10 Valuable Lessons I've Learned About Street Photography

February 2nd 2015 10:20 AM

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Introduction

First things first. My name is Marius Vieth and I'm a 26 year old fine art photographer from Amsterdam who loves nothing more than street photography. After shooting all sorts of things from 2011 to 2012 without ever finding myself and feeling my photography, I discovered my deep passion for street photography in the first month of my 365 project in 2013. Since then, I've not only spent almost every single day on the streets of the world to capture wonderful moments, but I've also built my life around it.

Within these two years, I've won 17 awards so far, but if there's one thing that makes me happier than that, it's sharing my experiences and maybe inspire fellow photographers to fall in love with

street photography as well. So, here are my ten most important lessons about street photography I've learned so far!

1. The Three Roads to Shot-ville

When it comes to capturing great moments on the streets, I've learned that there are basically three ways to approach it. The first way is rather obvious. Just walk around in your city or village and simply look for interesting moments happening around you. You must be a really good observer and your reaction time has to be as short as possible to capture moments within milliseconds. But I'll tell you more about improving your reaction time later.

The second and third way still keeps everything authentic, but lets you become the director of candid scenes on the stage of life. The second way basically lets you design the stage of your scene, but you have to wait for an "actor" to appear. Just look for beautiful parks, alleys or other spots that build an exciting scenery for a moment. Look around, analyze how people are walking and what might happen here. If you have an interesting concept in mind, simply wait till the right people appear and hit the shutter. Try it with different pedestrians, change your stage through composition and find the best way possible.

The third and slightly creepier approach is to find your "actor" and follow him to a great stage. To be honest, I've followed highly interesting people while maintaining a low profile for 15-20 minutes. Always keep your distance and if the scenery blows you away, hit the shutter.

2. How to Become a Ninja

One of the biggest obstacles in street photography is getting "caught." I mean, you are capturing random strangers. I remember my first months of shooting where I always got an adrenaline kick when I was about to take a photo. But after a while, I developed certain techniques that spare you the embarrassment 99% of the time. One thing I always do is when I take a photo of someone and they look at me afterwards, I just look into the distance where they were walking with squinted eyes and act like I screwed up the first shot and take another. I do a couple of steps forward and to the side as though I'm trying to get a better picture of the background behind them. They may look back once, but then mind their own business. Never forget: no one (except for celebrities) expects that they might be that interesting that someone would take a photo of them.

Another strategy is playing the super pro. Just act like you damn well know what you are doing and that this is serious business. People will get the idea that you're from the newspaper or doing a project and won't interfere with you. You seem way too busy and focused. In touristy places, just act like a moron tourist and they won't mind.

Another great way to become a ninja is to act like you're taking a video of the scenery. Move your camera up and down and to the side and you are usually good to go. It all depends on the scenery though. This works better in the city than in a dark alley. On top of that, always try to wear dark clothes or look as boring as possible. Furthermore, blend in with the crowd. Don't be that statue in the middle.

3. Shoot Less, But Then More

What I basically recommend is to take the analogous approach and take as little photos as possible. Spend way more time looking around, understanding your environment, observing people and falling in love with what you are shooting than taking hundreds of photos. It's just going to be exhausting to weed out all the bad ones at the end of the day. But if you find a really exciting moment, hit the shutter numerous times with the burst mode. Here's why: especially in street photography, it's all about the perfect millisecond, the so-called decisive moment. You don't want a person on your photo with their legs in a weird position. They should look natural. But to get the perfect "leg angle" you have to take some more shots, because usually you won't get the best one with just one shot.

4. Keeping It Minimalistic With Gear Avoidance Syndrome

GAS, also known as Gear Acquisition Syndrome, is very common among photographers. It simply means that you just can't get enough new lenses, equipment and upgrade your cam as soon as possible in order to have more options and improve. However, the opposite side of it, "Gear Avoidance Syndrome" as I call it, might even be healthy for your photography. The underlying issue is what psychologists call "Paralysis by Analysis." It simply means that you're getting so carried away analyzing every aspect of a photographic situation on a technical level that you oversee what it's truly about.

The great range of technical choices distracts from the even bigger choices on a creative level where the magic happens. My advice is to just stick to one body and lens of your choice which works for you and just sell the rest. Although there are less options available, you'll find way more creative ways to capture what you feel! In a way, all your technical options before turn into creative solutions with your minimalist set-up.

5. Reaction Time Is Everything

Street photography, just like sports photography, is one of the genres where your reaction time has to be as high as possible. Spend time improving your reaction time. You can do this at home if you want. Walk through your home and pick one specific object, i.e. a vase, and take a photo of it as quickly as possible from different angles and positions. Turn around to get your shot, duck, jump or even lie down quickly. I know it seems weird, but a decisive moment only lasts a blink of an eye.

6. Become the Master of All Elements

Developing a street photography eye demands more introspection than any other genre as far as I'm concerned. You have to feel a lot to actually find your photos. That's why your heart, eye and soul will always be your most important gear. But you still have to express this inner life of yours. And that's as hard as it gets sometimes. The thing is, on the streets there are so many different elements that you could use for a shot that you often miss the forest for the trees. What helped me was to focus on one element for a couple of hours, say a certain color. You can also only pay attention to lines, contrasts, interesting clothing or exciting sceneries. Reduce this broad range of elements to only a few and you'll see better results. The longer you do this, the more elements you can scan at the same time.

7. Become a Chess Master

Street photography is all about anticipation. You don't only have to be good at spotting wonderful moments, but also knowing that they will happen. Try to spend as much time as possible understanding how people interact with each other and how they move. Pay attention to walking patterns, traffic and things happening around you. What might possibly happen, if someone saw that weird light blinking or how will people react to the noise of the construction side. You can't influence what pedestrians are doing, but you can learn to predict it better. And that will help you so much as a director of candid scenes.

8. Your Best Friend: Natural Contrasts

This is one of the most important lessons I've learned. I can't stress enough how crucial natural contrasts are – especially in street photography. I've made this mistake hundreds of times and I see it all the time. Always try to bring your dark subject in front of a bright background and vice versa. This may sound so obvious, but it's one of the most common mistakes that take away from the energy of a photo. I've taken plenty of awesome photos that just didn't work because the subject didn't differ enough from the background. Try to avoid that as much as possible and spare yourself the agony of losing an otherwise amazing photograph.

9. Consider Your Photos as Paintings

The huge difference between paintings and photography is that when you paint, you add elements and when you take photos, you reduce elements. I'm not saying that you should reduce your sceneries as much as I do, it's just my personal preference. But one thing that I learned in the beginning was that street photography doesn't give you the right to neglect composition and subject, because it's a candid moment. I did that in the beginning and I think it's wrong.

This genre demands careful selection of subjects, composition and all other elements that make a great photo as well. It's just harder, because you don't have direct influence on what's happening. However, it helped me a lot to see my photos as a painting. Find elements you like and add them to your canvas. Ideally each element should have a reason why it's in there. Even if you take really vivid street photos with lots of elements, still ask yourself, why did I capture half a shopping cart in the background? No painter ever would draw something without having a reason why that element would add something to the painting. It took me a long time to realize that, but it definitely helped and I'm still working on it.

10. Realize That You Are Taking Photos of Yourself

One of the most important insights I gained on my journey so far is, that street photography is nothing more than photos of yourself through others. That's why I called one of my first articles where I realized this "The Stranger In Me." Give 10 people the exact same camera and let them walk through a certain street for 1 hour at the same time every day. I'm sure there will be some things that will be similar, because they are obvious, but the rest will differ from person to person. It's what they find fascinating, what they are passionate about, and what they think makes a great photo. For some, a street has a melancholic atmosphere, so they'll go for black and white and more serious strangers. Others will immediately love the colors and the happy people and will pour that into their photos.

When I started out with street photography I personally made the mistake of thinking that it had to resemble the typical street photography shot in black and white, wide-angle and fairly vibrant (at least that was my idea of a typical shot). I tried to create these shots, but didn't feel them. It took me a while to realize how to not give a crap and just do what I love. And that's how I ended up with my personal style.

What I'm trying to say is, it's fine to learn from the masters such as Bresson or Leiter, read tons of tips and try different styles, but please, do yourself a favor and just do what you think is awesome. Don't make the mistake I did. My only wish is that the genre becomes as diverse in style as the people on the streets we shoot – and I'm sure we'll make that happen.

About the Guest Contributor

Marius Vieth is a fine art photographer focused on street photography. Although originally from Germany, he is now living in Amsterdam. He also manages the International Fine Arts Label NEOPRIME. Visit his website here: www.mariusvieth.com

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1.

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Albert Evangelista

February 2, 2015

LOVE <3 LUV your photos! I am friends with many streetogs and learning your street photography art carries into my very own photography style….TY for the great article! :)

Log in to Reply 12

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[2](#)

Marius Vieth

February 2, 2015

Hey Albert,

thank you very much for the kind words! Wish you all the best!

Marius

[Log in to Reply](#) 9

2.

[5](#)

Aidan Morgan

February 2, 2015

I love these photos.

[Log in to Reply](#) 8

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[2](#)

Marius Vieth

February 2, 2015

Thank you Aidan!!

[Log in to Reply](#) 4

3.

[11](#)

David Hill

February 2, 2015

Great images and a good read! Nice one and thanks for sharing! Dave

[Log in to Reply](#) 8

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Marius Vieth

February 2, 2015

You're more than welcome, David!

[Log in to Reply](#) 1

4.

[10](#)

Eric Sharpe

February 2, 2015

Great article!

[Log in to Reply](#) 5

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Marius Vieth

February 2, 2015

Thanks Eric!

[Log in to Reply](#) 2

21

Brandon Dewey

February 2, 2015

I agree, great article full of great tips.

[Log in to Reply](#) 6

5.

Chet Meyerson

February 2, 2015

This just may be the best article I've read on SLR-Lounge. Written no only with passion but a real desire to share with no ulterior underlining motive to the advise (not asking us to buy, subscribe, join etc. anything). Besides, the images are spectacular on top of it all. Thanks so much!

[Log in to Reply](#) 17

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Marius Vieth

February 2, 2015

Hey Chet, makes me really really happy to hear that! Glad you like it!

[Log in to Reply](#) 4

6.

Sharon Jackson

February 2, 2015

Thank you so much for this inspirational article and shots, I am just getting into street photography and loving it, this came at the perfect time for me! :)

[Log in to Reply](#) 8

Marius Vieth

February 2, 2015

Awesome Sharon! Go for it, it's such a rewarding genre!

[Log in to Reply](#) 3

7.

[8](#)

Michael Henson

February 2, 2015

Wow! Beautiful images!

[Log in to Reply](#) 8

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  Marius Vieth

  February 2, 2015

  Thanks Michael!

  [Log in to Reply](#) 2

8.

[16](#)

Ben Perrin

February 2, 2015

I have to say that I really am not a big fan of street photography. Having said that, I love your photos and your style! That's always the true mark of an artist to me. Someone who I don't like their genre, but still can admire their work. It's rare to find. Well done.

[Log in to Reply](#) 10

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[2](#)

Marius Vieth

February 2, 2015

Wow, that's an even bigger compliment, Ben! Thank you so much.

[Log in to Reply](#) 4

9.

[14](#)

Ralph Hightower

February 2, 2015

Great advice. I haven't done street photography, but the tips looks like something to try.

[Log in to Reply](#) 3

- [2](#)

  Marius Vieth

  February 2, 2015

  Give it a try, it's great!

  [Log in to Reply](#) 2

10.

[13](#)

Lissette Garcia

February 2, 2015

Wonderful article – great tips and amazing photographs. Thank you so much.

[Log in to Reply](#) 3

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  [2](#)

  Marius Vieth

  February 3, 2015

  You're welcome!

  [Log in to Reply](#) 2

11.

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Thomas Ditmar

February 2, 2015

Terrific article and best tips I've read this far on walking around with a camera; some I already do, but most will help me get better. I take most of my photos on my dog walks and it is just plain fun…the best kind of hunting. Thanks again for this article because I'm already excited for the next walk.

Log in to Reply 7

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Marius Vieth

February 3, 2015

Awesome Thomas! Wish you all the best for your next walk!

Log in to Reply 2

12.

[11]

Basit Zargar

February 2, 2015

awesome

[Log in to Reply](#) 2

[2]

Marius Vieth

February 3, 2015

Thanks!

[Log in to Reply](#) 1

13.

Gordon Simpson

February 3, 2015

Excellent article and given me the desire to try something I stayed away from. Great photos as well.

[Log in to Reply](#) 3

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  Marius Vieth

  February 3, 2015

  Have fun! It's worth it.

  [Log in to Reply](#) 2

14.

7

Jason Markos

February 3, 2015

I want to echo what many have already said – this is an inspiring article that makes me want to go take more pictures and, more importantly, think more about what and how I'm doing it.

Thanks for taking the time to put these tips together – motivating, insightful, and practical!

[Log in to Reply](#) 2

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Marius Vieth

February 3, 2015

You're welcome Jason!

[Log in to Reply](#) 2

15.

[10](#)

Tosh Cuellar

February 3, 2015

Fantastic photos, thanks for sharing

[Log in to Reply](#) 1

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  [2](#)

  Marius Vieth

  February 3, 2015

  You're welcome Tosh!

  [Log in to Reply](#) 0

16.

[11](#)

David Hall

February 3, 2015

Great article… thanks.

[Log in to Reply](#) 1

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[2](#)

Marius Vieth

February 3, 2015

Thanks David!

[Log in to Reply](#) 0

17.

4

Riley Johnson

February 3, 2015

I agree with your comment about how you started out with what you thought was the set "method" for street photo. Black and White, Landscape, etc… I found that I also like shooting street photo, although I don't do it much, and I like shooting in color, sometimes close up to people, sometimes far back, and always waiting for a good shot rather than getting in peoples faces.

[Log in to Reply](#) 4

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Marius Vieth

February 3, 2015

Awesome, Riley! That sounds great.

[Log in to Reply](#) 0

18.

[3](#)

Steven Zay

February 3, 2015

Great insight to a unique style of photography. In the few minutes I read, re-read, and skimmed this article again, I learned some valuable lessons that as you put it are obvious. Above all, shoot for ourselves, then try to avoid being hyper critical of what we shot. Thank you for writing this. I needed to hear this today.

[Log in to Reply](#) 1

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  [2](#)

  Marius Vieth

  February 3, 2015

  Makes me happy to hear that Steven!

  [Log in to Reply](#) 0

19.

[10](#)

Rieshawn Williams

February 3, 2015

This is a great article! Now I am wanting to go out and shoot, but I am at work :-(Really nice read though.

[Log in to Reply](#) 1

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[2](#)

Marius Vieth

February 3, 2015

Go out later today Rieshawn :)

[Log in to Reply](#) 0

20.

Perry Ge

February 4, 2015

Thank you so much for this incredible article. I've neglected the street genre for years, having only recently developing an interest in it, and you've taught me so much through this post. It's so much fun to learn new things and it's rare to find an article that teaches, inspires and makes you reflect on your photography all at the same time. Thanks again, I'll be returning to this piece for inspiration. You've made me look at street photography in a whole new way.

[Log in to Reply](#) 1

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Marius Vieth

February 4, 2015

Wow, so awesome to hear that, Perry! Thanks

[Log in to Reply](#) 0

21.

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Jay Lay

February 5, 2015

Best Tip, nice article Marius. I can use this tip during the weekends. My only concern is camera security though :)

Log in to Reply 0

22.

14

Chuck Eggen

February 6, 2015

One of the better articles about Street Photography I've read in a long time. It's nice not hearing some philosophical "I'm the greatest" bug chattering on about changing the world through his photography. Well done! Motivated me to head into the city.

Log in to Reply 1

23.

[10](#)

robert garfinkle

February 9, 2015

I'm a new kid on the block, and looking for lessons. This article allowed me to get inside your head, what you are thinking tethered with your experiences… thank you so much…
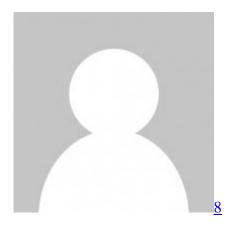
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[5](#)

Scott Pacaldo

February 13, 2015

Really great article, Marvius! So nice to see people wanting to try Street Photography after reading. This also made me want to go out now and continue with my passion, because I'm kind of in a rut right now.

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25.

[8](#)

Jason Boa

February 15, 2015

Great article Marius – very inspiring images and thought provoking comment , I hope we see and hear more from you !

Log in to Reply 0

26.

[5](#)

Fernandina Zee-Fritse

February 18, 2015

What an amazing article and dito photo's! I would love to see you at work! If you ever wish to share your skills in a workshop, please let me know.

Log in to Reply 0

27.

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Camille Hulajnoga

February 21, 2015

Hello,
I hesitate to utilser color in my photos, but thanks to your advice, I will try to move to the color, not to mention the black and white.

Camille

Log in to Reply 0

28.

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Anshul Sukhwal

March 11, 2015

Thanks a lot for sharing your experience with us, Marius. We will try to benefit from the lessons that you have learnt.

Anshul Sukhwal
http://www.clickstoremember.com/

29.

Graham Curran

April 13, 2015

Some excellent and inspiring images.

30.

Thomas Horton

April 17, 2015

First of all, everyone has their own interests in photography and that's great. I, personally, could not do street photography as I find my actions being guided by empathy for the other people. They may not like nor appreciate my taking their picture. Why would I want to take a picture of someone if it will make them feel uncomfortable?

There was one part of your well written article that caught my eye.

" One thing I always do is when I take a photo of someone and they look at me afterwards, I just look into the distance where they were walking with squinted eyes and act like I screwed up the first shot and take another."

If you feel you have to try to deceive someone after you took their photograph is that not a sign you are doing something unethical? Is this showing empathy or concern for the person? To me an ethical photographer does not need to deceive or cover up what they are doing.

These are just my personal opinions concerning street photography. Many many photographers I know vehemently disagree with my opinion. :)

I just find that there is a growing number of photographers who feel, in the context of street photography, that it is all about them and what they want with little empathy to the feelings of the other people in the street.

Log in to Reply 0

31.

Andrew Downes

August 19, 2015

Up to now I have been mainly photographing wildlife but would like to do some street photography. Your pictures are fantastic and the tips you have given in this post are of great value to somebody like me wanting to try street photography.
Thanks for the insight it will save me a lot of trial and error.

Log in to Reply 0

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Steven Simpson

December 9, 2015

Thanks for the great list. I'll take it to heart. Not all street photography has to be covert. Frequently, when I'm interested in taking a stranger's picture, I'll ask them if it's alright. The response I get most often is, "What for?" I have found that if I say, "For art," they usually agree and are even willing to let me talk them through a pose. I figure, most people would like to be included in — or considered part of — art, so they acquiesce.

Log in to Reply 0

33.

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Sonia BGlz

3 days ago

Thanks for your tips and tricks …I'm a newcomer in this beautiful world of street photography but I love to go out and follow my passion. Great pics!!!!!

Log in to Reply 0

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