



The Art of Street Photography

Photographing People

06

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01 Why Photograph People?

“Their expressions are always changing, every face is different, they’re always in movement. There can be an elegance or lack thereof to the way limbs are in motion, to body types, to skin color, all of these things are infinite, interesting variables within photographing people, and so for me, they’re an endlessly fascinating subject as a result.”

– **Peter van Agtmael**

People can be very rewarding to photograph. They are a common subject within the tradition of street photography and offer an infinite range of possibilities within the frame.

Photographing people can also be one of the most challenging aspects of photography. As Richard Kalvar says, it is an unnatural activity, “to stick a camera into a person’s face”. So how do you make relevant, engaging work, with real people as subjects?

Richard Kalvar
Italy, 1980.



02

How to Photograph People: Different Approaches to the Same Subject

In this lesson, we see a number of contrasting approaches to photographing people.

Consent

Your relationship to the subject may change depending on how much of a connection is made. Gathering consent to photograph (and more importantly, to publish the work) may be necessary, depending on the location you find yourself in. Whatever the context, you must be well informed about the rules and regulations surrounding photographing people in the location you have chosen to photograph in.

Candid Photography

Traditionally, street photography involves little to no interference. It is, as Kalvar says, grounded in real people doing real things, with the photographer taking “extracts” from reality. This approach relies on working with the everyday, as it unfolds.

“My photography is grounded in real people doing real things, and by observing them, reacting to them and trying to put them into, squeeze them into a rectangle. That’s what I’m up to. I don’t want to tell them what to do, I don’t want to influence them.”

– **Richard Kalvar**

The key to this approach is working quietly and unobtrusively to capture a scene undisturbed. During this lesson we witness Kalvar gradually moving in closer and closer to his subjects, doing what he can to stay camouflaged, to appear as though he is photographing something else entirely.

“If you want to be invisible, you have to be pretty much like [Henri] Cartier-Bresson and look like a Dutch tourist. You know, be very distanced and do nothing to generate any kind of interaction.”

– **Pauline Vermare**

There are many instances when photographers, though working within the candid tradition, may affect the scene in minor ways. This does not necessarily involve formally asking permission or posing people; it could include any number of small interactions that will affect the relationship between photographer and subject, such as vocalizing the scene, interacting with a subject to change their expression, making eye contact and smiling, or moving in their direction to maneuver the subject into a better position.

Getting Close

Robert Capa’s famous quote – “If your pictures aren’t good enough, you’re not close enough” – is often given as advice for street photographers. This message can be interpreted in a variety of ways, from physically moving closer to the subject, to having a closer emotional connection to the subject matter you are photographing.

A common trend amongst those just starting out in street photography is a visible distance between the photographer and their subject, often in both physical and connective terms, because they may be uncomfortable or have yet to identify what they are looking for. As Richard Kalvar says, you have to “dare” to move in, to fill your frame and make a connection with the subject you are photographing.

Richard Kalvar
Paris, 2000.



Bruce Gilden
New York City, 1986.



Street Portraiture

Many photographers use the street as a starting point, a space to find, engage and photograph the people they meet. Street portraiture relies on chance encounters but also on collaboration between the photographer and the subject. In this lesson, and in more depth during lesson seven, we witness Peter van Agtmael on the lookout for compelling characters. He discusses how to approach people and how to manage different personalities.

“Oftentimes approaching strangers is really scary and oftentimes there’s rejection and it’s sometimes hard to deal with. And sometimes, if too many people say no, I end up just going home because I just can’t take any more rejection. But I think it’s really important to keep trying because sometimes you end up finding interactions with people that are really beautiful. And I think there [are] some people who really like being photographed and feel that being seen is an opportunity. So I think it goes both ways and I like to find people who enjoy that collaboration together...”

– **Carolyn Drake**

The act of approaching strangers can be a daunting act. Here are some tips to help you on your way:

- Be friendly and polite. A smile can go a long way in putting somebody at ease.
- Be open and honest about what it is you are doing.
- Bring a book of your previous work to show potential subjects
- Stay for as long as you can. Be persistent.
- Work with a friend. Sometimes a single photographer may make people uneasy, so consider bringing a friend or colleague to assist.
- As a courtesy, it can be good to offer them a copy of the picture. Take their name and email.
- Keep trying, as it takes a bit of momentum. Don’t let rejection get you down!
- If you need to obtain consent, make sure you have the right documentation with you such as a model release form.

Carolyn Drake
USA, 2016.





03 Assignment: Photograph Five People

This assignment is designed to build your comfort level in photographing people. van Agtmael asks you to go out, find five people you are interested and to spend five minutes photographing them. This is a great exercise in developing your confidence and in getting used to interacting with strangers on the street.

Share your pictures from this assignment using the hashtags:

#magnumlearn

#photographingpeople

04 Building Relationships: Going Beyond the Street

“I don’t think the only way to do work is to go far away, I think you can do work close to home. I think you can, as I did, get to know your neighbors, not only relate to strangers. But it’s how you look at people, how you listen to people. Not just what you tell them about what you’re doing, but also how people understand why you’re there, and what you’re hoping to make, and what you give back.”

– **Susan Meiselas**

The street presents us with endless chance encounters with other people. For some, these chance interactions may evolve into something that goes beyond the tradition of street photography; as Susan Meiselas’ long-term project Prince Street Girls or Carolyn Drake’s ongoing collaboration with her neighbor, Cindy, show. During this section, both Susan and Carolyn discuss their experiences working with people over the longer term.



Susan Meiselas.
New York City. 1976.



Susan Meiselas.
New York City. 1979.

05 Assignment: Build a Photographic Relationship

Carolyn Drake asks you to seek out somebody you are interested in photographing or have photographed in the past and try to develop that relationship further, photographically. Drake asks you to take a risk, photograph them as you see them, and then return to them with the image.

Share your pictures from this assignment using the hashtags:

#magnumlearn

#photographicrelationship

Carolyn Drake
Vallejo, California. 2016.



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Further Reading

Carolyn Drake's Vallejo

Susan Meiselas' Prince Street Girls

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