

Exposure-Latitudes

Thoughts about the photographic imagination and photography as practice of mindfulness.

March 08, 2008

Street Photography or Candid?

Updated: May 2008

In my explorations of street, candid, documentary, and photojournalistic photography, I've come across posts about Street Photography in the various forums I frequent. Usually the conversation revolves around how to go about it, or what makes it a photographic practice different than just taking shots of people in the street. Sometimes folks elide any difference and call it Candid Photography. In my estimation there are some differences between Street and Candid photography that need teasing out. I try to outline some differences here from my experience (limited as it is), knowing full well that my attempt is idiosyncratic and thus outside common usage. Then again, that is precisely how new paths are discovered.

Now, some caveats: This is my opinion, nothing more. Not trying to make others have to agree. I'm a firm believer that rigid categories get in the way of creativity and the photographic imagination, but for purposes of my making sense of some of this work, and in order to entice you to think more about these issues, I offer what follows. Note: If you click on the images a bigger window will pop up. I make no claims to the effect that the shots here are the best exemplars of street photography, nor even that good. They are just some attempts of mine that allowed me much learning.

Candid or Street?

The most common concern I come across on this issue centers on the gumption needed for candid photography. Such is not surprising since Candid photography is often envisioned as taking shots of folks in an unplanned, unrehearsed and unposed way, most often without the subject acceding or knowing.

Candid photography of the sort most often seen: public space, passersby, etc., requires a certain confidence and comfortableness with being there and shooting folks who are, most often, strangers not expecting a camera to be pointed at them. But Candid photography is not necessarily the same as Street photography, even if candid shots are taken in the "street," and even though Street photography can be quite "candid"

Street photography is not just a point and shoot for whatever comes up kind of practice. In my estimation, Street photography as a practice has a strong purpose behind it and that tends to be aligned with documentary photography even though they are not necessarily the same. Context matters.

Street photography for me evokes social commentary, and in that way it is different than what most folks call "candid," which I often see as just a casual snap of something that seemed intriguing at the time, or because it was there. Shots of what catches our eye are cool, and can be great fun and learning. They also can be quite revealing about everyday life, but they don't always rise to the level of Street photography. Then again, candid shots, and going on photowalks in the city are essential for developing the eye, the photographic imagination.



For me the best Street photography tends to be reflective, often a kind of reportage that can take place with only one well captured shot, but



most often with a series. The quickness of it, that is the "lift the camera and shoot in the thick of things," does not mean that careful composition, artistic imagination, and reflection have not taken place -- but that much of it happens before looking through the viewfinder -- through learning to recognize situations, anticipating behavior, knowing the scene/place(s), in short, developing an artistic vision and photographic imagination. Street photography requires preparation, artistic vision, and quite often having a photographic project in mind. Here I am vastly influenced by Bill Jay and David Hurn in *On Being a Photographer* ([Lenswork](#)). Having a good eye, and being truly present help immensely.

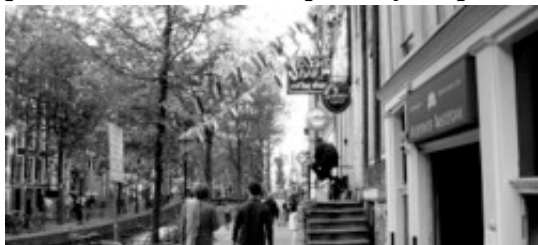
It bears saying also that not all Street photography is "quick" in the midst of events, "I'll-know-it-when-I-see-it" kind of shooting. Street photography projects are quite deliberate, carefully considered and executed.

Street photography then is -- for me at least -- not merely taking shots in public, but deploying an artistic vision that reads and captures slices of what we call public life. It might be motivated by such persistent questions as: How do our daily lives unfold? What social forces pull us together or separate us? How might the built environment organize our living patterns? What are the implications of particular interactions between us humans and our living spaces, contexts, etc? Probably many more, and better, questions than those. Sometimes the questions are not conscious or explicitly present at all, just a glimmer of response to something we see, that later we can analyze to our heart's content.

I happen to like Street photography that juxtaposes elements that raise such issues, that calls life in the making into some sort of question, that challenges our "taken-for-granted" about public life (most often in cities), that highlight the often blurry boundary between public and private, and which make us stop and pay attention by giving us what [Kenneth Burke](#) called "perspective by incongruity." For me, street photography is revelatory. It aims to be so. It does not aim to be voyeuristic. It is an attempt at Reportage.

A few questions for me when viewing street photography are: how might the photographer as "flaneur" ([Baudelaire's](#) "man about town," a witness to life in the urban jungle) pull together a measure of order from the delicious chaos of urban life? What constitutes the everydayness (or not) of life as a community that the photographer captures with a special vision and brings to the viewer's attention? A more general question for all photography for me remains: how might such photography reveal the world of the moment, the world that the photographer sees (one that might not be altogether evident for me).

Under this definition, walking down the street might be a public activity in that it takes place in a public space, but a shot of folks "hanging around" does not necessarily make it Street photography by itself. Not that such an effort could not yield excellent Street photography, but such excellence depends on composition, perhaps on other shots that accompany it, on presentation and technique, on juxtapositions made, on the narrative it tells, and so forth. I am well aware that my



definition here makes Street photography be akin to Documentary, Reportage, and/or Photojournalism. I think distinctions can be made, particularly from Photojournalism (Photojournalism is more constrained by the materials, access, commission, etc.), but I am comfortable with thinking Street photography as taking similar impetus and intentionality to what most folks refer to as Documentary or Reportage (Reportage carrying more of an honest inflection





about subjectivity). However, to me Candid photography does not involve this much project-based photographic imagination, nor sustained Reportage effort.

Again, not to get caught up in definitions, but at least this helps me think of such efforts and helps me not only conceive of my photographic practice, but of

how to look the work of others.

Practice

Some people speak of the street photographer as needing to be out in the open and not hiding what he/she does. Others interested in street photography consider using long lenses so that the shot can be taken at a distance with less intrusion by the photographer, and possibly less chance of confrontation with those who might be the subject of the shot. While important considerations, those concerns reveal too much of a focus (no pun intended) on the process.

I think that relationship ought to be reversed. I think we ought to place the photographic imagination, purpose, artistic vision if you will, first, and then worry about how to make the shot with the equipment at hand. You might be in the midst of things, at a distance, with a point and shoot, with a dSLR, etc. Whatever works best for you and for the moment should probably be the mantra. But consider that powerful street photography is about making a connection with whatever/whomever is the subject. It draws the viewer in by its sheer presencing of a moment, by being there (and not just physically). The distant observer has a different perspective, and definitely something to contribute, but the vision and power is different. The best answer of course is that what and how you shoot depend on what you are trying to accomplish. If you want to bring the viewer in with you, consider short focal lengths.

While not all Street photography require that you go out knowing already what you want to capture, why, and how, the best Street photography projects seem quite intentional. For me it means thinking of what worlds I see, what sparks my photographic imagination, I plan the shoot, do research and get to know my subject, and consider equipment and technique.

By the same token, none of that means that technical ability is not needed. Walking down the street and just snapping shots does not necessarily make art nor a great photographic practice.

I like street protest, social rallies, marches, etc. because it is documentary, street, reportage... and folks who go to participate to some extent expect media to be present, and/or images of the events, surroundings, and activities to be taken (nowadays they also expect the "authorities" to be taking them, so suspicion might be high). This kind of photographic practice requires its own skill set, and is highly rewarding. I would consider it a combination, a subset, a specialization of, documentary, photojournalism, and reportage. As such, it is not just "Candid."



How to Start?

But, you say, I want to take shots in the Street. Just walk about and shoot. Well, a good way to get warmed up to taking shots in the street is to walk about and shoot architectural themes, the built environment. What moves you about it? Stake (and study) a spot, people will get used to seeing you go about your photographic practice. Then gently move to the rest of the surroundings -- catch people about their daily lives if that's what you are after documenting. Take your time, take various kinds of shots, don't act nervous and weird. Be forthright with folks when they ask what you are doing.

If you expect to print those images, sell them, display them in public, etc. there is nothing wrong with going up to folks in your shots and saying they ended up in the pic and would they mind their use for artistic purposes. Some photographers carry releases always. Public servants, and public performers (although the rules vary for celebrities) are fair game most

often, but that is different than folks who had no expectation they would be photographed.

Try not to go to the park and take shots of kids, especially if you are skulking around while doing it. As a parent, I would be on you right quickly asking what you were doing and why. My sense of protecting children will always be far stronger than the latitude I might create for photographers. The image here is of my son and he gave me permission to use it (and no, I don't consider it street photography under the definition here).



A Brief Note About Ethics

It is worth keeping this in mind: ethical and/or moral considerations do not come at the end of the process of photography or anything else. Ethics are not supplemental to the practice of photography. In short, ethics does not come at the end of an "assembly line process of photography." Pointing the camera, selecting what we want to capture, how we go about it, whether we consult afterwards or not, already presumes ethical assumptions and choices. Those ethical assumptions

and choices are yours to make, but they are ever-present. They are also, by the nature of the fact that we share this world with others, not only about what we want or deem fine for ourselves. So, it is not the case that we render ethical decisions after the fact. We might justify those decisions and their grounding after the fact, but we render them in practice.

A strongly developed sense of what the project is about, what the photographer seeks to accomplish (of mission and vision), and of the ethical and moral considerations of photographic practice will make it easier to explain to others what you are doing, and might even sharpen your photographic imagination.

About Equipment

Most any camera equipment will work for this line of photography, but for what I like to do: street protest, rallies, marches, etc. I prefer to have a lens that will give me enough range to capture larger shots (wider) of crowds, and quickly zoom to isolate when needed.

I'd rather not be changing lenses in the middle of a rally if I can help it. I also don't want a huge lens sticking out. I have found myself in the thick of things and, you know what, running/moving through a crowd with large equipment is not always easy, or safe.

Climbing to get a better vantage point is also easier if your equipment does not stick out far. I have had to move rather quickly from one spot to another to get ahead of a crowd, or to get to a different spot on the route of the protest, and so I tend to do most of my shooting with a minimum of equipment hanging from me. I have carried a tripod, but I prefer something light. By the way, while most folks don't have problems with this, I have heard that law enforcement authorities in protests and rallies, etc. are wary of monopods (same reason why they are banning sticks for placards in many such events). Be deliberate in your moves, where you climb, etc.

Conclusion

There is certainly much more to be said about this subject... but this post has already exceeded what I intended. My final thoughts are that along with technical skill, photographic imagination, and artistic vision, it is good to study and learn basic communicative human behavior about personal space (proximity), non-verbals, what is deemed public, what situations might make people wary, how you might telegraph harmless intent, and how to be mindful and present with what you are photographing.

If you are already taking all of the above into consideration you might be doing more than just Candid photography. If not,

give it a try! Jump into street photography, and do it with brio and panache. Be well, and have fun.

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