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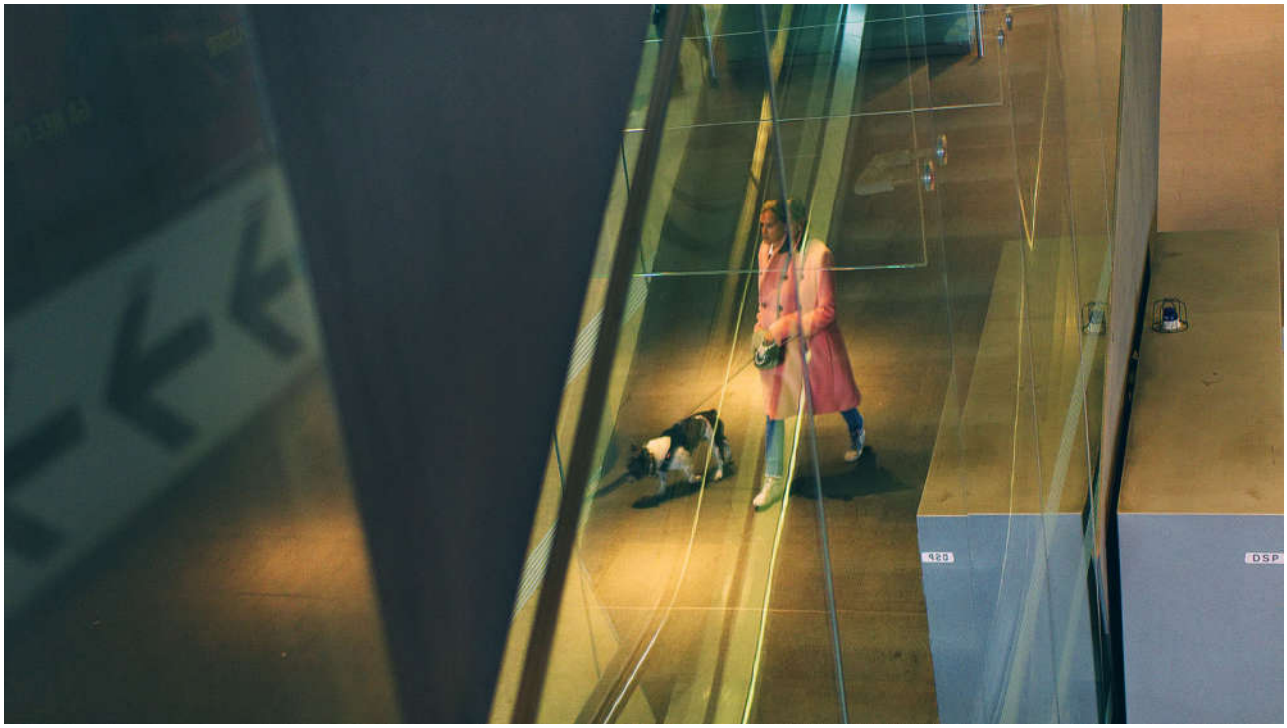
Wandering, Full of Reverie Street Shooters of August 2019



Marc Pennartz on Street Photography

Thank you for talking with me today. Tell me, where are you from and how did you get into photography?

I live in Antwerp, one of Belgium's biggest cities, but I am originally from the Netherlands. Photography has always been a part of my life. My father was a hobby photographer and when I worked as a journalist twenty years ago, I took pictures for the articles that I wrote. Gradually, it started to play a bigger role in my life. Professionally I now work as an SEO copywriter, journalist and content creator, and

have a strong need to make things, to create and to organize, and that can take many forms. Sometimes I write, sometimes I make music, and as a child I drew primitive comics. In essence, there is little difference between taking a photo, writing a song or a book, or designing a website: in the end, it is all about composing, getting interesting elements in the right place, and adding the right tone.

What drew you to street photography specifically?

A few years ago, both my private and professional life was turned upside down by a succession of events. One was the death of both of my parents. I needed something new at the time, and as a tribute to my deceased father, I decided to buy a new camera and start taking photography more seriously – exactly on the day I received his modest legacy. Back then, I didn't think about the term street photography. Only later I understood that my style of photography fell into this category. It suits me because I am more of an observer by nature, rather than a participant. Portraying strangers was something I considered normal. I knew from journalism that photos

thus became a way to let go of my worries and to reconnect with the world. Not by being directly part of it, but by looking at it.

I would call your street photography style "glimpses." I feel like you give viewers just a brief, partial glance into the life of a stranger. It leaves you wanting more, but allows your imagination to fill in the gaps. That's what I see anyway. Would you agree with that? Or how would you describe your street photography style? What are you trying to capture? And what do you hope your viewers see when they look at your photos?

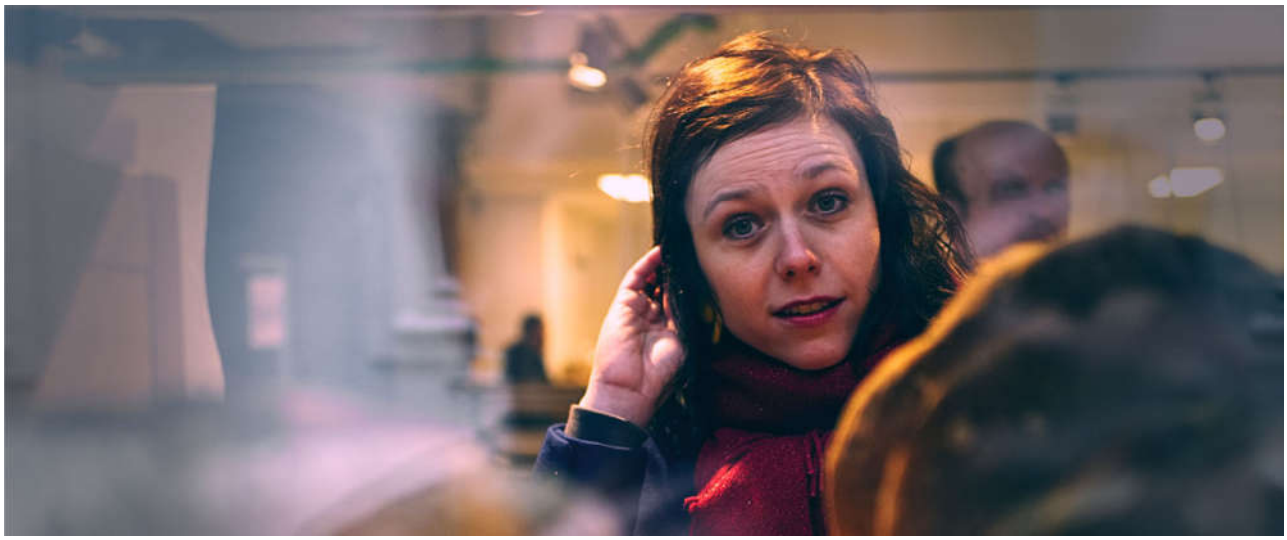
I like this description: glimpses! It is true that I am happy to leave the interpretation of a photo to the viewer. There must be something of a mystery in it, and if the circumstances allow, a level of abstraction. Personally, I am much more attracted to photos that convey an atmosphere or feeling more than a clear message. You can photograph a poor child in a distant country or a beggar at the railway station, or take a street portrait with permission, and such a photo may very well touch your heart, but it is also the type of photos

often and the intended statement is usually so clear.

Images that require some effort from the viewer to understand what it's about, are more interesting, in my opinion. I work very instinctively. If I have a style of my own, it has emerged without much analysis, but I see a common thread. In my work, people almost look like props that were dropped on a stage that they didn't choose themselves, a setting of which they aren't fully aware of either. And isn't that a bit like the way life goes? For most of us, the time that we spend on this planet is little more than a chain of rather coincidental events.

What have been the biggest challenges for you in street photography and how have you overcome them?

Patience and dumb luck. Like many street photographers, I was looking for interesting scenes when I just started out. I wanted interaction between people. However, that proved very difficult here in Antwerp. In Belgium, the weather can change quickly and people tend to live their lives indoors. Also, beautiful light is anything but self-evident here. The sky is gray most of the year and you need to be quick to capture sun, shades or blue skies. To keep street photography interesting in such a setting, you have to experiment. So I go looking for, for example, deviating points of view or reflections, and I like to use environmental or architectural elements in the composition of my photos. If I have the composition right, I usually wait until someone walks into the frame, preferably a person who looks interesting to me. Whether that happens is a matter of patience and dumb luck. You can have tons of talent and the best gear in the world, but if you're not patient and to some extent lucky, you won't get anywhere in street photography.



Where is your favorite place to do street photography and why?

I take eighty percent of my photos in Antwerp, because I live there, in the first place. But I also consciously choose to work mainly here. It may seem strange, because with a population of 520,000, it is just a small, albeit fashionable city by international standards, and as I said, people live more inside than outside. But by always going to the same places, I force myself to find different angles each time, so I won't take any photos that are identical to the ones before. I believe that if you want to get better in a difficult genre like street photography, you shouldn't choose the easiest way and visit Paris, London, Tokyo or other popular street photography destinations, but first stick to your own town, for a while. Does that make Antwerp my favorite city? Every now and then, I go to Brussels, and there street life is a little intenser and the settings are more varied. By the time I have really photographed every Antwerp citizen and tried everything here, it could well be that Brussels will deliver the main part of my output.

What is your most memorable image or experience in street photography?

I find it difficult to select one photo, because my opinion about my own work changes quite a bit over time. You won't find my photos hanging on my wall at home either. I am very critical of what I do. Too critical, I've heard before. I actually get the most pleasure from the photo walks, the search for the right image, and it always goes in a similar way: walking through the city without a preconceived plan and looking for potentially interesting situations. At its best, such walks are almost meditative experiences. I can then go on for hours, feel no fatigue, often not even hunger or thirst, and am purely busy with observation. I'm completely on my own and I do not feel the need to communicate with the people in my photo. I even think you can break the magic if you talk with them. You peel off some of the mystery that you try to put in a photo, when you know more about your subject. And by doing street photography, you also get some exercise!

Beauty. Street photography has sharpened my eye. I'm more able to enjoy beauty in apparently everyday objects and total strangers that I meet. Photography also confirms what writing and making music taught me before: living in the here and now is better than wallowing in the past or worrying about a future. Because when I'm outside to take photos, the past nor the future don't matter. For a few hours, I return to being the child of the past that entertains himself in his own dream world. Free as a bird.

Editor's Note: *To learn more about Marc and see more of his work, be sure to visit his Flickr account, website, blog (in Dutch), and his Instagram account. Marc was selected from our Flickr group (Street Photography Magazine), where we regularly choose photographers' work to be published in our magazine.*

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