



# An exploration of creativity

Exploring the creative process through the lens of eight contemporary street photographers



How much do we understand of our own creative process? And how much are we willing to explain it, to frame it for the outside world to understand it?

Is eventually our vision a private thing that should be understood with no words? Or is questioning oneself a necessary process to become the artist whom we are meant to be?

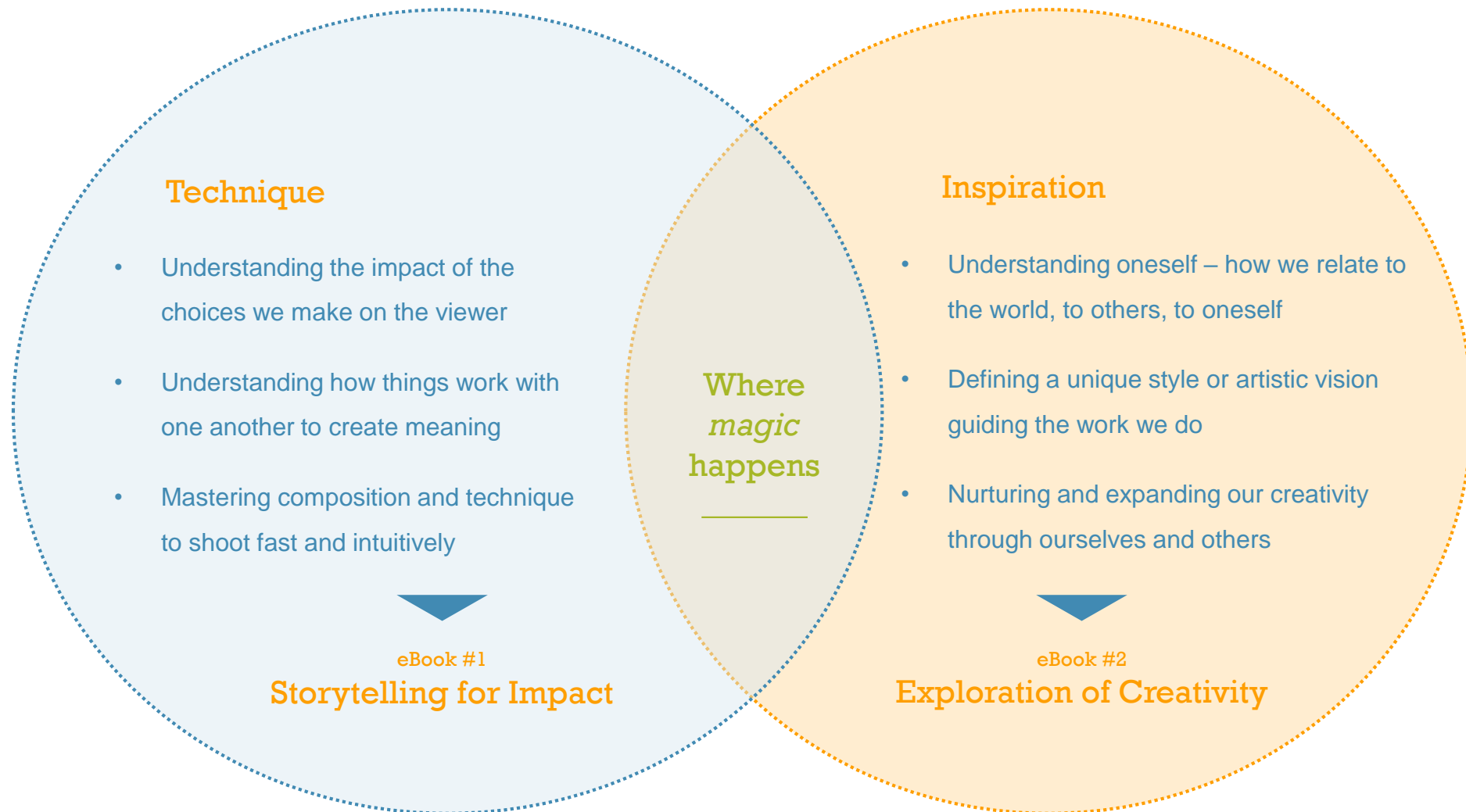
## Foreword

This book came to life as I was discussing with Matthew Cope, a fellow street photographer, in my home in London. He told me that he absolutely refused to describe what he does and why, arguing that his photography should speak for itself. This led us to uncover the premise that creativity in street photography remains a black box for many of us. We have no idea how photographs come to life – what drives us to shoot at any moment in time. And while we can see narratives emerging from our work, we can't easily put them into words, either for ourselves or for others. From this starting point, I decided to investigate the process of creativity and vision through contacting and interviewing eight of my favourite street photographers. A whole discovery process started from there: breaking down one element at time to understand what creativity was made of. But also looking at the broader perspective to understand the journey it takes to build an original vision with one's work. After months of unpacking an incredible amount of insights and perspectives, I have finally finished this second ebook: An Exploration of Creativity. The first chapter looks at the street photographer's creative paradox to frame the challenge. The second chapter focuses on analysing the 3 elements fueling creativity in street photography: the external environment, our internal experience, and artistic influences. Finally, the last chapter explores the journey it takes to build an artistic vision over time, both original and sustainable. I have based most of this book on insights from the photographers I have interviewed. My role was only to make sense of it – to organize it in a structured manner so that it would be made more accessible to you, dear readers.

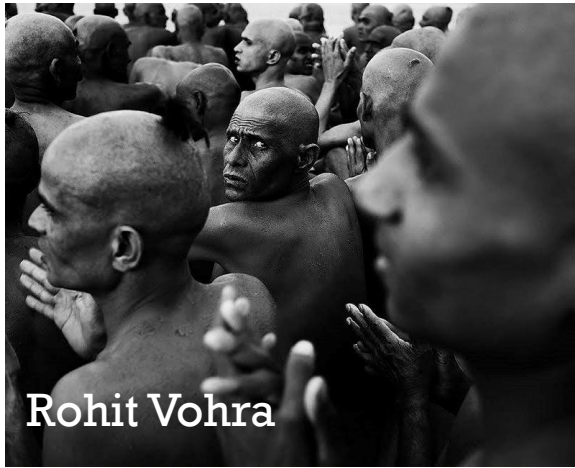
I wish you a happy exploration.

Marie Laigneau

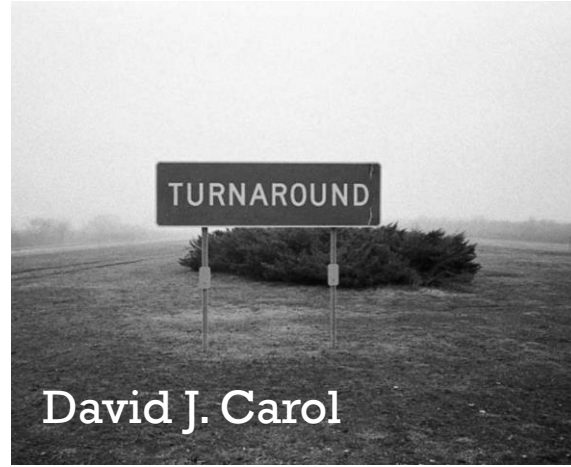
# Starting point: there are two sides to creation







Rohit Vohra



David J. Carol



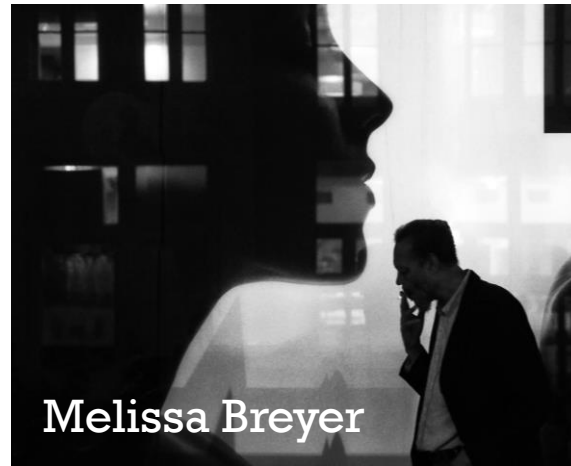
Rammy Narula



Nima Taradji



Mike Lee



Melissa Breyer



Martin U. Waltz



Arek Rataj

Through the lens of eight contemporary street photographers, we will explore in this book the workings of our creativity – decoding a mysterious process as unique as the artists themselves. David Carol, Rammy Narula, Rohit Vohra, Mike Lee, Melissa Breyer, Martin Waltz, Nima Taradji and Arek Rataj – You've inspired me. I can't thank you enough for your unique insights and perspectives. [Marie Laigneau](#)

# Chapters

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3. Building a vision: a journey to self-discovery (p53)

I

# The street photographer's creative paradox

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## Introduction

My first step was to understand the characteristics and boundaries of street photography as a genre. By understanding those, I was hoping to better frame the creative challenge that street photographers often face in order to produce original work aligned with their vision.

I therefore asked street photographers about their definition and approach to street photography, as well as the key differences between street and other genres. From their answers, I extrapolated two major characteristics of the genre that present, in and of themselves, critical challenges to the creative process.

Yet, that's also because creativity is hard in street photography that it is so appealing to us. That's because there are limits and constraints set from the start that we can produce even more creative work in the end.

That's what I call the **Street photographer's creative paradox**.



## How can we define street photography vs. other genres?

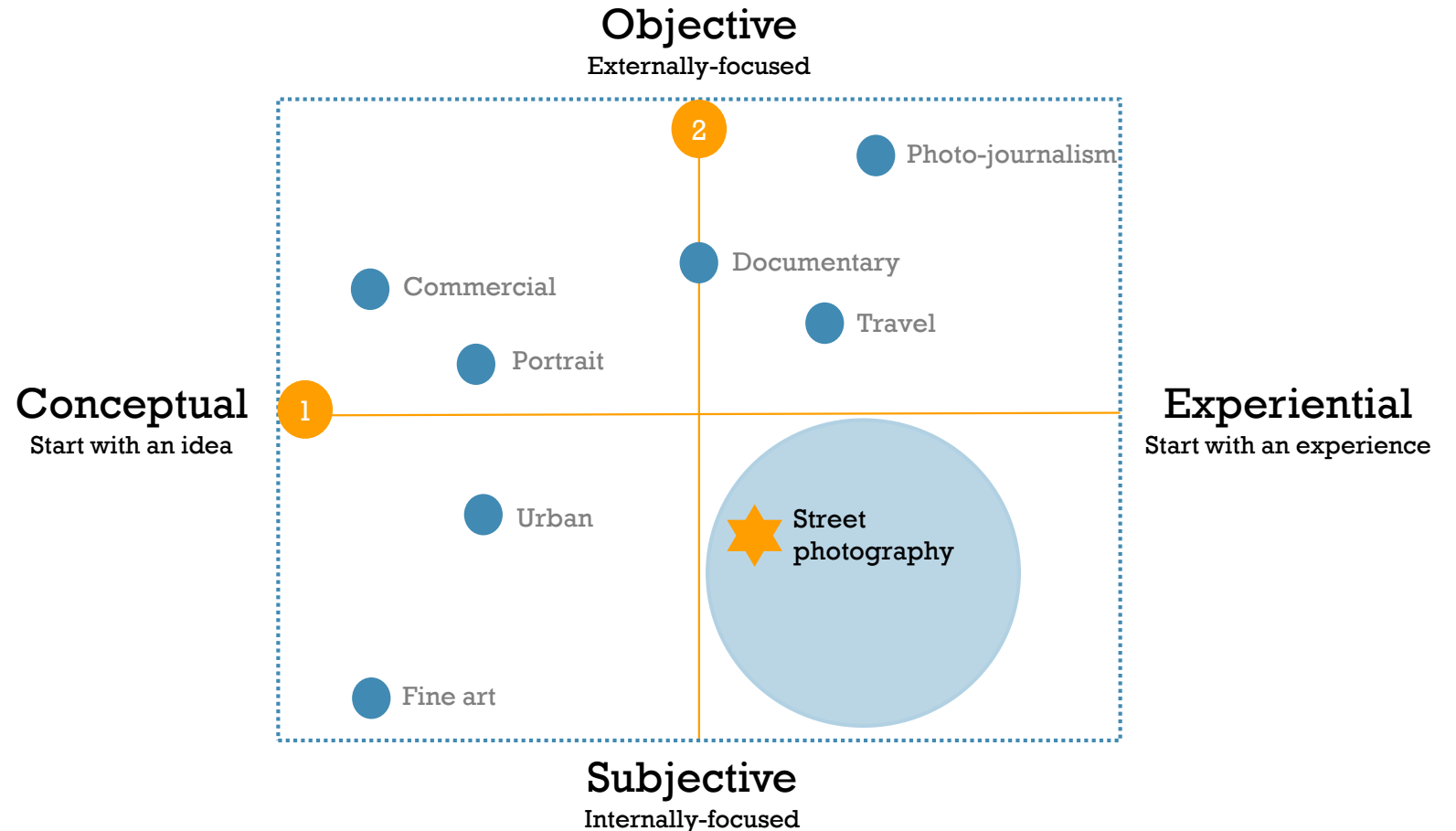
“Documentary photographers almost always have an agenda and present their story through facts about a situation. Street however doesn’t concern itself with the truth; it’s more about effectively telling a lie that happens for a brief moment.” **Rohit Vohra**

“Street photography has the ability to document while documentary has the definite intention of recording history. Documentary photography can be candid, but street photography is defined by its candidness and is expressed through unpredictable actions that lead to a decisive moment.” **Rohit Vohra**

“Street photography, in many cases, is an artistic endeavor as opposed to documentary work. The photographs almost always end up focusing on the artist herself/himself and tells her/his inner story.” **Arek Rataj**

# Street photography occupies a unique space within photography

- 1 **Planning approach:** is the starting point for a shot an idea or a feeling/experience?
- 2 **Subject orientation:** is the outcome an objective or subjective view of reality?



## Planning approach: Conceptual vs. experiential

Let's first talk about the approach taken to create a street photography shot. There are, in **David J. Carol's** mind, two different types of photographers: those that he refers to as *conceptual* who start with an idea or a concept in their mind to look out for a shot. And then there are those that he refers to as *experiential*, who unlike the conceptual ones, rely on their instinct to see and capture a potential moment – “*like a compulsion, a feeling*” that drives them to take the shot.

A street photographer belongs to the second category, as quite clearly expressed by **Melissa Breyer**: “*Everything, from the backdrops I'm drawn to, to the light I'm seeking, to the people who catch my eye, is all determined by an inner pull. And while sometimes I consciously release the shutter at a very precise moment, it is more often based on intuition and it happens unthinkingly.*” So this is the unfolding moment itself that drives us to shoot – not a pre-determined idea or outcome as seen in other photography genres.

**Rohit Vohra** talks about spontaneity to define his street photography approach. “*All my images are spontaneous. There are times when I find a spot interesting and wait there. It's more to see if anything unfolds and I am rather impatient, 5-7 shots and I move on. While working on a street series, I am the same, I go where the light or smell takes me*”. In fact, street photographers believe in the power of coincidences, and this is what photographer **Arek Rataj** has in mind when he says: “*The vast majority of photographs taken within so called situational photography are based on serendipity.*”

In other words, we can't predict a shot. It either happens, or it doesn't. The nature of street photography is the moment, defined by its candidness and spontaneous nature. As **Rohit Vohra** perfectly summarises here, street photography is the opposite of planning: “*Documentary photography can be candid, but street photography is defined by its candidness and is expressed through unpredictable actions that lead to a decisive moment.*”

## Subject orientation: Objective vs. subjective

Let's now look at the subject of a street photography shot. While obviously taking for inspiration the external world, does street photography really concern itself with the truth? No, says **Rohit Vohra**: *"Documentary photographers almost always have an agenda and present their story through facts about a situation. Street however doesn't concern itself with the truth; it's more about effectively telling a lie that happens for a brief moment."*

There is therefore a subjective aspect in street photography that is absent from other genres like documentary photography. While both of these genres take the external world as a starting point for the imagination, **Martin U. Waltz** explains a critical difference between the two: *"Documentary photography has for subject the external reality. But in street photography, I shoot what I feel is interesting in the outside world, not what is interesting from a factual basis. This is really more about how I relate to the world, than about the world itself."*

**Arek Rataj** concludes by saying: *"In many cases, street photography is an artistic endeavor. The photographs almost always end up focusing on the artist herself/himself and tells her/his inner story".*

This subjectivity element is also reflected in the manner in which we capture the world. **Melissa Breyer** explains: *"I approach my work more from the style of a painter, for which I am classically trained. So, for example, whereas a photojournalist would use a deep depth of field to accurately get the context and details, I shoot very shallow to isolate and abstract. I'm more interested in exploring beauty and mood and trying to express what it feels like to be in the city through visual cues and effects rather than the detailed facts."* And this is why street photography poses a real challenge in terms of creativity: finding inspiration both in the outside world and in oneself, to capture an unpredictable moment whose reality only exists at posteriori, after applying a large dose of subjectivity. Not a simple thing to achieve, you will agree that much!



# The street photographer's creative paradox

- A creative process based on intuition – hard to understand, even more so to rely upon
- An art form reliant on serendipity – driven by chance and coincidence in the external world
- An overly personal endeavor - requiring to get in touch with one's deepest feelings in the moment
- Very popular and competitive art genre – many good “technicians” making it hard to be original



How can we develop a unique voice in street photography given these creative constraints? How can we master the delicate balance of chance vs. talent, and of coincidence vs. intentionality?

# II

## Elements of creativity in street photography

Image by Melissa Breyer

# Creativity is made of 3 different elements

1

## External environment

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The people, places and situations that we come across on the streets

2

## Personal experience

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Our thoughts, feelings and unique ways of relating to the world

3

## Artistic influences

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Artistic influences and encounters that are shaping how we see

1

## The environment

The people, places and situations that we come across on the streets – the external stage, as it appears to us.



# Introduction

Street photographers have a fascination for the outside world which they perceive intuitively. Many have a strong attachment to places, associated with different approaches.

In this first section, we will explore the role of the external environment in the image-making process, notably understanding the importance of places and locations in defining the set of opportunities. For street photographers, the outside world is ultimately their stage: this is the place where images come to being, and realize themselves in front of our eyes. In this sense, images would never exist without a world outside of ourselves, a world filled with people and cities that tell interconnected stories. The world, in essence, is our greatest source of inspiration – life is the raw material, as Martin U. Walz beautifully explained, and we are the gatherer of this raw material. Without it, our art wouldn't exist.



# The world is our stage

**1. The importance of cities.** For street photographers, cities oftentimes are as important as the people inhabiting them. Cities have a soul of their own, that many photographers will aim to capture. In fact, the individual stories of people that we shoot doesn't interest us as much – they will remain strangers whom we will never see again, and probably never speak to. Cities are perceived as a limitless source of inspiration for street photographers, never fully knowable, always changing, a stage where stories happen magically – right in front of us, in the most unexpected settings.

**2. Intimate relationship to places.** Many street photographers have an intimate understanding of their cities and neighborhoods. They repeatedly come back over and over again to the same places, the same streets, neighborhoods, to whom they attach particular feelings and expectations. For example, crowded places will lend themselves to much closer and personal images, whereas architectural areas will spark ideas for minimalist photography.

But it's also the belief that through developing a unique relationship with places, we can start to see differently – beyond the common and the obvious. To tell certain stories, it's easier to come back over and over again to the same places that we have grown to know intimately.

**3. An intuitive understanding.** Street photographers display an instinctive and intuitive understanding of their surroundings – whether familiar or unfamiliar to them. In fact, many of them can't say for sure why they took a specific shot, and how they've come to take this shot, as so much of this process comes naturally to them. Yet intuition as magical as it seems, can be nurtured through continuous analysis and exploration of one's and other's work. This intuitive understanding of their surroundings allow them to see stories beyond the reality of a single subject. As HCB explained in *The Decisive Moment*, this intuitive quality is fundamental in perceiving the realization of an event happening in the external world, and the simultaneous orchestration of forms able to tell this event. Yet oftentimes, this event finds itself at the intersection of people and the city.

# The world is our stage

**4. Coincidences and serendipity.** As importantly perhaps, street photographers believe in the power of coincidences, and in the principle of serendipity - being there at the right time, at the right place to capture a unique moment. Their approach to capturing the external world is in essence filled with mindfulness. Like Rammy Narula said, being a street photographer is belonging to the moment. This is why street photographers never plan – not planning and letting themselves be surprised is a huge part of the joy they take from the experience. If they were to plan or stick to an idea, they would miss great opportunities happening around them. Of course, a certain level of pre-determination is somewhat inevitable. While we don't plan, the weather, moods and light will all influence what we shoot. After years and years of practice, we know how to maximise the opportunity during grey days. This doesn't mean that we have anticipated everything, but our mind and eyes might be searching for subtle hues and layers that sunny days will not provide.

**5. Candid images, subjective POV.** When it comes to shooting and framing, street photographers are extremely attached to the idea that they are shooting candid, non-staged captures of people in the street. They have a desire to remain true to the scene they are seeing, with its imperfections and chaotic elements. In this sense, they consider their images to be documentary in nature (i.e. not manipulating what the photographer sees at any moment in time). In reality however, street photographers are not bound by telling the truth with an objective point of view. Their choices of composition, angles, distance and focus will all ultimately create the story, much more so than the subject alone. We could also argue that certain types of shots, such as humans in architectural settings, illustrate a form of “calculated candidness” where composition is more deliberate and precise, and the “moment” is in fact a succession of possible moments.

## Case study: Mike Lee

**Mike Lee** doesn't reflect on what he does: his mind is always searching for the next shot. He trusts his instincts to lead him the way. Mike shoots from 8 to 10am every day, on his way to work, capturing the lively and rushing morning life of NYC. His work is at times blurred and angled, and reflects his obsession of capturing the story in front of him – much more so than capturing it technically, which is only his second priority.

Mike Lee never plans, it's part of the joy he takes from the experience. He remains conscious of his surroundings and is a keen observer of the world around him. In fact, he started street photography to become more aware of the city and the people, outside of his world centered on his child. His images reflect an intuitive understanding of his surroundings, but equally a desire to seize and embrace this world through photography: "You run to and embrace the world – it doesn't come to you".







## Mike Lee

*“To quote Anais Nin: ‘I will not be just a tourist in the world of images, just watching images passing by which I cannot live in, make love to, possess as permanent sources of joy and ecstasy.’ You either do, or you don’t. I pick up my camera and document what I see.”*

“ I don’t plan, which is part of the joy I take from the experience. That’s why so much of my work is described as either “shit” or “spontaneous.” In actuality, I just work conscious of my surroundings and hope for the best. This remains a learning process for me. You run to and embrace the world—it does not come to you.”

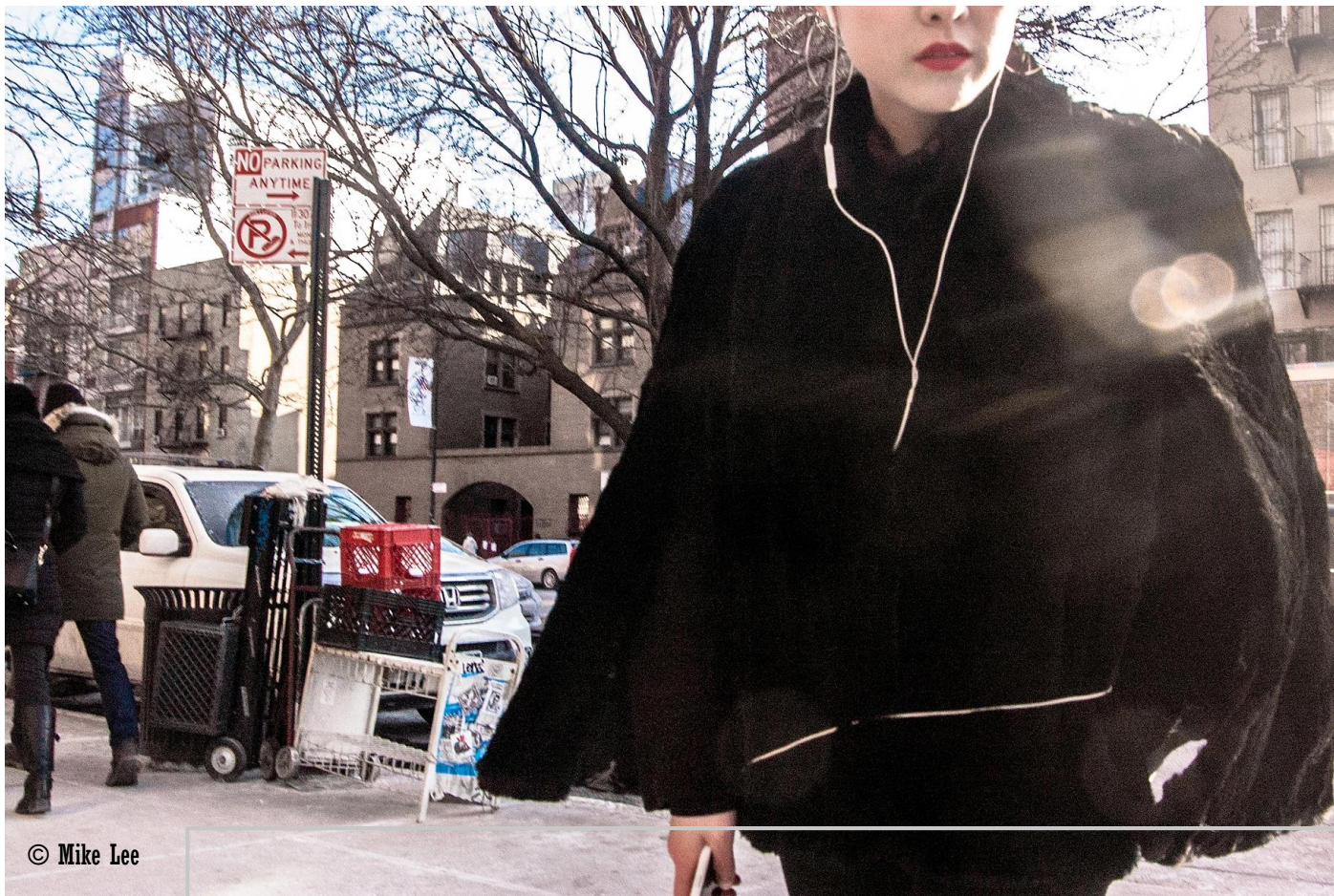


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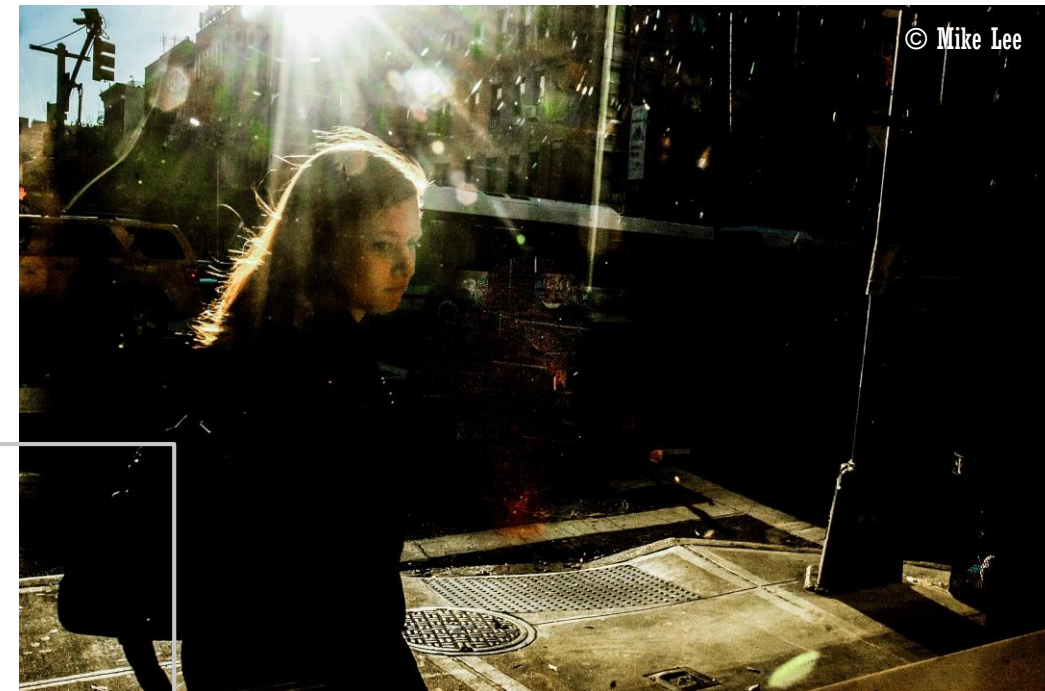


© Mike Lee





“I never think in series, or I would consciously be locking myself out of other possibilities. In comparison, fiction requires plot, action and strong characters, with specific needs to drive the readers attention from beginning to end. When I shoot, I feel unconstrained and a sense of joyful freedom that allows me to do what I want.”





## Case study: Arek Rataj

**Arek Rataj** has a special interest in what he calls “situational photography”, a larger umbrella of terms inclusive of candid, unplanned, un-staged photography – whether on the street or not. Immensely obsessed with faces and micro-expressions, Arek fully believes in the principle of serendipity. His quest so far has been to reveal to the outside world these truthful expressions that come to being in front of his eyes.

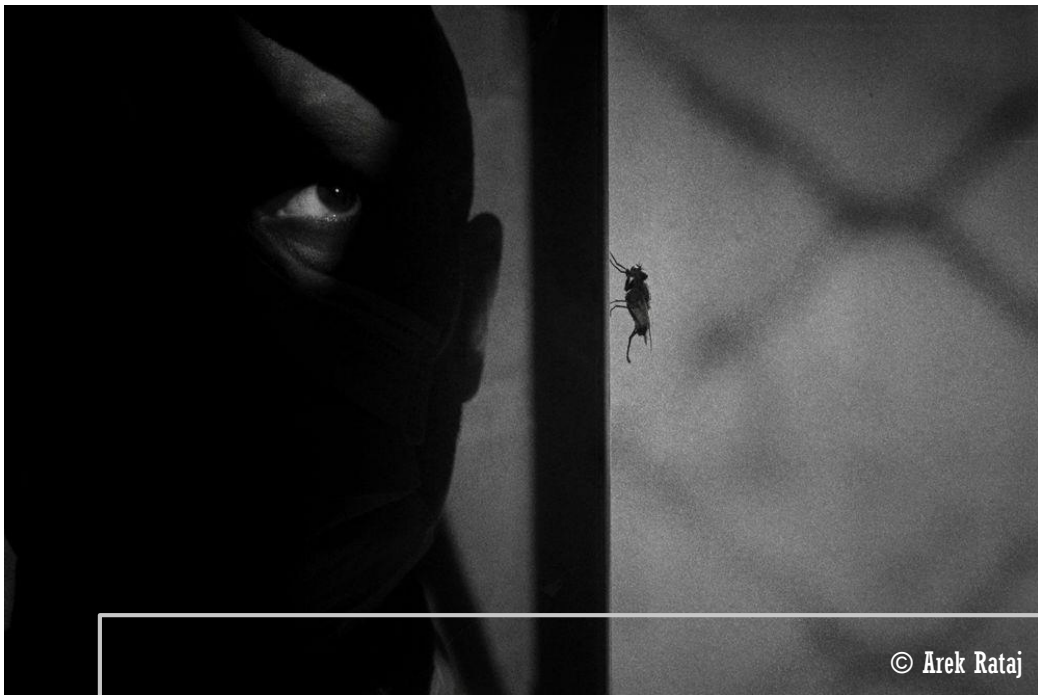
While his photography is inherently more about subjects and faces than the city itself, all elements within the image corroborate to create strange, intimate portraits of strangers with a darker, sometimes sinister mood. Once he has identified an interesting subject, his focus turns to understanding how to approach the subject, how to frame technically, and how to remain invisible all the while to capture a unique moment.





## Arek Rataj

“As a man who has non sexual fetish for faces, my photographic interests revolves around human micro expressions. And most probably it can be called my 'style', although I was not really aware of that till the moment someone suggested it.”



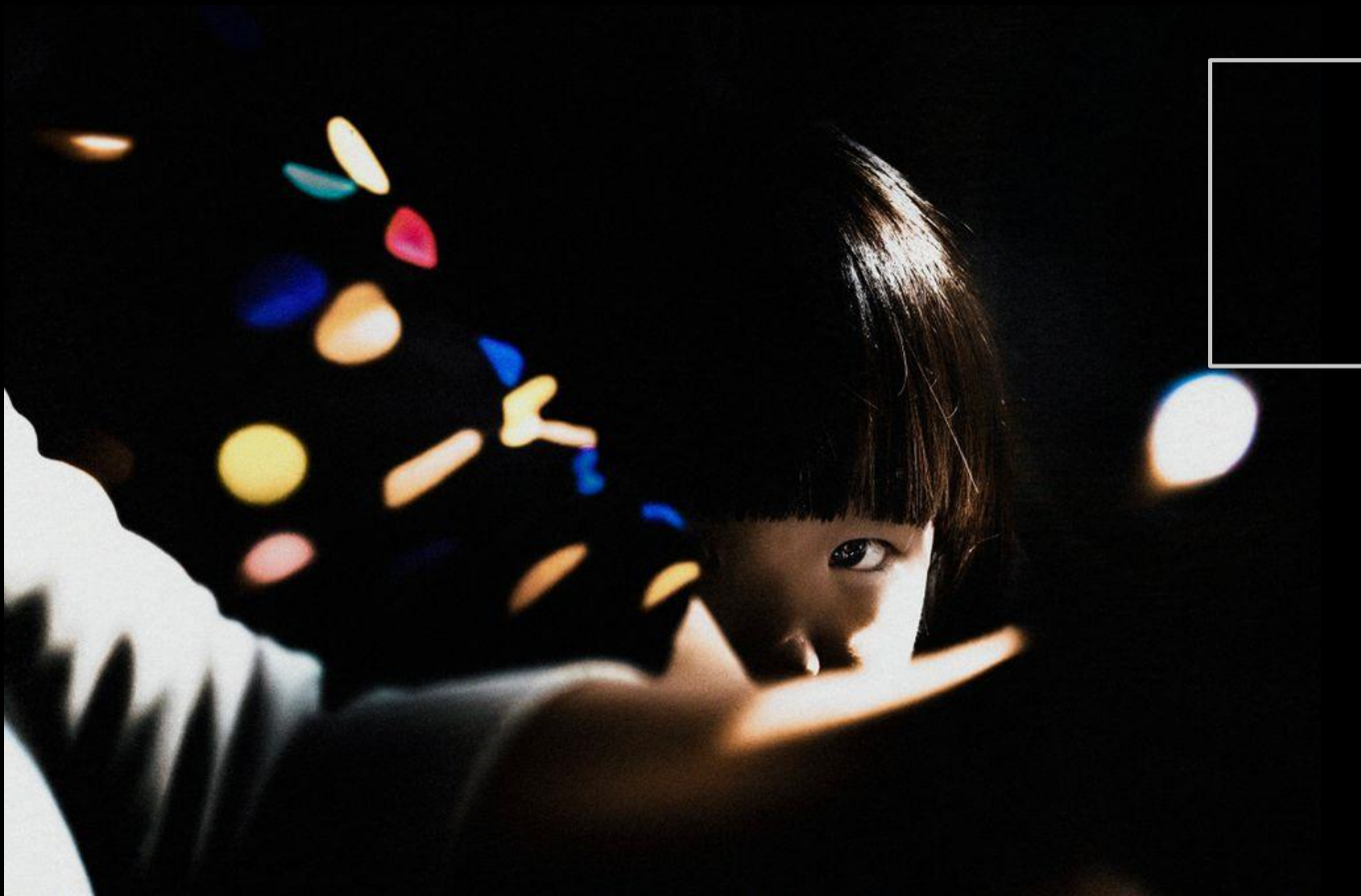
© Arek Rataj

“ The vast majority of photographs taken within so called situational photography are based on serendipity. It depends on the place – the more compact is the place, the bigger chances to capture valuable and desired content.”

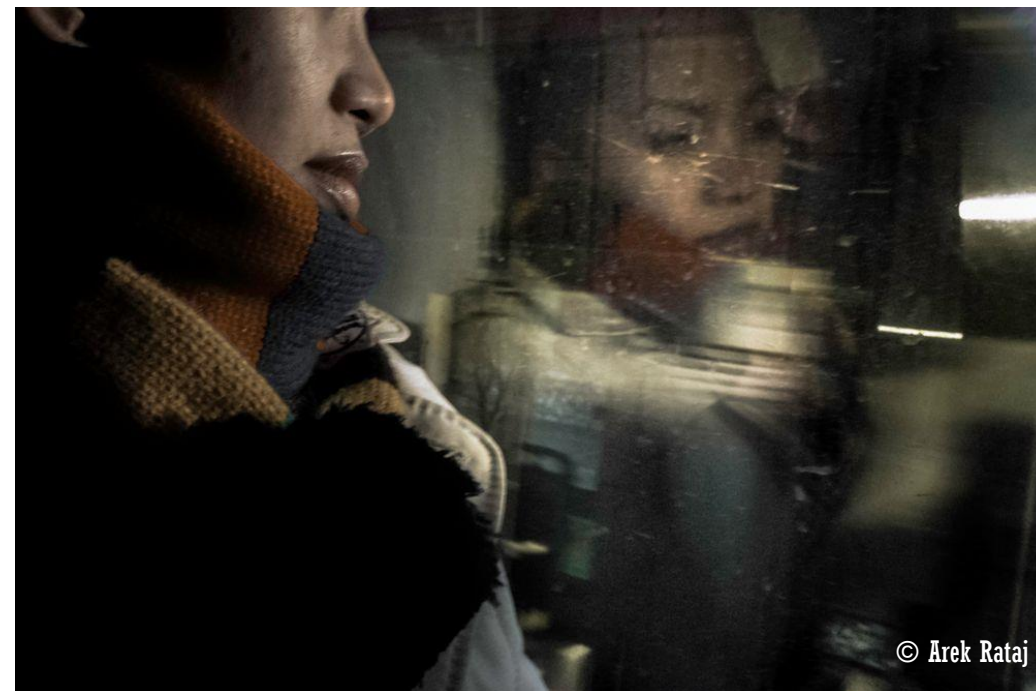


© Arek Rataj





“What I focus when a situation presents itself? How to silently approach the subject. How to frame it in a correct manner. How to perform it right in technical terms. How to act as if nothing happened.”



© Arek Rataj

© Arek Rataj



## Conclusion

- The city is the street photographer's real stage – images happen in front of them, not when they try to control them.
- The city is nearly as important as the people themselves. Combining elements together allow stories to be created.
- Street photographers believe in the concept of serendipity and coincidence, taking a mindful approach on the street.
- They have a particular attachment to places that they know very well, having formed an intimate relationships with them.
- Their style and comprehension of their surroundings is highly instinctive and intuitive at all time.
- They nearly never plan their shots in advance, yet are influenced by factors like weather and light.
- They thrive to take candid photographs, but not to emulate the truth – their POV is subjective.



© Arek Rataj

## 2 Our experience

Our inner thoughts, feelings, and unique ways of relating to the world – how we feel internally.

# Introduction

Being a photographer means learning how to see – but the way we see is heavily tinted by our own experiences: how we relate to the world, and to ourselves

In this second section, we will explore the role that inner experiences – our thoughts, feelings, moods and desires – plays in the making of an image. As Arek Rataj remarked: *“Street photographers are not interested with the facts, they end up telling their own inner stories instead”*. Given such a high level of subjectivity, it’s even more important to understand the power of emotions and moods on what we create, and further on, developing greater awareness of ourselves. Understanding who we are, what attracts us, and what makes our work unique in a way, is a critical step in finding one’s own voice in street photography. The more we know about ourselves and our art, the more we can become whom we are meant to be.



## Stories come from within

**1. Seeing beauty in the world.** In essence, street photographers are not interested in showing the real world around them, but in the possibility of turning the mundane into the extraordinary. While being keen observers of the world, it is not the world itself that makes street photographers see what they see, but the specific way they relate to the world. And it is as much a thought as it is a feeling that bring them to specific scenes and subjects. As Melissa Breyer beautifully explained: *“I feel something from what I am seeing – and my hands make the camera follow suit”*.

Yet recognizing such beauty requires a very personal, intimate relationship with the world, and oftentimes results in stories that tell more about ourselves than the world around us. When describing her *Waitresses* series, Melissa Breyer said that her work was closer to a self-portrait than a documentary. She recognized herself in these women, and was more interested in capturing moods and subtle hints of their lives than exposing their real story to the world.

**2. The depth of the mind.** Many street photographers have sooner or later realized that recurring patterns and themes have been emerging across their work. Arek Rataj never consciously realized his obsession for micro-expressions until it was pointed out to him. Similarly, Nima Taradji discovered that hands played an important role in many of his images when David Carol mentioned it to him. It appears that our work is filled with inner symbols and themes that are very unique to us – in other words, a representation of our feelings and desires, whether we are conscious of them or not.

The importance of our personal experience is even clearer when we look at the output that we’ve produced. *“All my pictures look the same”* says David Carol. While he tried to produce something new, more edgy, more serious when he was younger, notably using many different formats of lenses and cameras, he realized that he was still producing images that *“looked like him”*. This unconscious part of us appears to have a strong influence on our personal vision in street photography.

## Stories come from within

**3. Emotional attachment.** Many street photographers have experienced an emotional attachment to certain pictures displaying objective shortcomings. It is as if the experience of shooting this image was enough to make them fall in love with it, after the fact. Our internal experiences as such strongly influence what we shoot, but also how we appreciate and edit our work. Winogrand was quite aware of this fact, and always recommended to wait “at least 6 months” before looking at your pictures. “Photographers mistake the emotion they feel while taking the picture as judgment that their photograph is good.” While this length of time will rarely apply to the digital photography world, it’s important to realize the power of emotions when it comes to assess the value of our work.

**4. Mood and creativity.** For many street photographers, “seeing the world differently” requires to be in a specific mood, in a certain state internally. It requires Mike Lee to “get into the right internal rhythm”, while Melissa Breyer confesses following her moods when it

comes to choosing her subjects. Our internal moods are therefore intrinsically linked to creativity. Moreover, it seems that moods can also influence directly the type of images that we make. Martin U. Waltz explains that he alternates between two different mood states: Introverted vs. extroverted. While his default state is introverted, resulting in precise and sophisticated compositions, he’s started to enjoy acting as an extroverted. In this latter mode, Martin gets very close to his subjects, entering their private space to take raw moments of life. Mood shifts therefore result in vastly different sets of images for Martin.

**5. Blurring the boundaries.** Street photography is art, and for this reason, street photography is life as well. Our personal experiences can have a huge impact on our art. Rohit Vohra, for example, keeps a diary with text and drawings, and messages addressed to his late wife. It has become a log of his life, a trace of time passing, and a critical source of creativity for his photography. He notes down questions and thoughts that stick in the corner of his mind and change the way he sees.



## Case study: Martin U. Waltz

**Martin U. Waltz** is a gatherer of raw material – his work is authentic, raw, and inspired by the flow. From this raw material, Martin aims to see and reveal the beauty in the mundane. But as Martin says “it’s a learning process, and it never stops”. To refine his personal vision, Martin pays attention to patterns and themes emerging across his images, eventually aiming to create a “unique narrative between himself and his work”.

As a street photographer, Martin U. Waltz alternates between two modes: introverted vs. extraverted. The mood states have a strong influence on the images he will be making: introverted will lead to sophisticated compositions where Martin observes the world but doesn’t engage in it. Extraverted will lead on the contrary to positioning himself at the heart of the action, in the middle of the flow – with personal, subjective close-ups taken at short distance from the subjects.



© Martin U. Waltz



## Martin U. Waltz

“I consider myself a gatherer of raw material. Whatever I do, it is raw, genuine, authentic – I want to convey the beauty of the mundane. But my work heavily depends on my mood – my default mood is introverted, yet I increasingly enjoy acting as an extraverted.”





In introverted mood, Martin observes the world without engaging with it, passively and at a distance, resulting in intricate, sophisticated compositions and storytelling.



In extraverted mood, Martin's work becomes very close and personal – entering the private sphere of his subjects to initiate a response and capture raw moments inspired by the flow.



## Case study: Melissa Breyer

**Melissa Breyer** creates moody, dreamy pictures of New York, a stage that she never tires to explore. She shoots very shallow to isolate and abstract, emphasizing impressions and visual cues rather than revealing the detailed facts. Her motivations are simple: she's interested in capturing how it *feels* to be in the city.

Melissa's work is intensely personal and intimate – a reflection of her own stories and moods that she projects on the world around her. She describes her recently published Waitresses series as “much more of a self-portrait than a documentary”. For Melissa, a day's shooting is primarily define by her mood, which sets the stage right out of the door. Weather and light go hand in hand with mood for her, further defining her subjects and scenes. As Melissa describes herself: “Everything is determined by an inner pull. It's like a magnet; I feel something from what I'm seeing and my hands make the camera follow suit.”





Melissa Breyer

# *The ‘Quiet Moments’ of Waitresses at Work*

The photographer Melissa Breyer found herself drawn to the stories playing out behind the windows of restaurants.

By JOHN LELAND APRIL 28, 2017





“Several lifetimes ago I tumbled into the gritty wonderland of New York City and landed a job at a little restaurant in the West Village. A few restaurants and quite a few years later my service adventures came to an end; but whenever I see women working in restaurants lost in thought, I’m reminded of those freewheeling daydreams. I wonder, what are they thinking about? What are their stories? My imagination begins creating narratives for them; these women are so much more than their jobs and I see their grace and dignity even in the smallest of gestures.”

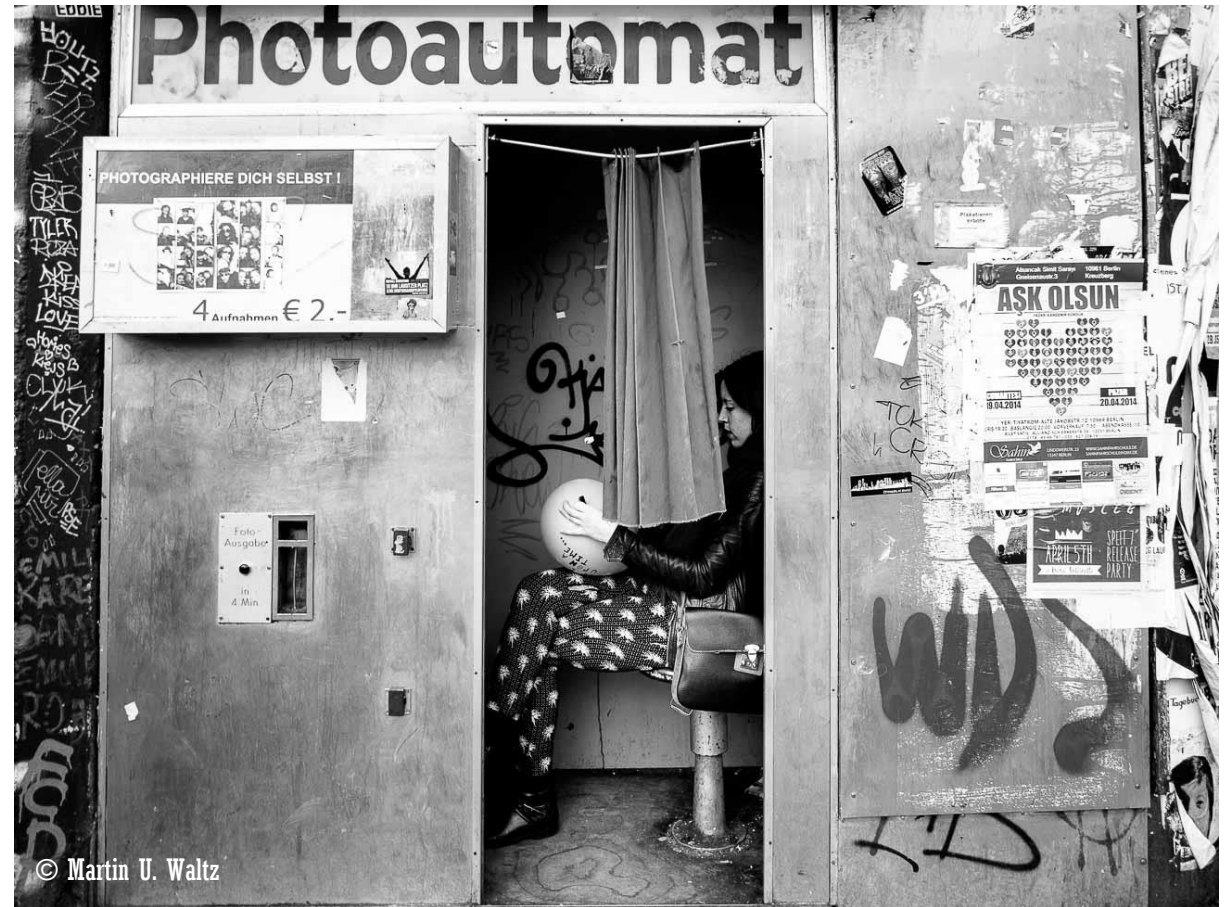




“In reality, *Waitresses* is much more a self-portrait than a documentary. I’m more interested in exploring beauty and mood and trying to express what it feels like to be in the city through visual cues and effects rather than the detailed facts. Everything, from the backdrops I’m drawn to, to the light I’m seeking, to the people who catch my eye, is all determined by an inner pull. It’s like a magnet; I feel something from what I’m seeing and my hands make the camera follow suit.”

## Conclusion

- Street photographers are not interested by the facts, they often tend to tell their own inner stories.
- Seeing the beauty in the mundane requires to experience the world differently, trusting our instincts and feelings.
- What we see and how we see is determined by both conscious and unconscious factors that are unique to us.
- Recognizing patterns and themes emerging from our work is critical to develop a unique voice and vision.
- Street photographers tend to become emotionally attached to their images, making it hard to self-edit their work.
- Mood influences our images and sets the stage for a day's shooting – it is a key driver of creativity.
- The boundaries between photography and life are often blurred, and our personal history changes what we see.



© Martin U. Waltz

## 3 Key influences

The people and art that are shaping the way we see – an ongoing dialogue with the world.

## KEY INFLUENCES

# Introduction

Photography is a constant dialogue between the artist and the external world – a refined stream of ideas that nurtures, inspires, and guides artists in their photographic journey.

Sometimes we meet an artist who will define forever how we see, and sometimes these are the multitude of interactions we will have with others – our mentors, peers and critics alike – who will push us further in our art. The commonality here is that no artist creates in a vacuum, in an ivory tower. We are all susceptible to be influenced by those who've changed art before us, and by those who will come next. And this is because our art belongs to something greater than ourselves that it will be able to touch people we don't know, whom we've never met. In this chapter, we will be looking at the role played by these external influences on how we think, create, and evolve our street photography – through an ongoing dialogue taking place with the world.



© David J. Carol



# A dialogue with the world

**1. Artists as social beings.** All artists, street photographers included, belong to a world much greater than them. A world with whom they interact and exchange ideas, find new sources of creativity, question and challenge themselves. We may be producing images for ourselves, but would we do it if we had no audience? It's unlikely that art would play the role it plays in our society if it was not used as well as a two way communication medium. To put it simply, we need others to create art, and others need our art to become themselves. This ongoing exchange has a tremendous impact on our own creativity as an artist: from the art created by others to the feedback we receive from our peers, we keep evolving our vision through these interactions. As Arek Rataj pointed out: *"Influences from others are felt both consciously (through new ideas and experimentation) and unconsciously (intuitive triggers happening on the street)"*. Therefore it's both conscious and unconscious material that we take from others, from their art, their ideas and their dialogues with us.

**2. The role of mentors.** More common in Eastern civilizations than within our Western traditions, mentors – whether official or not – are a key element of growth and becoming for street photographers and artists. Mentors are there to guide us, to help us change or evolve direction with our work. They are essential as artists are in constant change themselves, and in constant need to redefine their art along with this change.

For Rohit Vohra, now a mentor himself, it was a meeting with his mentor that acted as an eye opener a few years back: the challenge was not B&W vs. colors, it was really about form vs. content. This realization made him focus on content first, which totally changed the way he sees, and heavily impacted both his B&W and color work from that point on.

Interestingly, it seems that whatever we take from our mentors is more akin to an organic learning process: it has to come from inside of us for us to make good use of it. Following a mentor blindly will only lead to emulating that person, and not developing a real artistic self.



## A dialogue with the world

**3. The need for perspective.** As previously discussed in this book, others are also critical to self-awareness. There are so much that we can see and notice about our art without external perspective. Others not only bring an objective opinion devoid of emotionality, they can also see unconscious patterns in our work that our mind is not seeing and understanding yet. Arek Rataj and Nima Taradji saw these patterns emerging through interactions and feedback from others: they were literally pointed out to them; Rammy Naruma got help from David Carol, his friend and editor, for putting together his first photo project.

**4. A thirst for culture.** Perhaps not surprisingly, all interviewed photographers are deeply cultivated, with a thirst for discovering and consuming other forms of art such as books, music, painting, cinema as part of their everyday life. They see art as a continuous fuel of inspiration, and are unstoppably curious about other artists, new exhibitions and art in general.

Rammy Narula found the color work of Harry Gruyaert to be a strong source of inspiration for his project Platform 10, his favourite authors and artists always in the back of his mind as he formed a new idea for a project. Melissa Breyer takes inspiration from NYC writers as she goes out looking for possible shots.

**5. A medium for other arts.** As interestingly, some of the photographers I interviewed were also skilled at other arts – and actually started like Melissa Breyer as a painter, or like Mike Lee as a writer. Mike Lee, after spending some years focused on his child, started doing photography again as a mean to reconnect with his surroundings, and deepen the depth and quality of his writings (characters, details). He since then has continued to use both medium for creativity, and even use entire photography series as inspiration for new short stories and novels. Some of his written work now include his own photography – as an ongoing dialogue between his words and his images.

## KEY INFLUENCES

# Case study: Rammy Narula

Unlike many street photographers, **Rammy Narula** works on one project – or one central idea – at a time. While his projects evolve organically, he recalls being greatly inspired by many artists – looking for Tarantino-like drama on the streets, or for the colors and shadows present in Harry Gruyaert's early photographic work. Highly talented but equally very cultivated, Rammy effortlessly merges styles and art to produce unique series – his artistic influences coloring his vision of the world and pushing him forward in his discovery of himself.

Rammy Narula believes in the power of coincidences: his love for street photography stems from the unpredictable nature of the world around him. His vision is elaborated and complex, dramatic and meditative at once. Each project brings a little more light, and a little more depth into his multi-faceted world – a gracious nod to the artists that have shaped the way he sees.



© Rammy Narula



## Rammy Narula

“My vision is a constant exploration: I become drawn to a subject for a while whether I intend it or not – and it becomes central to my work. Artistic influences are constantly in the back of my mind, reminding me of possibilities, pushing me forward in my next project.”





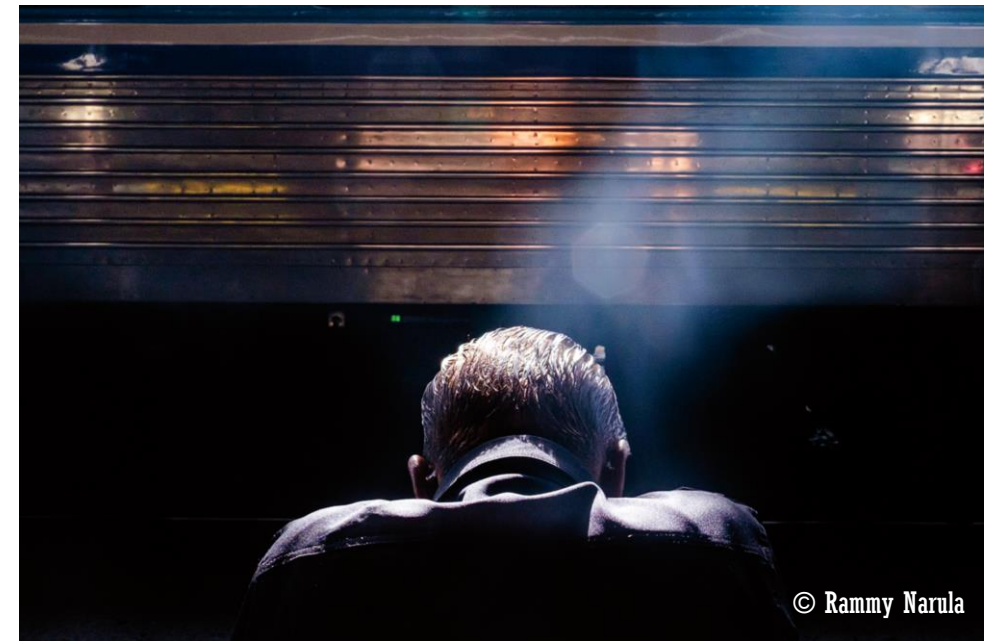
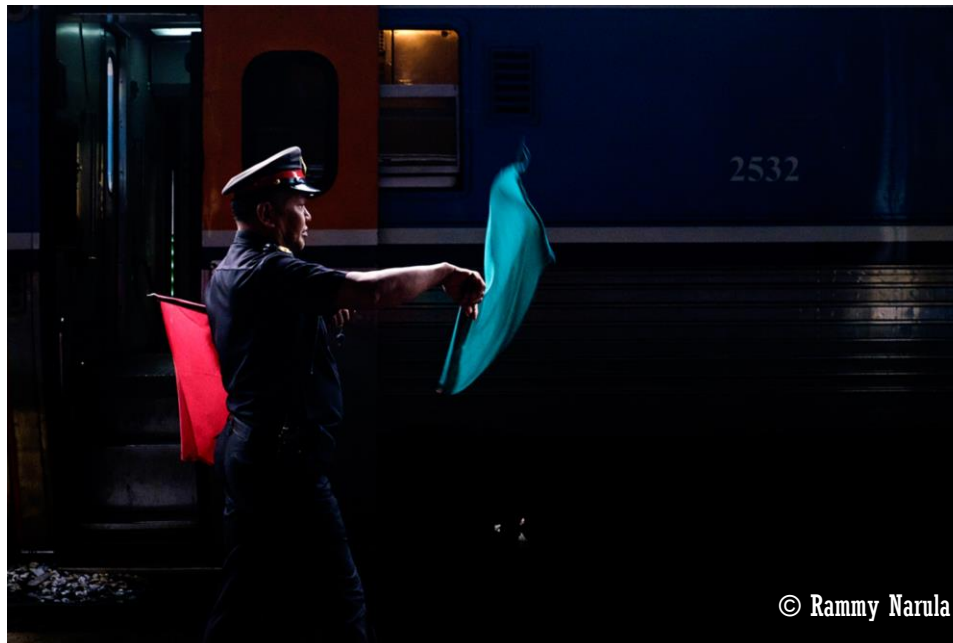
“You are what you eat: anything that you consumes is what you get. And I feed myself a lot from film directors – Torentino, Wes Anderson - to color photographers – Harry Gruyaert, Ernst Haas. Platform 10 was born out of this vision.”





*Platform 10* took 5 years to be completed, using many different techniques in the same location, for a short window of time: 20 minutes everyday. Rammy's initial idea was strongly influenced by Gruyaert's color work, but evolved organically.

Experimentation and persistence were key to produce a consistent and unified vision behind this project – which led Rammy to publish eventually his first photography book (Peanut Press 2017). The objectivity from peers and mentors was critical to editing and finalizing this significant photo project.



## KEY INFLUENCES

# Case study: Mike Lee & Melissa Breyer

**Mike Lee** and **Melissa Breyer** had fallen in love with art way before they took on photography in earnest. Melissa started as a painter, a career that she wanted to pursue professionally for a while. Mike comes from a family of visual artists, and has been a writer since he was a child. Photography, to them, came later in their life, and their work is tinted by the many influences they've gathered over time. Melissa sees the world as a painter, capturing blurry, imperfect images hinting at the essence of life, as opposed to making factual statements. She takes her influence as well from NYC writers most specifically, whose words are like songs in her mind as she captures the world around her.

Mike Lee not only writes and photographs in his idle time: he actually uses his photographs as inspiration and material for his future short stories. He needed to reconnect with his environment: photography gave him the fuel for his imagination.



© Mike Lee

## The voice of writers by Melissa Breyer



Melissa Breyer has in her head the texts of her favorite New York writers when she walks across NYC in search of her next shot: “What inspires me? The wistfulness of Edith Wharton’s New York, especially the dynamic between the constraints of the gilded age and the inner lives of women; the journalistic detail of Herman Melville; the vibrant urban voice of Junot Diaz; the lyrical observations of Pablo Neruda.”





# At the intersection of arts by Mike Lee

Finally she looked up, peering into his face, and the abyss was bridged. They need not have said a word, and they did not for a moment, as Zoe and Martin awkwardly sat beside them.

Finally, Stefan spoke. Pointing to the camera set next to the flower arrangement on the table, "I see you still have a Leica."

Patricia smiled. "Last model, M12. They don't make them anymore, and if something breaks, can't be fixed."

"Yes, I understand. Do you still have your film cameras?"

"A few. Some stolen. Others I had to give away or sell. Those I can have fixed, along with the other digitals."

"Do you have a studio?"

"No." She paused, adding, "This is awkward."

"Yes, it is. That's why I am focusing on the cameras."

Patricia smiled, and nudged Zoe. "Doesn't he look like Jean Gabin to you?"

"Yeah, he kind of does."

"Well, I am old."

Patricia reached out and daintily touched his hair. "You really went gray, babe."

"Obviously, I had reason to be."

Martin reached over and took his hat off. "Also lacks in manners."

"Oh, you really went gray, Stef. Yeah – you do look like Jean Gabin."

"Well, let's change the subject," Stefan said, feeling self-conscious. "You look the same."

"You know better, but I will take the compliment. I don't dye my hair."

"The yellow streak, yeah. The shitty hotel shampoo in Rattail caused that. It'll go away soon enough."

"I guess I should ask where the last fifteen years took you."

"Eighteen," she corrected.

"No, I knew you were in Hong Kong fifteen years ago."

"Bureau chief AFP, Asia. Then assignments in Australia – Sydney mostly, but ended up living in a place called Ballarat working on a long term project I never finished. Then your hullshit happened, and so way was I ever going to return."

"So, what happened then?"

The snapping Patricia emerged, cutting the conversation to the current moment. "This isn't story time. Let's order, instead. They have brunch here. Bloody Marys, oh, yum. Do I ever need one. All right, two."

"Trust me, babe. Me too. Oh, I just realized we have company."

Zoe playfully snacked Stefan over the head with the menu.

"Yes."

"Well, you did this."

Patricia smiled. "I plead guilty. This was my idea."

Stefan grinned back, eyes lingering at hers before looking at the menu. Awkwardness aside, the surprise meeting her again returned him to that faraway place: him helping her with the dog and taking her across the street, carrying the poodle while holding her umbrella, getting soaked on his exposed right

shoulder, water seeping into his shoes and soaking his socks. He ended up spending the day, and the night, in her apartment, clothes drying on that old radiator in the bathroom.

It seemed at the time they were going to be forever. Stefan really did believe. This was the first time Stefan ever believed in anything that was not an ideal. As experience eventually revealed to him, this remained the only occasion where this was so.

He really wanted to get drunk, now.



IX.

Stefan didn't get drunk, but buzzed. He relaxed on the porch at Martin and Zoe's with Patricia sitting by his side, both sunk deep into matching padded wooden deck chairs. The four of them talked throughout the morning, before Martin and Zoe insisted on going into the kitchen to prepare lunch. The conclusion Stefan drew from the conversation was that yes, they had all aged, but a layer of youthful idealism remained, keeping them fit psychologically and well prepared for their present. Optimistic, too, while all of them were aware they might never return home, the opportunities for rejuvenation were there – all that needed to be done was to assemble the moving parts into an engine of inspired work. This lifted his spirits, and after they left he drew quiet, thinking ahead to the mystery unfolding in his life.

He remembered the saying, "to rebel against the rebels."

It had been uttered in a speech by one of the leaders, who later

turned against the regime and went into exile. He had been told to keep clear of him, however. He was too big a fish, Stefan was warned, and his emigration to Antanzia had many strings attached. Some thought of him as a puppet, still others the puppeteer, manipulating the exile community with his writings and speeches, which were attended by agents. Stefan did see an editorial in the newspaper he read yesterday at the café, and after scanning it found him to be as clichéd and dryly dull as he was as a propagandist for the regime. To him, the two poles

of support and dissent were truly one, and as a thinker, Stefan found this prodigal son to be an unfortunate by-product of what happens when ideology is transformed into a commodity. His price was paid, left on a shelf, gathered dust, and then discarded.

He might meet him, out of curiosity, but this was not a priority for a long time. He never had much use for leaders, fallen or raised. One must pick through the ruins most carefully.

Dwelling on this man's presence, and on his own, his friends', and of Patricia landed here in this distant land, Stefan wondered if crossing three lines and a hemisphere was a cowardly escape to relative safety or an act of defiance. Would this be rebellion? He pondered this question while gazing at Patricia, who had turned away to look at the small garden of flowers in the yard in front of the porch. The house was two stories, five bedrooms with a den and separate dining area.

Built in California rustic style by an American oil baron nearly a hundred years ago, the house was designed with materials to survive for a very long time, with heavy beams of oak, with pine and imported rare Sequoyah flooring and buttresses. It had never been abandoned, each owner keeping care of the domicile, but Martin claimed he got a low price for the house. Martin had money, having parents who invested abroad before the regime took power, and used their resources for he and Zoe to live here, and to create a publishing house devoted to literature by the exile community in Antanzia and certain reprints of authors he preferred. They did add personal touches: Zoe grew a garden and replaced the front windows with stained glass panes of her own creation while, with the help of some of their Italian-Antanzian neighbors, Martin began building a three-story stone tower adjacent to the room both shared as their studio. He intended to be finished in a year, and explained he wanted the tower to be a place of meditation for them, and others who passed through from their homeland to enjoy and find a sense of place at the end of their long journey.

Stefan appreciated the sentiment, and inquired whether once completed, he could borrow time in the tower to write a book. Martin politely nodded, remarking that his writing always seemed to him to be a meditation on something. They all laughed – Stefan blushed at the notion, but nonetheless agreed that this was the case. His writing was always philosophical, meditative, and under the regime utterly out of favor. No one was interested in reading about mystery, or on the beautiful randomness of life, or to question beyond a boundary of materialism. Critics ignored him or, when they did take notice, berattled his work, passing judgment that the writing lacked a praiseworthy referencing regarding the glories of the class struggle, of the oppression by the former ruling class of the now new ruling class, and of course the attendant gushing over the wonders this new regime bestowed on the people. Stefan had found himself without work, so he had taken up proofreading legal briefs in a law office, which paid for what was not rationed, which was everything by the time he left. He thought about the Soviet Union and similar dictatorships, and wondered if this was the natural state of man. When he wrote about that, he realized it would never be published. Into an external hard drive it went, and soon other pieces rolled out.

He wrote mostly during breaks at work, which sometimes would be all day, because private law firms were generally proscribed and court cases rattled among the remaining lawyers still practicing outside of government: paid public advocates and prosecutors. He would save directly into the external drive, and obsessively delete any presence of an original manuscript, using cyber software to scrub out any disallowed pretexts of his thought. This went on for a year, until he finally was able to get a visa to get out of the country.

That process to escape became an excruciating experience that taxed the patience of even the strong-willed. Rumors were rife that so many people were leaving that the government

Continue reading on the next page. ➤



Though far from the debt, Stefan was not going to be the last. Fortunately, he knew a few here in the city, and a couple who lived in the deep forest. He planned to stay for several months in the city to give his prospects and, depending on the work opportunities, then travel the country – get his bearings, as it were – concluding his journey with Zoe and Martin, the couple living in the forest region, near the capitol.

From there he would decide what his future options in his new country would be. He had a hope, unexpected lightly around a belief that he would return home. But, he understood that might not happen. As he rode in the last driving toward the hotel district where he had booked a room, he considered what his options would be if he stayed in the city or moved further out into the countryside. Zoe and Martin were his extensively of their lives in the forest, sending the phone free books of their own making. Their relative isolation and the true beauty of the region appealed to Stefan, he re-instilled sense of what to expect in Antanzia (20) or in the northern rear cities beyond the forest, dotted along the Argentine and Brazilian borders.

After the regime took power, Stefan considered suicide. He doubted the ruling elite that had taken power, and had turned away from his destiny long before their family had taken over the country. He found them immature, given to hysteria when things did not go their way or they were

disgusted with the incoherence of critics but, like so many of his countrymen, he remained silent.

He read once that all men were immortal, and within each was an unexplored land in their eternal life. No power could ever take that away. As freedom was taken away, one law and other meant from the moment at a time. His fear slowly faded. Finally Stefan realized, when the dictatorship grew common and the threat of the superpowers and gas stations longer, that when communism, conflict and even the fall began to diminish, he had to overcome these fears and make a break.

If he had his last act of freedom, as a celebration in driving an automobile alone for the first time as a teenager. Still, his apprehensions toward the unknown remained. Though he was in the last hour of the Mercedes he left his anxiety. He convinced himself this was a process – a pause – and it's a growing confidence in the course of the journey he had chosen to undertake. What he left behind was not "safe," a promise that was going to be lost eventually in the end zone of the economic crisis. They were bad things to give an impression of wealth. The true treasure, Stefan concluded, was his mind and the freedom to act. His next journey was also an inner expression of taking over the destiny of his life, and the course he set in Antanzia was only the beginning in finding the peace he failed to find up to the moment he landed at the airport. Now was his time to live.

The last arrived at the hotel and, after paying the driver and checking in, he retired to his terrace, overlooking the beach, the swimmers of his childhood slowly slacking, revealing like the ocean waves he watched at the beginning of his life. The ordered American coffee from room service, sipping coffee with red sugar cubes stirred into the cup and cream served from an actual server felt so honest and real – the way he wanted to live his life. Stefan looked back to his chair and considered leaving, the ocean breeze whispering about him, and closed his eyes until dusk came to gently wash him.

III.

Stefan found the city nightfall eerily serene, with (newly) parking outside the nightclubs and bars on the main street, Avenida General O'Neil. Outside of burning to 1980s disco music and new wave, which had him feeling sexually uncomfortable, he felt a deepening sadness that overcame his relief at having escaped to this safe harbor.

Stefan went to a café on a side street with architecture he found appealing, and sat himself down for a while. Antanzia had a large number of Argentines, as well as Brazilians and Europeans, and his Latin influence ground itself into this national scene along with all the other culture from breaking through from Europe to India. Antanzia was the recipient of many a culture or, if not failed nation, but crushed dreams, in being the latest wave rippling in from the skies, landing at the international airport, disembarking, taking to the land, and finding their way to search for their own lives in the city.

It did not take long for Stefan to recognize a commoner. He looked the part, tan sport coat and a black t-shirt, faded

Levin and balanced One Martini, coming of as too cool and individualistic to come from anywhere but his homeland, along with the shaggy, unkempt mop of jet black hair and deep-set facial features.

He looked up from his wine poured, thinking to recognize. Stefan nodded, smiling while serving his mate. He was recognized – and for the first time in months, he felt no anxiety. Back home it made him nervous to be noticed, mainly because of his politics, which were deeply dissonant under the new regime. So he tried to become – in his grand mother advised when he was a child – one with the wallpaper. Stefan did into the patterns and, for the most part, became at a quickly cup of the academic, intellectual cultural scene that became the biggest pitfall in the established political machine.

Surprisingly all that was behind him, and Stefan smiled, responding by flipping his knowledge of his first love. The young man blushed at him again. Stefan assumed he was a – great guy.

There was a pause, more than a moment, between them in silence as one appeared the other. Should they introduce? Stefan being the more reserved character would likely wait, but so the risk was of water to coffee. He also did not should make the approach.

Instead, he hesitated, the pause serving to through the cracks of confidence. Antanzia might be a safe haven, but there were eyes probably everywhere. Stefan did had been back home. So he remained guarded, focusing his attention to his mate.

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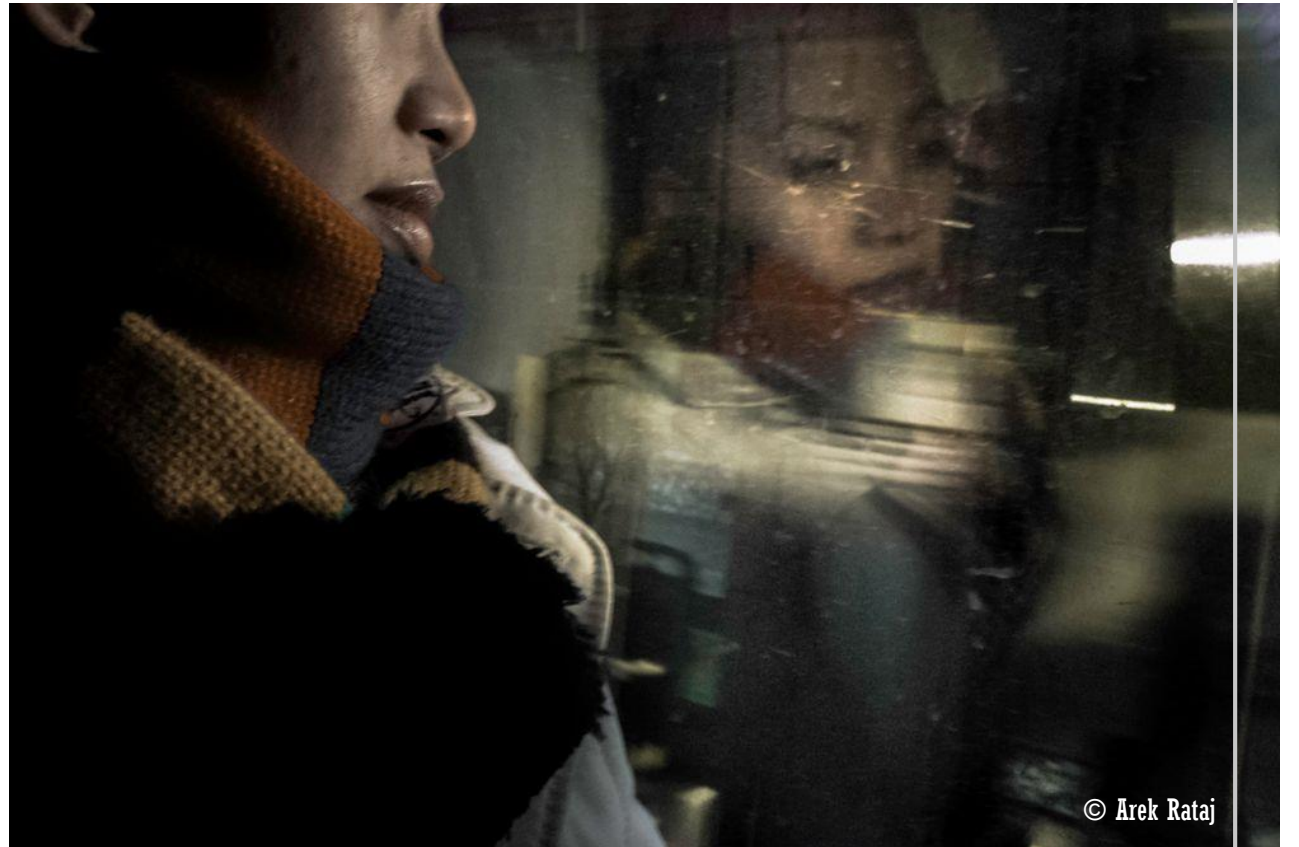
© Mike Lee

© Mike Lee

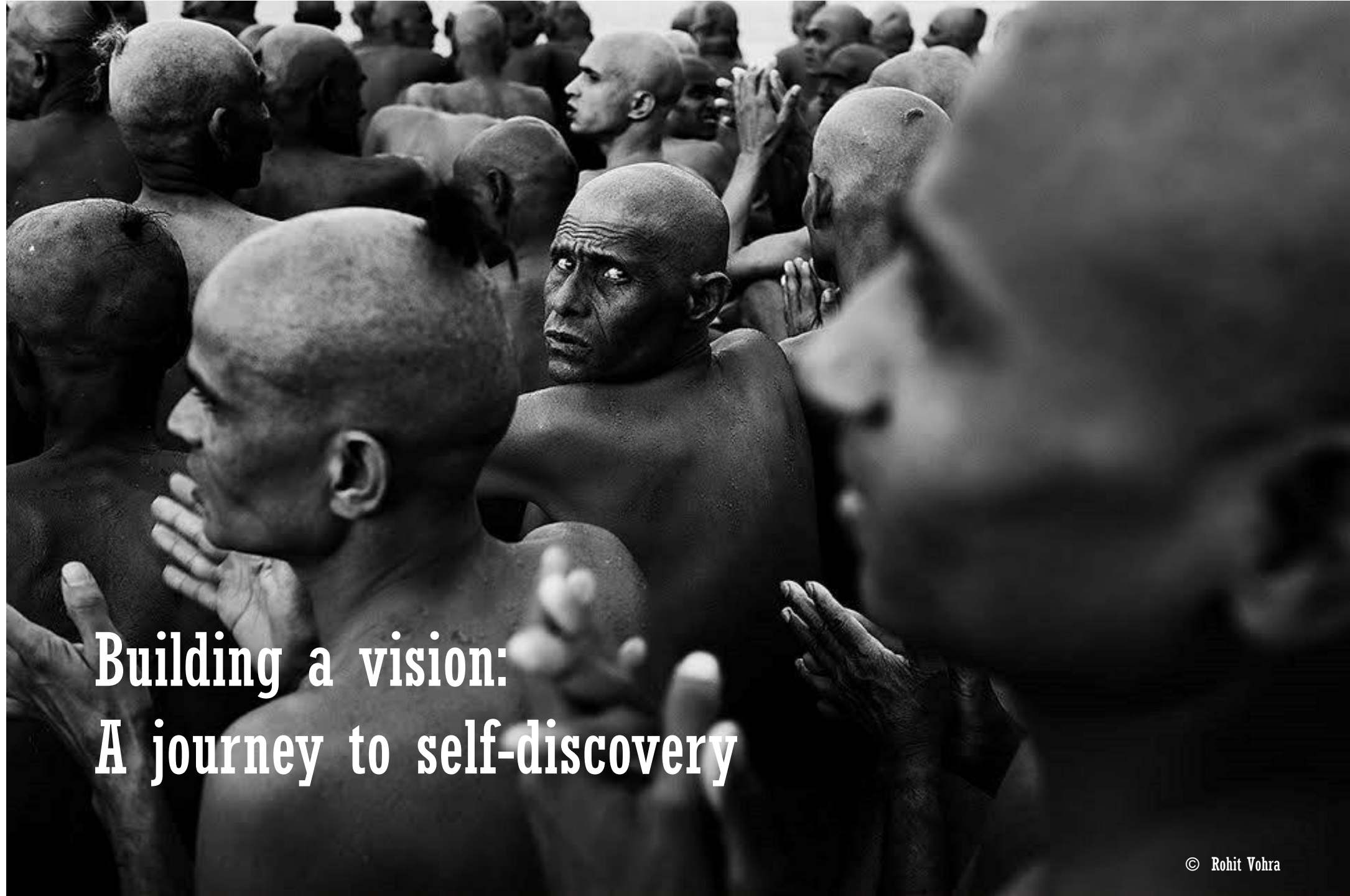


## Conclusion

- We do not create art in a vacuum, and our art is greater than ourselves – which is why the external world matters.
- External influences are expressed consciously (in ideas) and unconsciously (as intuitive triggers on the street).
- Photographers need others to see their images objectively, and increase their understanding of themselves.
- In particular, having a mentor is seen as critical for growth and evolution as an artist – as we are ever changing.
- Street photographers are incredibly cultivated, with a deep and wide knowledge of art across many genres.
- Some photographers commonly use their proficiency in other arts to fuel their photographic work.
- External influences are seen as critical to continuously get inspired and push one's own boundaries.



# III



**Building a vision:  
A journey to self-discovery**

1

## Vision and unicity

Building a unique vision or voice: what does it mean? The paradox of unicity.

## What does having a vision mean?

We've already seen in this book that our creativity is driven by internal and external elements that are unique to us – namely our experience, the environment, and critical influences in our lives. All these elements already mean that our vision of a particular scene will be unique to us. As Rohit Vohra said very well: “We are the director of this shot. Should we have taken this shot some milliseconds before, or using a slightly different angle, this would have resulted in a very different shot. Street photography is highly subjective for this reason. But moving away from a single shot, what does building a

unique vision really mean? Rohit Vohra describes it as “developing a unique voice in street photography capable of influencing others”, while Mike Lee defines this as “developing a unique style combined with a powerful narrative”. In essence, a vision is a unique way of seeing and capturing the world that transcends every picture one takes, creating a sense of consistency and unicity in one's work. It means stepping away from imitating others in order to create images that are truly ours: unique in themselves, yet consistent and recognizable as a whole.



## Building a vision over time

Building a vision, for a street photographer, can be incredibly difficult at times. Because a photographer is not planning consciously his shots, it is hard to create an output that shows unicity and consistency. It's as if trying to take the best shot coming in front of us, all the while making sure that this shot reflects our unique way of seeing the world, not anyone else's. Not a simple task to achieve, for anyone!

Winogrand used to say that a photographer should take 10,000 images before figuring out who they are and what they do. And indeed, it takes time and practice to reach a level where an artist develop what we call a unique vision – a style, a voice – that is consistent across their work and resonates with others in the street photography world.

- “I admit I was naïve about what the hell I was doing until one day I was in a café watching and realized I got my eye back. From that point on, the train started rolling.” **Mike Lee**
- “My style found me when I stopped trying to have a style. Despite my yearning otherwise, I kept coming home with moody/abstract/pretty photos. So I decided to go out and take whatever I was drawn to.” **Melissa Breyer**
- “I found myself slowly, through doing 25 years of assignments. Before that, I was interested in taking important pictures like Robert Frank. Nowadays, the subject doesn't matter anymore. Only the story does.” **David Carol**

## Case study: David J. Carol

**David J. Carol** aims to paint the absurdity of the world, a constant theme tying together a 35 year long career as an artist and professional photographer. For David though, his photographs are primarily a reflection of who he is: “all my pictures look the same. I am just being myself.”

When he was younger, David tried to be edgy, to take intelligent shots, to always create something new. He shot with many different formats and lenses with the hope that something new would come out of it. He now understands that ultimately, he takes pictures for himself – pictures that look like him, and he remains the only judge of whether he’s been successful or not. After years of practice, the importance of the subject is no longer relevant to him. He can afford to take the images that he likes, favoring unexpected moments over events with historical significance. The story is all that matters to him nowadays.



© David J. Carol



## David J. Carol

“Most of the time I'm just acting and speaking spontaneously. It's only in hindsight that I see the logic. This certainly applies to my photographs as well...I try to portray the absurdity of the world, but eventually, I am the only judge of it. No one else can tell me whether I have achieved it”



“I take pictures for myself.  
Before you reach this  
conclusion – and it took me  
25 years to get there – you  
can’t really produce  
anything that is yours”.

David photographs the  
relation between people  
and the absurdity of this  
world. But he’s the only  
judge of whether he  
delivers against this vision.  
He found himself slowly,  
through doing 35 years of  
assignments. Earlier, he  
was interested in taking  
important pictures like  
Robert Frank. Nowadays,  
the subject doesn’t matter  
anymore. Only the story  
does.





For his first book, David decided to place the foreword written by Anne Wilkes Tucker as an afterword, in order to let the public decides for themselves – deciding not to reveal his vision before they had experienced his images.



## The paradox of unicity

David J. Carol has clearly established a style and a voice in photography, and the thematic homogeneity of his images – across both new or old work – appears clearly to the viewer. However, not all photographers follow a similar approach, and the meaning of unicity and consistency can largely differ based on what drives you as a street photographer.

As an example, here's what Mike Lee says about style and unicity in his work: "You have to develop your own style, but it doesn't mean that you have to stick to one style or form of composition for the rest of your life. I like to play across a large sets of styles influenced by Saul Leiter, HCB, Lee Miller, Robert Frank for example. I still see unicity in my work across these different styles – my pictures are still mine."

On the other side of the spectrum, some photographers favor a project-based approach to their work, so consistency and unicity are more easily shown within a project or series, as opposed to the entire portfolio. Rammy Narula's vision is a constant exploration for him: he gets drawn to a subject for a while whether he intends it or not – and it becomes central to his work. Now that he's done with Platform 10, he's moving on to a very different subject, about patterns in light. His work is no longer about people at a particular location, but about colors and light everywhere. Change is key for him – his creativity is tied to a subject, one at a time. He doesn't come back to creating the same images over and over again, and keeps evolving with his each new subject.

## Conclusion

- A vision means creating a unique voice or style in street photography, that is recognized within the artistic community. In other words, it means creating photographic work that is clearly distinct from others.
- Building a cohesive vision means achieving a level of consistency and unicity in one's work, which is often a challenge for emerging street photographers.
- It takes time and self-knowledge to be able to create something truly unique, meaning that the evolution is long and requires a high level of maturity from the photographer.
- Some photographers keep producing the same pictures with high level of consistency in their work, while others display more diverse styles sometimes dependent on the project they are working on.
- Very often, the work we produced at the beginning of our journey will be greatly influenced by others, while the more we know ourselves, the more we are able to find our style.



© David J. Carol

2

## Self-discovery

Why we take pictures on the first place: it's all about understanding oneself.



“Are you taking pictures for people to like you? What you need to learn is not **how** to take pictures, but **why** you take pictures of strangers that you will never meet again.”

Rohit Vohra



© Rohit Vohra

## The importance of understanding the why

One of the most important insights from this project, for me, was the necessity to question the why we are doing the things we are doing. I had always suspected that without an answer to this question, very little could come out of our work. But seeing that so many photographers agreed, and had slowly resolved to answer this question for themselves, made me realise just how important this was. And indeed, building a vision is a journey to self-discovery. Images tell as much about ourselves as artists as they tell about our subjects. In street photography, where subjectivity is king in contrast with documentary or portrait photography for example, this is even more true and required to succeed.

All too often, younger photographers tend to emulate their mentors or idols, trying to impose a style to their work which they believe will attract attention from the audience. But the real work starts after that. The technique, the copying is only there to put the bases in place. After all, no work is purely original, and we all copy someone without intending to because some photographs have marked us and will remain with us. But that is not enough. The difference between talented artists and would-be artists lies in their understanding of themselves and their art. It starts with acknowledging that unless we define what makes us unique, we won't achieve this level of unicity that is required to have a singular voice in the field.

## A three step journey



## Succeeding in this journey

The first step in the process of developing a vision is to acquire the technique. [David J. Carol](#) notes in his interview that learning the technique was critical to get him where he was today. He's now able to take the shot of what he sees, just the way he's intending to – and by doing so, he has removed a significant barrier and can entirely focus on the story unfolding in front of him. [Martin U. Waltz](#) explains that in his extravert mode, where he consciously enter the private sphere of his subjects, a lot of practice was required to take the right shots intuitively, leaving intact the experience of shooting. Both photographers have acknowledged the necessity to take away the need to think about the tool, as a way to more centrally focus on the possible stories instead.

While many photographers achieve a satisfying level of technicality, we all face the fear of not doing anything relevant. But measures of relevance are hard in the artistic world, and this leads many young photographers to emulate their mentors versus developing their own style. As [Rohit Vohra](#) highlights, “As a mentor, your students tend to emulate your work without trying to be themselves. They can see now through social media what works, what's trending, and that influences them to produce the same images than everyone else. At some point in their career, they will need to learn to make photographs for themselves, and to turn away from their peers and mentors. But that takes courage, because it's safer to copy the best versus suggesting a different way.”



## Knowing the why: photographers' testimonies

"I am a gatherer of raw material. I am inspired by the flow, by the moment. My work has a clear intent: creating beauty out of the mundane. I then look for patterns emerging from the raw material – an ever changing narrative between myself and my work." **Martin U. Waltz**

"When I shoot, I feel unconstrained and a sense of joyful freedom that allows me to do what I want. I don't reflect on what I do – my mind is constantly searching for the next shot. I trust my instincts to lead the way, and I never plan, which is part of the joy I take from the experience." **Mike Lee**

"I shoot for myself, it makes me happy. I am not a greedy shooter like a lot of photographers I know. I am happy to step out and come back without a shot. I shoot very little now and only press the shutter when a scene intrigues me, if it moves me or if I see something unusual. The urge is to capture that moment, not necessarily to share it with the world." **Rohit Vohra**



© Martin U. Waltz

## Knowing the why: photographers' testimonies



© Rammy Narula

“I’ve always been an obsessive maker of things, photography makes a continuation of that possible in a life leaning towards having fewer actual things. At this point, making more stuff seems unsustainable, so making photos is a fabulous way to indulge in creative gluttony. There is also the ineffable pleasure of walking through the streets of New York City. Everyday here is history in the making, and I am so fortunate to be experiencing it.” **Melissa Breyer**

“As a man who has non sexual fetish for faces, my photographic interests revolves around human micro expressions. I am interested in situational photography, which really is an umbrella term to include candid, social, documentary photographs of people.” **Arek Rataj**

“A street photographer believes in the power of coincidence. I became a street photographer to bring myself back into the moment”

**Rammy Narula**

## Case study: Rohit Vohra

In 2004, when **Rohit Vohra** got his kids, it all came back to him: the joy, the experience, the value of having images for the future. Photography became his break, his “me time” and getting the results had never been the point for him. The camera in fact is a tool against shyness for Rohit - with a camera, he becomes more social, want to travel and discover the world. He becomes another person, more social and extraverted.

For Rohit, finding his voice in street photography is all about creativity – and creativity is the contrary of predictability. In fact, a few years back his mentor commented that his B&W photography was now easily recognizable: “That made me uncomfortable rather than making me happy. I don’t like being predictable and I didn’t want to be a slave to a style and got back to color. I like doing new things and experiment a lot.” Now a mentor himself, Rohit aims to support younger photographers in their quest to finding themselves artistically, whatever risks they need to take to get there.



© Rohit Vohra





## Rohit Vohra

“I shoot for myself, I am happy to step out and come back without a shot. I only press the shutter when a scene intrigues me, if it moves me or if I see something unusual. The urge is to capture that moment, not necessarily to share it with the world.”





© Rohit Vohra

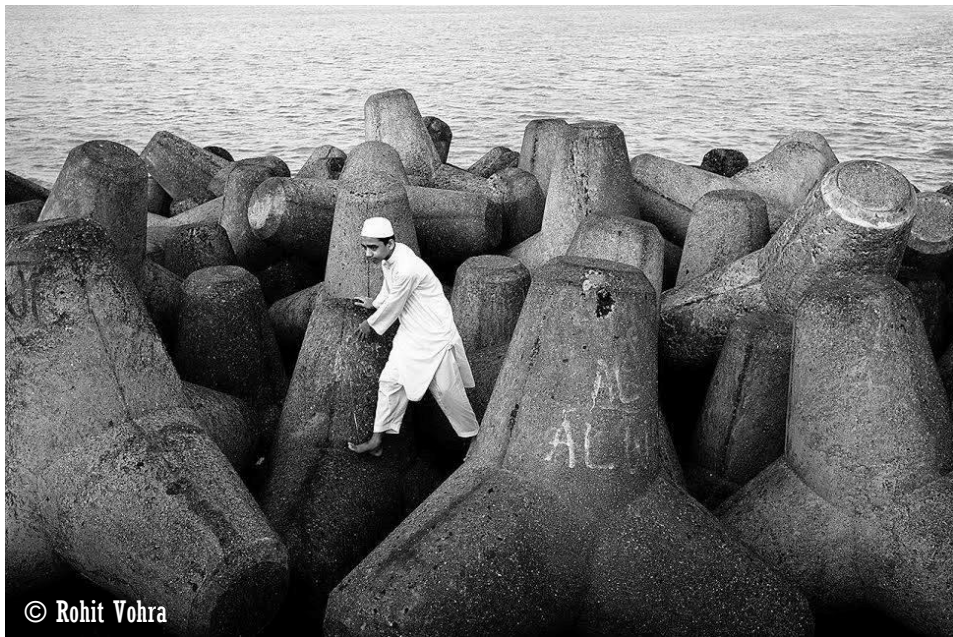
“Creativity means finding a unique voice for oneself. It is the contrary of predictability. I went back into color photography to learn to see content, after my mentor thought he could recognize my B&W work all too well. This changed the way I see today, this really changed my photography”



© Rohit Vohra



© Rohit Vohra



“I am always thinking: what’s next? Can I do something differently? I look for joy, for inspiration. And this requires setting new constraints to keep challenging myself, such as mobile photography or flash photography as I have done most recently.”



## Conclusion

- A vision is not about how we take pictures, but why we take pictures on the first place.
- There's a learning curve for each artist where they've got first to learn the technique, then imitate their mentors / peers and finally detach themselves to find their unicity
- Mastering the technique is critical to allow ourselves to focus exclusively on the elements of the story as it happens, not on how to take the shot
- Imitating our mentors and peers is oftentimes a necessary step before developing a unique style. However, social media makes it harder to define a unique style, as copying what works appears the safer option
- Finding a style or voice doesn't mean that we need to stop searching and challenging oneself. Some photographers thrive on constant challenges of their style



3

## The power of narratives

A dialogue with the world: the power of unique narratives to convey meaning



## Narrative in street photography: revealing a paradox



© Rohit Vohra

By its own spontaneous and candid nature, street photography doesn't often lend itself to the creation of intentional narratives. Why? Because narratives assume that several photographs make sense together to tell a particular story, evoke particular feelings, build upon common themes. But if each shot is an unique as our vision of the world in this moment, can narratives ever exist in street photography? Can the lack of planning and premeditation be somewhat overcome to create a piece of work that tells something bigger than each shot on its own?

Rohit Vohra shares: "I rarely take photographs with a series in mind. Sometimes a strong photograph will lead to an idea and that idea will stay in the subconscious mind, patterns emerge and you soon know there is a potential of a series. Most of my series have started with a few existing photographs or at least one strong photograph, but I have never consciously looked for the next shot. It's only while I am taking a shot, or a little after it that I might feel it fits well in an existing series."

## NARRATIVES

# The role of narratives in sharing with the world

Yet, most often than not, published artists and photographers have been able to present their work with a specific angle and narrative, a way to create sense out of an accumulation of images, whether in the context of an exhibition, a publication in a magazine, or the creation of a photobook. Photographers, this is a fact, do not randomly display their images. They think through them carefully, and organize them in ways that create meaning and communicate something unique about their work.

**Melissa Breyer** shares: “To get published, it’s important to think through narratives and series. Telling the specifics of one’s work is an essential factor in getting seen.” While she considers most of her work to be an ongoing series, she now enjoys smaller bodies of work. From a street perspective, she’s quite content with where she is. Yet she’s always hoping that there will be something new, a small change that will keep her curious and interested in street photography. Some idea that will flourish and become a whole narrative on their own.



© Melissa Breyer

## The different ways to articulate narratives

Narratives can be told at portfolio-level, expressing the intent behind an entire body of work, or may be expressed through smaller bodies of work: whether a set of images working together as a series or the output from a project

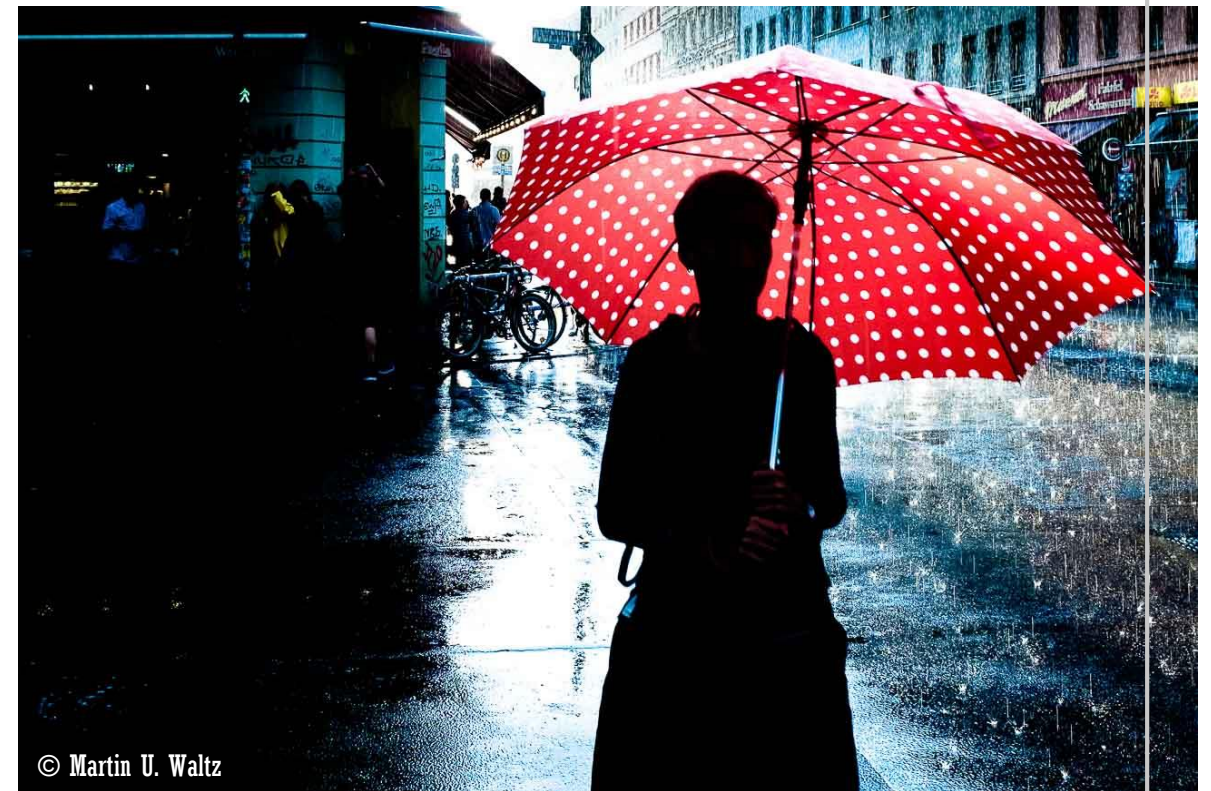
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## On the creation of a portfolio (1/2)

Building a portfolio requires to select images that provide a consistent view of the work. For a portfolio to be remembered, there must be strong unicity in the work being showcased, unicity in places, time, styles, moods or subjects / situations.

Martin U. Waltz has the ambition to move beyond single images to create a narrative more specific to his work – with consistency in places, subjects, location. This is why on his website, he removed all photos not taken in Berlin. Indeed, after showcasing images from all locations for a while, he realized that his travel photographs could never really expressed the same raw feeling that he tries to convey through his work. But Martin doesn't stop there: he continuously pays attention to the recurrent elements in his photography to refine his style and unique vision – e.g., repetition in moods and situations, and eventually create a “unique narrative between myself and my work”.



© Martin U. Waltz

## On the creation of a portfolio (2/2)



In photography, Mike Lee believes that you need a style or narrative to go with your own work. Photographers need to define what street photography means to them if they ever wish to create interesting work and get published. A few years ago, Mike published Invisible Mirrors with Corridor Elephant editions. Packaging his images into a narrative was an integral part of the editing process. He asked himself what his best pieces were, then what narrative or thread was connecting each of these images. For him, unicity in his work is more easily achieved because of the short window of time and place that he allows himself to shoot: 8-10am on his way to work. Once Mike had to choose 200 pictures based on his PhotoVogue portfolio – curated by a PhotoVogue editor: “Whether we agree with the curator or not, an external eye can make us see patterns in our work that we wouldn’t have seen otherwise. This helped me improve my editing skills to be published / accepted.”

## Making series in street photography (1/2)

### CASE STUDY: MELISSA BREYER

#### Steam Systems

“I think of my whole body of work as one on-going series. Part of that is because I don’t have the chance to photograph outside of NYC very often which defines a theme already, but also because I have narrowed down my style to a pretty streamlined version of what I want to document and express. Within that, more specific themes may emerge as a series. I am definitely drawn to certain themes, and if I find myself collecting a number of photos that I like that share commonalities – and I feel that they have stories to tell as a collection – then I start looking for more with the idea of grouping them together.”









© Melissa Breyer ➔



© Melissa Breyer ➔

## Making series in street photography (2/2)

### CASE STUDY: MARTIN U. WALTZ

#### New Year's Eve, Backstage

“Themes are preferred subjects, stuff I just care about, lenses through which I see the world. They are created at posteriori through looking at patterns across my work. Unlike themes, my series are quite intentional, but are not always thought conceptually. They are built on unicity in places and moods, and are more documentary than the rest of my work. Eventually, I am inspired by the flow, by the moment. Series will always be an evolving dialogue created from the raw material, not the other way around.”













## Conclusion

- Narratives are what connect images across our work: a way to provide meaning beyond any single image, and to be remembered among many photographers and artists
- Street photography, by its candid and spontaneous nature, makes it harder to articulate intentional narratives – yet published authors have not chosen their images randomly
- We can tell narratives in various ways: broadly, through showcasing a portfolio, or through narrow bodies of work – either themes, series or projects
- Unicity in places, time, situations, moods or subject matters provides the foundation for presenting images in a meaningful and coherent way
- Eventually, to prevent against becoming formulaic, many street photographers create series organically, through a combination of intention and improvisation



© Nima Taradji

## 4 Ongoing revolution

It's a journey, not a destination. We keep changing.  
We keep evolving.

“An artist has a voice, but it’s constantly evolving, it’s a process in the making. It’s always too early to know who we are as an artist. Creativity is not predictability... It’s really the opposite.”

Rohit Vohra



## The constancy of change

For human beings, life means change. The constancy of change in an artists' life is perhaps the only certainty that we are allowed to have. The street photographers interviewed for this project all agree on this: our art is changing, just as we are. It's a continuous revolution for the artist.

Mike Lee summarizes this process of change this way: "To be brief, I am instinctive. I may often not get it right, but this is part of the learning process. What I saw three years ago, for example, isn't what I am looking for now, and that — of course — will change in time. I also find images taken over the last past years that now fit with my current vision & narrative."

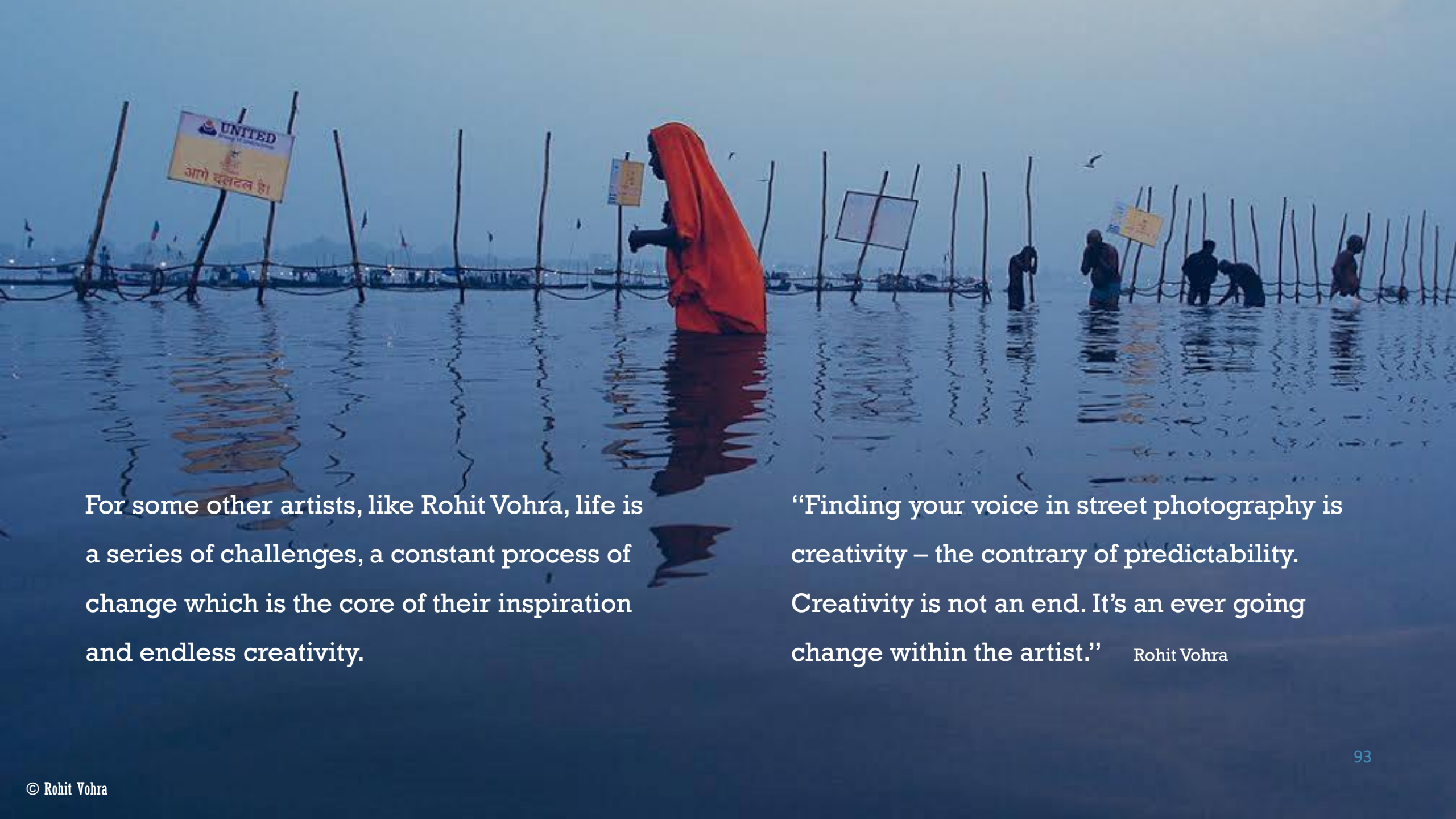


## Letting the door open to change



For some photographers, like [Melissa Breyer](#), their vision has slowly refined over time, but change is always welcome:

“I don’t think I ever stop feeling creative, but I sometimes feel like I want to break out of certain themes I’ve been exploring for fear of becoming formulaic. But finding new ways of seeing is such an organic process; it can’t be forced. I am patient with myself and trust that I will fall into the themes that are natural for my progression. Every little step I take might be creative, but the path is winding and passive. Sometimes I’ll go for very long walks and not take a shot, and that’s fine because the experience was no less meaningful. I am quite content of where I am today, but I am always hoping for something new – a small change – that will keep me curious and interested.”



For some other artists, like Rohit Vohra, life is a series of challenges, a constant process of change which is the core of their inspiration and endless creativity.

“Finding your voice in street photography is creativity – the contrary of predictability. Creativity is not an end. It’s an ever going change within the artist.” Rohit Vohra



## Embracing challenge as a way of life

Earlier in his life, Rohit Vohra was shooting everything. Now he's thinking about what's next: "Can I do something differently?" He looks for joy, as he is not self-motivated. He needs to challenge himself by setting new constraints to his creativity. "I don't like being predictable and I don't want to be a slave to a style. I like doing new things and experiment a lot, these days I am shooting a lot with flash. It's an ongoing process... The experience is always unique. Despite working from one style to another, I believe I am able to see unicity in my work, though this is not what I am trying to achieve."



© Rohit Vohra

A REVOLUTION

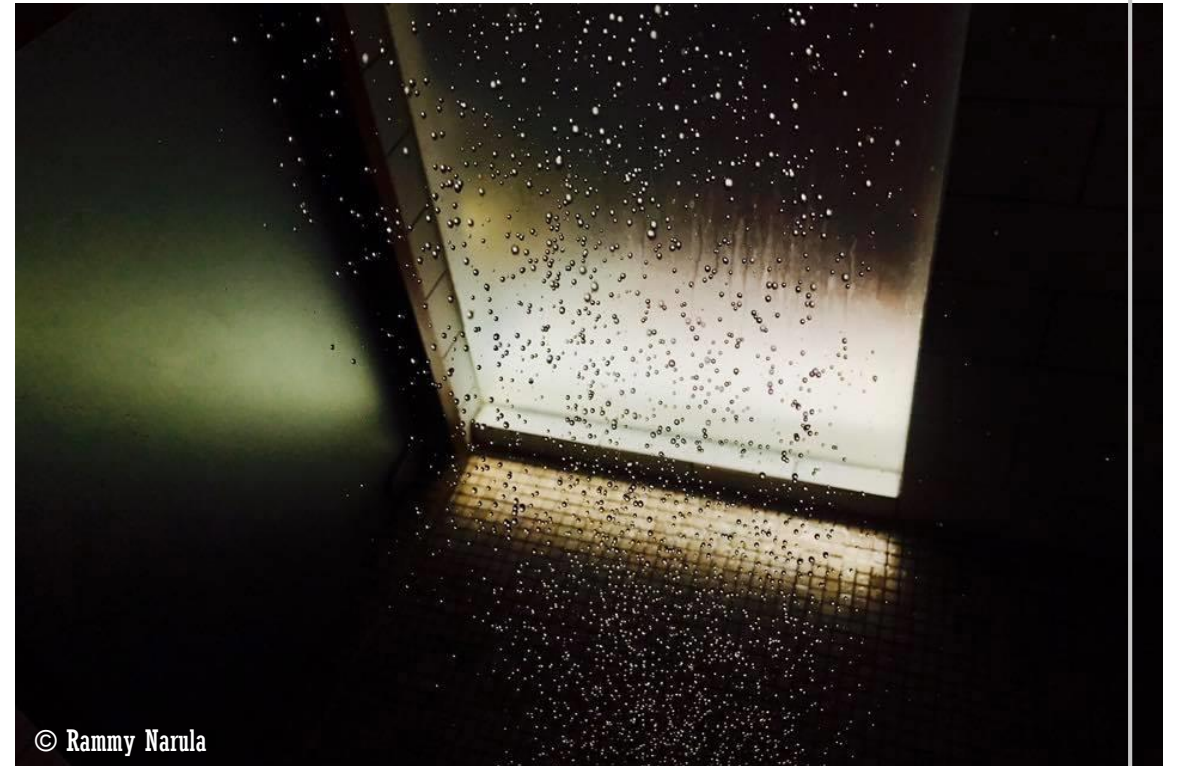
## Restoring our lost creativity



Rohit Vohra further reveals his own tactics to find inspiration and overcome any creativity blocks: “I read a lot, not just photo books, or essays. I read anything and everything. I am always asking myself questions, this really helps in creating mind maps and that often leads to new ideas and creativity. Yes, we all stop feeling creative at some point especially if one has been shooting for long. Different things work for different people. What works for me is taking a break, travelling, reading a nice book, or going out to shoot without a camera. Shooting without the camera enables us to see more and it’s a great exercise for the brain. One doesn’t feel the pressure of taking pictures when you step out without the camera. Sometimes a movie, a song or just great design will inspire you.”

## Expanding one's creative horizon

Arek Rataj and Martin U. Waltz have shared their interest in exploring new photography genres, beyond pure street photography. In Arek's words: "There's only so much that I can achieve through opportunistic and situational photography. The reality is that I am interested in capturing bigger stories, that are documentary in essence, and that I can orchestrate from start to finish." For Martin, street photography has clear limitations. It is too reliant on chance, and there's no certainty of output. "You need to want to love the process more than the result..." He's currently interested in exploring urban and people photography with more staging and control, as well as documenting big stories but with a street photography vision, raw and authentic. Finally, Rammy Narula has started a new project: it's no longer about people and places, and it's all about light and creation of shapes and patterns through light. This is clearly a new direction for Rammy, putting human beings as secondary subjects.



© Rammy Narula



## Case study: Nima Taradji

**Nima Taradji** used to be a talented street photographer. But his evolution as a photographer took him beyond the narrow sphere of street photography to focus on intentional storytelling: the major difference, according to him, between pure street and documentary photography. For Nima, street is more of a tactic than a genre itself, and he uses his street photography skills to capture the real people and communities making up our world, especially those at risk of being forgotten. When looking at Nima's street photography and documentary work, we recognize the same themes and patterns repeating themselves across genres (e.g., focus on hands to express individuality). And yet, his projects – whether political, social or cultural – are as different from one another as the people making them. The people themselves determine the visual feel and style of the series, as does Nima's point of view, subtly overlaid onto the 15-20 frames that will become his final story.





## Nima Taradji

“Street photography is a tactic, not a strategy. I approach all my documentary work with this approach. My work nowadays has evolved: it is no longer meant to create a single image that tells everything.”





“Everybody has a unique vision. They just need to find it” says Nima Taradji. “But when you do it for many years, it’s always the same thing that comes out of you – it’s an ever going series. Themes and subjects or particular obsessions repeat themselves across pictures, no matter what genres and can be conscious or very unconscious. I never noticed that I paid so much attention to hands before meeting with David J. Carol.”





© Nima Taradji

A key differentiator between documentary and street photography lies on level of planning and intent (a serious project to document versus just shooting for pleasure). This becomes a very deliberate process, with oftentimes an amount of upfront research, getting in touch with organizations, getting people to talk to him and to trust him. This has become Nima's preferred approach nowadays.



© Nima Taradji



© Nima Taradji





© Nima Taradji

600 native American Eskimos leave on an island that is sinking and will disappear in the next 10-20 years. While the culture will disappear, moving the entire population in a different place would cost billions. Nima researched the subject beforehand, but the subject became its own on the field, at proximity of the people. Nima doesn't care about the place itself, his story is always about the people to whom this is happening.



© Nima Taradji



© Nima Taradji

## Conclusion

- Photographers and artists experience constant change, giving birth to new artistic directions throughout their life. Their vision and voice change as well with time.
- Some photographers have narrowed down their vision enough to be content where they are, while others thrive on new sources of challenges or new projects to pursue
- Finding ongoing inspiration sometimes requires to take a beginner's mind, looking at the world as if we were seeing for the very first time through reading books or practicing photography without a camera for example
- Some photographers are also looking beyond pure street photography for their next challenge, looking to explore new visual genres such as documentary photography
- Change is to be embraced, not feared. It's always too soon to determine who we are as an artist. Creativity is the contrary of predictability.





## CONCLUSION

# Final words

This book has been a long journey for me. The density of the insights and personal perspectives that I have gathered through initial interviews posed a real challenge at first: how to represent, as faithfully and intelligibly, an entire repertoire of thoughts and perspectives from 8 of the most exciting street photographers I know? Creating the story underpinning this book took a lot of thoughts, but as this was figured out, the rest became evident. I not only admire these photographers for their genuine talent as artists – I also truly admire the way they speak about themselves, and about their passion of street photography. It led me to understand what, at the core, was the street photographer's creative paradox, and how to break down elements of creativity to make sense of their intuitive decision-making processes. But it also allowed me to go further and understand through the broader perspective of their lives the journey it takes to develop a vision. Unsurprisingly, the leading theme was that of self-discovery, as we cannot become who we are meant to be unless we go through a necessary effort of self-exploration. Understanding this process was understanding the essence of creativity in a dynamic perspective – not as a fixed outcome, but as an evolving process that grows and changes with us as artists. I want to conclude here by thanking once again these 8 photographers for their invaluable contribution to this project. I would have never gotten that far myself, in my thinking, and this book would have never come to life without you. I also want to thank my future readers for their insatiable curiosity, and for their patience as they go through this lengthy analysis!

I wish you an extraordinary journey.

Marie Laigneau

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**David J. Carol** [www.davidcarol.com](http://www.davidcarol.com)

**Martin U. Waltz** <https://streetberlin.net/>

**Melissa Breyer** [www.melissabreyer.com](http://www.melissabreyer.com)

**Mike Lee** [www.mleephotoart.com](http://www.mleephotoart.com)

**Nima Taradji** <http://www.nimataradji.com/>

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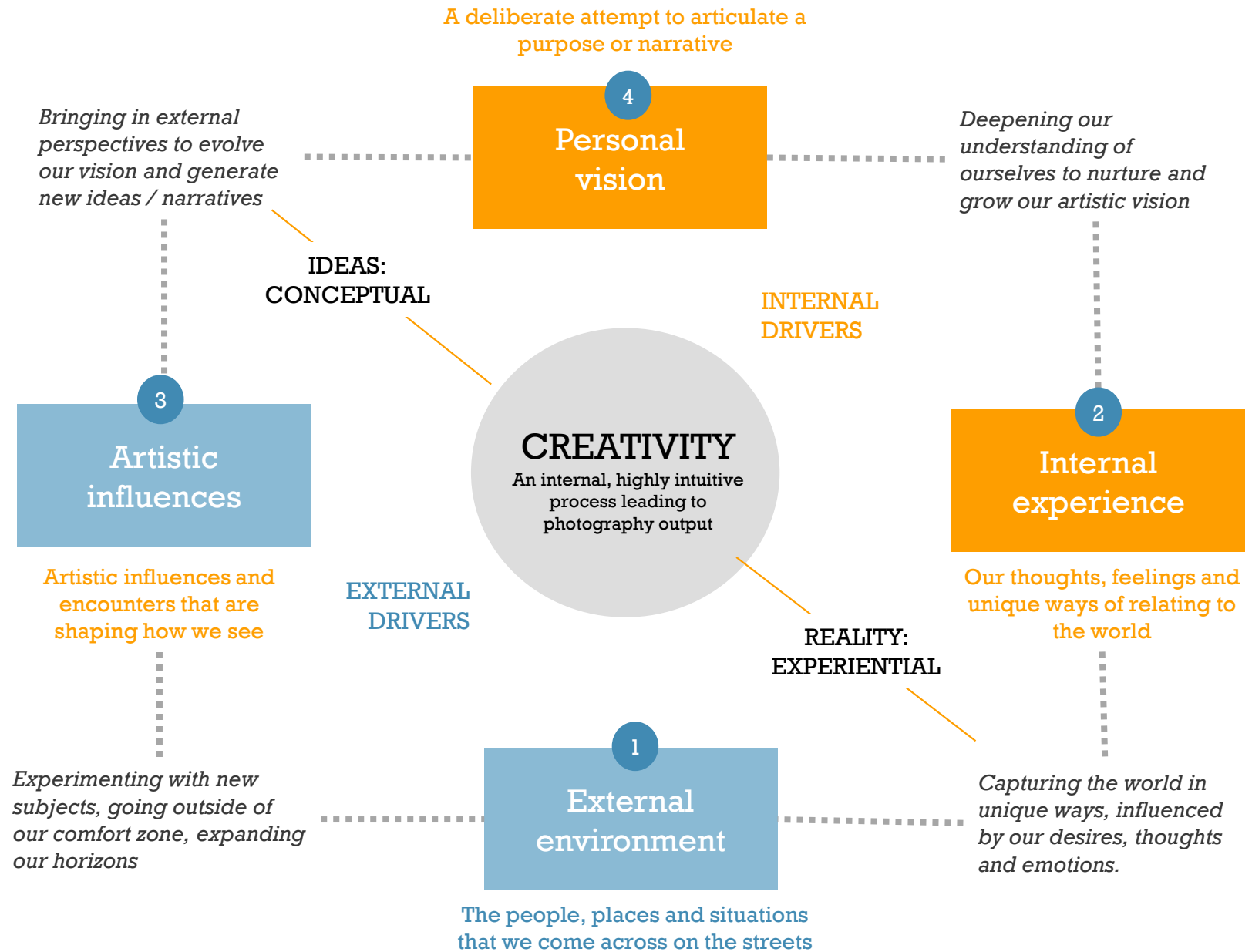
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## CONCLUSION

# The map of creativity







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