography has had to endure, hopefully we will also make some inroads into reconsidering the possibilities that digital photography can offer us to create the images that might otherwise have eluded us. Some have described the process as a “magic ” moment when all things come together without being seen. OK, I prefer a bit less magic, and a lot more reliance on my abilities to use the tools as I need them, rather as they see fit to work by themselves. Maybe the good thing is that today we have the options open for doing them both ways.

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