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10 WAYS TO BECOME A FEARLESS STREET PHOTOGRAPHER

+ MY NO#1 STREET PHOTOGRAPHY HACK!



POLLY RUSYN



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Street photography is candid photography of people (or the evidence of them) in public places, and often fills beginner street photographers with fear...

Street photography is THE most accessible form of photography (you literally grab something to capture an image with, and leave your house), it keeps you fit (you could easily cover 10km if you spend a day exploring a city with your camera), and it's great for your mental health (once you get into the zone, nothing else matters, nothing, I tell you!), yet the main thing I hear time and time again that holds people back is the fear of taking candid photographs of strangers without their permission.



So in the short and street (see what I did there?!) guide I'm going to share ten things with you to help you be a guilt-free, fearless and confident street photographer (with practice of course!). And I'll share with you my simple No#1 hack to help you get started on your street photography adventure.

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Hello, my name is Polly Rusyn – I'm the Boss at the Department of Street Photography and the author and creator of The Street Photography Playbook and The Photo Composition Playbook. I'm a pro-photographer, multi-award-winning street photographer, and a former Fujifilm Ambassador. I'm one of a 100 women featured in "Women Street Photographers" (Gulnara Samoilova), I contributed to "The Travel Photographer's Way" (Nori Jemil), and also "Reclaim the Street" (Stephen McLaren + Matt Stuard).

INTRO

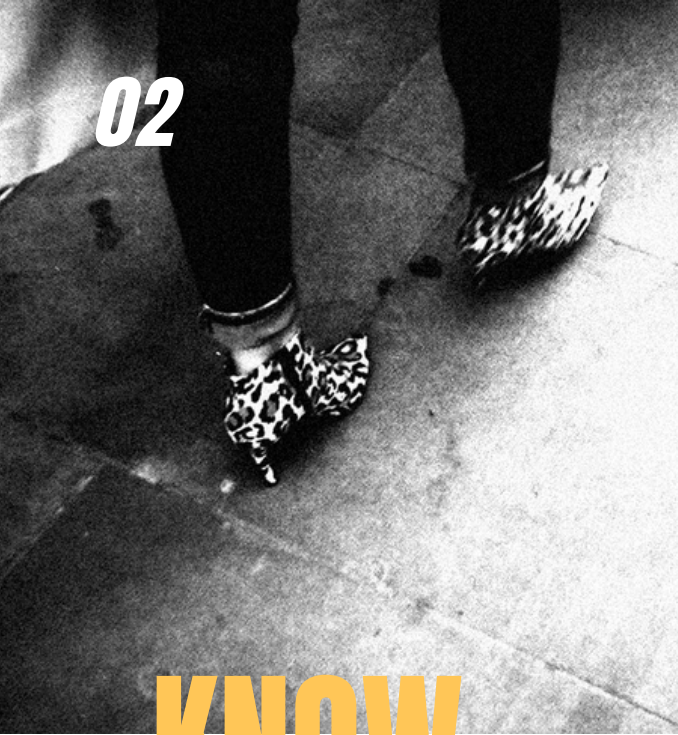
CHANGE YOUR MINDSET



It can be scary taking candid photos of strangers without their permission. But think about this - when was the last time you left your house in the morning and asked yourself, "I wonder how many people will try and photograph me today?!" The answer is probably: never! That's because people have more important (or random) things to fill their heads with, such as: "What shall I make for dinner?", "Did I switch the lights off?", "Why hasn't he texted...? It's been three days." You get the idea!

So, no-one is really thinking about, or expecting someone to photograph them. Unless you spring up in someone's face then it's actually quite unlikely you'll even get noticed. Keep this in mind, and along with the other things I'll be sharing with you, you'll have a very good chance of becoming invisible... And consider this: you are giving someone a compliment by choosing them to be immortalised in one of your photographs!

02



KNOW THE LAW



There is no universal law when it comes to privacy. As a street photographer you need to make yourself aware of the privacy laws of the country you are photographing in. In the UK, for example, it's perfectly legal to take photos of people in public places without their permission. Yep, totally cool, and you don't even have to tell someone you've photographed them after.

Some countries, however, have very strict privacy laws. But that should never stop you! You can still make street photographs - you just have to be a bit more creative photographing anonymous subjects (silhouettes, obscured faces, random limbs etc.). And by the way, you don't need model releases from anyone you photograph, unless you are planning to use the photos for commercial purposes, such as for an ad campaign.

Ethics are your own personal laws that inform your behaviour. Ultimately, you have to answer to yourself and be able to sleep at night. Personally, I avoid making street photographs of vulnerable people such as the homeless. It feels exploitative and disrespectful. It's different for a documentary photographer who is collaborating with the person to tell their story.

Some street photographers have concerns about photographing children. But they are such irresistible subjects because they embrace the freedom of life and it would be so sad for future generations to look back at the street photography from this era and wonder why there were no kids! What you can do is try to maintain children's anonymity as much as you can when photographing them, or get permission from parents.

BE ETHICAL



"I'M A SORT OF SPY."

VIVIAN MAIER

KEEP CALM



Remember, you are doing nothing wrong (you've checked the law and are abiding by it), but also be aware that the person you have photographed may not realise this. If you do find yourself in any confrontation, the best thing to do is to diffuse the situation as quickly as possible.

Start by introducing yourself by name and simply explain what you are doing: "I'm a street photographer. I'm just photographing things and people I find interesting." Add a little sugar with a compliment, such as, "I loved how the light looked on you", or "Your hat is so stylish I couldn't resist". You can also offer to send them the photo by email. By now you should no longer be stranger-with-a-camera-danger, but if someone is still not happy and really wants you to bin the shot - just do it! Do you want to look at a photo and remember how ruined someone's day? It's not worth it.



BLEND IN



Some photographers are quite comfortable with being seen by their subjects (they'll smile and maybe even chat after a photo has been taken!). But if, like me, you'd rather spend more time taking pictures than chatting, then the aim of the game is to hide in plain sight! In the absence of an actual cloak of invisibility there are a few ways to go relatively unnoticed on the streets when you are taking photos and one of those ways is how you behave.

Step one of stealth mode is to act normal - don't be the weirdo in the crowd who looks suspicious! We've all spotted someone who is acting shifty - you know, the dodgy dude with darting eyes and hunched body language. We spot them because they are the "odd one out", but also because they are giving off a different vibe. As a street photographer you need to be able to blend in with the crowd.

What is “CHIMPing” you might ask? Well, it’s short for “CHeck IMage Preview”. If you are shooting film (or used to shooting film) this will not be a problem for you, but in the age of digital cameras with LCD screens that show you what you have photographed, the temptation to check every single shot you is strong - you must resist! Do you hear me?!

So, while it’s a real luxury to have this facility, if you are CHIMPing every shot, you are probably giving yourself away, especially if someone has already wondered if you might be photographing them. Aside from that, you may well be missing the best shot of your life while you are busy looking at the back of your camera. So keep shooting until the moment is over, then walk away, and only then let yourself CHIMP.

STOP CHIMPING



***"TO TAKE A PHOTOGRAPH
IS TO ALIGN THE EYE AND
THE HEART."***

HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON

NOT THE EYES



It is a normal human reaction to look another person in the eye. It's a way of connecting, of creating intimacy, or rapport; and in normal everyday interactions it's what you should be doing. But when making candid photos it's best to avoid any eye contact altogether. Eye contact is a way of telling someone you are open to communicating with them. And if you combine that with a camera to your face, and throw in a CHIMP, you are giving the game away. You may find yourself having to explain what you are doing, which could lead to a conversation (which would be cool), or a confrontation (which would not.)

Some street photographers covet the moment they get caught, when eye contact is made, as a magical instance of connection with the subject. But what happens then, is that the candid moment is over - people behave differently when they know they are being photographed even if they don't mind you carrying on.



FAKE IT



A great way to take photos of people without them realising is to not even look as though you are photographing anyone. You could fake-shoot some architecture above someone then bring your camera down to make the shot. You could fake-shoot behind someone. You could fake-video! Interestingly, people tend to be less bothered about being caught in a video than they are about being singled out to be photographed.

Remember - avoid eye contact and don't CHIMP. Although, you could fake-CHIMP if you are fake-shooting above someone! It's all about distraction. Sometimes I pretend I'm adjusting the dials on my camera, I might even look puzzled while I'm doing it - but I'm not adjusting anything - I'm actually making photos (cue evil laughter).

The idea that a large camera with a long lens is a “professional” camera is still very much the case for people who don’t know about recent camera developments. And if you are perceived as a pro, people get suspicious as to why you are taking photos. Not to mention that a big old camera will just attract more attention to you in general. And don’t get me started on long lenses for street photography - it’s not the Serengeti! If it’s long, it’s wrong.

I use a Fujifilm X100V (possibly the most perfect street photography camera ever made), which is very discreet as it’s small, has a fixed prime lens, a silent shutter, and a flip LCD screen. No one takes me seriously when I’m out with it. I use my LCD screen a lot, and it means I’m looking down - just like Vivian Maier with her top-down viewfinder Rolleiflex camera - and am more likely to go unnoticed.



***"WHEN YOU'RE OUT IN THE
STREET IT'S A MATTER OF
GETTING IN A CERTAIN
TYPE OF GROOVE."***

JEFF MERMELSTEIN

START SIMPLE



If you are brand new to street photography start by making photos where you have a solitary human for scale against some nice architecture. This is a super safe way to start making photos that include people, while honing your compositional skills, and building your confidence in the process. It's also a great way to warm-up at the start of a day shooting, even if this isn't the style of street photography you want to develop.

Overtime you may well want to try to get in a bit closer to people, photograph stories taking place, and start creating more complex images that have human interactions and interesting context. Again, start simple with one subject before building up to more, while always being mindful of the background.

+

After taking on board all of the ideas in this guide, let's hack some street photography of people a little closer up. And it's so darn simple:

DON'T SHOOT AT EYE-LEVEL

MY NO#1 HACK

Firstly, if you aren't shooting at eye-level, you are less likely to look someone in the eye (remember tip number 7), and thereby more likely to be able to stay in stealth mode. Secondly, you are making yourself smaller and less obtrusive. Finally, you are INSTANTLY creating an unusual angle on the world. We all walk around seeing everything at eye-level (yes some people's eye-level is different to others but you know what I mean!). So when you shift your point of view dramatically, not only do you go unnoticed, but you are also making "something from nothing". Take a look at these two examples:



This is literally someone walking across a bridge. That's it. Yet, if it had been shot at eye-level it would be completely different and totally boring. I would have lost either the shadows on the ground or the wheel in the distance; and I wouldn't have had those lovely leading lines taking you into the frame. I took this picture from the floor (my knees are still not speaking to me!).



This is a man dancing. Yes his outfit is cool and he's doing an unusual thing, but if it had been shot at eye-level I would have had to contend with a messy background thanks to the crowd watching him. This way (shooting from belly-button height using my LCD screen) I cut out the crowd, and cut off his head! Making it so much more interesting and unusual to look at.

NOW STOP READING ABOUT IT, AND GO DO IT. AS SOMEONE ONCE SAID TO ME, "GET YOUR KNEES DIRTY!"



INSPIRATION KICKSTART LIST

BOOKS

[Women Street Photographer - Gulnara Samoilova](#)

[The Suffering of Light - Alex Webb](#)

[Think Like a Street Photographer - Matt Stuart](#)

[Reclaim the Street: Street Photography's Moment - Stephen McLaren and Matt Stuart](#)

[Street Photography Now - Sophie Howarth, Stephen McLaren](#)

[The Street Photographers Manual - David Gibson](#)

[The Street Photography Playbook - Polly Rusyn](#)

[The Photo Composition Playbook - Polly Rusyn](#)

VIDEOS

[Henri Cartier-Bresson and Richard Avedon interview](#)

[Everybody Street](#)

[Joel Meyerowitz at Les Rencontres d'Arles 2017](#)

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by Polly Rusyn

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