The Minimalist Photographer

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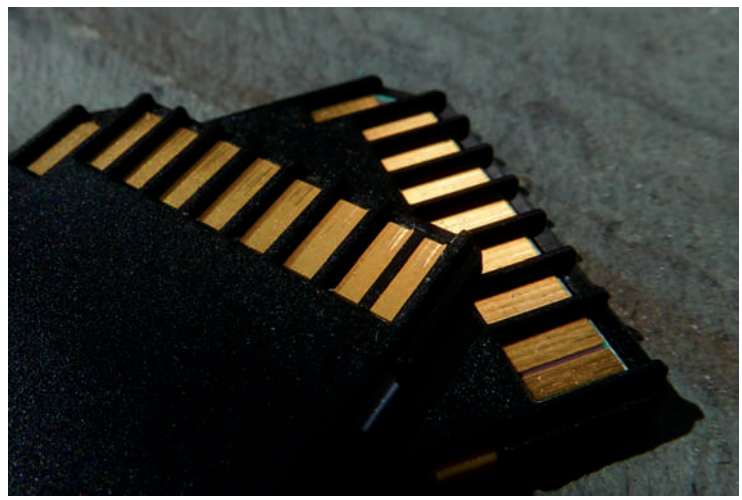
Chapter 1
You

The more you know about yourself as a photographer—your preferences, your motivations, and your goals—the better your photography will be. Here we will take a look at these issues so that you can see the importance of defining them for yourself.



Memory cards

So You Want to Take Better Photographs

By far, the most profound change that occurred over the past 20 years was the shift from film to digital. The appearance of the first consumer-level digital cameras in the mid-1990s really did change everything. Producing photographs went from being an expensive pastime to something that was basically free after the initial equipment was purchased. The cost of early digital cameras was very high, and the image quality was low when compared with film cameras, but this is no longer the case.

I now take for granted that I can take 50 or 500 shots of a subject, whereas with film I may have limited myself two or three at most. The extra cost is nothing more than a miniscule amount of depreciation on the camera and on the rechargeable battery—a couple of cents against tens or even hundreds of dollars. This reduced cost of digital photography has made it much easier to experiment with the medium and has allowed many people to produce images who could not have afforded to do so with film. Another big technological advance is the modern-day ability to instantly see the result of a shot on the camera's LCD screen, rather than having to wait for it to be returned from the photo lab. Adjustments to an exposure, and other on-the-spot modifications based on viewing the original, can now be implemented without an intervening period of days or weeks.

Since the cost of producing a perfectly serviceable photograph is only a fraction of what it used to be, and experimentation is now within reach of just about everyone, there are a lot of people taking photographs who otherwise would not have been. This includes, among other loosely defined groups, thousands of people taking photographs of their daily lives as well as visual artists who can now afford to use a camera for something other than simply recording the work they produced in other mediums. For the first time, photography has become

a serious medium for those whose background is not primarily photography.

Of course, the digital revolution has influenced more than just camera technology. The computer has now replaced the darkroom. What used to require a small room, lots of chemicals, and lots of waiting for stuff to happen can now be accomplished on the same machine that most of us use for our taxes and letter writing: the computer. Of course, specialized software is required, but this can be had for free. Now on a computer, anyone can do much more to an image than was ever possible in even the best-equipped darkroom. Even more amazing is the fact that this often involves no extra financial outlay. It is easily possible for one to have purchased a smartphone and a computer without even a thought about photography, yet they will have all the tools required to produce stunning images. Anyone can make a photograph, from choosing the subject to shoot to doing the final editing. Sometimes it is easy to forget just how far things have come.

In the days of film, one of two things was likely to happen: a print would end up in an album and be shown to a couple of dozen people. Or the print might be placed in a shoe box, or possibly an old box file, and it would be lucky to ever see the light of day again. Today, websites like Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, and more recently Google+ provide virtual spaces where anyone can publish their images and receive feedback from photographers and non-photographers alike.

Any effort you put into answering the 'why' question at any time during your photographic career will pay for itself many times over.

Historically, for a photograph to have appeared in a print publication, other than in rare cases, it had to be approved by someone, probably a picture editor. The Internet dynamic is completely different—photographers decide for themselves what they publish and exactly how they publish it. With a little self-promotion, it is possible for unknown photographers with something interesting to share and a feel for the Internet as a medium to have thousands, or even tens of thousands, of people viewing their work on a regular basis.

The importance of this change from a virtual dictatorship to a democracy cannot be overstated. Photographers can publish what they want, and others can decide whether it has merit or not. This situation may pass the test of time, but I'm not overly optimistic. I suspect that a new class of gatekeepers will emerge, albeit a less rigid one than in the pre-digital days. At this moment in photography history, though, things could not be better for the photographer who wants to find and connect with an audience. The other thing that this democratization of photography has led to is an explosion of styles and approaches. If you have something different to communicate, there has never been a better time to do it, because photography is no longer the backward-looking sibling of the other, more enlightened, visual arts. This really is the best time to be a photographer.

Why Do You Want to Take Photographs?

At first, this may seem like a question with an obvious answer, rather like asking someone why they want to drink coffee. But this is one of those questions that seems to get harder the more it is grappled with. Let's return to the coffee example for a second. There are several possible, easily defined reasons why someone may want to drink coffee. These reasons include taste, stimulative effect, and possibly social contact. Now try answering, with some level of clarity, the question of why you want to take photographs, and then write down your answers. The good news is that any effort you put into answering this question at any time during your photographic career will pay for itself many times over.

This is my most recent attempt to answer the question: I am obsessed with aesthetics and composition. The camera and digital editing

tools provide a means to capture and manipulate lines, tones, colors, and shapes very quickly and relatively easily. Photography allows me to cover much more ground than any other visual medium. I am interested in showing the connection between the photograph and human emotion. More specifically, I want to experiment with how much information can be removed from an image before it loses emotional impact. Allied to this, I want to study why contrast seems to be the most important quality when it comes to eliciting an emotional response. I enjoy exploring the relationship between the logical and the emotional, and the camera is the best tool for this process.

The less generic and more personal the response, the more useful it is likely to be. I have no desire to go all Zen at this point, but the answers should come from within and should be *your* answers. While you work on answering this question, forget my opinions and the opinions of writers and photographers that you admire. For the moment, it really is all about you.

One other bit of advice is to make your answers as open, as opposed to closed, as possible. Think in terms of exploration, not being the best or getting to some imaginary winning post.

If I had taken the time to ask this question of myself when I first started out, the answer would have been along these lines: I want to find the most beautiful scenes, people, and objects and produce the best possible two-dimensional representations of them.

This answer is a lot less open ended than my current working one, and consequently it would be a lot less useful. It is also much more generic, and while it would be better than nothing, it is nowhere near as useful as my current answer.

Of course there are many possible answers; the important thing is to be honest. The worst trap to fall into is writing something down because you think it is more worthy than what you really want to use the camera for.

Here are just a few possible reasons for wanting to pick up a camera:

- Record family life
- Record another interest, such as a sport
- Sell stuff on an auction website
- Build a record of beautiful things
- Understand visual language
- Explore artistic concepts
- Expand personal horizons
- Supply images for a website or social media page
- Spend time with your photographer friends

Ideally, the question of why you want to take photographs should be a fundamental part of your ongoing internal dialog about photography. Every image you make changes you, usually by a tiny amount, but occasionally by a massive amount. These changes accumulate and will cause you to periodically revise how you think about your own photography.

The question of why you want to take photographs should be a fundamental part of your ongoing internal dialog about photography.

However dedicated you are to photography—or even if you're obsessed with it—there will be times when pointing a camera at stuff no longer excites you and editing your images becomes more of a chore than an exercise in discovery. We all have days like this, but if these days start to stretch into weeks or months, then it is a fair bet that you need to take another look at your reason for taking pictures. If it's just for a day or two, though, do something other than photography if at all possible. We all get jaded from time to time.

If this whole approach seems a bit daunting, another exercise to try is to look at images on the Internet, or in books, museums, and galleries; find photographs that appeal to you and then find out a little about the photographer and his or her motivations. In addition, you can look for common features in photographs that appeal to you. A quick indication of your artistic preferences can be gleaned by determining whether it is the subject matter that appeals to you or the use of color, strong lines, or other compositional elements. This exercise will aid you toward expressing why you want to take photographs. It may take a little time, but that is perfectly okay; this is not a race.

I suspect that most people who buy a camera and then leave it at the back of a drawer or let it gather dust after taking a few dozen photographs do so because they don't take time to address this fundamental question.

What Type of Photographer Are You Now?

What was the first thing that came to mind when you read this question? At the risk of stating the obvious, if you like to photograph landscapes, you would probably have answered that you are a landscape or possibly a nature photographer, and if you enjoy making images of people, then you might have answered that you are a portrait photographer. The problem with this type of labeling is that it can be self-limiting. If you think of yourself as a nature photographer, for instance, you might stop yourself from seeing the slightly less obvious beauty of urban and industrial environments.

A better approach is to categorize the type of photographer you are in a way that doesn't restrict the subject matter. Professional photographers often prefer to use terms such as *fine art photographer, stock photographer,* or other terms that define the market they are selling to.

Another way photographers define themselves that is less common is by using a philosophical or artistic label. Minimalist, experimental, and even abstract are among the more obvious examples. Whereas more commercial photographers are likely to use market-based terminology, more academic-minded or, for that matter, hobbyist photographers are better served by using the philosophical approach. The reason is simple—this method of labeling provides a lens through which just about anything in the visual world can be understood.

I call myself a minimalist photographer for several reasons, but the main reason is that it forces me to focus on the essential and find ways to either lose, or at least minimize, everything else. The label helps me achieve what I want to achieve. If I am struggling with an assignment, it is because of a lack of clarity. I solve the problem just by the act of thinking about what type of photographer I am. If I called myself a portrait photographer and was having trouble with a shoot, say, of street photography, reminding myself that I was a portrait photographer wouldn't help me nearly as much.

It may seem that I have belabored this point, but it is important, and as much as we may have problems with labels, they are important. A label communicates a lot of information in shorthand form to other photographers, viewers, and clients, but most important, to ourselves. Give yourself the wrong label, and you could be

fighting it for the rest of your photographic life. Choose a label that expands your horizons and provides clarity, and it can be one of your biggest assets.

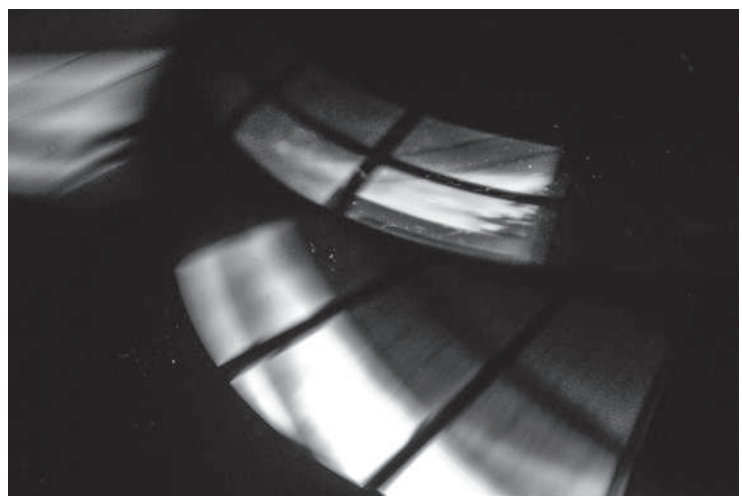
What Type of Photographer Will You Become?

The short answer to this question is that no one knows, and other than in rare cases, that includes you. That said, certain changes and shifts on your photographic journey are likely. You will see things very differently after spending time with a camera. This is a continual process; it never stops. Photographers who have worked for half a century still discover new things regarding their relationship to the art.

I know that in a year's time I will see differently than I do now. The change may be a massive, fundamental one, or it may be of a smaller, more incremental nature. I know this much based on past experience: A year has not gone by in which my photography has remained static. The thing that keeps me going day after day is not knowing where this journey will end up. If I knew, there would be little point to continuing with it.

Photography writing tends to treat the art as a top–down process. The assumption is that there is this finite amount of technical and artistic knowledge required, and when you have this knowledge, you are a master. You can then call yourself a photographer and charge money for your services, with no need to do more than keep up-to-date with equipment advances. This approach is fundamentally wrong. Photography is a bottom–up process; it is about learning from the past, experimenting, making mistakes, and heading toward an unmapped future. This approach produces great photographers.

Temperament will play a huge part in determining your photographic future. Possibly the hardest work that you will have to do as a photographer is to mesh your art with your own nature. If you are easily bored and always looking for novelty in other parts of your life, then traditional landscape photography, for example, may not be for you, because it requires a high level of patience. For this type of person, the sheer unpredictability of street photography may be a much better fit. I may be stating the obvious,



Abstract monochromes. The objects' identities are completely immaterial in these two images—it is all about the relationship between the light and dark areas. It is this type of work that defines my own chosen label.

I am drawn to fences and ambiguity. Abstracting what lies beyond the fence (using depth of field) is also a metaphor for something that is unobtainable. I think that I will move toward more conceptual work in the future, but it is impossible to be definite about this.

but the fact that many photography courses and instruction books leave the photographer's temperament out of the equation never ceases to amaze me.

I do feel that photographers should explore as many different avenues as their temperament allows and I generally am opposed to the idea that specialization is a good thing. In fact, I think that specialization should be avoided for as long as possible, or failing that, the photographer should switch genres regularly to keep the eye and the mind fresh. Becoming a photographer is about developing a way of seeing. Ultimately, this way of seeing is something that should be applicable to just about anything in the visual world.

The rush to specialization is largely driven by the mistaken belief that specialization and style are intimately connected. Photographers are often told that they have to develop a style and that the developed style comes as a result of specialization. This is false. A style develops organically through constant practice and not through the adoption of a photographic niche.

Great painters, for example, all have a recognizable style. If we are looking at a particular painting of a flower, a person, or a night sky, we do not have to read the signature to know that it is a Van Gogh. Painters do not set out to develop a style, they set out to paint. Throughout their careers, their styles evolve and mature independently of intent. As a photographer, my greatest satisfaction comes from someone recognizing one of my photographs, regardless of subject matter, as mine without any clues other than the image itself.

Although there is no way of knowing where the journey will take you, it is worth keeping a few things in mind:

- By and large, do things photographically that work with your own fundamental nature
- Do not specialize too soon; instead, build a broad foundation
- If you practice enough photography with these points in mind, a recognizable style may emerge

A note about the use of the term style*: for the purposes of this book, style is something that develops through constant practice and is not something deliberately aimed for. It happens organically.*

This effect was achieved by placing a strobe in a laundry basket

Gallery 1: Only the Essential

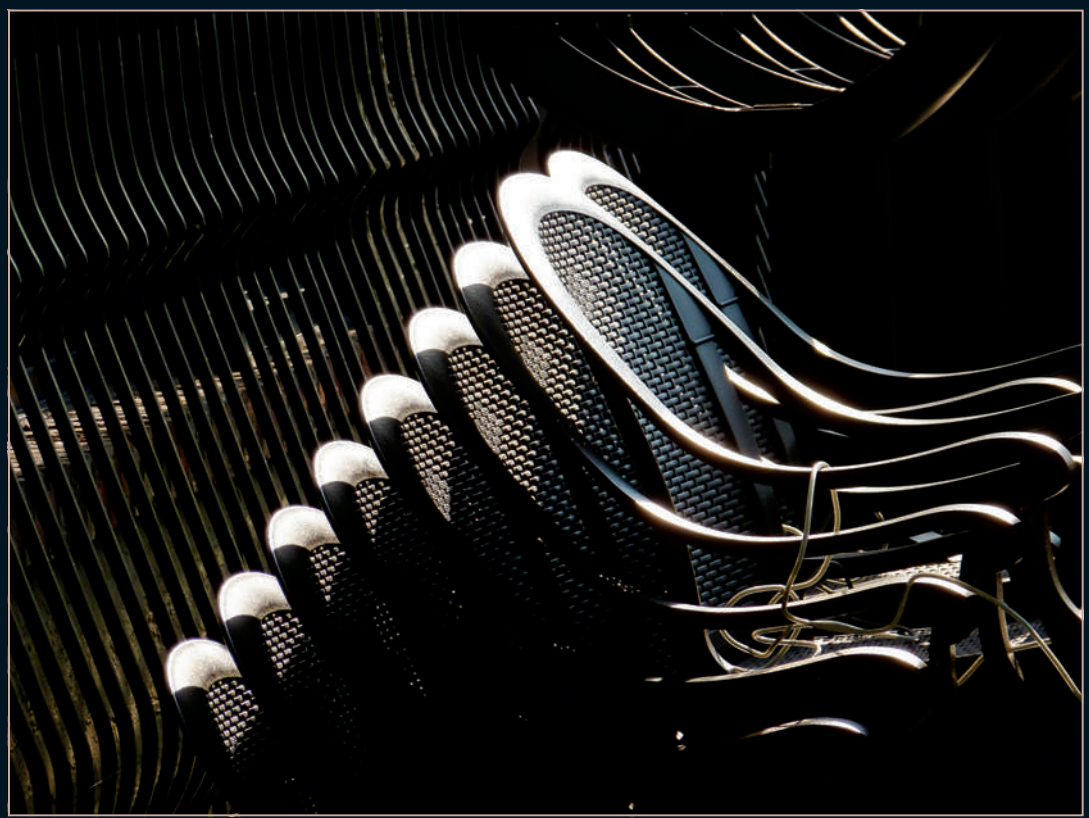
Losing background clutter is an essential photography skill. A minimal aesthetic takes this as far as possible without losing the essence of the image.

A texture layer has been added to this photograph to heighten the mood

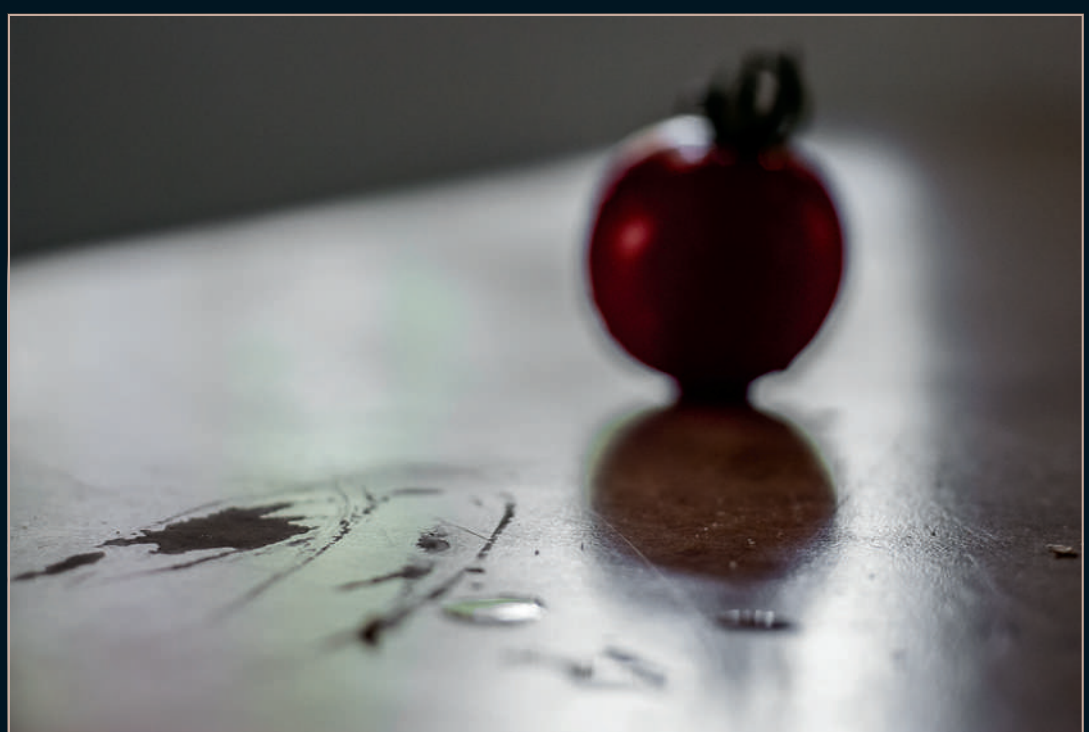
Repetition and strong shadows make this image interesting

When photographing an object, it is worth giving some thought to the supporting surface. In this case, the glass of water is on the arm of an Adirondack chair.

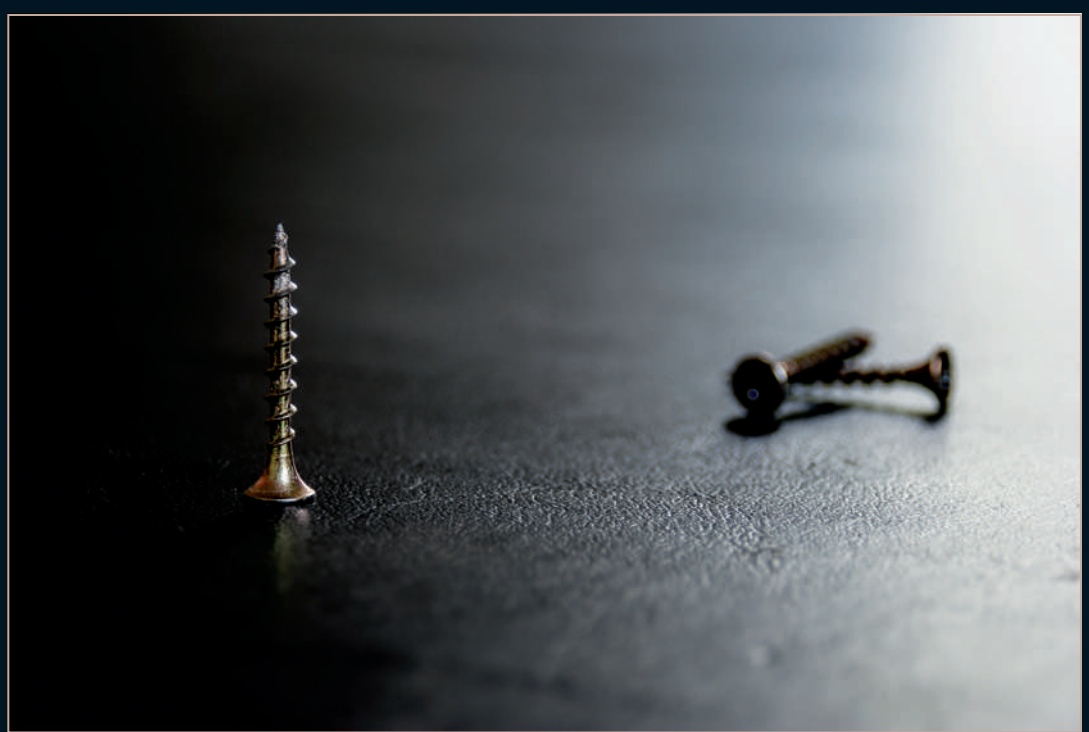
Early morning sunlight on stacked chairs and tables. Getting the framing right was critical with this shot.



The obvious choice here would have been to focus on the tomato, but by focusing on a seemingly inconsequential part of the image, a bit of mystery is created



This image appears to be about the cotton spool, but the wood grain is an important part of the composition because it draws the eye into the image



A composition to focus the viewer's attention on the upright screw


the
essential
only

Chapter 2
A Minimalist Approach

The following areas of photography can benefit from a minimalist approach: Equipment should be purchased according to need, the workflow should not increase the size of the task at hand, and a composition should never be cluttered. Let's take a deeper look at each of these elements.

Equipment

In the past, a photographer would simply buy the best equipment that he or she could afford. Things have changed a lot over the past few decades, though, and this cash-driven approach is no longer the only approach, or even the best approach. Under the old model, two things were regarded as absolutely key, both concerning lenses. First was the speed of the lens, or if it was fast enough for a correct exposure. Second was the quality of the components that made up the lens. This second factor determined the sharpness of the image. Faster and sharper lenses cost much more than the slower, slightly less sharp counterparts.

A fast lens makes it possible to work in darker conditions than would otherwise be possible, at least without a tripod or supplemental lighting. In other words, it enables photographs that would not otherwise happen. Sharpness, on the other hand, is an incremental thing. A less than perfect lens will not stop the photograph from happening; it will just make it slightly softer. It does not take a conspiracy theorist to see that the photography industry's interests are best served by pushing the importance of speed and sharpness, because this is where the greatest profits lie.

I think the emphasis on speed is justified, but the obsession with sharpness is overdone. Just think of some of the photographs that have really affected you and try to remember whether they are tack sharp, moderately sharp, or not very sharp at all. I have my own favorite images by other photographers and cannot remember which, if any, are super sharp. The truth is that sharpness doesn't have the same influence on emotional and art-appreciating centers of the brain as contrast does. While absolute sharpness can be achieved at a cost, contrast can be optimized using relatively cheap or even free software tools. An impression of sharpness can also be created by judicious use of contrast, especially local contrast, but that is a discussion for a later chapter.

One thing needs to be clear: I am not making an argument for buying and using only cheap equipment, but rather I am making the case for not spending a fortune that you do not need to spend. If your images are going to be used as fine art prints, 300 dots per inch (dpi) at three feet per side, then get ready to spend some money. You will need a top-quality lens, a camera body with a large sensor, and some expensive software. Not many of us are producing such large, high-quality prints, though, so a considerable amount of money can be saved by not paying for incremental improvements that will be unnoticeable in our final output. The bigger and more expensive approach may be

flawed, but there is something at the other end of the scale that is just as wrongheaded. This is the recent trend toward self-imposed limits on equipment. New websites and publications are appearing all the time where the owner seeks to showcase work done with basic gear. Some of these websites show only photographs taken with point-and-shoots, while others go even further and only show work from smartphones. Artificial limits on technology encourage serious exploration of the equipment at hand, but there are times when a different type of camera really would be better suited for the task.

The type of photography you want to do should guide your choice in equipment, as opposed to the industry-approved approach of setting a budget then spending up to your limit. There are times when cheaper equipment may actually outperform a more expensive kit. If you want to take photographs to appear with blog posts or to sell products on eBay, then a budget compact camera may be more useful than a DSLR. The compact camera will give a larger depth of field, be easier to handle, and the picture quality will be sufficient for output to a computer screen.

Workflow

Workflow encompasses everything from pressing the shutter-release button to the final resting place of the photograph, be it a print, on a website, or as fodder for a graphic artist or designer. A good workflow saves time and minimizes frustration, while a bad, elaborate, or nonexistent workflow does the complete opposite. A minimalist workflow does exactly enough.

For someone who takes photographs occasionally, workflow is a minor issue. It is only when dozens of images need to be edited, sorted, and stored on a regular basis that a system needs to be put in place. The system should be tailored to suit the individual photographer, not the other way around. The photographer should always work in a way that suits his or her own temperament, not in a way that others say is ideal. This means the process should be an organic one, arrived at by trial and error.

Think minimalism when creating your workflow, and try to keep things as simple as possible. The fewer required actions, the more likely you'll adhere to the process and reap the benefits.

Other than the photographer's temperament, the final output will influence workflow the most. If your photography is the starting point for an intensive graphic design or fine art project, then your workflow will be different than that of a photographer who deals with a lot of finished images but doesn't want the photographs to look very different than when they were originally shot.

As I mentioned in chapter 1, the biggest change over the past couple of decades was the shift from film to digital photography. Computers have replaced the darkroom, and any time invested in learning how to use the newest technology will more than pay for itself. Working knowledge of a decent photo-editing software package will add another dimension to your work.

While we're on the subject of computers and photo-editing software, I would like to throw in one piece of advice: if you haven't already, do not go out and purchase Adobe Photoshop—at least not yet. Unfortunately, we have been influenced to think that being taken seriously as a photographer means having to own a full copy of this package. It is an excellent software package, but it is not necessarily the right one for the majority of photographers. Despite its name, it is much better suited to graphic designers and digital artists.

If you feel the need to invest in software right now, I recommend Adobe Lightroom. It is much more affordable, much faster, and the structure

of the application is a lot more intuitive than Photoshop.

My Workflow

What follows is an outline of my workflow, along with my rationale and some other thoughts. Bear in mind the bit about finding what works for you. If you can adapt some of this to your own needs, or gain a better understanding of the workflow concept, then this discussion has been a successful one; however, it is definitely not a tutorial in any way.

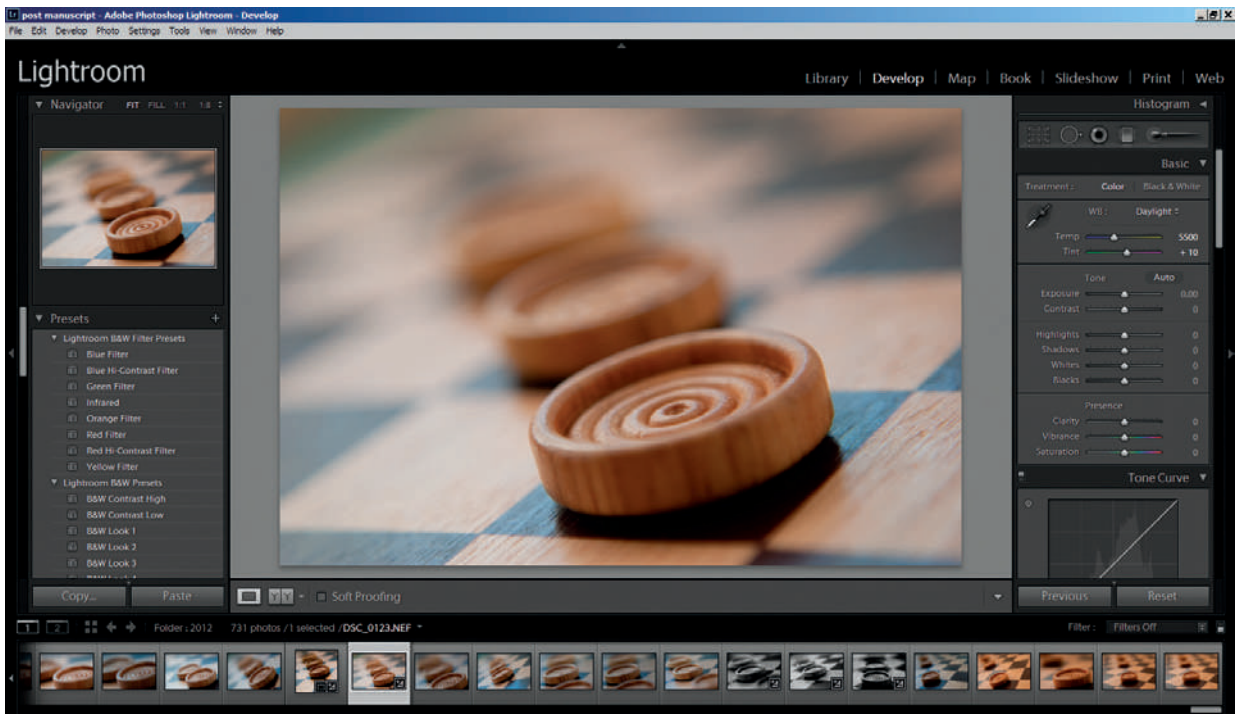
I use two cameras, a compact point-and-shoot and a DSLR. The compact shoots only JPEG images, and the DSLR offers the standard choice of RAW or JPEG. Many photographers advocate always using RAW if the option is available because it allows for greater flexibility in editing. I use RAW for mission-critical work, if possible, and JPEG for other things (such as blog posts). The much smaller file sizes of the latter format give a speed advantage that, to me, is worth the loss of flexibility. You may well think that losing editing possibilities and some quality is a strict no-no under all circumstances. There is really no right or wrong answer. This applies to just about everything in a workflow.

As a rule of thumb, the earlier in the workflow process that any decision can be made, the better. I like to delete unwanted images as I go, while the pictures are still in the camera. By and large, I'll know quickly if a photograph has potential or if it is likely to just take up space on my hard drive for years to come. I delete the unwanted images before they ever get to the hard drive. This probably cuts my processing time in half because it is easier to hit the delete button twice on my camera than to later separate 20 or so keepers from a group of 200 images on the computer. I find the thought of whittling down images from hundreds to a couple dozen to be overwhelming.

The next job is to transfer the images from the memory card to the computer. Since I diligently delete as I go, there are only a few images to import. I use Adobe Lightroom for this. Lightroom is set up to automatically detect a memory card and import files into a folder. I rename the folder to something meaningful. I then do a second transfer of the files from the memory card to an external hard drive using the computer operating system. This means I have a working set of images within Lightroom plus a backup set on a hard drive that I can attach to any computer and work on in case of emergency. I do not delete the images from my memory card at this stage because space is not critical, and leaving them alone provides a third, albeit temporary, backup. Again, this is a matter of choice; many photographers prefer to work with a clean card every time they get their camera out. In fact, memory cards have come down in price so much that some photographers use them just once and then store them with the client's file after transferring the images. If I were a wedding photographer, I would definitely go this route.

I always want to be sure that I am not working on an original copy of a photograph because there is nothing worse than editing a photograph and then deciding to reject the edit, only to find that you have destroyed the original. Making a separate backup as previously described ensures that you have an intact original, but with Lightroom you have another failsafe: nondestructive editing. This means that whatever you do in Lightroom, or in another application that can be opened via Lightroom, it is always possible to retrieve the original photograph. One benefit of shooting in RAW format is that it's impossible to edit over the original—work is always done on a copy. When it comes to your original images, redundancy is never a bad thing.

So far I have described importing the photographs and backing up, the boring but essential



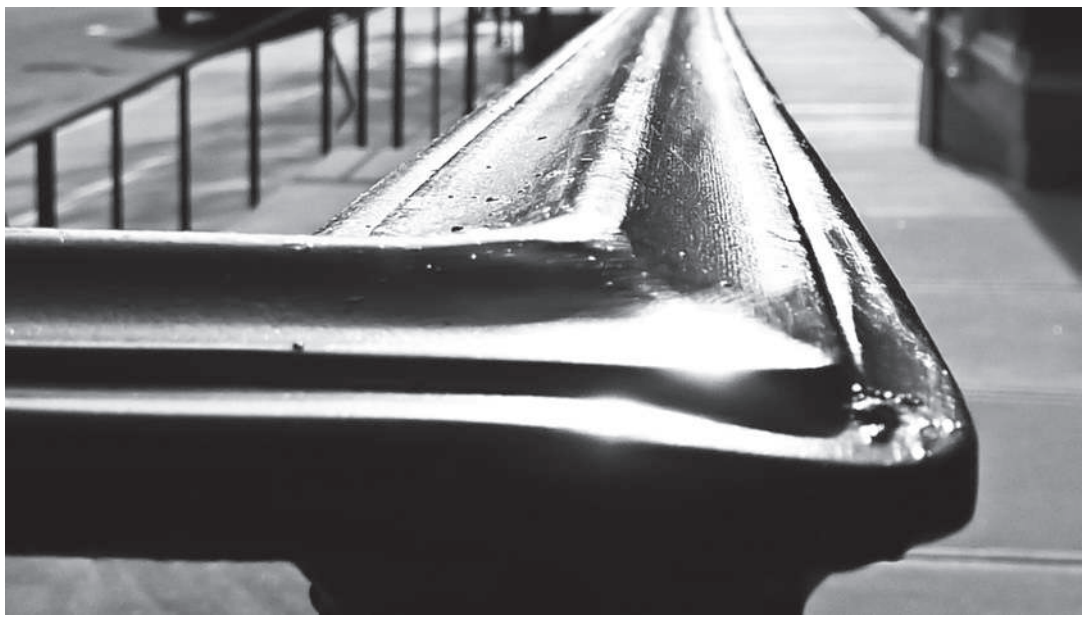
Adobe Lightroom. A major advantage of this type of software is the nonlinear workflow. Any image can be worked on by highlighting the bottom strip and adjusting the settings to the right. The software will remember whatever changes have been made, so no saving is required. This makes it very easy to move quickly between images.

parts of the process. Now is the fun part, which is making the most of the images. Before starting to edit, I do one more pass to reject any shots that I thought might be okay when I saw them on the camera's LCD screen, but that do not work as well when viewed on a larger monitor. I reject about a quarter of the remaining images at this stage, which leaves me about 10–15 keepers from an average shoot.

This is the point at which I start to think about the end use of the image. Certain types of shots may suit my blog or social networking projects, while others may have potential as stock photographs or even prints.

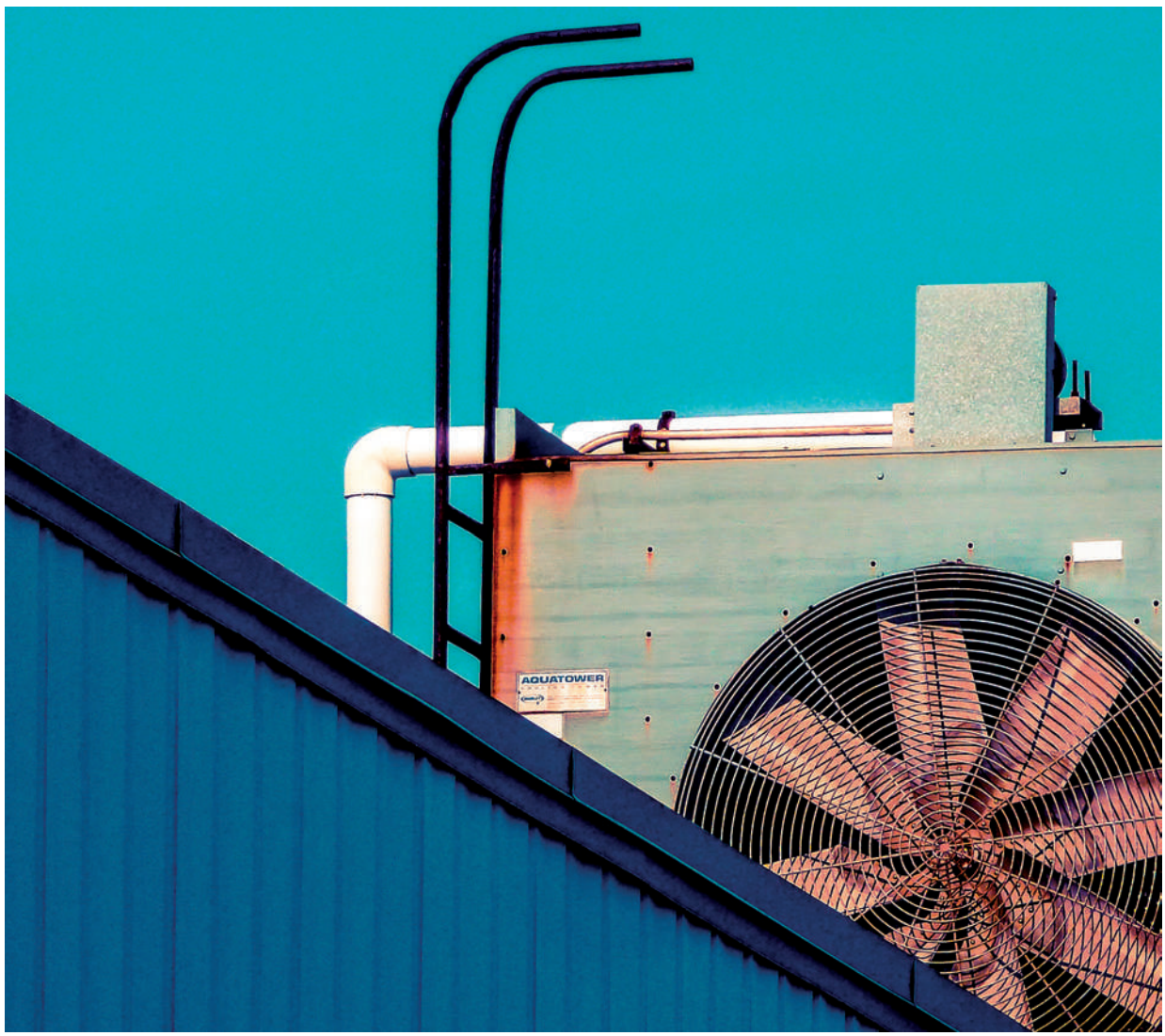
Now I start to edit the individual photographs. The main advantage of a nonlinear editor such as Lightroom is speed, especially when applying changes to more than one photograph. If, say, I'd set my exposure slightly low during the shoot, it would take only a few seconds to compensate for this across the entire set of images. Even if I were editing 200 photographs at the same time, it would not take longer. It is also very easy to generate multiple copies of a photograph, so if both a monochrome and a color version were required, a couple of mouse clicks would do the trick. Saving files can be done individually or in bulk, with all of the parameters, such as size, sharpening, output folder, and so forth, preset. Saving 15 or 200 edited files takes little more than a few seconds.

As far as editing options go, I rarely need anything that isn't doable in Lightroom because it covers all of the basic editing functions to



A handrail from an unusual perspective makes for a simple composition. The photograph was shot in color and reduced to black-and-white in Lightroom.

An image does not have to be perfect to have impact. Technical perfection and impact often have to be balanced.



Split- or dual-toning has been applied to this image in Lightroom. Dual tone is a process where dark tones and light tones are given different colors. The process is usually applied over a monochrome image, but in this case a little of the original color was left in.

This image has been edited to make the darker tones black. This technique reduces visual clutter and is a simple task with plenty of flexibility when done in Lightroom.

To highlight the die's transparency, the local contrast was boosted. When you're editing, a proactive approach works best. It is always good to know which characteristics you want to emphasize.

Photography is about seeing, and that cannot be emphasized enough.

a professional standard. Contrast, saturation, sharpening, noise reduction, cropping, spot removal, and curves, along with some more creative options such as vignetting and split toning, are available. Sometimes I need to do something that is beyond Lightroom's scope, and setting up other editors (including Adobe Photoshop) for round-tripping is straightforward. Occasionally, I use some other software for adding a border or for more esoteric artistic effects, but the end result is always returned to Lightroom, where images can be exported along with the rest of the edits.

There are some good free workflow tools out there, the best of which is probably Picasa. This application, owned by Google, has come a long way and now offers high-quality editing and cataloging. Editing is faster and more flexible in Lightroom, but Picasa will provide more than enough tools and options for most users, and the results are very good. However, if you intend to output a lot of images to print, Lightroom (ideally along with Photoshop) is the way to go.

The most important thing about your workflow is that it has to suit you. This probably seems like stating the obvious, but the Internet is full of articles whose authors think they have the only solution. If you find a method that suits you and provides the results you like, stay with it and don't feel obliged to follow someone else's lead. The only thing that is non-negotiable, as far as I am concerned, is backing up the original files from the camera and keeping them safe, preferably on two different drives. Regard your native image files as you would negatives, if film were the medium, and protect them by backing up.

There is a difference between looking and seeing. *We look at things whenever our eyes are open, but we only really* see *things when we make a conscious effort to do so.*

Subject Matter and Composition

One of the greatest advantages of a minimalist approach is that the most seemingly banal subjects can make the most interesting photographs. While traditional photographers may have to drive a hundred miles, setting out at four o'clock in the morning to capture the perfect sunrise over the perfect landscape, or invest in a studio full of incredibly expensive equipment to practice their art, you can give minimalist photographers a basic camera and an object, and they are good to go. I have spent a whole day working with a jar of screws and a hundred dollar point-and-shoot. Some of the images from these low-budget shoots are among my best sellers.

Seeing

Photography is about seeing, and that cannot be emphasized enough. We all know what a screw looks like, that it has a thread and a head, but how many people have really looked hard at a screw? A closer look reveals so much more, especially if it is old and used—with metal shavings, dents, pits, and possibly flecks of old paint. The head design could be one of a hundred variations, and it could be anything from pristine to unusable due to the slot or slots being worn beyond recognition.

Light is, of course, an important factor. It can be hard, highlighting the metallic nature of the screw with its sharp tonal changes, or it can be soft, giving very smooth tonal gradients. The same screw framed in different ways will lead to photographs with different visual results. The negative space around the screw becomes as important as the screw itself.

These suggestions demonstrate the difference between looking and *seeing*. We look at things whenever our eyes are open, but we only really *see* things when we make a conscious effort to do so. Seeing takes practice. When we learn to see, just about anything can be the subject for a potentially good photograph. If the camera records what we really see, the photograph stands a chance of being a good one, but if it merely records what we look at, the image

Minimalism is about getting to the essence of something. With this image, the essence is in the relative positions of the limbs.

Something simple in the middle of an urban scene, in this case a shocking pink door, can provide an interesting contrast

A daffodil photographed to emphasize the delicacy of the flower. The fact that it is hardly recognizable forces the viewer to see the attribute as opposed to the object.

A minimal landscape that is very different than a traditional landscape because there are no leading lines and no focal point. The image instead relies on texture and a very simple, flat composition.

will never be more than a snapshot. After I have really seen something, the photograph comes easily, and if I haven't seen it, the photograph will never come.

Of course, the subject does not have to be as small or even as simple as a screw. With larger objects, framing makes or breaks the photograph. There is no rule that says the whole object has to be in view, or that it must fill the frame. Cropping an object is a great way to practice seeing because it forces you to see in terms of lines, shapes, tones, and contrast. This is the first step toward abstraction because the identity of the object becomes less obvious. It is impossible to be a good photographer, let alone a minimalist photographer, without an understanding of abstraction.

Going in the other direction, making an object appear very small in the frame can have a similar effect. If you shrink an object enough, it becomes, essentially, a point. Points and lines are extremely important elements in abstraction and minimalism. An object can be large enough to be recognizable yet still work as a point in a composition. A common example is a few seagulls over a calm sea under a clear sky. The seagulls, though recognizable, serve as points in the composition, and are often balanced by the single line in the image, or the horizon.

Framing

Framing, done well, can make an image more abstract and less literal. Good framing forces the viewer's brain to see the photograph with fresh eyes. When we see a chair presented normally and in a common context (all of it in the frame in a sitting room), the brain recognizes it for what it is, decides that there is nothing of interest going on, and stops working on the image. Now, show only a part of the seat, or change the context to a distant shot of an armchair on a beach. The viewer's brain wakes up and *sees*

the image because it had to work to build context. Novelty for novelty's sake is usually a bad idea photographically, but novelty coupled with something genuinely interesting will always make a strong image.

Any photographer should aim to make composition an instinctive skill. The ideal is to be able to size up a scene, frame it, and shoot, knowing that a reasonable photograph will result. When I see photographers who advise others to have the tic-tac-toe grid on their viewfinders so they can use the rule of thirds to compose an image, I want to punch walls. The only possible use for this grid is after the fact. If an image works much better than expected, or if it fails to work despite the photographer's best attempts, the grid may—just may—be a good way of finding out something interesting. As a photographer, you need to be surprised; if you turn photography into math, this is not going to happen. The resulting work will be workmanlike at best, but more likely it will be static and devoid of interest.

This is not an argument for not knowing theory, though, and I recommend understanding the basics, such as the rule of thirds, tone, color, and so forth. I do cover these topics later on in the book. If you are truly dedicated, I recommend taking a drawing class because it will lay a good foundation for future photography endeavors. Drawing is hard, but even if you don't become the next Picasso, the insight gained will probably get you further along than a weekend photography workshop. To draw well, you have to be able to *see* in the proper sense of the word—it cannot be fudged. Those who teach drawing understand the issues involved in making a two-dimensional image from a three-dimensional scene better than anyone who hasn't picked up a pencil ever could. It is no coincidence that many people we now recognize as great photographers spent years studying painting and drawing before they picked up a camera.

A minimalist approach to composition is, in many ways, different than a traditional one, but the best minimalist photographers usually start off by mastering the traditional approach to composition and working with it, often for years, before they start to pare it down and arrive at the essence of the potential image. Traditional composition includes removing clutter and ensuring that the image is not messy. Aesthetic minimalism can be seen as an extreme extension of this process.

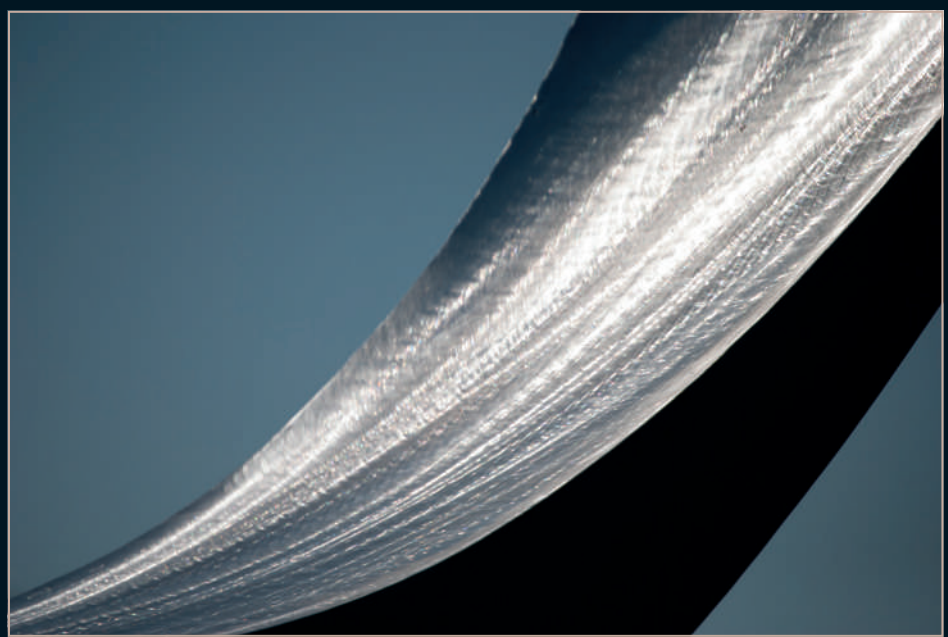
An interesting analogy can be found in music. Musicians, particularly in jazz, blues, and rock, tend to play fewer notes as they get older. In their youth, they want to show their prowess and their grasp of technique, but as they age the urge to express ideas takes over. They strip away the inessential, the purely decorative, to force the listener to focus on what's left, the essence. Photography is no different.

At this stage you may be thinking that first going the traditional route and then the minimalist route is a waste of time. Why not just cut out the traditional and go straight to photographing, say, two seagulls and a horizon? Although some photographers have a good enough eye to do this, very few can carve out a career using this approach. The essence of something has to be arrived at by stripping away the inessential, and is not something that can be arrived at instantly or by sheer luck.

The best minimalist photographers usually start off by mastering the traditional approach to composition and working with it, often for years.

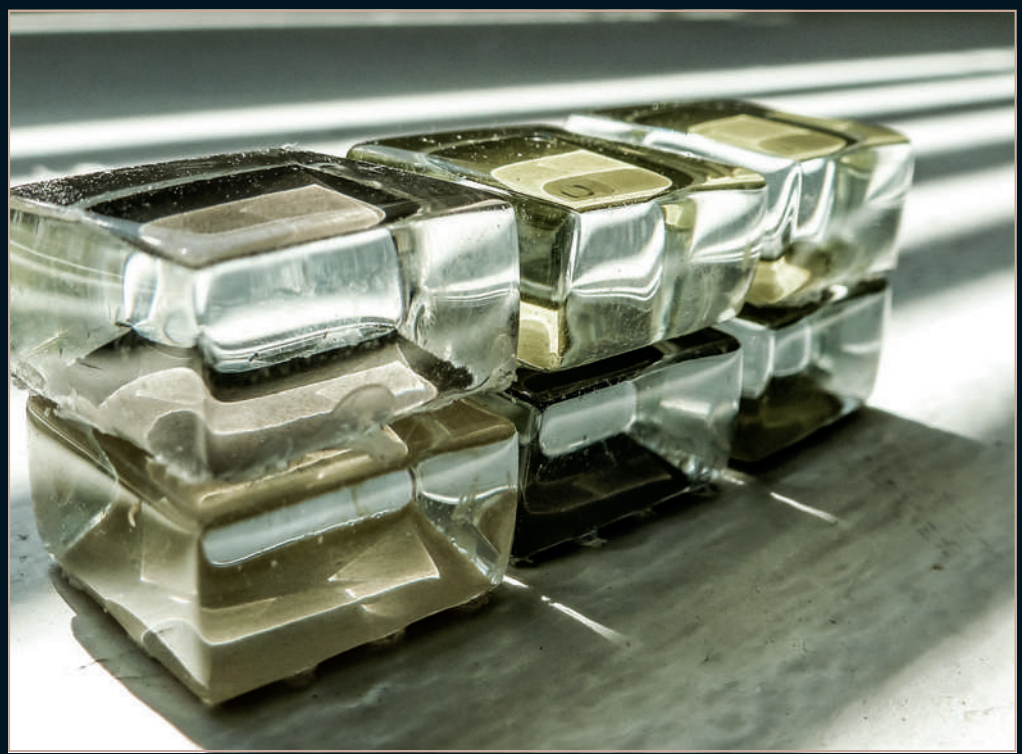
Gallery 2: Surfaces

Different surfaces present different challenges.



A composition of four areas, three of which are uniform; this helps to emphasize the fourth area, where the sun strikes a steel surface

Point-and-shoot cameras generally have very good macro capabilities. It is worth experimenting with objects that others tend to ignore.



Glass mosaic tiles reflect and refract light in interesting ways

Two stools. Taking time to get the framing right always pays dividends.

Chapter 3
The Basics

This section consists of two parts. The first part examines the question of what photography is in terms of art, technology, and as a social tool. The second section examines the many aspects of working with light. Light is the fundamental medium the photographer works with, therefore understanding exposure is critical.

What Is Photography?

According to Wikipedia, at the time of this writing, photography is defined as follows:

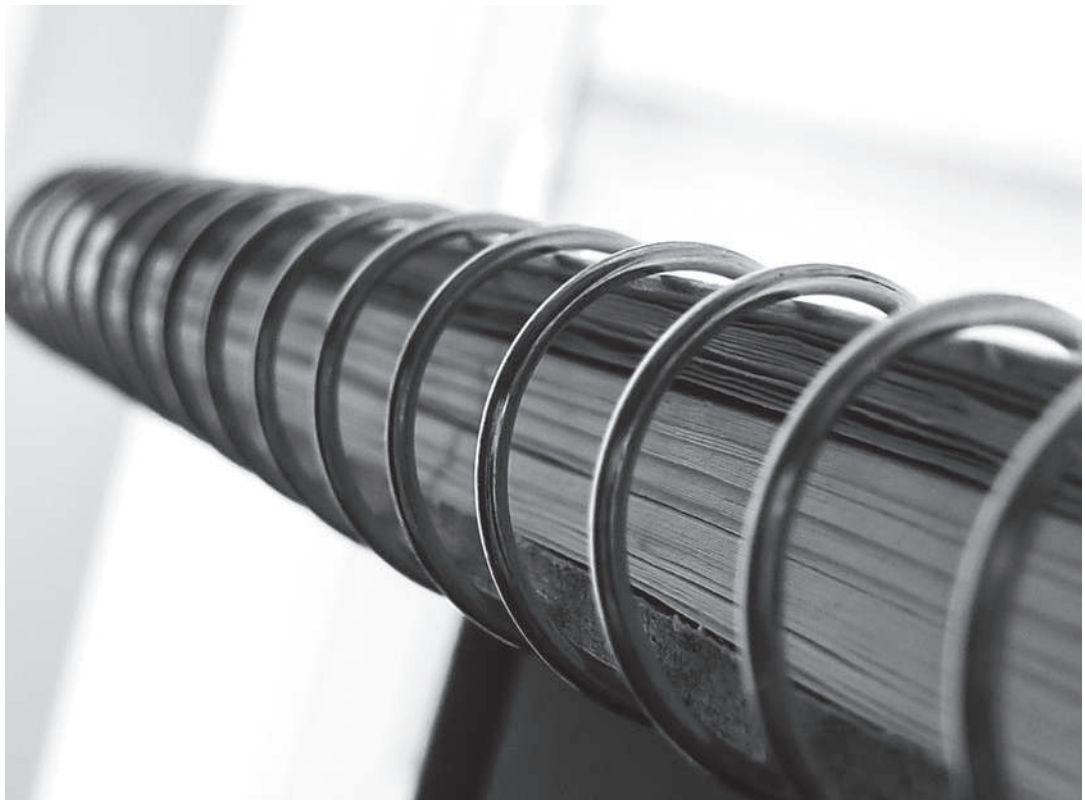
The art, science, and practice of creating durable images by recording light or other electromagnetic radiation, either chemically by means of a light-sensitive material such as photographic film, or electronically by means of an image sensor. Typically, a lens is used to focus the light reflected or emitted from objects into a real image on the light-sensitive surface inside a camera during a timed exposure. The result in an electronic image sensor is an electrical charge at each pixel, which is electronically processed and stored in a digital image file for subsequent display or processing. The result in a photographic emulsion is an invisible latent image, which is later chemically developed into a visible image, either negative or positive depending on the purpose of the photographic material and the method of processing. A negative image on film is traditionally used to photographically create a positive image on a paper base, known as a print, either by using an enlarger or by contact printing.

To put it another way, photography is the capturing and focusing of light from the three-dimensional real world onto a two-dimensional surface. The camera lens focuses the light onto a digital sensor or film. The technology may change over time, but the fundamentals will not. There is no substantial difference between film and digital, for example. Good film photographers transition to digital photography easily because the basics of exposure and composition are fundamentally the same in both mediums.

That is the bare bones, science-based definition, but it doesn't even begin to answer the question, what is photography? A more useful answer can be realized by looking at photography and its role in society. This is covered in much more depth in later chapters, but here is the two-minute version. Up until a couple hundred years ago, the only way to make a visual record of the world was to draw or paint it. Obviously, these skills are beyond the ability of most people and are very time consuming; therefore, with rare exceptions, only carefully selected and usually contrived moments were recorded. This is why portrait painting was so dominant up until the 19th century, after which time the camera replaced the brush and pencil and portrait paintings waned.

A simplified definition: Photography is the capturing and focusing of light from the three-dimensional real world onto a two-dimensional surface.

It was some time before technology was such that the camera could be used for candid work, the taking of a photograph on the spur of the moment of subjects that were unaware they were being photographed. This was the point at which photography became more than a cheaper and more convenient form of painting



This is an example of an image that just wouldn't have happened prior to digital photography. I was writing some notes for this book and I became curious as to how the spiral binder would look in a photograph. All I had to do was turn on my compact camera and fire off a few shots. The image stabilization meant that I didn't have to set up lighting or spend time setting up a tripod, and the macro setting meant that I could get in as close as I needed to.

or drawing. For the first time, the camera could be used to record something approaching reality, and not just a version especially contrived for the photographer, such as a portrait sitting.

Most of the recent developments in photography, from those first candid images until the present day, have been ones of convenience. A perfectly good compact camera can now be purchased for around a hundred dollars, and the darkroom has been replaced by the computer, which is a device most of us already own. With digital, so called "film" is now virtually free. The upshot is that millions of people are recording every conceivable part of reality, and also publishing their efforts for the world to see on social networking websites such as Facebook. Photography is no longer a separate thing that looks in on society from the outside, but rather is an integral part of society.

The relationship between the photographer and photography as a whole is one of the most important parts of the question of what photography is, but it is a chapter you will have to write yourself. Even if you never write an article about your own relationship to photography—a manifesto describing what photography is to *you*—any time spent considering this relationship will bear fruit. It is also good to realize that we are a part of something much bigger than ourselves. This awareness can ease the sense of isolation that can come from a photographer being a somewhat detached observer as opposed to a full-on participant in events.

To my mind, it is impossible to define photography without addressing the issue of whether or not it is a legitimate art form. My view on the subject can be summed up very simply by the following statement: *Photography is an art form every bit the equal to other visual arts, such as*

painting and sculpture. Many disagree with this statement and seek to pigeonhole photography as nothing more than a technical skill. As far as I am concerned, this is an old argument that was laid to rest in the early part of the 20th century. Chapter 8, which is about the history of photography, covers this in some depth.

Exposure Explained

Exposure refers to the amount of light that is allowed to hit the recording medium, usually either a digital sensor or film. What is the correct amount of light that should be allowed to hit the sensor or film? As much or as little as the photographer wants. There are ways to mathematically calculate this, a fact that automatic settings on cameras take full advantage of. A photographer who doesn't bypass these settings and experiment, however, is giving up a huge amount of creative control. If a layperson looks at a photograph, two things will determine whether they think the photograph is a snapshot or the work of a professional: composition and exposure, with the latter being more influential. This explains how important it is to understand exposure.

Understanding exposure in applied terms is pretty straightforward. Three separate things control exposure, and they are set either by the camera, the photographer, or a combination of the two. The three controls are *aperture,* which determines how much light hits the recording medium, *shutter speed,* which determines how long the light hits the recording medium, and *ISO,* which refers to the sensitivity of the recording medium to light. The most important thing to grasp at this point is that any one of these can be used to balance out one or both of the others. For example, if you were to increase the aperture, decreasing either the shutter speed or the ISO by a set amount will cancel out the change in exposure.

So far so good, but it raises the question, why change anything? Why allow more light in by increasing the aperture, only to then reduce it to the exact same amount by increasing the shutter speed? The answer is that changes to these three settings do more than simply increase or decrease the amount of light that is allowed to hit the sensor; or in the case of ISO, it changes the sensitivity of the sensor. It is these other changes, and managing and understanding them, that turns someone with a camera into a *photographer*.

Aperture

The aperture is basically a hole, the area of which determines how much light hits the sensor over a given period of time. Increasing or decreasing the size of this hole does more than just determine the amount of light, though. A photograph is a two-dimensional interpretation of a three-dimensional reality, and much of the resulting effect is directly related to aperture size. For an image to appear sharp from near to far, a small aperture must be used. Conversely, the larger the aperture the smaller the range of depth that will render sharply. *Depth of field* is the term used when discussing this aspect.

It doesn't take much to realize the potential of using aperture size as a creative tool. A large aperture is often used to isolate a subject from its background or to add some creative bokeh. A smaller aperture is often used in landscape photography, where sharpness right through the depth of the image is required.

The word bokeh *means* blur *and is used in photography to describe the aesthetic qualities of any areas of a photograph that are not in sharp focus. There is much discussion about what constitutes good or bad bokeh. When the out-of-focus area is attractive—not* what *is out of focus, but the* way *it is out of focus—it is said to have good bokeh.*

A large aperture setting (f/1.8) gives a very small depth of field

This is another example of using a large aperture to limit depth of field. This type of shot is only possible with a sensor that is larger than those available on a typical point-and-shoot camera.

It is important to mention at this point that depth of field is not only a function of aperture size, but also of sensor size. An identical aperture size will have a very different effect on a full-frame sensor on a DSLR than on the much smaller sensor of a compact camera. The smaller the sensor, the greater the depth of field. This is why for macro work a compact camera can be preferable to a DSLR.

Aperture is measured in a scale called f-stops. A full f-stop is exactly twice the area of the one below it and half the area of the one above it. This is important to understand, especially in relation to shutter speed.

Shutter Speed

A shutter speed of 1/500 second will let in half as much light as a shutter speed of 1/250 second, and twice as much as a setting of 1/1000 second. Therefore, if the aperture is increased by a full f-stop—that is, twice the size—doubling the shutter speed will lead to no net change in the actual amount of light allowed into the camera.

Let's take this out of the realm of the abstract and apply it. If you want to use a smaller aperture to increase the depth of field, you can do so by making the shutter speed slower to compensate.

Just as there are situations in which the aperture setting is the priority, there are others in which shutter speed is the important consideration, because there is a minimum shutter speed at which a camera can be held steady. This varies according to the camera's design, the focal length being used, and the steadiness of the photographer's grip.

ISO

ISO is different than both shutter speed and aperture size because it doesn't influence the amount of light entering the camera, but rather it affects the *amount of light required to form the image*. It is also the only measurement of the three that is not standardized among camera manufacturers. Whereas an aperture of, say, f/8 is a constant, and a shutter speed of 1/500 second is also an absolute value, ISO readings vary. The doubling principle still applies, though, and this is what is important. ISO 200 on a given camera will allow the sensor to absorb light twice as fast as ISO 100 and half as fast as ISO 400.

Increasing the ISO does come with a cost; the higher the ISO, the lower the quality of the image, which is due to some pixels not being rendered accurately. Raising the ISO may be enough to force the shutter speed to be high enough to avoid camera shake, but the resulting image will not be as clean. That said, some photographers like the added low-fidelity effect that so-called *noise* adds to their images.

Cameras with smaller sensors, such as point-and-shoots, are much more prone to noise than those with larger sensors, such as DSLRs. The whole noise issue is continually being lessened by improvements in software, both in the camera and on the computer. This, along with the now-ubiquitous image stabilization technology, means that low-light and nighttime photography without a tripod are now available to just about anyone who possesses a camera.

How Does the Camera Know How Much Light to Let In?

The amount of light entering the camera and the sensitivity of the medium—whether it be film or an electronic sensor—combine to give what is commonly called *exposure*. The aperture size and shutter speed control how much light is allowed to enter the camera, while the ISO setting controls the sensitivity of the sensor. The question, though, is how much light is actually needed for the correct exposure? Almost all cameras nowadays have some means of measuring light and

Overexposing the image or "blowing" the highlights can really help to focus attention

suggesting three settings that will allow this amount of light in.

The photographer can then do one of three things with the camera's suggested choices:

1. Accept the camera's choice of settings
2. Change more than one of the settings, but keep the exposure the same; for example, double the shutter speed and make the aperture a full stop larger
3. Change the exposure, which will result in the image being lighter or darker than if either of the first two methods were used

The Importance of Tone in Relation to Exposure

The camera's internal light meter, or an external handheld light meter, measures the light reflecting off a surface, representing a tone within the range the camera is able to record. Two things determine tone: luminance and available light. A pale color will convert to a lighter gray than a dark color—this is due to luminance. The same surface will show different tones under different lighting conditions. For example, the tone will be much darker if a surface is in shadow rather than in bright sunlight.

If this concept is a little abstract, think of an artist making an accurate pencil drawing and producing a grayscale version of the scene. When considering metering and tone, forget about color. Whether the initial color of a subject is red, green, yellow, or blue does not matter; you want to think of it in grayscale, as in a pencil drawing.

Light Metering Methods

Most cameras are capable of measuring the amount of available light in several different ways: *averaged, spot, center weighted,* and the

manufacturer's *matrix/evaluative* settings. If averaged or spot metering is selected by the photographer, a single value for the entire image area is being calculated and returned. Matrix/evaluative metering is not so cut and dried, and it is hard to make a definitive statement because methods tend to be proprietary and manufacturers are loathe to share details. Some manufacturers do, however, state that they expose different parts of the image differently using electronic techniques. Darker parts of the image are boosted while very bright parts are underexposed.

Averaged Metering

Averaged metering is when the camera takes measurements across the whole scene and simply comes up with a value based on the medium (average) tone in the scene.

Spot Metering

Spot metering is when a measurement is taken from a single, very small part of the image. The idea is that this part of the image will expose perfectly at the expense of the rest of the image. A couple of examples of when this type of metering may be used are on a face, where exact skin tone is required, or on a candle flame, to not overexpose the flame, which averaged metering would do. Averaging would see mainly black and would therefore interpret a tone as close to black as middle gray, and try to lighten the entire scene accordingly. Spot metering is great for drama, and what we often think of as cinematic-type lighting is often the result of spot metering.

In practical terms, spot metering usually involves pointing the camera at the part of the scene that is to be perfectly exposed, half pressing the shutter-release button to lock the exposure, then reframing the shot and fully pressing the shutter-release button.

Center Weighted Metering

Center weighted metering may be thought of as a compromise between spot and averaged. It gives the highest priority to tones in the center of the scene and the least priority to the tones at the edges, but it does take them all into account.

Matrix/Evaluative Metering and Others

Camera companies often use their own formulas for a metering system that is likely to get the exposure correct in all situations. This often involves a database inside the camera that contains comparative scenes and the best settings for such scenes. Manufacturers tend to keep the details of these systems to themselves, so it is not possible to come up with a definitive description. If your camera has such a setting, it will be good, but that doesn't mean it's always the best option. I tend to swap between this setting and spot metering.

A Practical Demonstration

If your camera has a live view LCD screen, you can try this:

- If you can, and normally you can, set the screen to monochrome
- Set the metering mode to either center weighted or the camera's default mode
- Find a scene with a wide tonal variation—indoors is best, a room on a sunny day is ideal
- Slowly pan the camera while watching the LCD screen
- Now set the metering mode to spot, and pan the camera over the same scene while watching the LCD screen

This is what should have happened:

- On the first setting, the brightness of the image on the LCD screen changed gradually, if at all

- On the spot setting, the changes should have been much more dramatic, going from very light to very dark and back again, with very little movement of the camera

Exposure Basics from a Minimalist Perspective

Some musicians can play instruments superbly without ever learning to read a single musical note, while others need sheet music in front of them to perform. Parallels to this can be drawn with regard to photographers: some work instinctively, while others require a more formal approach and need to have a good grasp of the theoretical.

Most of us fall somewhere in the middle. I find that an understanding of the theory behind exposure is a tremendous help, but I don't have to keep the mathematical equations that underpin this stuff in my head, or even to know them, in many cases. It is enough to understand the interplay between ISO, shutter speed, and aperture size. Understanding the underlying principles involved is important, but knowing the exact equations and numbers is optional.

Of course, this is all academic if it cannot be used when actually taking a photograph. My understanding of exposure allows me to use several methods, and that suits me. As an example, when I use a DSLR camera, I first set it to spot metering and set the lens to manual focus, and then I proceed as follows:

1. Check that the camera is set to aperture priority
2. Roughly frame and manually focus
3. Note the shutter speed that the camera wants to use
4. Decide how I want the image exposed and note how much this varies from the camera's choice—this gives me a shutter speed to aim for
5. If I want to underexpose, I point the camera at a relatively bright spot; if I want to overexpose, I point it at a darker spot, and then I adjust until the shutter speed I want appears in the viewfinder display
6. Halfway press the shutter-release button
7. Reframe and adjust focus
8. Fully depress the shutter-release button

This probably looks like a complicated way to take a photograph. Believe me when I say that it isn't. After a few attempts, it will become second nature, and it is much more instinctive than twiddling with dials. It will also provide an instinctive understanding of exposure.

The main points about exposure are as follows:

- Exposure determines how light or dark the photograph will be
- The camera determines an exposure, but this can be changed by the photographer
- The photographer can determine how the camera chooses an exposure value
- The exposure is always a single value regardless of what type of metering is used, unless the manufacturer's own proprietary method is used

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Ice melting on a glass coaster