



Michael Ernest Sweet, Contributor

Canadian writer and photographer.

Michael Kowalczyk: Street Photography And The Contemplative Moment In Urban Life

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MICHAEL KOWALCZYK

I recently gave a workshop at the B&H Photo Event Space in New York City about finding style in street photography. I was fortunate to have a large audience and this allowed me to meet many new photographers following the event. One such photographer was Michael Kowalczyk. Michael showed me a glimpse of his portfolio on his tablet and I was initially hooked by his eye for the “close up moment”. As I looked through his work more thoroughly, I came to realize there was some exceptional talent in his urban compositions. I wanted to see more, know more, and that is how we ended up here—in an interview on HuffPost.





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Michael Ernest Sweet: Michael, how and why did you get involved in street photography?

Michael Kowalczyk: Well, before moving to New York I lived in Aachen (Germany), a middle-sized town close to Belgium and the Netherlands, for over twenty-five years. I noticed how things and places were gradually changing over time and I started to document it from the most accessible and reproducible viewpoint, the street. Besides my former full time job in the university, I enjoyed exploring the town and its suburbs with my bicycle. The possibility to get around healthy and fast, and stop for a photo where needed is priceless. In 2014 I decided to publish my local photographs on a day-to-day basis on Aachenlife.de. It was then that I started to identify my work as street photography. I like when good street photographs transport the dichotomy between urban culture and human nature. I feel the need to do it from a documentary perspective.

MES: What, exactly, do you look for when shooting on the street?

MK: After moving to New York City I realized how preoccupied most people seem to be in public, especially with their mobile devices. Being sensitive about our culture of constant distraction, I started to focus on contemplative moments in urban life. I look for people in lonesome, reflective, or sleeping situations, and then discreetly photograph them and their surrounding context. On the other extreme I am pushing myself right now to experience the gritty, invasive style of street photography where disputes between my artistic vision and other people's idea of privacy are inevitable. My goal is to find my niche by trying out all approaches to street photography.



MES: What value do you think there is in the street genre?

MK: If street photography had a voice it would say: Don't hesitate, it's now or never! Street photography demands decisiveness and with that its value is educational. It teaches us to realize the elusiveness of special moments in life.

I also feel that street photography gives us the opportunity to use it as a metaphorical, often ironic, tool for statements about the zeitgeist and society.



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It might not account for every theme in street photography, but I think that street photographs which are understandable as a comment on human reality are valuable historic documents. A good example is Vivian Maier's work.



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MES: I always ask this because other photographers always want to know: What equipment are you using and why?

MK: I use a Ricoh GR the smallest and lightest digital compact camera with a built in fixed wide-angle lens and a large APS-C sensor. I bought it because I wanted to lose weight in my camera bag and it helped a lot compared to a traditional DSLR. Initially I considered the fixed 28mm lens to be a burden, but it turned out that limitation is the spirit of creativity. Instead of getting close to a subject optically, I have to get near personally. This is a huge opportunity in terms of engagement! Thanks to the GR's manual controls and unique snap focus abilities it translates my photographic vision consistently, and more importantly, with complete silence.



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MES: I certainly can agree with you there. I've been using the Ricoh GR lineup of cameras for my own work for years. I've used both the digital and film versions and they simply cannot be beat. Often, we pick up our affinity for cameras from other photographers we admire, who are some street photographers that inspire you?

MK: I will keep the list short and name only three influential street photographers in order of appearance in my life.

- Fan Ho: He is a self-taught Chinese street photography master. He created works that I admire very much from an aesthetic point of view. His way to capture light, his precise application of composition and his patience for the decisive moment inspire me to produce street photographs which reflect each moment with elegance.
- Jeff Mermelstein: A New York based street photographer from who I learned to accept the "you just do it" attitude when shooting portraits of strangers on the streets of Manhattan. As he puts it, his work shows the "extraordinary out of the banal" and this inspires me to look for such special findings in NYC as well.
- Mankichi Shinshi: An award-winning Japanese street photographer who shows me that meaningful street photographs does not necessarily have to contain people. His works narrate with simple and sometimes very small and atypical elements. I am fascinated by this way of storytelling because it is strong without being intrusive.



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MES: Michael, finally, I notice you shoot in both color and monochrome. Why? Do you ever feel conflicted by the back and forth between the two?



in mind, I develop only those photographs in monochrome that will benefit from a reduction to improve readability and clearness. Then there are times when I'm not able to decide and that is a good sign to reach out to other people and their opinions.

Michael Kowalczyk is a passionate self-taught multimedia artist with an educational background in linguistics, communications and media design. Michael currently lives in New York City. Follow him on his [website](#) or through [Flickr](#) and [Instagram](#).

Michael Ernest Sweet is a Canadian writer and photographer. He is the author of several books of street photography including [The Human Fragment](#) from Brooklyn Arts Press. Michael lives in New York City. More info at his [website](#).

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