IAN'S STUDIO PHOTOGRAPHY GUIDE

Street Photography

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IAN'S STUDIO

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INTRODUCTION

Let's start with a confession. I am not a "Street Photographer" - I don't often go out with my camera just to photograph people. There are many reasons for this not least of which is the ethics of it.

I have deliberately used the words ethics and not the word legality - just because something is legal doesn't mean it is ethically right or justifiable.

The first section of this guide is devoted to looking at the question of ethics and what is legal.

For me it comes down to a question of consent. Would the subject of my image object to being photographed?

In the second section of the guide we look at different ways in which consent may be obtained.

In the next section of the guide I am going to present a number of images and look at the techniques used in their creation.

I am also including in the guide a case study from a water fight in the Azores and some images which I hope will inspire you.

You will notice that most of the images I am using to illustrate this guide have been made outside of the UK. This is because most of my street photography is done as part of my travel photography work. Photographically the techniques do not change from one country to the next, however, laws and culture do, so it is important to stress that you should take the time to understand the laws and customs of the places you are visiting if you are doing street photography while travelling.

Havana Street Scene, Cuba

Date: 21 Mar 2017
Camera: Canon EOS 5D Mark III
Lens: EF70-200mm f/2.8L IS II USM @200 mm
Exposure: 1/5000s, f/2.8, ISO 640
Exp mode: Aperture priority
Metering mode: Pattern
Exp comp: 1/3 EV
Ref: 20170321A-G04792

ETHICS OF STREET PHOTOGRAPHY

A Cuban man smoking a cigar in Havana

Date: 21 Mar 2017
Camera: Canon EOS 5D Mark III
Lens: EF70-200mm f/2.8L IS II USM @155 mm
Exposure: 1/250s, f/2.8, ISO 100
Exp mode: Aperture priority
Metering mode: Pattern
Exp comp: -1/3 EV
Ref: 20170321A-G04748

Back in June 2017, I read the following BBC article about the exhibition of images by Shirley Baker at Manchester Art Gallery. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-40003514

If you are interested in street photography it is worth reading the article. Shirley Baker photographed life in Salford in the 1950s and 1960s. The images form a fascinating look into what life was like at that time. What stands out to me in her images is the fact that all the subjects are clearly aware of her photographing them and yet the images still appear natural.

As mentioned in my introduction, I feel strongly that no one should be photographed if they don't wish to be photographed. This is a view that tends to divide street photographers.

Opposing views

What I am never going to be able to do in this article is to settle that debate. What I can do is talk about some of the popular for and against views and leave you with some of my own conclusions and practices.

Beyond that it, it is up to you to come to your own conclusions.

What's the law?

Better writers than me have written about this, so I'm not going to try to reinvent the wheel here. One example is this article by Amateur Photographer: http://www.amateurphotographer.co.uk/technique/expert_advice/street-

However, what I will say is this – that it is perfectly legal to take photographs of people in public places. What is sometimes not so clear is what constitutes a public place. Churches, shopping malls, National Trust properties and land and even some parks are owned and are thus subject to the rules of the owners. Those rules may effectively prevent you from creating photographs in those places.

Even where it is legal to photograph, you may choose not to. For example, it is perfectly legal to photograph children in public, providing the images aren't for commercial or illegal use. However, because the intent may be misunderstood, I would strongly advise any photographer not to do so, unless you have first obtained written permission from the child's parent or legal guardian. That applies to anyone under the age of 18.

A record of the time

One of the strongest arguments for street photography is that it provides a visual record of a time and place. This is what makes the Shirley Baker exhibition so interesting to those of us living in the twenty-first century – it is a window into life in Manchester in the 1950s-1980s. If we as photographers are not recording the world we live in, what record of our time will exist for future generations?

You could almost argue that we have a duty to record the world around us for future generations. But if you are using that as your justification for street photography, you need to be giving as much effort and thought to the preservation of those images for future decades and even centuries as you are giving to the creation of the

Arab bread sellers, Syria

Date: 21 Sep 2008
Camera: Canon EOS 5D
Lens: EF24-105mm f/4L IS USM @73 mm
Exposure: 1/125s, f/8, ISO 100
Exp mode: Aperture priority
Metering mode: Pattern
Exp comp: 0 EV
Ref: 20080921A-E09851

So effectively, yes legally, you can photograph anyone who is out in public. But just because it is legal doesn't mean it is ethically or morally right to do so.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. When I was in my late teens there was a photography exhibition at the local art gallery. It included a number of street photography images. One of those images was a 10ft print of a teenage girl picking her nose. The girl in the photograph was a friend of mine. She had no idea the image had been taken, it was taken in a public place, and I believe the first time she knew of its existence was when she visited the gallery. As you can image she was both embarrassed and upset to see a less than flattering image of herself as a major exhibit in an art gallery. Legally the photographer had done nothing wrong, but I would argue that the distress caused to the subject of the image meant that he/she was definitely in the wrong ethically and morally.

Working it out in practice

First, let me say that I don't do much street photography in the UK. Most of the street photography I have done has been as part of my travel photography.

Because of what happened with my friend when I was a teenager, obtaining the consent of my subjects is important to me. If language is a barrier, I attempt to obtain permission from my subjects by a simple hand gesture: indicate the camera and then indicate to them while smiling. This almost universal hand action appears to be understood by most cultures and languages.

Of course, the problem of having obtained consent in this way is that often that the subjects are trying to

images in the first place.

Invasion of privacy

A strong argument against street photography is that of 'invasion of privacy'. The reality is that when in a public place none of us has a right to privacy. However, the European Convention on Human Rights does grant UK citizens a 'right to respect for private and family life'. This effectively means that even if you are on public land you can't photograph someone through their window.

Cleaning of Trevi Fountain, Rome

Date: 23 Feb 2004
Camera: Canon EOS 10D
Lens: "Unknown" @70 mm
Exposure: 1/350s, f/4.5, ISO 200
Exp mode: Aperture priority
Metering mode: Pattern
Exp comp: 0 EV
Ref: 20040223A-D00506

pose for the camera rather than naturally going about their business. To work round this problem, I may use a longer lens and shoot from a distance first, before coming in close, making myself known and asking for permission. If permission is denied when asked, any shots I have previously taken will never be used by me.

When travelling in Egypt many years ago, at a distance I photographed a market trader in Aswan, sitting cross-legged on his stall. It was lovely street shot and we had the image hanging on the wall at home for some years. A couple years later I returned to Aswan and saw the same trader, still sitting on this stall. This time I was able to ask permission to photograph him. He denied that permission. Not only did I not create any new images but I no longer show the original image or have it on display.

In the next section, I turn my attention to different ways to obtain consent.

"Baksheesh! Baksheesh!"

One final tip for street photography: in some countries, it is customary to tip or give a small cash amount to anyone you photograph in the street. In Egypt, you will often see your subject hold out his hand and say the words "Baksheesh! Baksheesh". The word has its origin in the Persian word meaning "to give".

When doing street photography abroad, I keep my baksheesh money in a pocket separate from any other money I have with me. This means that I am not revealing where the bulk of my money is and there is no risk of having a large amount of money snatched from my hand. Additionally when the baksheesh pocket is empty, I know that is the end of my photographing people.

Restoration work on an
Egyptian temple

Date: Sept 2002
Camera: Canon EOS 5
Film: Velvia slide

OBTAINING CONSENT

I am going to share with you a number of street photography images that I created on the first half of an Amazon cruise on the MV Magellan in 2018 and the stories behind them.

As you know from the previous chapter of this guide, privacy and consent are important to me, so for each of these images I'm going to talk you through how I dealt with that.

The fishmonger

A fisherman selling fish in Funchal market, Madeira

This image was created during our visit to Funchal in Madeira. The fish market and produce market is one the big tourist attractions in the town. It is possible to view the fish sellers at work from a balcony where you can watch and photograph them. I have visited this market many times in the past and know that the traders there are used to tourists photographing them. I have never had anyone object to being photographed. In fact the nearest I have ever had to an objection was a man who appeared slightly annoyed at being distracted from his work by my asking for permission.

With all that knowledge and bearing in mind that I was shooting some distance away on the balcony, I didn't explicitly ask permission to make this image, and was confident that had I asked that permission would have been granted.

The market traders

Mindelo Market, Sao Vicente, Cape Verde

This was another port, another market and another balcony. This time in Mindelo in Cape Verde, I was looking down on the market looking for potential images when I became aware that these two guys had seen me with my camera and its beige 70-200mm lens.

I waited to see what their reaction was going to be, I wasn't specifically looking to shoot people but as they started posing for the camera, I decided that it would be good to make a shot, smile and give them a thumbs up gesture.

A fisherman selling fish in Funchal market, Madeira

Date: 13 Jan 2018
Camera: Canon EOS 5D Mark III
Lens: EF70-200mm f/2.8L IS II USM @140 mm
Exposure: 1/100s, f/6.3, ISO 1250
Exp mode: Aperture priority
Metering mode: Pattern
Exp comp: 0 EV
Ref: 20180113A-G00215

The bench sitters

Boats on the waterfront in Santarem, Brazil

In Santarem, half-way up the Amazon in Brazil, I spotted this group of people sitting on a bench on a riverside beach surrounded by various boats. I was attracted to them photographically because of the solid colours of their t-shirts.

As you can probably tell, I was clearly too far away to ask permission and additionally, they are all facing away from the camera, so I didn't feel as though I was invading their privacy by making the image.

What makes the image work for me is the fact that although they are the subject of the image they are quite small in the frame. I also like the detail of the egret in the bottom of the image.

The captain

On our second day in Manaus, I was escorting a trek in the Amazon jungle. To get to and from the start point we were on a medium sized river cruiser. This is a portrait of the captain. The image was made on our return journey. I confess that I didn't explicitly ask his permission to photograph him. There were a couple of reasons for this. Firstly, really didn't want to distract him while he was piloting the boat, secondly, I was close by and took my time getting ready to make the image, I was obvious what I was doing and I was closely watching his body language for any signs that my camera was making him uncomfortable.

With hindsight, I think I probably should have found some way to politely ask, but the image I have presented here is the last of three

taken at short intervals, and there was no indication that my photography was upsetting him. The slight scowl on his face is actually his concentrating on his job and he had the same expression even when I wasn't pointing a camera at him.

The cyclist

We had just come ashore at Parintins when this young man cycled up to the quayside and stopped. I could see him looking in my direction and he spotted the camera in my hand. I gestured to the camera and then back to him to indicate that I would like to photograph him. He nodded and smiled. It was a very short conversation with no words being exchanged but the question and answer were both clearly understood.

The boatman

The following day we were in Alter do Chao. I was on one of the early tender boats and I arrived in the town in torrential rain that had been going on for quite some time. It didn't take long for the rain to stop and I soon found an area of small boats that I wanted to photograph. Among the boats was one man bailing out the rain water from his vessel.

I didn't ask his permission to photograph him. The reason I didn't on this occasion was that I was not the only photographer in this location, the ship's resident photography team were also there. What you cannot see in my image is a member of that team just out of frame videoing the bail out process.

Given that he was clearly comfortable with them videoing and photographing him, I didn't feel I need to ask his permission. Additionally, interrupting him to do so would have spoiled their video.

A fisherman bails water out of his boat, Alter do Chao, Brazil

Date: 27 Jan 2018
Camera: Canon EOS 5D Mark III
Lens: EF24-105mm f/4L IS USM @105 mm
Exposure: 1/80s, f/8, ISO 160
Exp mode: Aperture priority
Metering mode: Pattern
Exp comp: 1/3 EV
Ref: 20180127A-G01814

The bikers

This image comes from our last day in Brazil and our visit to Belem. Here you can see three motorbikes and one cyclist. For me, this image clearly fits into the category of being a public location where it is not possible to obtain permission from the people involved.

Had anyone in this scene waved a hand to indicate that they didn't want to be photographed, I would, of course, have not made the image.

The nut seller

My final image in this blog also comes from Belem and this is yet another approach for making images of people on the streets. I had just purchased some Brazil nuts from this market stall and as I was leaving I indicated to the trader that I would like to photograph him, and he

politely posed as I made a couple of image of him in this busy market.

My top tip for buying souvenirs when travelling is to search out the most photogenic stalls/shop and the most interesting shop keepers and buy from them - then ask permission to make your images.

Conclusion

I hope you can see from this blog the different ways in which I obtained consent for photographing these people. If you find any of the techniques and approaches helpful to your own street or travel photography please let me know.

Case study: Waiting

One of the most important lessons I have learned about street photography is the need to wait to create your image.

Sometime we have the perfect location and all it lacks is the person to make the image work. In the image above the colour of the windows and the pattern of the shadows works perfectly to make an interesting image. However the image lacked both a human element and something to give the windows scale.

I only had to wait for about 5 minutes before someone walked past to complete the composition.

The same was true with the Tunis image left where I waited about 15 minutes for a suitable person to walk past.

In this case I had identified the belly dancing costumes and realised that I needed an interesting person to walk past them.

Fortunately I had luck on my side as the woman turned to admire the outfits as she walked past. The contrast between the 'sexy outfits' and the black jilbab are what make this image work.

Case study: Crop & Convert

Many street photography images can be significantly improved by careful cropping and by converting to black and white.

In this image of a street preacher in Galway, Ireland, there were a few problems with the original image (see right). Firstly the people sitting at the tables to the left of the preacher add nothing to the scene, and in fact may be a distraction. To solve this I have cropped in tightly to remove them. This also makes the preacher far more dominant in the frame.

At the same time I have also cropped in on the right slightly just to tidy up the framing on that side of the image.

The red of the pub tends to dominate the image - this is the first thing that the eye sees when looking at the image.

Converting the image to black and white and selecting a mid grey to represent the red moves the viewers attention away from the pub

This is helped by the fact that both the preacher and the person at the front of the crowd are wearing light colours so that is where the eye is drawn in the black and white version of the image.

Case study: Ask and wait

One of the problems with asking permission before making your image is that your subject can end up posing for you and your images do not look natural

One solution to this is what I did with this image.

I had spotted the tailor working in a very small room with his door open onto a street in Valletta, Malta.

Still standing on the street I asked if I could take his photo. The tailor looked up nodded and immediately posed as though he was working. Unfortunately the pose didn't look right.

I immediately looked at my camera and apologised to him. "I'm sorry, I need to make a few adjustments, please carry on." For about 30 seconds I busied my checking settings, looking at menus making adjustments.

Once I could see that the tailor was again working away, oblivious to me, I raised the camera and made my image.

I thanked him and went on my way.

In post production I have slightly tightened the crop but most the image is pretty much straight out of camera.

I particularly like the concentration on the tailor's face and the slight blurring of the hands which indicates that he is actually working and not just posing for the shot.

A tailor at work in Valetta, Malta

Date: 3 Dec 2007
Camera: Canon EOS 5D
Lens: EF24-105mm f/4L IS USM @67 mm
Exposure: 1/20s, f/4, ISO 400
Exp mode: Aperture priority
Metering mode: Pattern
Exp comp: 0 EV
Ref: 20071203D-E09038

CASE STUDY: STREET PERFORMERS

This should probably go without saying, but if you are going to photograph a street performer, please make sure you put some money in their 'cap'.

I usually put in some money, wait for the performer to smile/acknowledge the donation and then with a hand gesture that is understood in any language I indicate the camera and gesture back to them to let them know that I wish to photograph them. Using this process I have never had a request turned down.

One of the advantages of photographing performers is that you have time to think about your shot, and choose your angles. For the 'floating man' living statue I spent a little while working out how I wanted to photograph him before I even put any money in his 'cap'

I made sure that I crouched down low so that he was against the white wall

and so that it was clear that the only thing supporting him was his stick.

Case study - Ponta Delgada water fight

In this section, I want share with you a full shoot - and go through the thought processes as I created each of the images that make up the set.

Consent

Water fight in Ponta Delgada

Date: 13 Feb 2018
Camera: Canon EOS 5D Mark III
Lens: EF24-105mm f/4L IS USM @58 mm
Exposure: 1/250s, f/5.6, ISO 100
Exp mode: Aperture priority
Metering mode: Pattern
Exp comp: 0 EV
Ref: 20180213A-G03402

On this occasion I didn't explicitly obtain consent before photographing anyone. The event is a big public event and just about the whole town takes part. I think there is an implied understanding from anyone attending that they might get photographed.

Additionally It would be impossible to get permission during a fast moving situation like this.

Not only that but it doesn't make sense either: "Excuse me, would you mind if photograph your reaction to

that gentleman who is about to throw a bucket of water over you?"

War zone

I have never been a war photographer; I never want to be a war photographer. I never photographed a riot and I hope I never will. On Shrove Tuesday (Mardi Gras) the MV Magellan was docked in Ponta Delgada in The Azores. Each year, the town celebrates Mardi Gras by having a massive water fight along the main road through the town. It was great fun but also a little scary at times. Some of the images I captured reminded me of photographs of rioters and the aftermath looked like a war zone. Let me tell you what happened and the photographic

lessons I learned from it.

I had seen one of the huge truck laden with water bombs in a side street and knowing the fight was going to take place I followed it down on to the main road. As I arrived at the main square I could see the preparations taking place: barrels full to overflowing with balloons containing water, then pickup trucks laden with plastic bags full of water started to arrive and began to unload their cargo into the square.

At first, there was a general air of anticipation, children eager to play started throwing water bombs at each

other. The occasional bag of water landed at my feet and splashed up at me. It was all a bit of fun. Then I became aware of two groups teenagers in one of the covered colonnades having a bit of battle. I went over to photograph it.

Settings

After experimenting a little with my settings I eventually settled on ISO 100, Aperture Priority with f/5.6. It was a bright day and out in the open, this meant I was getting shutter speeds of between 1/200s and 1/1250s certainly fast enough to freeze the action but with a depth of field that wasn't too shallow. However, in the colonnades, the shutter speed did drop below 1/100s but I decided I could live with that.

Think about the light

The next decision I need to make was what direction was I going to shoot. There is a general rule for photographing water that you really want to get the light behind the water and passing through it. This makes the water sparkle and glow. So when photographing the teens in the colonnade I decided to shoot towards the sun (actually it wasn't directly towards it but it was at about 10 o'clock (assuming I am in the middle of the clock face and the camera is pointing at 12 o'clock). You can clearly see the sparkling in the image because of this.

Reactions

As the fight progressed and more and more people were getting involved and getting soaked, I turned my attention to photographing the reactions of the people who were getting wet. People were laughing, smiling and shielding themselves from the water that was being thrown

Water fight in Ponta Delgada

at them. My favourite reaction images are the three girls shielding themselves (above) and the smiling passenger from the ship (next page).

Being alert

As the fight progressed, we were subject to regular 'patrols' of the large lorries carrying plenty of water bombs and even hoses. They also had on board teams of men who knew how to look after themselves such as the local firemen. It was at this point that I began to understand why many people were wearing some sort of helmet or head protection. When these guys threw bags of water at you, they did so with quite some force. To protect myself and my camera gear, I opted to photograph the lorries from behind a tree with just

the camera lens sticking out and keeping a careful eye on what was being thrown in my direction.

Street photography requires you to be alert, so that you do not miss the shots you are there to create. At a water fight like this it's not just about making sure you don't miss the shots it's about keeping yourself and your gear safe.

In the gaps between the lorry patrols I would venture out into the fray. Despite keeping a very keen eye on my surrounding I was hit a couple of times by the water bombs, mostly on my side and on my camera rucksack (which had its waterproof cover deployed and well tested). One bag of water did strike me on the side of the head – which stung for a few minutes. I still managed to get my favourite image from the day – one of

the colonnades with four or five teenagers getting soaked as a water bomb explodes near them.

Aftermath & post-production

By the end of the water fight, so many bags had been thrown that it was almost impossible to see the road surface below them. It truly did look like the aftermath of a major conflict or riot. And although I did leave some images in colour when I did my post-processing I decided to convert the majority of them to black and white to give more of a reportage feel to them. As usual, my Lightroom workflow for black and white conversion includes adding contrast and clarity and using the blacks slider to ensure I had some deep blacks in the image.

Water fight in Ponta Delgada

Date: 13 Feb 2018
Camera: Canon EOS 5D Mark III
Lens: EF24-105mm f/4L IS USM @65 mm
Exposure: 1/640s, f/5.6, ISO 100
Exp mode: Aperture priority
Metering mode: Pattern
Exp comp: 0 EV
Ref: FL0213A-G03346

Water fight in Ponta Delgada

Date: 13 Feb 2018
Camera: Canon EOS 5D Mark III
Lens: EF24-105mm f/4L IS USM @58 mm
Exposure: 1/400s, f/5.6, ISO 100
Exp mode: Aperture priority
Metering mode: Pattern
Exp comp: 0 EV
Ref: FL0213A-G03421

Thoughts about war photography

As I walked back to the ship I thought about what I had experienced. It was a fun day, and I didn't mind getting soaked. But it was also a day that made me think. It was that bag hitting me on the head which made me think the most. It was only a bag of water that hit me, in a good-natured but huge water fight. Had this been a real war zone or real riot, then it wouldn't have been water, and a single blow to the head could be much worse. It was at that point that I suddenly developed a huge respect for the many photographers who cover wars and riots. I thought I had a good awareness of my surroundings and I still took a hit. The people who work in war zones and riots take risks, they can't let their concentration drop for a moment. For most photographers, the worst that can happen from letting your concentration slip is a blurred out of focus image. For war photographers, a lapse of concentration could be fatal.

So to all war and riot photographers everywhere – I salute you.

IMAGES TO INSPIRE

No explanations, no titles, no descriptions and no settings. I will leave these images to speak for themselves and hopefully inspire your street photography.

IAN'S STUDIO

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