

Street Photography



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It used to be that up to the 80's photographing on the street and walking around with a camera was a safe practice. If you respected people's privacy and were gentle in your approach towards the subjects, more often than not, people were either glad to participate in the ritual or at worst tolerated it.

I started to notice a gradual disappearance of what traditionally was called "street photography". I could not find a suitable explanation for that until I traveled extensively throughout the United States in pursuit of fulfilling a Guggenheim Fellowship that I had received; the subject of the project was to capture street life in the United States.

Two major issues came to my attention. One was the disappearance almost everywhere of any downtown life. Those parts of the city had become populated mostly by parking lots and empty streets, with whatever was left of "life" taking place inside tall buildings. What used to be a bustling environment around commerce, had now been displaced towards the "shopping mall" located in the suburbs. "Street life" changed from being in a public -city- space to that of a private -corporate- one, the mall. The malls usually forbid one to walk around taking pictures. I was personally evicted several times for doing so without permission: I was on private property, I was told.

In this latter environment, any traditional “street life” worth photographing has practically evaporated anyway. The second issue that emerged was safety. In those areas of the city where indeed some life was worth photographing, it was not such a hot idea to walk around with a camera hanging from your shoulder or neck. Tough neighborhoods had lots of life, to be sure, but unless you BELONGED, you would be safer not making yourself present with such equipment.

In Mexico, which has always been a bastion for street photography, this practice also suffered, but here it was more safety related, than from “life” displaced to shopping malls. Although there are a number of such commercial centers which imitate the American shopping centers, street life is still pretty much prevalent throughout the rest of the city. However, walking around with a camera is not something you want to do so readily, that is, if you want to avoid being mugged and lose your equipment aside from any physical danger which might come your way in the process of such a holdup. Today, walking around Caracas, Rio de Janeiro or Bogota is not very different from the experience of Mexico City. It stands to reason that if you are walking around with a camera, amidst poverty, the provocation to be relieved of your possessions can be understood as some confused notion of distributing wealth.

All these realities are in marked contrast to the experience I’ve had in most of western Europe, where walking around in the street with a camera does not carry the same security connotations as in the Americas. In most of Western Europe they have better safety records as well as plenty of life going on in their downtown quarters. Compare downtown London or Milan, to Houston, Pittsburgh or Los Angeles, and you will think that life in such US cities had been extracted with a technique like liposuction. There is little life left on those city streets.

The question is then, given that the Europeans have ampler resources to create “street photography” images, why is it that not more Europeans have made it their tradition than what can be observed today. One line of thinking is that this tradition has been conceptually exhausted. Another is that such imagery does not sell very easily, it isn’t decorative enough I would venture to guess, and therefore is discouraged as not sellable. A third possibility has to do with what is being published these days and therefore might have the possibility to generate income. In reality there is a close relationship between the decline of “street photography” with the downward spiral that has been experienced in the photographic marketplace during the late nineties by documentary photographers or photojournalists.

Today the images that sell well are those that depict stars, people that are either fa-

mous or nearly famous, the “wanabes” (want to be: famous). They come from the world of sports, film or music, or simply because of their wealth; mind you no teachers, poets, or farmers. The emphasis today IS on celebrity photographs. I believe this is the outcome of societies whose values have become more individualistic than ever before. The celebrity is, by definition, self-centered and narcissistic. The images of “life on the streets” had to do more with genuine concerns for the other, a sense of the collective, a more humanistic photography if you will. Today even those topics which would like to express a degree of humanity at large, tend to play to the most basic sentimentalism. Which together with “celebrity pictures” have become the other great topic of most publications and television presentations. Hard news which are very close to Soap Operas, that is what sells. And the distinction between them is ever smaller.

So where do we go from here? If I was forced to make some sort of prediction, I would venture to say that the Internet will play a major role in reviving both the interest and dedication to a more humanistic photography. The photographic community has always had a very healthy dedication to such imagery, and I am sure the Internet will provide ways and means to make such work more readily available again as the risks -from an economical point of view- will be diminished, and the niche markets will surely develop to give support to such work.

Digital technologies will play a major role in all of this happening. With photographers being able to spin off both video and still images from the same source, there is going to be a redeployment of what have been the traditional destinations for such work. Already there are film makers who are using modest camcorders to create films that are later being upgraded to 35mm for mainstream cinemas. In the process they can also document as would a still photographer with such images being used for other purposes than strictly a film.

Some digital cameras are today less obtrusive and visible, therefore can be carried around with less risk. They can be shot from angles that are usually not associated “with taking a picture”. I have been surprised of many times I have been able to photograph in situations where the expectations of me holding a camera to my eyes would have impeded me from taking the picture.

We can repurpose videos and pictures towards the Internet in new ways, to do so is obviously going to be a transition that depends more on the issues of bandwidth (the speed at which you can access the information) than on the interest people have for certain topics. With these potential new markets, new possibilities will emerge for photographers, where content will be the driving force.

We have had some experiences at ZoneZero which are encouraging. The work that we show, as you well know if you are a frequent visitor to our site, is one of photography with content, all within a humanistic tradition. With the number of visitors continually on the rise, we sense there is indeed an interest for such work, in spite of all the opinions to the contrary.

We can imagine that at some point in the near future, we will be able to support the site both through advertising, commerce at our site (the sale of books for instance is also on the rise) and contributions from sponsors. We will also be giving courses in everything related to photography, which we hope will also generate some income. We do not think it is too farfetched to make the operation self-sufficient, and to be able to support the work of photographers.

Maybe the tradition of “street photography”, like all else in contemporary life, will have to find a new way of making images even though the intentions and the gaze might be similar. With new markets, will come new opportunities. What I am most confident about is that the need to comment on human nature and ordinary life, will not fade away, but rather come back with considerable strength.

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