



The Art of Street Photography

Framing the Unexpected

04

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01 The Frame

The frame—a tiny little rectangle or little square, as described by Peter van Agtmael—is key in photography. What you include or exclude, how you position yourself and your subject within this limited space, can drastically affect how successful an image is.

For street photographers, this is especially true and challenging as the scene in front of you is constantly evolving in infinite ways, from people entering and leaving the frame, to their expressions changing. Much of this is out of your control, but by inserting yourself into the action, reacting to what is around you, you can improve your chances of finding yourself in the right places at the right moment to (with some luck) capture something remarkable.

Consider how you compose and structure the image to create, as Richard Kalvar says, something that feels satisfying. This requires a combination of quick calculations, focus, and awareness.

“[...] that surge of joy when my eye kind of aligns with the scene in front of me and everything comes together perfectly, you know, there’s no greater feeling than that.”

– **Peter van Agtmael**

“Street photography is all about being aware and curious and open to the world.”

– **Pauline Vermare**

Richard Kalvar shoots London

The Magnum photographer spent one day wandering the busy streets the UK's capital visiting Chinatown, Piccadilly Circus, Regent Street and Oxford Street. Here are some of his results.



Richard Kalvar
London, 2018.





02 What Makes a Good Photograph?

What makes a photograph ‘good’? This is a difficult question as although there are some fundamental guidelines in photography—for example, the Rule of Thirds, Golden Rule, Leading Lines and so on—even if you execute your photography to so-called technical perfection, there is no guarantee this will result in an engaging image. What is often cited as the key component to a successful photograph is, as Susan Meiselas describes, an emotional connective point, in combination with a strong sense of form.



“There are no real rules in photography. There are tricks, there are guides, there are ways to be inspired by what’s been done, but there’s no real specific rule about what makes a great photograph. In fact, a lot of the best photographs are the ones that are the most unexpected. For me, lots of the pictures I like are pretty densely layered frames that have all sorts of tiny little elements of varying significance. There’s always something - one thing or two things - that draw your eye in, and ideally, the rest of the frame kind of is both drawn inward and also offers support for those key elements that may occur in the center of the frame, maybe in the left, maybe in the right.”

– Peter van Agtmael

“A good photograph is one that works well within the frame and has a strong emotional content. It emotes something in you, it makes you have a feeling, the viewer. Whether you love it or hate it.”

– Bruce Gilden

“...for me, a successful picture is a picture in which everything works together...by together it could mean [that they] work against each other, but there’s a relationship between everything in the picture.”

– Richard Kalvar

Top

Martin Parr
The Netherlands, 1997.

Bottom

Richard Kalvar
New York City, 1970.

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Using the Frame: Tips to Improve your Framing

Learn from the masters.

Many of your tutors would agree that studying the work of great artists, not only within photography but painting, film, and other mediums, is a very valuable learning exercise. Look deeply and critically at these images to try to dissect the formal components that make the picture. Ask yourself: why is the image successful? How does your eye navigate the frame? How is it formally constructed? How did the person position themselves in order to achieve the composition? By really interrogating the image, you can learn from it and put it into practice on the streets.

Understand the fundamentals, but then experiment.

It is good to learn the fundamentals, but as your tutors have said, these are just guides. Once you have an understanding of this base knowledge, you should begin to experiment with your approach to find what works for you.

“One thing that I would like you to try and think about is to see if you can step out of the box and step away from the formulas that maybe you’ve heard before about how to take a good picture or even what makes a good picture....think experimentally about your approach and about which images really have meaning or have an impact. Not according to the formulas but according to you.”

—**Carolyn Drake**

Use a lens with a fixed focal length.

“I want an intimate connection with the reality that I’m photographing. Intimate connection.”

—**Richard Kalvar**

Why use a fixed lens? As Richard Kalvar points out within this lesson, a fixed lens enables you to understand where the ‘walls’ are: where the frame begins and ends. It is also useful to get into the habit of physically moving your feet in order to fill the frame. It forces you to get close to your subject and make that ‘connection’ he speaks about.

28mm or 35mm lenses are good starting points and both are widely used by some of the masters of street photography. Both of these lenses are wide-angled, meaning they exaggerate angles and scale so that objects within the foreground of the frame appear much larger and vice-versa. They are very useful if you want to create images that are layered and dynamic. If you only own a zoom lens, just set it to one focal length and try to resist the urge to zoom.

Fill the frame. Create layers.

Try to use the space well. Though it can be effective in some cases, placing the subject in the center of the frame often equates to less interesting photographs. Experiment. Try creating layers in your photograph where the relationship between the elements within the foreground and those in the background contribute to a dynamic overall visual experience.

“You have a whole frame to fill and everything has to work, and it’s not just the little thing in the middle.”

—**Richard Kalvar**

...then go beyond ‘just’
arranging things in the frame.

The most successful images are more than simple arrangements in a frame, rather they present something meaningful to the viewer. Whether that is a moment of humor, sadness or excitement, it is important to be thinking about the content as well as the form.

“I want the tension within the frame of those different elements to play. So it’s something between the content and the meaning of what I’m trying to draw from that moment. But certainly with a strong sense of form, so the formal elements are operating parallel to the emotional.”

—**Susan Meiselas**

Practice.

Practice, practice and more practice. This is the key to improving and is a process that never really ends.

“It’s really a question of determining, really calculating every millisecond, what might be adding to the photograph and what might be taking away and what elements you want to zoom in on and when you want to zoom out, and that can only be understood and reacted to over time and it takes years of practice to get there and the process never really ends.”

—Peter van Agtmael



Peter van Agtmael
New York, USA. 2015.

04 Seeking the Unexpected

How can you find and capture unexpected, surprising or moving moments? When we view the work of some of the great street photographers in monographs or portfolios, it seems as though something incredible was unfolding in front of them whenever they hit the streets. The reality is that these photographers have dedicated a huge amount of time to making pictures and we end up seeing only a tiny fraction of what they have photographed. You need to be patient, work hard and keep going, even when it isn't working.

“Photography is often likened to fishing because they both require patience. You can't just stand out there on the street and expect something to happen in front of you, just like that. You have to wait... I think what I've learned is that the grass is not always greener around the next corner. And let's face it, would you rather go home with one really good picture that you've really worked hard at or 20 pictures that are just so-so? I think it's an easy question to answer.”

– **Mark Power**

“I did an assignment recently where I literally photographed for 24 hours straight and took probably 2000 photographs and wasn't fully happy with a single one of them. You know, even if you have 15 years, 20 years of experience, 50 years of experience doing this work, there are no guarantees whatsoever in photography. So the only thing you're left with in a way is persistence and patience. You have to be willing to wait for an image to occur, either by just motoring down that street all day every day, or standing on that street corner for 45 minutes waiting for the light to change and when it doesn't happen you can't get too discouraged, you have to let go.”

– **Peter van Agtmael**

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Further Reading

Inge Morath: Learning from the Master

Behind the Image: At the Piazza della Rotonda
by Richard Kalvar

Behind the Image: Daytona Beach
by Constantine Manos

Behind the Image: Work Horse on a Family Porch
by David Alan Harvey

Behind The Image: An English Sunny Afternoon
by Ian Berry

Behind the Image: Satellites by Jonas Bendiksen

Behind the Image: Inquest of Identity
by Patrick Zachmann

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