



# The Art of Street Photography

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In Focus:  
Peter van Agtmael

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# 01 Peter van Agtmael

Peter van Agtmael works across a variety of photographic genres, including conflict, documentary, portraiture and street photography, to explore broader ideas that largely concentrate on America in the shadow of 9/11, looking at issues including, militarism, class, race, power, and politics. This has led him to work extensively in the conflict zones of Iraq and Afghanistan, across the Middle East tracking the outflux of refugees, and at home in America, road tripping across all fifty states.

This work has manifested in two monographs, *Disco Night Sept. 11* and *Buzzing at the Sill*, which form two chapters of this major ongoing project.

*“Buzzing at the Sill, like a lot of my work, has a lot of different approaches, depending on what I was trying to achieve. There are a lot of images that were just taken impulsively and spontaneously on the street, one or two frames and then the scene is over, no words are exchanged. I just saw something that I both found beautiful and perhaps symbolic or emblematic of an idea that I was trying to get across with the work.”*





# 02 Bonus Assignment

Peter van Agtmael uses photography to explore and shed light on a broad range of themes and social issues, and many other photographers do the same within the street context. Consider what subjects interest you, and how you could explore them photographically.

While van Agtmael often focuses on serious issues within his work, photography still functions as a means of mediation and as a way to record his life.

“It’s a means and a way of meditation. It’s an escape. Sometimes a lot of the work I do can be extremely serious [...] but a lot of the time, photography is just a means of engaging with the world and in some ways or sometimes just shutting off the world entirely and just kind of reveling in the beautiful things that surround me, and that’s better than any therapy, better than any glass of wine, better than any drug that I can ever think of. And it hasn’t lost anything over time. I’ve been doing this 20 years and that feeling, 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.”

# 03

## On Location

Over the course of two days, van Agtmael explored different areas of New York. He spent time on the famous boardwalk and beaches of Coney Island, wandered through Brooklyn, and walked over the Williamsburg Bridge into Chinatown, Manhattan. Throughout this lesson, he demonstrates how to approach photographing the different characters and scenes encountered along the way. Here is a small selection of the photographs made over these two days.





Peter van Agtmael  
New York, 2018.

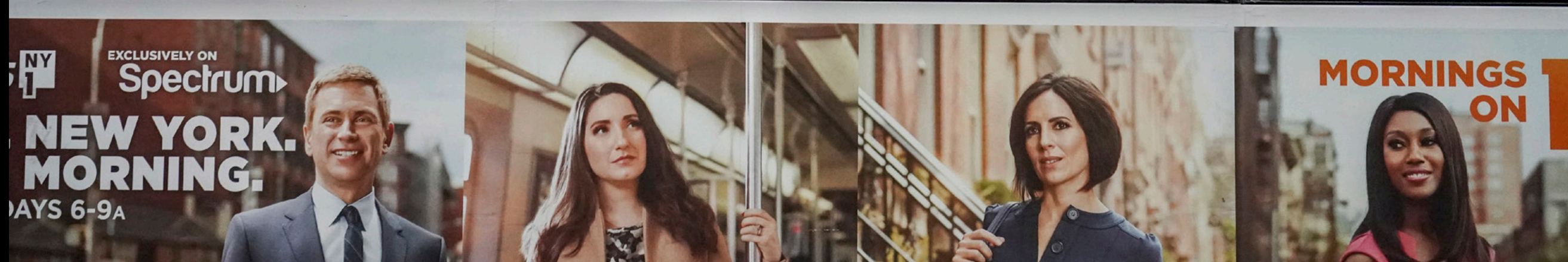
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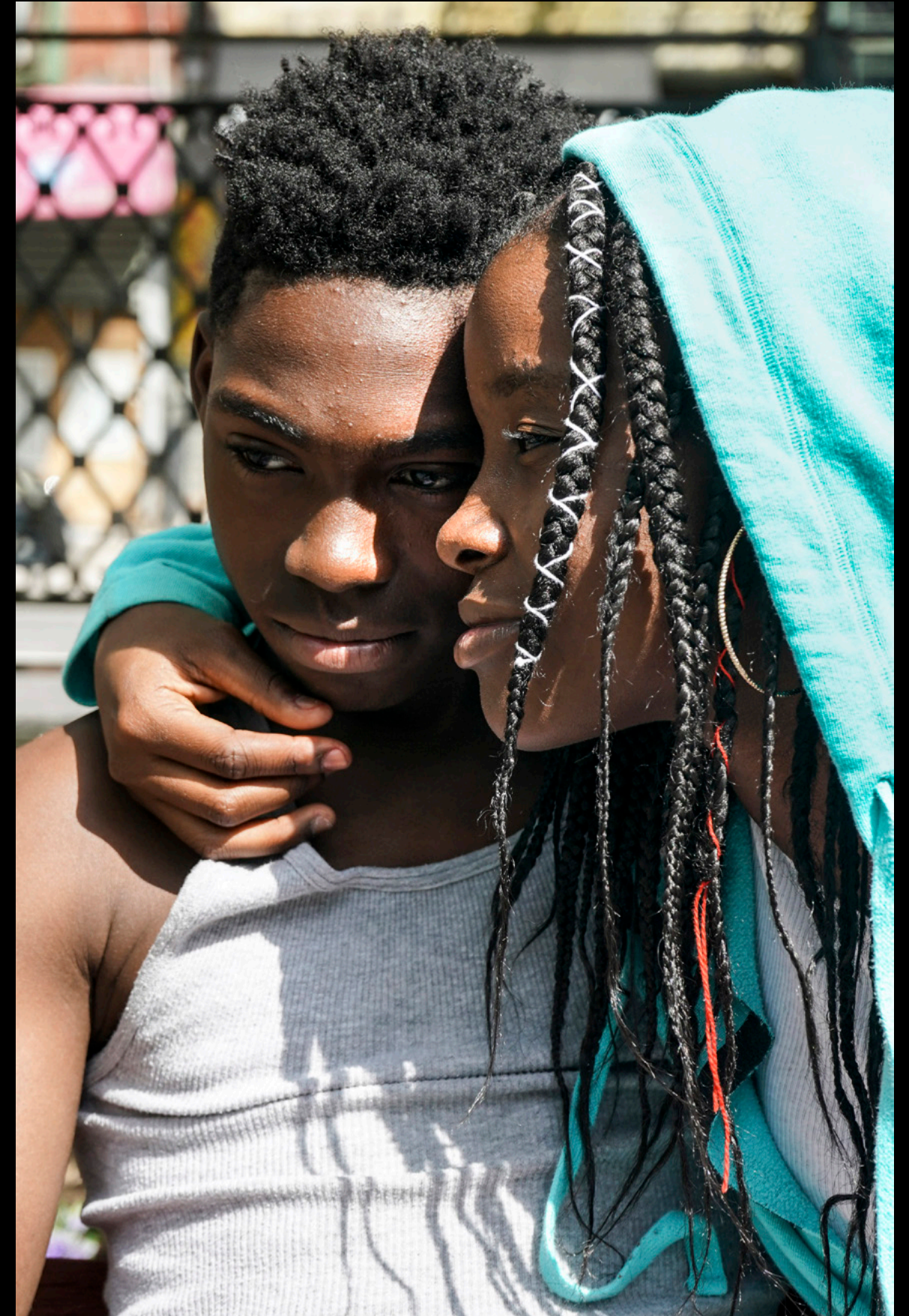


Peter van Agtmael  
New York, 2018.



“I was photographing in Manhattan, in China Town, and there was a group of teenagers sitting on a bench. As soon as they saw cameras around...they got really excited, they came up to us, and wanted to be photographed. Usually when those scenes happen I either politely decline or I indulge them for a few minutes, but there was something a little different about these teenagers. They were a little nutty and a little annoying but there was something sweet, thoughtful and sincere about them, and I had this feeling if I stuck with the situation for a while, something penetrating might cut through the silliness of the teenagers trying to impress one another and impress us. And sure enough, as I got past...the initial posing and primping and preening, they got back to what they would of be doing ordinarily and these ..delicate, tender moments emerged, and as they stopped kind of yelling so much, the individual characters became a little bit more clear and distinct and I was able to work a little bit more quietly and effectively. And in the end, I think I got quite a nice photograph out of it.”

Peter van Agtmael  
New York, 2018.



# 04

## Lessons Learnt

Serendipity plays a huge part in photography.

“Serendipity plays a huge part. I’m attracted to some people to photograph and not others for reasons that I can’t entirely describe and it’s always shifting. What I might be attracted to one month or one year is going to be different from what I’m attracted to later on, and that often has to do a lot with kind of internal forces in one’s life; what you’re thinking of and feeling in your own personal life, in your own heart.”

[Then] there’s the serendipity of just who you form a relationship easily with and who not. Who feels natural in front of the camera and will open up to you and [those] who may be cautious or who may be too ostentatious.”



Peter van Agtmael  
Coney Island, New York, 2018.

## Push yourself out of your comfort zone.

It can often happen that the more experience you gain, the easier it can be to slip into a routine of photographing within your comfort zone; where you are coasting and no longer feeling challenged. Finding or placing yourself outside of this can be, as van Agtmael describes, both “inspiring and powerful”. Even if it results in a failure you can learn lessons from the anxiety of the situation. Challenging yourself by going beyond your comfort zone can help you improve your confidence and open up new opportunities.

Sometimes you don't get the shot, but it is important to learn from that.

Sometimes you encounter a great character, but you don't quite get the picture. This can often be due to a reluctance on the subject's part or a lack of persistence by the photographer. It's important to learn from these disappointments and to think about how you can get more out of your subjects in the future, when appropriate.

“He had shown some willingness to be photographed, but [also] some reluctance. If I had just pushed it a little bit harder and said ‘Excuse me Sir, just give me one minute of your time, or just give me three minutes of your time,’ I probably could have positioned him a little bit better and gotten a little more out of him, and the results would have been a pretty good picture.”



In general, people like to be photographed, but be wary.

If you are looking to make street portraits, it can be a daunting task to approach people to ask them to participate. Van Agtmael believes that in general, if you are friendly and sincere with your request, the majority of people will respond positively, as ultimately most people are willing to be photographed.

“Partly it is experience, sensing when people are being sincere about not wanting to be photographed, and when it is a little bit of a game.”

He adds that in his experience, it is often the individuals who don't desperately want to be photographed but politely consent that result in more natural and sincere portraits and he warns to be wary of those who want to be photographed a little too much.

...but persistence and patience can pay off.

However, sometimes you will encounter a scene that initially presents itself as problematic, but which you feel could result in something intriguing or beautiful if explored further. Being patient with your subject(s) and persistent in your actions—allowing the scene to settle—can reveal moments that are worth sticking around for.

“Patience and persistence are the two most important factors in photography in many ways. Photographs come very slowly. They don't come easily at all. You can wait a whole day, you can wait for days, you can wait weeks to get a good photograph sometimes. There are no guarantees whatsoever in photography. So the only thing you're left with in a way is persistence and patience.”



# 05 Bonus Assignment: Head out with a Friend

During this lesson, Peter describes how sometimes it can be difficult to engage people when working alone, as people can often be wary of an individual with a camera. To counter this, Peter recommends hitting the street with a friend. This can both boost your confidence in approaching subjects, and help to put them at ease.

In a similar vein, the encouragement and friendly competition you get from working with another photographer is a great incentive to keep “motoring down that street all day every day” as van Agtmael says; something that Joel Meyerowitz and Garry Winogrand did together on New York’s Fifth Avenue, every day for five years.

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