Street Faces

The art of
Candid Street Portraiture

"If you can't focus anymore,
you are too close..."

Foreword

Sharp and thought-evoking, Thomas Leuthard shows the street as it is through his candid portrayal of its dynamic inhabitants. Although some may regard his approach as a bit controversial, there's no denying his raw talent and uncanny ability to boldly capture the most humane aspects of the character he encounters. That's not an easy feat, but then again Thomas is no ordinary street photographer. It's rare to find a person so dedicated to his craft and, more importantly, so willing to generously share his wealth of knowledge with others across the world. Thomas has been a tremendous inspiration for our growing community of street photographers in Lebanon and continues to be an active mentor encouraging everyone to "get closer". Thanks to Thomas, we're all bolder street photographers and can view the world differently as a result of it.

Loryne Atoui
Founder, Beirut Street Photographers

About me

My name is Thomas Leuthard, I'm 40 years old and I live in Zug, Switzerland. Since about 3 years I do street photography. For me the interest in humanity was the primary reason why I started to shoot strangers in the streets. I always wanted to see and document everything and everybody. I wanted to be close, the closer the better. This brought me to a genre of street photography I call "Candid Street Portraiture". It's a way of taking someone's portrait from a very close distance without asking for permission. This kind of photography may be controversial, but it's part of my passion taking photos in the streets. I have to live with critics about my art every day. Since I love this so much, I don't really care that there are some people shouting at you, writing negative comments and try to take you down. It was my choice to shoot like that and keep doing it, no matter what happens or what people say about it.

About this book

This is my third eBook about street photography. This time I would like to write about my speciality, the candid street portraits. It's a very direct and controversial way of shooting people in the street. There are a lot of people who like it, but there is even a bigger amount of people who don't like it. Some people even say it's not street photography at all. For me, it is what it is. It's a way of documenting the diversity of humanity in an honest, but very straight and uncommon way. Since I don't ask the person, I take a photo of; most of the observers think it's very rude. This may be true, but you will not get the desired result, if you do it in a different way. It's my way and it's my style. It's what I like to do and what interests me. It's not about the communication with the person which I shoot. It's the directness of an unasked portrait of a stranger in the street.

What is Candid Street Portraiture?

I'm not sure, if this word exists, but I call it like that. Portraiture is clear; it's a photograph of a person that displays the expression, personality, and mood of the subject. A candid photograph is a photograph that is made either without the subject's knowledge or without their explicit permission, hence they are captured un-posed. Since the whole thing is happening in a public place, it's street photography. Therefore I call it like that and it's important that all the three elements are fulfilled. You have to get close, you have to be in a public place and you don't ask the subject upfront. Of course there are different ways and styles to do this. This is what this book is all about: the ways, styles, difficulties and challenges of this kind of photography.

Which Camera do I use?

While I try to get the smallest camera possible for my normal street photos, I use a normal DSLR for my street portraits. The reason for that is very simple. The person I shoot, looks at me, sees me and realized that I take a photograph of him. Therefore the size of the camera is not that important. It's more important that your camera has fast auto-focus and a fast frame rate. Often you only have a fraction of a second to shoot a candid portrait of someone. They look at you and as soon as they realize you, there is a reaction. This reaction is unpredictable. So you have to be quick, shoot while they look at you and shoot as many frames as possible. Press the shutter and keep it pressed as long as it is needed. It's very important that your camera is fast and not that important that it is small.

Which lens do I use?

I used a 50mm prime lens to shoot all these photos. For me a prime lens is the key success factor because it's fast, sharp, small and affordable. There is no time to zoom in this way of photography. It's important that I know the distance where I need to stand before I approach someone. With a prime lens, this distance is always the same. Therefore I can focus on the person, the light and my position. Sure a 50mm (75mm equal) is pretty close, but with a longer lens I will not get the same effect. With a longer lens, people will also not see me and there will be no direct eye contact, which is important for me. With a shorter focal length there would be distortion or will not be able to get as close as you need to. If I would use a full frame camera, the best lens would be an 85mm. Most important is that I perfectly know my lens and that my settings are optimized for it.

Which settings do I use?

I always shot in A Mode with an aperture of f/4. Choosing the aperture is essential because I want to define the depth of field. Now it's important that my shutter speed doesn't go slower than 1/200 to freeze the action. I can't shoot a sharp portrait with 1/50 of a second. This is simply not possible, if someone is not posing. I increase the ISO until I get the ideal shutter speed. The reason for that is I don't want to have a blurred photo. I can hold the camera still, but my subject may move. I have to re-check the shutter speed several times, especially when the light changes. I have set the AF to continuous to ensure it will refocus when something moves. Another important setting is the burst mode. I always shoot a series of frames in the highest rate possible. The rest of the settings are not that relevant and I have set them to automatic. You can click on any photo in this eBook to get to Flickr, where you see all the EXIF data.

Post-processing

I was asked very often how I post process. I shoot in RAW format. I use Apple Aperture. I straighten and crop the image if needed, which is seldom on a candid street portrait. I add some contrast to ensure that the black is strong enough. I add some vignette to get some dark shadows around the edges to center the view of the observer. I make it black and white (Red 33%, Green 33%, Blue 33%). I increase the definition to emphasize the wrinkles. I sharpen the photo with the standard value. For me post-processing is standard process which should not take more than 1 minute. Therefore I have created a pre-set for all these settings. A candid street portrait is being created in the camera and not on the computer. On the computer I can only improve it by 5-10 percent. A boring face remains a boring face, no matter of my post-processing skills. Don't think, just shoot

Where to start?

The biggest question for everyone is probably where to start shooting people from such a short distance. I started with an 85mm lens getting closer over time. It was important that I always knew why I did this and that I wanted to get closer. Some people said that you should ask first. Some people say that you should drink before you shoot people. Some people may say other things. The most important thing is that I wanted to do this from the beginning and I never stopped doing it. When I want something very strong, I know I can do it. Thinking about the result and how I feel, when I look at a good candid street portrait, then I know what to do. Maybe you should start asking people for a portrait first. Then you learn what it takes from a technical perspective to shoot a street portrait. After this experience you can start shooting in a candid way.

How to approach

The right approach is pretty important while doing a candid street portrait. For me this is one of the key elements to success. First I have to find an interesting character while walking through the crowd. The average person is not interesting. I have to find the character faces. People I don't see every day. People which stand out of the masses. Then I only approach people which are standing still. Good places are bus stops, zebra crossings, meeting points, etc. I approach them from a side they don't notice me. People tend to look towards the side where traffic approaches. I never look them into their eyes, never ever (only through the viewfinder). I point my camera to the persons face before he turns his head. I press the button halfway down to pre-focus. When the person turns around, I press the button down and make 3-4 frames in a series. After 3-4 shots I turn around and walk away. Don't talk, don't look, I don't do anything else...

What about my fear?

The main challenge of most people is fear. Fear is a very personal thing and is a mental problem. They think too much about possible causes, which very often don't happen at all. When you already have some negative thoughts on your mind, you cannot focus on the act of shooting. You will not be relaxed and you can't make a good portrait. I would say it's only you, who make up the fear. There is no reason for that. I have done many close portraits and I know that hardly anyone says anything. This knowledge let me calmly approach someone, take his portrait and calmly walk away. I know that a lot of people don't ever realize what happens, I have a good answer, if the question me and I can always delete the photo right away. So why are you still afraid? Try to focus on the act of taking the portrait and not to think about the consequences. This sounds simple, but that's all you need to do. Don't think too much, get close and shoot.

What did he say?

This approach has turned out to be working fine and although people realize that you took their portrait, they normally don't say anything. Yes, they don't say anything! People always think that everyone says something when I take his portrait. Hardly anyone says anything as a lot of the people don't realize that I took such a close portrait of them. Normally the people, who think that everyone would say something, are the ones, who have not tried it yet. Everyone who has tried it, knows, it's working. Reactions are very seldom; maybe 5 out of 100 people say something. If you don't believe me, try it and count. I don't see their reaction, but sometimes they look to their back to see what I have taken a photo of. See my two YouTube videos to understand what I mean: Video 1 | Video 2

How to get closer?

I started with an 85mm lens on a crop 1.5 camera (equals 127.5mm) and did full scenes on the street. I got closer and closer over time and figured out that it was not as hard or bad as expected. At the beginning it's important that you know your goal which should be getting as close as possible. If you don't work towards such a goal, you will never get closer and will stuck with a longer lens. My goal always was to make a candid street portrait with a 50mm on my crop 1.5 camera (equals 75mm). With a full frame camera I suggest a 85mm lens to get equal results. In the end there are more people who will not make it closer than the ones who do. That's normal as this kind of photography is not made for everyone. Growing your balls is not that easy, but you can do it, if you really want. Just keep trying. The more people are in one place the easier it is.

What about Composition?

For me more than 50% of a good photograph is reached with an interesting composition. Taking a candid street portrait, the composition is also very important. Be sure that you think about the following things. I don't position a person in the center. I don't take a person frontal. I don't take a passport photo. I'm on eye level with the person. I wait for direct eye contact. When the person looks to the left, I leave more space on the left. When the person looks to the right, I leave more space on the right. I often crop 3:4 instead of 2:3 to get a better composition. I also like the square format, which is different and therefore interesting. I don't crop (zoom) out, I always leave one side to the original length. The composition happens in my camera and not on my computer. I prefer to take what comes out of it. If you have to change too much on the computer, you are not good enough.

What about Ethics?

Ethics in street photography is a difficult thing. For some people it's already a problem to shoot any stranger in the streets, no matter how far away he is. For me there is no limitation and ethics is a very personal thing. Maybe I have no ethics at all, as I don't really care about what the photographed person is thinking. I see someone in the streets, decide if I will take his portrait and shoot. I don't think about anything else in that moment. There is always a big debate about ethics when taking candid street portraits like I do. I can't give any advice other than trying it out and figure out, how far anyone can go and if he feels fine doing it. There is no general rule or codex in street photography. What is right for someone might be wrong for others. Sure it is rude to shoot someone straight into the face, but I still do it. Maybe I'm just a disrespectful person without any ethical behavior. I can't disclaim it, it's the truth...

How to handle critics?

When I do candid street portraits, there is a massive amount of critique. I often have to be resistant to it. Most of the critics think it's rude, disrespectful, not right and against the law. Sure they are true, but what should I do, when I like to get that close and want to show a person's face without asking for permission? My passion and my hunger for shooting strangers is stronger than my fear of critics and the law. Another aspect is that some people say that this is not street photography. This might also be true and I can live with that as well. For me it's something I like and I don't care what it is called. I don't do this because of a genre or style, I do this for the sake of my interest in people's faces or characters. It's my choice, what I do and why I do it. When there is critic, I have to face it. I can't ignore or delete it. When I delete or block comments containing critics I censor them and this is not accepted by the community.

Right or Wrong?

There is always a big debate going on about what is right and wrong in street photography. From a law perspective it is not right to publish a photograph of a person without the permission to do so. Even shooting close portraits in the streets is not allowed in certain countries. It's your responsibility and your personal decision, if you want to follow the rights in your country, if there are some. For me my interest in the human being is much stronger than my fear of violating any law. Therefore I have decided a long time ago to publish all my street photos on the Internet without having a model release contract in place. This is a very personal decision and can cause some legal issues with some expensive consequences. But since there are no comparing lawsuits available, I have no idea, what the consequences are. I keep shooting and publishing until something is happening…

How to get Eye Contact?

For me direct eye contact is one of the main elements of a candid street portrait. I always wait until the person looks at me before I take the shot. Sometimes I have to wait some seconds, but it is worth the time. Without the look in their eyes, portrait is meaningless to me. Next to a strong character, there must also be a strong eye contact with a look, which could kill. While I look for eye contact, I don't look into their eyes, except through the viewfinder. I prevent eye contact before and after the shot, as I don't want to let them know that I have taken a portrait of them. As soon as I look at someone after shooting him, he knows that he was the main subject in the photo. It may be difficult to get eye contact on the frame, but not in reality. But for me this is one of the most important rules taking candid street portraits. I sometimes look to the back, to pretend shooting something else…

Your own style

When you look at the candid street portraits in this eBook, you can see that they all look very similar. This is the result of the same approach, with the same camera, the same lens, the same settings, the same composition and the same post-processing. When I do it always the same way, it looks the same. This emphasizes my personal style and makes it recognizable to the observers. This style was established about 2 years ago and it still works as I still do it the same way. Sometimes I thought, it's getting boring since it looks always the same. After some time of abstinence I had the desire to do it again as I'm still thrilled by interesting characters and I still have the hunger to shoot them from a short distance. That's the reason I always carry two cameras with me; One for full scenes, one for candid portraits. I guess this will not change in the near future...

Where is the story?

I tend to say that a good street photo has to tell a story. A candid street portrait just shows the face of a person. I don't see what this person is doing, I don't see where this person is standing and I hardly see what this person is wearing. I just see an expression or emotion. This can be interesting for a short moment, but often it's not lasting very long. That's why there are a lot of people, who don't like this kind of photography. For me my interest in the person is much stronger than the missing story I can't tell. I would not be able to only shoot portraits, as this would be too boring. But together with my other photos from the street, it's a great balance and keeps me getting thrilled with some adrenalin from time to time. So don't try to find a story in my street portraits. There is no story. It's just an interesting character with an interesting emotion, facial expression or look. Nothing more, nothing less...

The Basic Instinct

During the last 12 months I thought about 10 street photography workshops. I always tried to explain how I shoot in the streets, what is important and why I shoot exactly this way. Now I think that street photography has to do mainly with talent and instinct. It's not something you can learn in workshop or from a book. You have to explore life on the street yourself in endless photo walks and thousands of photos you take. Even then it's possible that your talent is not big enough to master street photography. I often can't explain what I do and why I do it. First I see something, then I compose it and then I just press the button. That's all. Not a lot of thinking, not a lot of time spent. Just simply press the trigger of your gun when you know you are ready. If you don't know, when you are ready, you have to keep practicing. You will feel it, when it's right to shoot…

One Last Word

People always discuss technology, techniques and other measurable hard facts. Candid street portraiture for me is more about feeling, sensitivity, fear, challenge, happiness and other soft facts. I have to face myself up the one to one full frontal and close contact with a subject I'm interested in. This short contact is unpredictable and both parties don't know what exactly is going to happen in the next second. I want a photo, my subject may want to prevent it. This makes this kind of photography so controversy. For me this is exactly the excitement of my passion as a street photographer, although society believes that I'm steeling someone's privacy with my way of photography. This may be true and a valid point of view. For me it's not steeling, it's preserving a moment in life of a stranger on the streets which attracts me in some way. But that's my personal thinking.

Things to remember

These are the Top 10 things I think people should remember from reading this eBook:

1. Candid Street Portraiture is straight, real and not setup.
2. It's not about the camera, the lens or the settings.
3. Your eye decides on what you see and capture.
4. A good composition can do much more than good technology.
5. A good photo arises from the camera, not from your computer.
6. You can't start at the top. It's a long way to get closer.
7. It's very important how you approach and act while you shoot.
8. 95% of the people won't say anything. That's a proven fact.
9. You cannot learn everything. There must be some talent present.
10. There is no right or wrong. It's your photo, your style, your way.

Thank you

This eBook is much shorter than the other two. I wanted to explain what I think about close candid street portraits and how I capture them. I hope you could follow me and will be able to put the learned theory into your practical work as a street photographer. Feel free to look at my other work and read my other two eBooks. If you like my eBooks, just tell your friends about it. Share the download link and pay it forward in a way. I don't ask for money as this would not make me any happier. For me it's more important that I can share my knowledge and help other people making better street photos. I thank everyone who comments my photos on Flickr and follows me on all the social media sites. I hope we will meet one day…

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"The shorter your focal lens is the bigger your balls have to be."

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