On Street Photography

What is street photography? You don't need a dictionary to define it. Study the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson, Andre Kertesz, David Seymour (Chim), Robert Doisneau, Willy Ronis, Brassai, Walker Evans, Elliott Erwitt, Mark Riboud, Garry Winogrand, Helen Levitt and Robert Frank, who are only a few of the masters of

street, and you'll have a much better appreciation for what street photography is than words can give you.

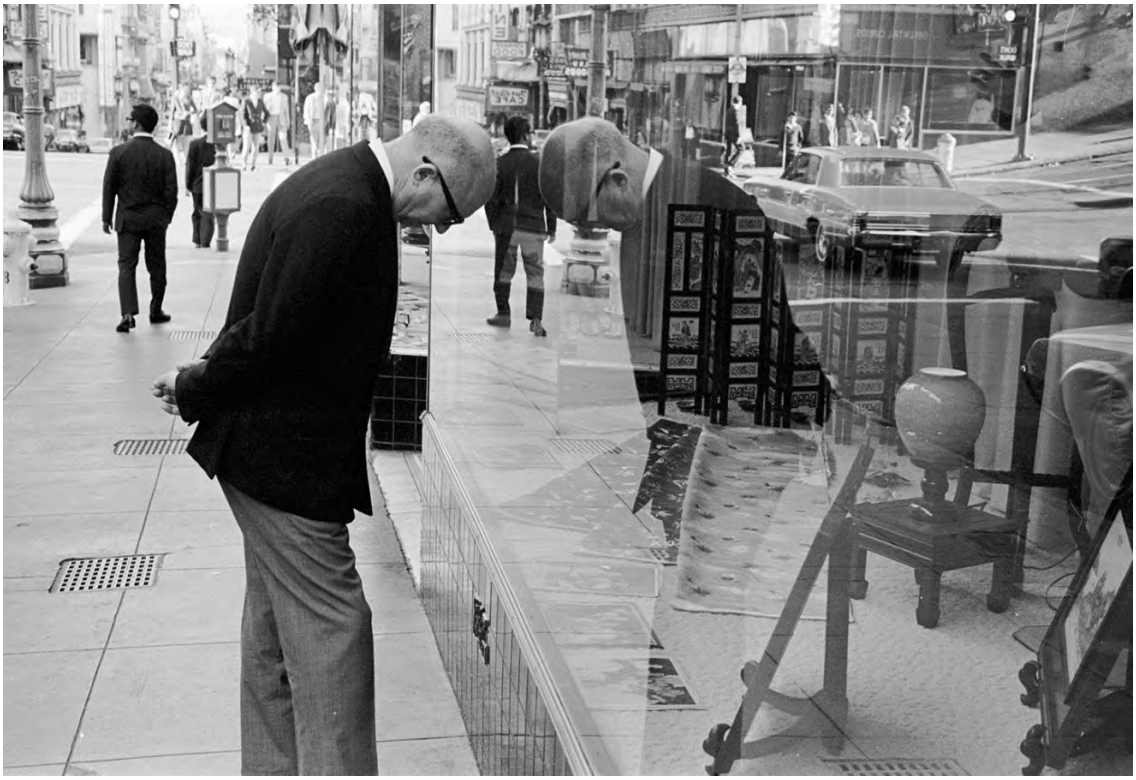
Street photography often is confused with photojournalism because, in a sense, both are documentary photography. In my own understanding of the term a street photograph must involve a story. Notice that I didn't say, "tell a story." A good street photograph doesn't need to make you understand its story. Ambiguity can

add to a street photograph's impact, but a story has to be there even if its meaning is hidden.

Photojournalism, on the other hand, seeks to tell an understandable story, and ambiguity is ruled out. The central picture in a photojournalistic spread may qualify as a street photograph, but the story's peripheral, clarifying pictures usually can't. You can see an example of this in Cartier-Bresson's book, *The People of Moscow*. If you're familiar with Henri's street photography you'll recognize that though the pictures in the book reflect his mastery of composition, many of them don't contain the depth that would make them good street photographs.

Street photography is about how people are: not as they are after a photographer's hassled them and not as they are when they're posing, but as they are in an uninterrupted state. Elliott Erwitt's picture of a woman pulling a pistol-equipped, arm-like lever on an evil-looking slot machine in his "Las Vegas, Nevada, 1954" is street photography. So is his heartrending picture of Jackie and Bobby Kennedy at John Kennedy's funeral. But his fine informal portraits of Marilyn Monroe and Che Guevara aren't.

So with that definition in mind, let's ask a question: why would anyone do street photography? What's significant enough about people interacting with other people and with their surroundings to make it worthwhile to go out with a camera and



shoot pictures of people who are complete strangers, and to risk disapproval and even downright anger if you're caught doing it?

Of course, if you've been bitten by the street photography bug you already know the answer to that question. There's a rush of satisfaction when you realize you've caught an image that has the power, like a finely wrought poem, to convey something about human existence that words, by themselves, can't convey.

Cartier-Bresson's “Behind the Gare St. Lazare” is a perfect example of some of the things a photograph needs in order to be a real street photograph. The action itself is straightforward: the man has jumped off the ladder and is about to land in the water. His splayed legs are echoed by the splayed legs of a dancer in a poster on the fence behind him. The picture is an example of great composition, the kind of intuitive geometry for which HCB was famous. But why has the man walked toward the flood on the little ladder? Since it's obvious he's not dressed for wading why is he jumping into the water? There's another man in the picture, slouching behind a fence. What's he doing there? Why is the partially destroyed poster on that desolate fence? Then there are a chimney and some foggy roofs in the background that give an ominous flavor to the whole thing. It's an arresting and mysterious image – exactly what a street photograph should be.

Few of us will ever shoot the equivalent of "Behind the Gare St. Lazare." But how do you go about getting a photograph that meets the basic requirements of a good street photograph, even if it's something much less than the "Gare?"

One thing most of us shouldn't do is walk down the street like Bruce Gilden, wearing a mesh photographer's vest, carrying a camera in one hand and a flashgun in the other, shoving the camera and flashgun into people's faces and blinding them. I'm always amazed when I see a decent street picture by Gilden, and I'm always amazed when I realize Gilden's still alive. Gilden's

flashgun blows out the faces of most of his subjects and he's not photographing people as they are. He's photographing people as they are after he's hassled them.

How do you find good street photographs? You can't plan street photography the way you can plan studio photography or landscape photography or even wildlife photography. There's that old saw: "f/8 and be there," and the "be there" part is right. You can't do street photography relaxing with a drink in front of your TV. And there's another old saw you should consider: "The best camera in the world is the one you have with you." The corollary, of course, is that if you're there without a camera you're out of luck. Yes, you need to take a camera with you when you go out, but the camera you have with you isn't going to lead you to a good photograph. I keep coming back to Cartier-Bresson because not only did his pictures define street photography, he was able to write about it coherently. He said: "Photographing is nothing. Looking is everything." And that's the key. You're unlikely to find a good street photograph unless your camera is in your hand and you're actively looking.

Another thing HCB said was: "approach tenderly, gently on tiptoe - even if the subject is a still life. A velvet hand, a hawk's eye - these we should all have." ...which sort of lets Bruce Gilden out of the picture. Or does it? If you look at Bruce's pictures on the Magnum photographers web page you'll see that in spite of

his nasty approach he's made some pretty good street photographs, as well as some pretty bad ones. So, how you approach your subjects is a subjective thing: something you have to work out for yourself. I'm of the Cartier-Bresson school of thought, but Gilden and others, like William Klein, have proven that's not the only possible school.

How do you capture a good street photograph? If you look carefully at the street photographs of masters like Cartier-Bresson, Elliott Erwitt, or Robert Frank you soon realize that the best of them are snapshots: gut reactions to what they saw before them, not planned intersections with the scene. There's no way HCB's conscious mind could have registered all the elements of the scene in "Behind the Gare St. Lazare" before he tripped the shutter. That truth is reinforced by the fact that "Gare" is one of only two photographs I know of that Cartier-Bresson cropped. He had to shove the camera's lens between two boards in a fence, and part of the left board was caught by the camera. You can see the original, un-cropped version in his book, *Henri Cartier Bresson: Scrapbook.*

So there are two things you need to learn to do: First, you need to practice composition to the point where it becomes intuitive. You don't have time to line up all those elements of geometry with, say, the rule of thirds. You have to see it whole in your viewfinder without stopping to analyze; to rely on your unconscious; to react instinctively. You also need to become so familiar with your camera that you don't have to think about it, any more than you have to think about shifting gears when you're driving a stick-shift car.

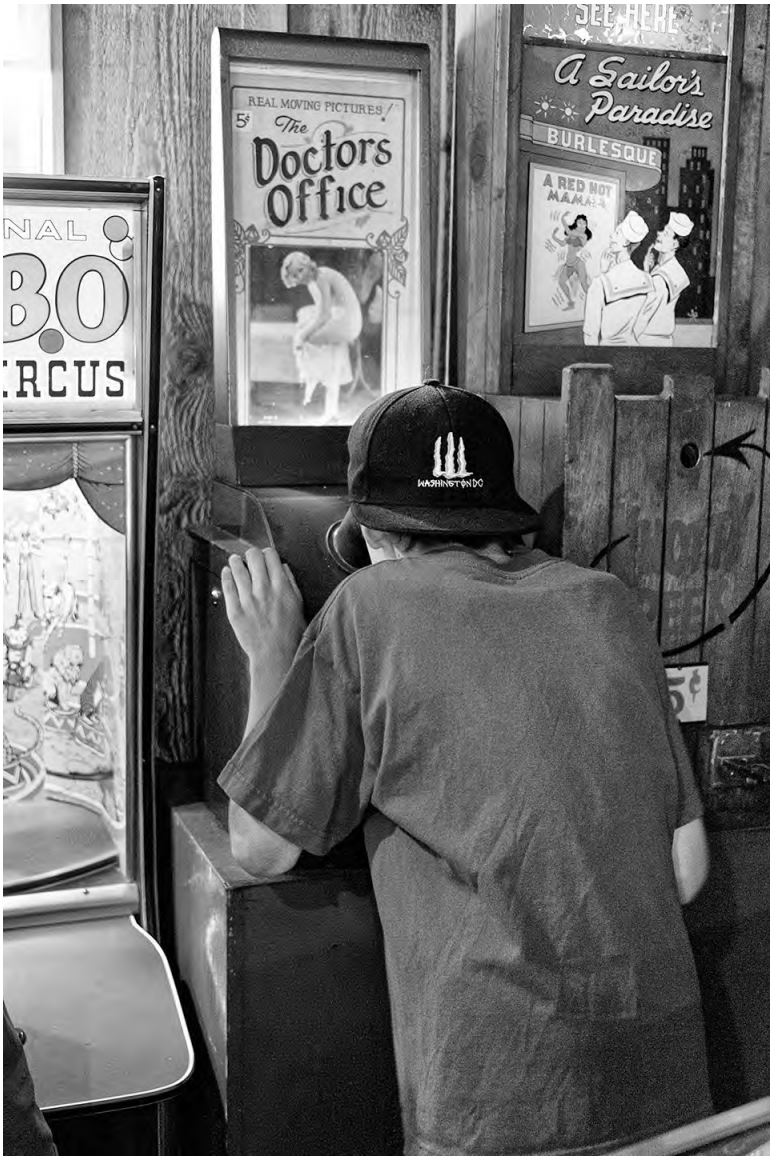
Spending days on the street looking, and rarely seeing a situation worth shooting can become pretty discouraging, so

there's a temptation to just shoot some people on the street and call it a street photograph. There's nothing wrong with shooting something you know isn't going to be good, in fact that's part of the learning process. You need to do it again and again to learn to get the geometry right. But when it comes to posting or displaying your photographs you should be extremely critical, and to be able to be critical in an informed way you need to become familiar with the genre. That calls not only for reading, but for *studying* the work of the masters, including the ones I listed near the beginning of this article.

I sometimes see howlers people post on the web as street photography, and I try not to laugh because I've shot my share of flubs like these too. I'm sure I'm far from the only one who reacts that way. Fact is that even when you get good at street photography you'll shoot bags and bags of bloopers, a smaller number of not too bad shots, and the rare picture you should be willing to show. Beyond the rare picture that's showable there's the kind of picture upon which you'd be willing to hang your reputation. If you can average one of those a year you're getting pretty good.

There's a cliché that tells us a picture is worth a thousand words, but a truly great street photograph conveys something that words can't convey at all. In his wonderful book on the power of poetry, *Poetry and Experience,* Archibald MacLeish pointed out that poetry conveys its "meaning" not through the denotations or connotations of words, but through the interstices between images. And, in a sense, so it is with the best street photography. Within a great street photograph the people, like words, must themselves be understandable, but the real power of the photograph is in the relationships between the people and the geometry of their surroundings.

Beyond the poetry of street photography there's an historical element street photography shares with other kinds of documentary photography. Unlike landscapes, Ansel Adams's "Half Dome" for instance, people change, and it's not just their surroundings and the way they dress that change. Their attitudes toward life change, and really good street photography can give later generations a revealing glimpse at the attitudes and the outlook of their forebears.



Nowadays we can look at the photographs of Eugene Atget and learn something about the people who lived in his time and in his surroundings, but the most effective glimpse of historical human differences comes not from the kind of documentary photography possible with Atget's slow view camera and his posed subjects, but from the kind of street photography that became possible with the introduction of the small hand camera. Oskar Barnack's 1925 Leica finally made it possible for artists like Andre Kertesz

and Cartier-Bresson to photograph people as they are, in an uninterrupted state, rather than as they were when posing.

An historical novelist guesses at the past on the best evidence he can find, but a photograph isn't a guess; it's an artifact that has captured time. And so, a street photograph that has captured not only the visages of its subjects but the story that surrounds their actions can be a more convincing reminder of how things were than any novel or any straight, posed documentary photograph.

Although good street photography is a powerful art form, it's also a way of recording what people really are like, and, for those after us, a way of learning what we were like. Seems to me that besides the satisfaction it can give you, those two things alone make it worthwhile.

For a larger street photography collection see Street Photography on this site.