



The Art of Street Photography

Editing –
Creating Order Out of Chaos

09

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01

What is Editing and Why is it Important?

“Editing is how you create meaning, so it’s probably the most important part of the process. It is about getting rid of the clutter and the terrible, embarrassing images, and honing in on what you are really trying to see...sometimes it means starting with ten thousand images and ending up with ten or one.”

– **Carolyn Drake**

Editing is a hugely important and valuable process with different stages and uses. Not to be confused with post-processing your images with programs like Lightroom or Photoshop, editing is the process of looking deeply at the photographs you are making, to interrogate them with a critical eye, to review and reject the weak images, and to find something remarkable on the contact sheet or screen. One fundamental component of this process is giving your pictures time and focus. In doing so, you can begin to understand yourself as a photographer more deeply, while also contributing to the development of your photographic practice, learning from your mistakes, missed opportunities or outright failures, all of which are frequent occurrences in photography.

“It’s only in analyzing the images that you’ve taken and the editing process that you can really start to see what works and what doesn’t, because what you see and feel, especially early on in photography, and how that translates into a frame, into an individual image, oftentimes those things are in disconnect. So constantly looking at what you are doing and thinking critically about what you’re doing...is really important, especially in the early days of working. But [this] lesson never goes away and in fact, the more you work, the more humble you have to be with your failures.”

– Peter van Agtmael

Through editing, you can discover what it is you are interested in, even if you were not conscious of this when making work. As Richard Kalvar notes in this lesson, you can find out “what you are up to” by examining the work you have been producing. This can be an important step in making sense of your photography, and your voice as a photographer.





02

Editing: Processes and Steps

“Every editor has their own approach. There’s no school of editing that says do it this way or do it that way. You find your own way there.”

– **Chris Boot**

There are many different types of editing, from magazine features to monographs, but this lesson focuses on personal work or projects. Editing is a personal and contemplative process, with no right or wrong approach; the key is defining the process that suits you, so experiment until you find a way that feels comfortable. Once you have defined what that looks like, it is worthwhile building it into your practice with some regularity.

There are various stages to editing. Step one is the process of elimination. You are working toward removing and discounting images from a broad selection. Step two is the same, reducing the pile down further. Continue doing this until you are left with only your best images.

Richard Kalvar says his process essentially hasn't changed over the past 50 years, though the technology has. When he was using film he would produce contact sheets – traditionally a 10x8" photographic print made with all 36 images from a roll of film visible – and slowly but surely identify the images that were of interest by drawing lines using a grease pencil. Today, his process is digital so instead of lines he uses stars to organize his work:

“On my first round, going from zero stars to one star, I'm on average eliminating two-thirds of the pictures. [...] It could be that I'm keeping all of them or keeping none of them, but on average, two-thirds go out. And then I have to go from one star to two stars, so that's another cull. To three stars and then if necessary four or five. It's a process of elimination and you get the same satisfaction. A whole lot of crap – the first time around is really difficult because you see how many lousy, lousy, lousy pictures you've taken – and then it gets better and better, it gets more interesting, hopefully, if you have some good pictures. You keep on refining it until you get to purify the selection down to just the gold that you didn't expect [or that] you didn't suspect was even there in the first place.”

– **Richard Kalvar**

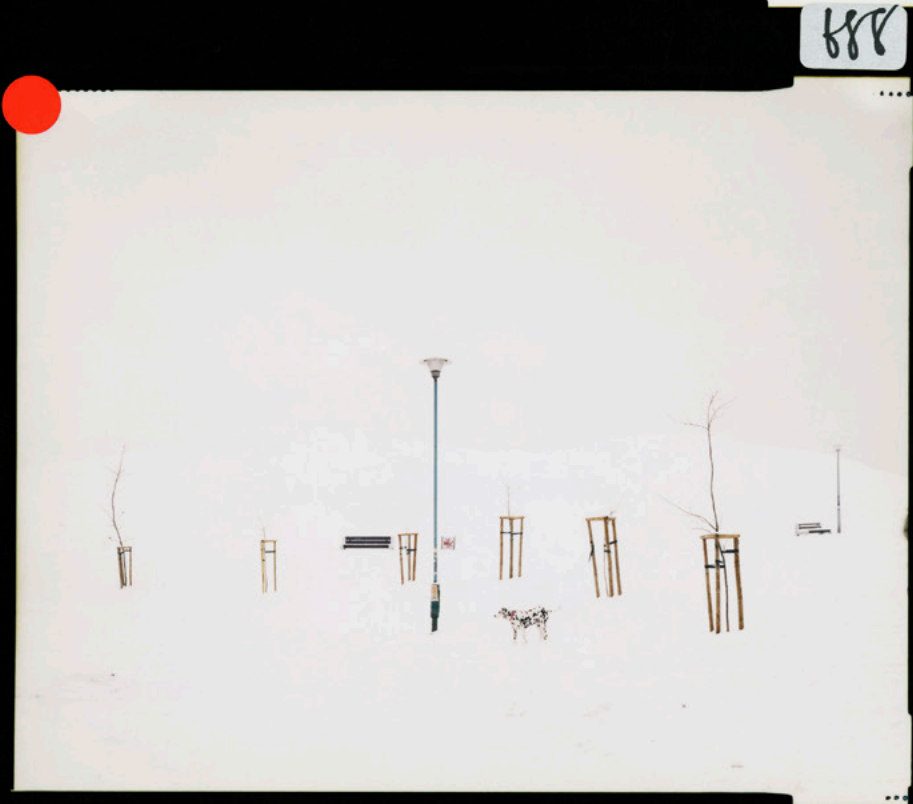
And for Mark Power, physical prints are key for his process:

“Making a photographic project is multifaceted, of course. First of all, you have to get yourself out of the house, or your hotel, or wherever you are. You have to make that initial effort to do that. Then you have to go out and make those pictures, and then you have to bring them back and look at them, and make sense of them and think about what you're going to do with them. Then, for me, it's very important to make physical prints. Particularly in this day and age, when most of us are working digitally, it makes me slightly nervous to think that the thing only exists on a computer, and we all know how easy it is to lose those images. So to make physical objects... That's never changed. I've always been very careful to make prints, and if I'm editing work, sequencing work, I'm always using prints to do it. I find myself a big space or the floor, and that's how I work. I don't move things around on the computer screen, I don't have the kind of brain to be able to deal with that. I like to work with physical objects.”

– **Mark Power**

Mark Power
Poland, 2005.

Own the signed print



03 Kill Your Darlings and Second Opinions

“The easiest person to con is yourself.”

– **Martin Parr**

It is, without doubt, a challenge to look objectively at your own photographs. Often, photographers will attach memories or emotion to images which can cloud or inhibit a critical eye, and therefore lead to instances where they hold on to weaker images. Once you have made your initial edit, a useful next step is to seek a second opinion. Van Agtmael describes how he will take a loose edit of images—the ones he likes, thinks he likes and others that are “wildcards” to some trusted individuals, asking them to give “really honest answers and be brutal about it”: to tell him what do they like, what they don’t like, and why.

“It begins this process of trying to justify to yourself and justify to them why it is you like an image. And if you find you can’t justify that, it may be that the picture itself isn’t actually that great, so it becomes this dialogue almost with oneself and with one’s work.”

– **Peter van Agtmael**

04

Single vs. Series

“Sometimes there’s a unique picture whose composition possesses such vigor and richness and whose content so radiates outward from it that the single picture is a whole story in itself.”

– **Henri Cartier-Bresson**

Street photography, as Mark Power says, is often perceived as a collection of individual moments. Many photographers follow in the ‘hunter’ tradition of Henri Cartier-Bresson and other greats, taking pleasure in the ‘making’ of photographs that are “extracts” taken from reality, as described by Richard Kalvar. A single photograph can have the power to tell a story in itself, as a compression of reality where all the elements are working together, but this can often be hard to come by. Striving to capture these so-called ‘decisive moments’ can also be quite limiting.

“One of the limitations of the ‘decisive moment’, the moment where everything comes together: the content and the composition, the content and the form is what photographers are looking for, but there is a lot of beauty in the ‘undecisive moment’. The ‘weak’ moment in the photograph where nothing seems to be happening. Photography is not so much always about the one frame, photography can be very much about the series [and] the sequencing.”

– **Pauline Vermare**

Today, more and more, the focus is on a series of pictures presenting a narrative or a cohesive exploration into a specific subject matter. Together these photographs communicate broader ideas and concepts. Both approaches are perfectly valid, but no matter which approach you take, you should consider what your work says about the world and yourself as a photographer. Inevitably, through the act of photographing and through the process of editing, you will find common threads within your work and learn to identify the subject matter you are most interested in. This is vital for forming larger projects and a voice as a photographer.

Historically, though we often remember single images, it is usually bodies of work, presented in book or exhibition form, that become influential. Robert Frank’s seminal *The Americans*, first published in 1958, is such an example. Having received a grant from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Swiss photographer set out on a grand tour of the USA to document contemporary American society from the viewpoint of an outsider. Frank’s photographs challenged the conventions of photography at the time by opting to prioritize feeling over technical prowess, and through the sequencing and pacing of his photographs throughout the book, the result was a poetic and evocative experience.

05 Sequencing

The meaning of an image can be drastically altered by simply placing another image alongside it, drawing connections, creating juxtapositions or suggestions. When sequencing is done well, you can create a flow between one image to the next, keeping the viewer engaged and moving through your work. This process can be a liberating and creative experience, so it is worth experimenting to see where it takes you.

“Things develop meaning when you connect them together in a more complex way. Think of a series of pictures like a series of words; the words develop a different meaning when they’re put next to each other. And you can swap the place of a word and it means something else. You can choose how to sequence those words in order to totally reinvent the meaning. And that is a really empowering thing, that’s really a creative thing, and the same thing can be done with photographs.”

– **Carolyn Drake**

See the next lesson for more on building bodies of work.

06

Bonus Assignment: Get a Second Opinion

For this assignment, we encourage you to share some of your work with a trusted peer or friend. Pay attention to their reactions: do they skip past an image or does it hold them? Ask them what they like, or dislike about an image. Maybe share a variety of similar frames of the same picture to see which they feel is strongest. Start the dialogue with them about your photographs that van Agtmael describes, and gain valuable insights into your work.

07

Further Reading

[John Morris on Photo Editing](#)

[Xavier Barral on the Art of Photobook Publishing](#)

[Big Screens and a Nonconformist Streak:
Advice from a Photo Editor](#)

[Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida](#)

[John Berger, Ways of Seeing](#)

[John Berger, Understanding a Photograph](#)

[Robert Frank, The Americans](#)

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