

## Photographing People- Advanced Techniques for Honest Environmental Portraits.

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### Introduction

(Warning: I belong to the “**Loyal Order of Slide Dinosaurs**” (LOSD) or Kodachromus Rex, if you please. So no rude digi-comments please or I might have to get huffy and defensive.

More and more as I've continued to evolve my shooting style I have found myself gravitating towards photographing people, both professionally and for personal work.

I still enjoy landscape and still life too but I think I'm better with people.

What follows is a summary of my technique and procedures with a few pointers towards the end. If it has any value it won't matter much whether you are analogue or digital.

I accept that there are situations that preclude these techniques that I discuss such as, photojournalism involving confrontation and certain types of documentary of current events. We are discussing how to achieve better results in the discipline of photographing Human Interest situations that may intrigue you but where, up till now, you may have been reluctant to approach.

I am taking for granted that participants are reasonably familiar with their chosen equipment whether 35mm or other. If I have not explained a term completely, feel free to ask or e-mail me.

I have had the good fortune to be associated with some pretty talented individuals over the years but I am not yet capable of defining all the terms of the topic. I still expect to learn something new with every new discussion.

In my experience, photography is cyclical, people tend to pick it up and put it down as other factors in their lives ascend or decline or because we see it as a coping tool in this ever changing world. I see young people enjoying it and I've seen many continue well in to the upper decades with fulfillment. That's one of photography's qualities. Anyway here goes...

**Generally I work in my subject's environment.** If I had to define different types of photographers, I would say there are two broad categories: Conceptual, those producing the majority of work within a studio or controlled space and Perceptual. I fall into the latter group. I enter upon people's spaces. I try to get them doing the activity that likely caused me to want to photograph them in the first place. This is the most important concept I can convey to those who are interested by my photographs. Inactive subjects are a great deal more defensive than active one's. They have every reason to be because your arrival on the scene has put them on the spot, and not very many of us are at our best when we are on the spot but we are at our best when we are doing an activity at which we are skilled. So Job # 1 is making your intended subject feel comfortable. You need to get them doing something they are good at such as playing the guitar or changing the muffler on their truck.

**I try to get past my first reaction to the situation.** I'm not saying, don't shoot your first reaction but I am asking you to question it and to not be satisfied with it. Change lenses, change positions, try again. You will see the benefit in editing. This is also a good time to work on picture composition. Simply put, your eye needs to flow through an image. You control that flow by choosing foreground, middle ground, background. Give your viewer a place to start and a place to finish.

**I work as simply as possible in order to be as invisible as possible.**

You need to have the least intrusion on a given situation as is possible. This means using mostly available light or at least mixing available with some fill flash. I use fast prime lenses on my cameras. In order of priority mostly 24-28mm, 35mm, 50mm, and sometimes, an 85-90mm. Less often, longer telephoto lenses. I use a hand held incident meter that, besides giving me accurate readings, allows me to "look" like I'm going to make a photograph. In the earliest stages of a given situation there is a "loss of face" that comes out of raising your camera when person doesn't understand what you are doing or if potentially a willing subject isn't ready to trust you to photograph them yet. So, besides giving me an accurate reading, when I begin pushing buttons to get a reading it usually will bring out a question like; what is that? Or what are you doing? To which I respond; Well I kinda like this situation and I'm thinking of making a picture here, what do you think of that? So I haven't raised my camera and I haven't lost face. It's still a take it or leave it situation that the meter has helped me make it through. But by now the readings are on the camera.

**I try to never sneak a photograph.** I believe this is cheating and it's inherently dishonest and the result is seldom satisfying. Anyway, the resultant photograph is not really yours if the subject didn't "give" it to you. Working simply means I have to be technically comfortable with my equipment in order to avoid fumbling at a critical moment. I have in my hand what I intend to use first with a back up body and lens on my shoulder. I use a waist pouch for film and filters. I do not use a big bag in a confined space or an unfamiliar room as it can easily get left behind as I move along. I go into a room or subject area ready to shoot. I've set exposure to the "ball park" settings so I know I'm close. Few subjects will share your enthusiasm for equipment. It is said that we do 80% of our work with 20% of our equipment and I believe it. We have to try new techniques of which equipment is part of it, so you're testing separately and before you use it on a subject. So the good news is you get to leave 80% of your stuff behind. Simpler is better. I say that if I had to leave the planet with one lens, it would be my 50mm. It's the best bargain in the bag. It's fast, small and sharp, a hard combo to beat. I'm obviously speaking to you as a shooter and not a salesperson. I don't like big slow heavy zooms and no amount of digital evolution will change me.

**A goal in the above is to attempt to work long enough with a subject so they will naturally want to return to what they were doing before my intrusion.** I don't want them to host or change their activities - I want the novelty of the interruption to wear off. The best complement a subject can pay me is, in

fact, to trust me enough to ignore me, then, I can really work.

**The inverse of this is: Learn to walk away from marginal situations that we know will result in “unsatisfactory keepers”** –images that don’t really have a reason to live but are technically too good to throw away when editing. I’ve a little more to say about this later.

**I have learned to recognize “picture rich” environments that I then concentrate my efforts in that space.** I return, as necessary, again and again as conditions, light, time of day and even season change. There is the case where my photographic Geiger counter is really going off and there is a person who is really “hot” photographically for example in a market or public place. They know they are “it” too. If you start with this individual your finished before you start. If there is a lot of ego and they have an audience you are pretty much assured of a “no”, because they are maintaining something that’s there before you arrive and there after you leave. For these individuals the best response is to start with anybody else, even if you know you don’t want them. Eventually the “hot subject” who knows he’s “it” will be more than willing and you can pay a little more attention at the end so you leave them happy.

**Try to avoid an entire portfolio of “camera aware” people pictures.** A little bit goes a long way. If you are working well and getting subjects to “do what they do”, this shouldn’t be a problem. It’s an evolution and camera aware pictures are adolescent images, there is a more mature version out there. Camera aware pictures say to me: “I didn’t make the extra effort or time to take a really effective image instead I offer this shortcut - an unsatisfactory keeper. Let’s digress for a second to composition issues again. When you begin don’t be afraid to ask yourself, ” **Why am I shooting this image?**” Avoid shooting first and asking yourself why afterwards. Clearly identify your subject. Gradually begin to work tighter. A really disciplined photographer should be able to have a dialogue going at least in his own head with regard to how the current view fits into a body of work and where it fits.

**If you are working on a theme and have time to plan, try working on “pre-visualization”** even drawing sketches of what you want to end up with. You will be surprised how real life situations can fit into your pre-visualized mock up.

**Practice Left brained activities and activities causing right brained - left brain switching.** It is a fact, if you improve left brained activities you are improving your creativity. Take a common familiar object and try to draw it upside down when you begin concentrating your just switched sides. (see: Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain, by Betty Edward published by Tarcher/Putnam). **Consider a mentor.** Anybody who has a signature to their work as in you don’t need to look at the name to know who shot it, has reached well beyond a threshold level of shooting. In fact they have obviously done a tremendous amount of work in order to reach that level. In order to accelerate your style you

need to discover someone's work to use as a guide. In fact, through the history of photography there is obviously influence from one generation to the next i.e. Eugene Atget's work influences Walker Evans who influences a whole generation of photojournalists. I love the work of; **Elliot Erwitt, Sebastio Selgado** and **William Albert Allard**. Allard has spent most of his career at National Geographic where his unique approach has caused a revolution in how pictures editors use images. He prides himself at working on what he calls "the edge" which is where he describes capturing satisfying images in hand held, full aperture, slow shutter speeds that often show motion, with a threshold level of fill flash to stop action or define a subject that is otherwise a blur. I love the work of **Larry Towel** a Magnum member and a Canadian who spend at least ten years documenting Mexican Mennonite farm workers who migrate to Canada for harvests. Photographers are like painters as most successful ones are there because they have evolved a consistency to their visual style and this is where we strive to go, consistency of style.

**Maybe it's like Music.** The real object of a satisfactory portrait is getting the spirit of the subject on film (or memory card). Within every body of images there evolves single images that are stronger than others. Almost never, could any photographer have cut directly to the point of creating these stronger images. Treat any session like it was a symphony. When you begin to make the comparison you will realize, just like the musical equivalent, your session needs an "Introduction phase", a "Developmental phase", a "Climactic phase" and finally, a "Conclusion".

Perhaps you have already noticed how frequently your best images are on from 28 or 34. Why could you not have just begun there? Because human behavior just doesn't always allow it and a worthy subject will usually need a certain amount of "dancing" or auditioning before they will react honestly. They often want to see if you are worthy of their letting you inside their "bubble". They need to drop some protective barriers. So be prepared to invest time in order to do it right.

**Before we get to equipment.** I bring up and issue I think needs discussion; I think there is value in having a finite quantity of image capture material (read; film or memory). It encourages an economy in shooting. I strongly disagree with the concept of "shooting now and fixing it in Photoshop". Too many photographers are getting their signature out of the Photoshop box. Remember all the great images that preceded 35mm with its 36 exposure rolls. If you look around the famous shot of Mohammed Ali's triumph over Sonny Liston in 1964 you will see a ring of Rolleiflex's and Speed Graphics. These guys had to concentrate for the entire event in order to make a decision about their "decisive moment". This phrase is one of the greatest teaching tool there is in imaging. I fear in the Digital age we are losing this concept that Cartier-Bresson so aptly named. In digital terms there doesn't have to be a decisive moment if a shooter relies on the concept of "fixing it in Photoshop". The best editing happens in

camera, at the moment. Robert Capa photographed D-Day with a Rolleicord and a Contax both with fixed standard lenses.

### **Time and Technique.**

The other side if all this talk around settling in an having a good shoot is this: It's all fine to say you want your subject to forget you etc, but keep in mind, **You have to have a pretty good idea how tolerant the subject is going to be to your intrusion** so that you know just how long to play out "the symphony". For example, if it were children at any normal activity short of sleeping, you have to know you have 3-5 minutes before they are on to something else that may not necessarily include you. A busy executive, you may have two minutes before their patience runs out or they are interrupted by their trade, in which case it's usually better to set up with a stand in so that you call them only when you are completely set up and ready. Sometimes you will be given the whole day from sun up to sun down with lots of variety of locations and situation. Where this happens, you have to be careful to ration film or card space so it lasts the whole session.

But the main point is: thinking ahead is very important to the process. For example, if the subject is moving around a space you have to constantly consider where he or she is going next so you can be out front otherwise all you will have to edit is the back of someone's head.

**Another potential problem may be that your arrival may also create a lot of "hosting" by the subject.** Nip this in the bud as it can be very counter productive. Review your goal with the person who is over-hosting. If someone is over tidy, assure them that you will not be able to include the area of concern and exclude it or offer to show them the results before anyone else.

**Camera's and Equipment;** As previously discussed, my expertise is with analogue 35mm equipment. Two quiet small camera bodies and two small prime lenses are my preference. Standard fare is filters and hoods. I leave anything behind I can, like film cans, front and back caps etc. Anything that might get in the way or make an unwanted noise. A good item is a good leather waist pouch with two pockets so you can divide exposed and unexposed.

**I do all my testing before hand.** I test my meter so it's exact, I test my lenses, my shutter speeds, flash output which is important because you have to know what the exact output is if you are combining flash with ambient. I test everything I can test so I don't have to worry. I use a film I'm familiar with and whose characteristics fit the subject. I test it for latitude" i.e. Fuji Velvia is great for anything but skin tones. Kodak EPP is a medium contrast not too punchy alternative that does produce nice skin tones as is Fuji Astia. Fuji Reala is likely the best all around neg. film with NPH as a faster alternative. I really loved Kodachrome 200!!!! ....

It may surprise some to know, that I have not made a smooth transition to digital. I believe the output part is a better solution as long as you can actually find a P.C that works or a Mac you can afford but I've yet to see a digital body that gives me

what K200 did. And I don't like the constrained aspect ratio either. So my Digital camera will be full frame like 35mm and will give me the pastel tones I want and it won't cost \$9400 dollars and it will go for more than a couple of hours on a battery.

Just a little more about flash. **The ultimate use of flash is to have images that don't look "flash dominant" or "lit"**. So that means we mix flash and ambient by decreasing flash output and using long speeds to pick up what you can from the environment. Flash is usually modified if it's lighting something under ten feet such as at least bounced with a white card (buy broccoli for the great elastic they work great on most flash heads to hold a white card) or with a buy a dome (Tupperware like diffuser) they are great because they are ready to go right out of the bag. Remember the bigger a light source the softer, so you need better than a 30 inch umbrella to get an improved quality of light than what these domes provide. Besides you can add gels inside. If you combine them with an off camera cord and a little tripod base you can get a great simple little tool that's not hard and direct.

**Filters.** I generally only use filters as problem solvers. If its not solving a problem don't use it. An exception would be using tungsten slide film and filtering the light source with 85B gel so it outputs tungsten balanced for the flash. Really cool background with balanced light on the subject. Try it.

### **In Conclusion:**

It was wisely written (even if I can't recall exactly who said it); **"That nothing we perceive as beautiful is thus unless light makes it so."** Reality is that we must often search out quality light at the location, which may mean we have to encourage the subject to relocate near it. Again an incident meter hand held is a useful too because you can do a walk around or an assessment of conditions as you arrive so that you don't suggest a spot that just isn't lit well enough or has a bad mix such as fluorescent and daylight etc. As an alternative to flash use big reflectors held by available assistance.

**I learned a while ago that a camera was a license to participate.** It opens doors that would otherwise remain shut. When fully realized it makes me see well subjects I would have simply missed or walked by. I believe strongly in the motivation received from "self assignments" which result in pictures with a purpose, which also means I believe pictures work better in a series or sequence than they do as individual images.

Combine anything that truly interests you and your photography and good things and good pictures will result.

Ken Ginn