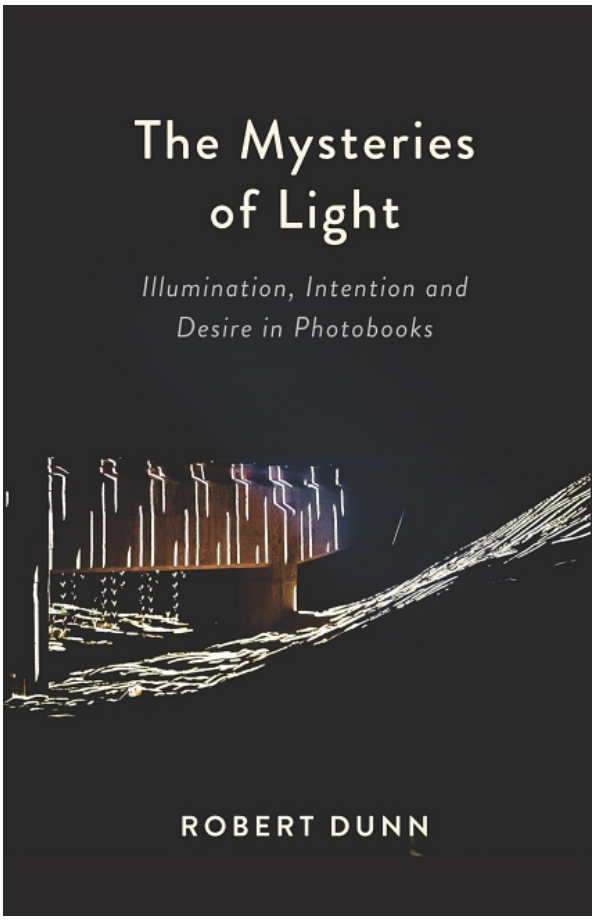

The Mysteries of Light is an original literary meditation on photobooks. It's personal and passionate, fun, lively, informative, inspiring, and will help you understand photobooks—and get you jazzed about them—in a whole new way.

The Mysteries of Light:
Illumination, Intention and Desire In Photobooks
By Robert Dunn

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ROBERT DUNN

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Why I Love Photobooks

And some of the ones I love

1 – The Radiant Jukebox

It all starts with one photo. The jukebox in the New York City bar in Robert Frank's *The Americans*, by my count, the fourth jukebox pictured in the book, the one that's pure light, glowing top and middle and bottom-sides, its no-doubt candy-colored exuberance turned into simple black and white, highly contrasted, the light framing a man's arm thrusting into the photo from the right, a bar sign also reduced to pure light floating above a couple at a checkered-cloth table, nursing their beers … but of course it's the jukebox that's the star of the photo, holding center stage, broadcasting its glow, embodying every promise and joy of a record machine, kicking out tunes to dance to, fall in love to, or as the couple in the picture are surely doing, simply talking, drinking, maybe humming along to Sinatra or Elvis as he sings up a storm.

If at some holy center of art every medium melts down into another, then this photo is music is visual art is structure and intent, is deliverance and relief—is Rembrandt and Kerouac (obviously) and Mark Rothko and Buddy Holly and (of course) the Big Bopper, even if "Chantilly Lace" was still a couple years away from spinning majestically on this particular reverent machine.

Yes, the New York City bar jukebox is the *fourth* one in *The Americans*, which is why this is a piece on why I love photobooks. Because the jukebox is, as the art teachers would say, a motif. It's an image of import to Frank and to his vision of us, and it's the

fourth because I'm looking at this photo (over and over, in the same way I re-spin a great Beatles LP, each time hearing it both fresh and new, yet old and familiar and deep) in a book.

A book. A series of photos. A photobook.

Definition here: By a serious photobook, I do not mean a simple collection of a photographers' snaps, a travel book, a museum catalogue, or any sub-form of the ostensibly uplifting *Family of Man* (except in exceptional cases); I mean a book comprised of photographs (words wholly optional; to my taste, best left out) that becomes a work of literature; the equivalent of a novel, a story collection, a book of poems (or all of the above)—works of words that hold together through one (however complex) vision, one idea, one compelling force.

So one of the joys of *The Americans* are the photos Frank chose, the order he put them in, the motifs he repeated. Think of this: The book is dotted with photos with flags in them, and each one works as a chapter beginning. *The Americans* is a novel, an epic of America, and though Jack Kerouac probably tossed off his intro with a bottle of Jack on the table and his trusty Underwood underhand, a road-whispering tire riff in his brain as the book at hand stood in for the trip he wished he were on, he was still the best choice for a preface: His fame got the book attention, his *On the Road* mimicry suits the shots (and takes nothing from them), and if we're going to put the *On the Road* scroll in the rotunda of the main New York Public Library fifty years after Kerouac pounded it out in three weeks, well, we're also going to fill up galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art with photos and outtakes from Frank's book.

I was there at the Met, taking in *The Americans* exhibition. The photos were stately on the walls, the light, well, art(museum)ful, the text informative, the museum-goers hushed and appreciative. Did the New York City jukebox radiate light? Of course it did, it's the same photo—an artist's print—but in the book it radiates more intensely. Because it's me alone holding the book the way I want to. Because of the other jukebox photos, and the flags, the lost black soul on the New Orleans trolley, the serene black soul in South Carolina, the angry black soul in San Francisco, the dead soul in his coffin back in South Carolina, the

memorial crosses lining the road in Idaho, the two proceeding crosses, the shrouded body outside of Winslow, Arizona … it's as Kerouac says, "you end up finally not knowing anymore whether a jukebox is sadder than a coffin."

There's a depth of sadness in Frank's America to rival Faulkner's South or Melville's star-crossed seamen or Gatsby's green light or Springsteen's Jersey losers … it's all there, you can read and reread *The Americans* over and over, and it always pays off. It's never one photo or even any grouping, it's all of them together, and the stories they tell.

That's a great photobook: photobook as book, photobook as novel, photobook as singular work of art.

What's not to love?

2 – The Looming Tricycle

TAKE ANOTHER PHOTO. A key one for me is William Eggleston's tricycle, on the cover of his *Guide*. I still can't get over the angle at which the trike is shot; Eggleston presumably flat on the ground, hugging it, the little kids' bike the most important thing in this suburban ranch-house world.

It is also in color.

I can't recall exactly whether *William Eggleston's Guide* was the first photobook I bought, or whether it was Bill Burke's *I Want to Take Picture*. I was working at *The New Yorker* magazine in the mid-'70s and early '80s, then pushing along as a short story writer and novelist, that's pretty much all I was, but I'd been to Thailand and was fascinated by the ICP show in 1987 of Burke's work. I can remember wondering if I could afford the book, deciding I couldn't—I was truly struggling back then, living in a $90-a-month East Village tenement on next to nothing—and buying it anyway. *I Want to Take Picture* made me, well, want to take pictures, which I did assiduously for a couple years with my cheap Nikon EM (all I could afford), and scaring up money for film processing and dreaming of being able to pay for high-quality prints.

Back in those wholly predigital days, I could be a writer with the occasional ream of paper, my trusty Selectric typewriter, and enough postage to put on the self-addressed-stamped-envelope to bring back my submissions. Photography turned out to be just too much rich.

Still, I loved it, and I did pick up a handful of photobooks, including the Burke one and, now that I just pulled it off my shelves, my 1976 edition of *Guide*, which I must've bought earlier. So when I plunged wholeheartedly back into taking pictures and collecting photobooks a decade ago, I took some comfort from thinking I'd had good taste: The few books I'd bought new back in the day were classics.

I digress. I always wanted to shoot color, only color, and there was Eggleston, doing it better than anyone. And making a brilliant book out of it.

That was the thing about *Guide*, it was another great story, welcoming us with its first picture, a white door festooned with a basket of blue flowers. Come on in … maybe. Ease past the dog lapping the gray-blue rain puddle and the scattered puzzle pieces waiting for us on a living room card table—looks like fun … maybe. Of course there's a man strolling a grave yard, and a naked man in an orange-glowing room with spooky graffiti spray-painted on the walls ("Talley Ho," "God," "Mona"), and even further along an elder gent languid in his bedroom, grasping a pistol, an unreadable expression on his face.

Each photo, Eggleston's genius, is ideally composed, nothing obvious, just right. If photographers sometimes work to center subjects, or dally with the Rule of Thirds, Eggleston works by his own rules of composition—rules broken but always in just the best way. Everything, in composition and subject matter, is off-center enough to catch our eye, make us speculate as to what's going on, and draw us into Eggleston's world. He more than most photographers has what we prize in literature: a voice.

Now that Steidl seems in the process of putting out nearly every good photo Eggleston ever took, it's remarkable how all-present his voice is. Butt him up against his Southern contemporary, William Christenberry, and you can well see how voice works. Christenberry has one, too, a way of depicting roadside

buildings and signs in a way all his. Eggleston trumps him, of course. He can shoot a building and make it his own, but he can also, as he does in his *Guide*, shoot a green shower or an open-door oven and make that his own, too. Try that: Pick the most banal, everyday thing you can find, and invest it with grace and significance.

That's the great power of *Guide*, how common nearly all the subjects are, yet how rich and meaningful and perfect they loom. I can recall spending long amounts of time looking at the shot of the lit-briquette barbecue, placed between the right wheel of an old car and a man with a clenched fist, placed just right with another tricycle, this one with streamers attached to the handlebars.

Why do I get so lost in this shot? It has fire, a burst of energy and light not that far from Frank's radiant jukebox, and somehow every object and line of the concrete is … right. I keep using that word, *right*, because I can't, and am not sure anyone can, explain why all these photos work, just that they do. The photos work. The book works. Sometimes that's all that need be said. Further words can diminish the impact, the purity of the ever-rich experience of a great photobook.

And in *Guide*, all the shots are in color.

Justly famous is the shot of a distant female relative in her flowered dress, smoking, and sitting on a crazily-floral outdoor porch glider. As Eggleston puts it, "I remember I found the color of her dress and the chair very exciting, and everything worked out instantly.… I don't think I would have moved her in any way. I'm still very pleased with the photograph." Add that to what makes a great photobook: a gathering of instants that work out just that fast, that need not be changed in any way.

What make this photo of Eggleston's relative (her name's Devoe Money) work for us is the crazy contrast of flowered dress and cushions, the jumble of colors and shapes, almost too much, but of course not too much. It's a photo that could only work in color, and so it's good to recall that back in the 1960s and '70s, when Eggleston started working in color, how radical a move it was.

I don't think there's a photo in *Guide* that would work half as

well in black and white. The way the colors fall, their extreme, at times Gothic qualities, and the way color itself becomes such a vivid compositional effect … no, there's no other way the book can be. Color, when taken seriously, adds a whole new dimension to photography, makes it a geometric chess game, a Ginger Rogers in heels doing everything the classic black-and-white photographers did, but in a more difficult way. That challenge of making shots work in color inspired my own work, and countless others. And of course now black and white seems a little quaint, a clearly "artistic" choice. One piece in this volume, about *Astres Noirs*, even talks about how photos made on smartphones in 2016 have been bled of color and rendered in black and white—in ways, a radical return to the world Eggleston (and compatriots such as Stephen Shore and Joel Sternfeld) blew up all those years ago.

3 – The Nothing Photographs

Here's a story I love to tell about how photobooks have worked on me.

Back in the late 1960s, when I was a teenager, I used to spend a lot of time at the L.A. Free Press Bookstore, Los Angeles's counterculture book emporium on Fairfax Blvd., and I have a clear memory of seeing a small white book with a bunch of pictures of gas stations, then another, a similar-looking one, that folded open and showed every building on the Sunset Strip—and I thought they were the stupidest thing I'd ever seen.

The Strip, where as a music-loving, *Riot on the Sunset Strip*–type denizen, was a place I spent a lot of time; there were some great clubs, but there were an awful lot of boring buildings, too, and this guy, whoever he was, had photographed every one. Boring? Yes. Way boring.

And gas stations? In L.A. back then they were everywhere. So what?

The thing is, I remember vividly thinking that: How stu-

pid, how boring. So now I own copies of all of Ed Ruscha's plain-white-covered books, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, *Various Small Fires*, *Some Los Angeles Apartments*, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, *Thirtyfour Parking Lots*, *Nine Swimming Pool and a Broken Glass*, and *Real Estate Opportunities*. Back at the Free Press Bookstore they cost $2.00 or so. Seemed like a fortune. Needless to say, I've paid a bit more for copies in the last ten years.

The thing is, though there's really nothing much to look at in Ruscha's "White Album" books, each volume emits an unwavering power and compelling interest. Like many of the photobooks I love, I can't explain what makes them so magical; or at least, I don't want to sully the books with too many or the wrong words.

But each Ruscha white book has enormous presence. They've been called the first artist's books that are more works of art than books, and it's hard to argue with that (the much older me says). The size is right, the paper, the minimalist printing, the almost silky glassine wrappers, the purposefully blank pages, the perfect banality of most of the shots, and yet the occasional surprise, such as the glass of milk following the Small Fires … yes, it's all just right.

The remarkable thing about Ruscha's books is how many rip-offs they've inspired. I own a book that's nothing but takes on his White Album: *None of the Buildings on Sunset Strip*, *17 Parked Cars in Various Parking Lots Along Pacific Coast Highway Between My House and Ed Ruscha's*, even the most perfect rip-off, *Various Blank Pages*. There are dozens, perhaps hundreds, and they keep coming.

So Ruscha's White Album books have had more direct effect on the world than any other artist's book or photobook. I guess there's something in the essential nothingness that makes people think they can make something artful out of riffing on Ruscha's initial ideas. They've persuaded printers, maybe publishers, possibly their friends … and the books keep coming.

You've got to give the imitators props for being so brazen, but none of their books work anything close to Ruscha's originals. The originals … they hold their power, their perfection, and though I don't get all that much from actually "reading"

them, I always know where they are in my office, and simply having them there makes the room richer, fuller, more artful. Nothingness as compelling presence … a nifty trick, indeed.

4 – The Inexplicable, Transcendent Glow

One of my earliest serious photobook purchases (circa 2012) was a book in a tattered plastic bag thumbtacked to a corkboard in a used bookstore in New York's East Village. It was a lot of money, but as I looked through it I saw something I'd never seen before, and haven't since: mostly night shots in black and white in which light appeared to rise off the page. That is, whatever is a light source on the page, bulbs strung along the tents of an outdoor circus, a cooking fire under a bridge, the light inside a trolley car, the window of a restaurant called Suzy, even whatever catches illumination glistening along a cobblestone street … in this photobook, all light is so intense that the photographs don't simply depict light, they truly glow.

Glow as if actual bulbs are implanted in the aged paper!

The book, of course, is Brassai's *Paris du Nuit*, and the reason it was pricey (but, fortunately, not that pricey) was that it was the original iteration from 1933, in purest gravure. I've just been looking at my copy, went to get a cup of tea, and thought I'd better wash my hands before squeezing the teabag, lest I get ink all over it—even though the ink dried well over eighty years ago. (It's rumored that printers of the book died from too much gravure, however that might work.)

What is true is that although all further printings of *Paris by Night* (and its more disreputable cousin, *The Secret Paris of the Thirties*) show us excellent photographs with strong angles, memorable composition—there's a shot toward the end with four people inside a cab that Woody Allen cribbed for *Midnight in Paris*—and a vivid near chiaroscuro, there is no actual book like its first printing in 1933. All the others show us a master photographer; the original offers us light itself.

Is there a story to *Paris du Nuit*? I believe that *story*, if nothing else, a synonym for a cohering principle, is essential to a good photobook. By story I by no means expect an actual plot or characters or anything, just an idea that holds it all together, gives the book shape. Brassai's book has a rudimentary "story," but one that's powered other great photobooks such as Cartier-Bresson's defining *Decisive Moment*. I'll call this story the notings of a serious *flaneur* with a perfect eye. That is, is it enough to shape a book by sending out a photographer possessing this great eye to walk around a city, see what he or she sees, and capture what they can?

I believe so, with the codicil that even if the photos come from simply walking about, the book itself takes place in editing, the choosing and ordering. Note that *Paris du Nuit* is comprised only of photos shot at night. Follow its rhythms, from the mostly distant shots that open the book, to the excitements and gaieties of people toward the end. You know it's a great photobook because no photograph in it feels misplaced or wrong. Because it's as seamless an experience as a powerful novel. Because like any work of literature, the great photobook invites you in, takes you somewhere, leaves you changed by the end.

All of which Brassai's masterpiece does.

And, oh, yeah … that enrapturing light.

It should be clear by now that I adore light, especially as it appears in photographs and certainly in photobooks.

And it could be argued that putting light (and dark) on a page is at bottom all black-and-white photography actually does.

What's indisputable is that no book does that more powerfully, magically than the original *Paris du Nuit*.

5 – The Rain-Streaked Window

And then there's color … again.

Long before color was a glint in Eggleston's eye, color photos crept into mass magazines, around the time Dorothy in

The Wizard of Oz got swept up in a tornado and wasn't in Kansas any longer, but it really wasn't till the Eggleston-Shore-Sternfeld 1970s that it was taken seriously in art photography. This doesn't mean great photographers weren't shooting color before, just that it was still an outlier. Artists such as Paul Outerbridge played around with color in his studio-shot still lifes. The Danish photographer Keld Helmer-Petersen got even more ambitious in 1948, devoting a whole large-sized book, *122 Colour Photographs*, to shots he believed could only work in color. The photos are not wildly adventurous, but they have an originality and stiff beauty as Helmer-Petersen shows us commonplaces such as a stack of bricks, red-fingernailed hands, a locomotive engine, red tanks against a blue sky.

Then there's Saul Leiter.

His book *Early Color* is one of the great, enduring photobooks. It's comprised of shots from 1949 to '70, though the book itself wasn't published until 2006. Leiter was a painter, a black-and-white photographer, a denizen of New York's East Village (evidently he lived around the corner from me when I first moved to the city), and he was never hugely successful till the end of his life. He worked as a fashion photographer, explored the city, and along the way created a unique body of work.

What is a Leiter color photo? It's quiet, even in the hurly-burly of New York City. It's complexly framed, people often shot through windows or as in the cover shot of *Early Color*, an open slat in a Mondrian-painted billboard. A Leiter color photo can blend people with signage in a way that doubles, triples the meaning, as in the photograph of the smoking black gentleman beneath the bold, white-type awning spelling out HOUSE and BAR, behind which is the tail of a truck carrying WALKER'S GIN (MADE WITH IMPORTED BOTANICALS).

And most interesting to me and my own work, Leiter can double, triple, quadruple the layers of the city by shooting passersby through windows, naturally cloudy and a little out of focus, or truly at the mercy of the elements, rain-streaked, snow-flurried, even paint-gobbed. His most interesting photos exist on different planes, the here, the there, the far, the near. These of course are all just one snap of the shutter, but

look at the shots, there's foreground, background, middle-ground, people-ground.

Leiter's also a master of slices and corners of life. Half a foot of leg and shoes atop three visible rungs of a ladder—it's enough for a picture, anything more would be extraneous. Or two hands and five inches of coat sleeve, one hand flourishing an artist's paint brush. Or a left foot tipped against the edge of a train seat across from the sitter. Or umbrellas … just umbrellas, graceful arcs, safety from the rain, floating or bunching up down the street; or in one memorable shot, just the trace of a red curve on the edge of a snow-mushy road.

Shots patterned or broken up or refracted or reflected or mosaicked (in one of his few explanations, Leiter titles one shot "Times Square Mosaic") or abstracted (some reminiscent of Helmer-Petersen, just a lot more complex and interesting) or blurred into what could be paint strokes and dabs.

These are the photographs of a painter, which leads to two shots from Paris in 1959 that could have been painted by Renoir. Presumably that's intentional, the prints just a brief step beyond representational into a look that can only be called impressionistic, but the astonishment is that Leiter pulls it off. These are photos that don't look like photos but instead like paintings. There's a painterlike quality to all of Leiter's color work, as if somehow he can manipulate lens and film like a fine brush. Is there any other photographer so good at this, making unique photos that look like that whole other discipline? It's no doubt a credit to his darkroom skills, choice of film, etc., but really it's the singular quality of his eye.

The eye of an artist.

The photos in *Early Color* are the work of a man who seems to love art first, photography second, and yet has found his inimitable way to make his pictures glow as works of hand-created art. There's a joy, a bounty in each picture. His photos are a little like Beatles' tunes, they always make you feel happy even when they have dark depths, such as songs like "Nowhere Man" or "We Can Work It Out." Leiter's complex colors, his perfect form, the sly, slant, sexy way he sneaks up on a shot … it's hard to think of another photographer who makes you feel so good.

A final personal note. I was fortunate to get my copy of *Early Color* signed by Leiter the year before he died. He was at his longtime gallery, Howard Greenberg, sitting at a small table, grinning hugely. After signing my book, he picked up a couple of small rubber stamps by his side, and plunging them into a red-ink pad, he gleefully stamped my book.

I'm looking at it now. There's a circle with the initials SL inside it. Then there are two red hearts.

Joyful indeed.

6 – Enough … Too Much

Then there's Daido Moriyama.

What if you get sick of what you're doing? You've done art, invented new ways to make books—Xerox machines in rented storefronts, perhaps the original pop-up show—and become a preeminent photographer … and then you get sick of it. Do you stop, or do you go so totally over the top in your rejection of your life's work that you make arguably your best book, and then propel a further life of work that seems to get richer and more intense as the artist moves through his eighth decade.

I'm talking about Daido's 1972 book, *Shashin Yo Sayonara*, translated most often as *Bye-Bye Photography*. It's a thick book, a dump of photos with negatives blurred, scratched, light-bled in development, some keeping their sprockets, photos hyper-exposed, cast off … every possible thing you can do to film and photographs when you're furious with them and no longer give a damn … all coming together in one of the most beautiful, powerful photobooks ever. (For someone's who is ostensibly giving up photography, given the number of shots in the book, he sure wants to go out with a big bang.)

I'm lucky enough to own an original, but the first copy I got was the excellent reproduction from Steidl's *Japanese Box*. There they were, the three Provoke books, Araki's *Sentimental Journey*, Takuma Nakahira's *For a Language to Come*, and then *Bye-Bye*

Photography. I pretty much knew what I was getting into, but let's say you're mostly familiar with the Western canon and thought Daido's book might be a somewhat normal photobook, the kind you see in stacks on a table in a Barnes and Noble. You pick it up expecting a collection of pictures that will take you some place, show you hopefully decisive moments, give you a glimpse into a world you might someday want to travel to … and it's not till the fifth picture in the book that you can even kind of make out something recognizable: fish and/or dolphins in an aquarium.

Even this photo's mostly a blur and wash of light, but there, clearly, is a long fishlike entity; so, yes, it's representational, if that's what you need. So, you're thinking, these actually are pictures of real things … and you go back two photos and finally figure out that the white thing that fills most of the frame is a close-up of a pair of briefs, on a male body (Daido's? probably), wrinkles and seams clearly denoting that.

O.K. It's going to be *that* kind of book. A book whose reigning principle is that there are no principles or rules or anything else in photography. I don't know how the book was taken in Japan in 1972, but it's not hard to imagine that anyone who thinks of photography as actual pictures is confused, angry, disgusted. *Bye-Bye Photography* is the premiere of Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps*, it's Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, it's Dylan going electric at Newport, it's the Sex Pistols banging away in 1977 … loud and raucous and assaultive and the beginning of a new way to take in and understand the world.

Moriyama back then is surely confused, angry, disgusted, too, and this inner state has found a rare shape in his "mess" of a book. If some of the best things art can do are to start to fly off the rails, and yet not; to break down boundaries nobody else knows are there; to assault us with a pure chaos that as we begin to understand its underlying rationale becomes a whole new way to order experience … *Bye Bye Photography* accomplishes this in spades.

Daido himself calls the book one of "pure sensation without meaning," also saying it's the book closest to his heart. He asks, "Could one give meaning to the meaningless act of printing a

simple black and white of a frame that by accident recorded nothing?"

Except it's hardly nothing. *Bye Bye Photography* captures the edges of sight, the far boundaries of the world as we take it in. Here's how Daido puts it: "We perceive countless images all day long and do not always focus on them. Sometimes they are blurry, or fleeting, or just glimpsed out of the corner of the eye. Our sense of sight, which is active all day long, cannot be constantly coming to rest."

So everything Daido's masterpiece shows us is there in the world. We just haven't seen it before. Now we do.

And these edges, once seen, can never be unseen. The photobook as world-expander, as guide to the barely known, as celebration of empty walls, blown-out faces, a sea of rooftops, a vague line on a city street.

What I—what we all—learn from Moriyama's work is that we can photograph anything, and our worst, least-understood photos might be our best.

Of course it helps that it's Moriyama's eye and unshakable editorial coherence at work. There are countless billions of bad photos out there these days, just poke around Facebook or Instagram, but only genius can put them together into a book that not only makes these nothing photos make sense, it also changes the world.

7 – Punks on the Boardwalk, Guns in the Streets

As DAIDO DEMONSTRATES so well, a photobook can ignore all interest in depicting a graspable world—showing us people doing what they do, probing society—and get away with it. But a great photobook can also go right into a world, the characters who inhabit it, and bring back not only enduring shots but also clear understanding. I'm thinking about documentary photobooks in which the quality of the shots lifts the book beyond

just telling us what's going on. I'm thinking in particular about Bruce Davidson's *Brooklyn Gang* and Susan Meiselas's *Nicaragua*.

Brooklyn Gang is the record of Davidson's hanging out with a Brooklyn gang called The Jokers. Straight society got all worked up about juvenile delinquents (JDs in parlance) back in the 1950s, witness such flicks as James Dean's *Rebel Without a Cause*, and in 1959 Davidson reached out to a social worker to make contact with The Jokers. (The book itself hails from 1998, one of the last gravure print books ever, beautifully put together by Twin Palms.)

I'm writing about *Brooklyn Gang* specifically because it took almost forty years for Davidson's shots to make it into a book (though on my desk right now I have a copy of the Summer 1962 issue of *Contemporary Photographer*, the "Bruce Davidson Issue," with a number of the Brooklyn photographs in it). That's hardly because JDs were still news in 1998. Indeed, few things in our current world are more amusingly quaint than straight 1950s America getting all bent out of shape by teenagers with slightly long greasy hair who smoked cigarettes, drank from the bottle, and danced to that wild rock and roll music. (Davidson tells us that a few years after the photos were taken, drugs ravaged the gang members; a far more serious situation.)

No, the photos in *Brooklyn Gang* were collected because 1) they're all wonderful, moody, evocative, enduring shots; and 2) because they continue to tell a powerful, personal story. It's the same reason we still read James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* about tenant farmers in the Depression, or Tom Wolfe's *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* and Joan Didion's *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* about the California '60s. These books aren't merely sociology or even history, they're literary works worth reading in their own right.

The characters in *Brooklyn Gang*, like characters in a great novel, slowly take shape for us. Davidson captures such telling moments in their daily lives that we begin to know them. It's only in an afterword circa 1998 that we learn some of the characters' names and personal fates, but knowing any of that's hardly important to what we get simply from the shots in the book. Davidson captures anxiety, anguish, confusion, toughness,

kids posing as tough, loneliness, flirting, the joys of dancing, the stirrings of teenage sex (a particularly evocative shot, a shirtless boy and a girl necking in the back seat of a car, turned up as the cover shot of Bob Dylan's 2009 album, *Together Through Life*), moments of teenage braggadocio followed by uncertainty and despair, fights, tenement gymnastics, cool ways to smoke cigarettes, showing off a new tattoo, a tender moment in a nighttime park, and the pure pleasure of, as the Drifters put it a few years later in 1964, life under the boardwalk: *Out of the sun, having some fun, people walking above, falling in love*….

Here's the basic test for a great photobook: Is there one shot in the book that is weak and doesn't belong? The answer in *Brooklyn Gang*: not a one.

And some, such as the famous shots of a girl combing her hair in the mirror of a Coney Island cigarette machine and another girl pinning up her hair in the glow of a jukebox, are as good as photography's ever gotten.

The same applies to Meiselas's 1981 book, *Nicaragua*. Meiselas, a Magnum photographer, went to Nicaragua to cover the end of the Somoza regime and the Sandinista revolution, which she does brilliantly; but she also made an enduring book of enduring photos. As with a reportorial book such as Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* on the Spanish Civil War, Meiselas's book is not simply a record of what happened but a work of literature. It's history—and it's the history of the war that shapes the book—but it's far more than that. Meiselas has captured a deeply felt human story, a unique take on the violence of civil war (the equal of Robert Capa, also in the Spanish war), and photos with a power to move us no matter what they were about.

Particular standouts include a yellow-glare of triumphant, Sandinista-flag-waving motorcyclists running toward us; a dark silhouetted gunman standing guard at a corner of a burned-out town; a fighter teaching a cock-eyed woman to shoot a pistol; and the startling cover shot of masked revolutionaries behind a row of sandbags. Meiselas is so close to the fighting, the violence—she's so damn *present*—that her fearlessness and bravery are hardly noticed. She's just there. Right in the middle of it. Capturing the war and making photos that would be great in any context.

And she did it in color.

In 1981, color was still relatively new, somewhat suspect, for serious photography. Perhaps Meiselas needed to shoot color to get her photography into magazines around the world, but for that purpose she hardly needed to shoot it so well. Take one shot: a row of rebel soldiers with heads stuck out of a school bus, a Sandinista flag flowing along the bus's side. The top third of the shot is a bar of school-bus yellow and the gun- and fist-flourishing soldiers. The second third is the bold red of the flag, the bottom third the black of the flag. It's a perfectly composed shot, presumably grabbed split-second as the bus ran by. In *Nicaragua*, we're not just getting timeless war reportage, neither are we simply getting decisive, telling moments that make a long-ago civil war fresh to us. What we're getting are photos fiercely composed in color, taking full advantage of an artist's wide pallet, making strong statements just in the way the colors fall on the page.

I again can't resist the old Ginger Rogers riff: How she did everything Astaire did, but backward in heels. That's Susan Meiselas shooting color in the dead center of a violent war, in 1981, when serious color photography was so new that that year it got its first book, Sally Eauclair's *The New Color Photography*. Nobody in this landmark collection was shooting war photographs, and curiously Meiselas didn't make it into any of Eauclair's collections. But along with Eggleston, Stephen Shore, Joel Sternfeld, and Helen Levitt, Meiselas's color work helps define the advent of color as a serious medium.

I love color. I shoot only color. And I can still remember the thrill of the photos in that first edition of *Nicaragua* I bought when it came out. Last year, I met Meiselas and asked her to sign my copy of her book. She did: "To Bob, from long ago."

Yep, long ago in years, but in the timeline of enduring art, just the other day … and all days to come.

8 – Over, Under, Sideways, Down

I LIVE IN New York, so I shoot mostly in New York. Yet I hesitate to call myself a "street photographer" because it sounds dated, as if I wanted to hang out on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 57th Street along with Garry Winogrand and Joel Meyerowitz, in the same way I might want to play guitar down in a folk club in the Village so I can be Bob Dylan or thrash away at CBGB's before it became a trendy clothing store. All that *was* a long time ago.

But still the streets, especially of New York, with its incessant jumble, parade of characters, ever-pulsing energy … you can still get strong photographs on the streets of New York.

But will anyone ever again make a book that shouts and cries, pulses and leaps, with the energy and abandon of William Klein's *Life Is Good and Good For You in New York*?

When the Beatles hit America in 1964 and "I Want to Hold Your Hand" was the No. 1 record everywhere, folksingers took up electric instruments, kids who never gave music a thought learned guitar, and everyone grew out their hair. The world changed—and fifty years later, the Beatles can still change the world.

So can Klein's *New York*, now sixty years on. Boom, you see the book—especially a first-edition gravure copy, though Errata's version can stand in—and it can make you change the way you shoot, haunt street corners, then yearn to put everything you have into books that desire to be livelier and crazier than anything else out there.

There are pictures I love in *New York*, but the greatness of the work is how as a book it skirts the border of New York madness. It's subtitled *Trance Witness Revels*, and that's the deal: *New York* as psychedelic experience a decade before LSD took off. The book's a phantasmagoria of city life … and yet it *is* city life. Again, that's the astonishment of photography: You gotta be there to take the pictures. Klein was there. Got all the shots, from the pre-Provoke masterpieces of blur and indefiniteness, to the straight-up shots of guys walking around with signs, crowds

pressed together, Brooklyn Dodgers fans in the stands, to the general weirdness of our streets, the dwarf held high on a man's shoulders, the famous shot of the boy shoving his toy gun into our faces, the huge, mysterious question mark drawn on the rear door of a delivery truck stopped on a cobblestoned street.

New York rattles, pulses, nearly explodes with its energy, and all that's in how it works as a book: photos all different sizes, collaged or alone, one per spread, almost a dozen per spread, loosely themed but not burdened by the rough breakdown into chapters, faces mute, faces overexpressive, parts of the city you barely notice, people way in your face in classic New York City style.

It's all here, the whole city, circa 1954 and '55, for sure, yet as with any of these photobooks I'm treating as enduring literature, Klein's *New York* is as alive today as when the book was first conceived. The movies on the marquees change, Daido Moriyama found different ones during his first visit to NYC in '71, and Robert DeNiro as Travis Bickle walked beneath other marquees in '76's *Taxi Driver*, but the city—the irreducibly pounding and ecstatic city (trance reveling indeed) doesn't change. It's Klein's, it's ours, and it's here forever in his book.

9 – How Close Can You Get?

The photos in my books are all taken on the street or under it, mostly in my home of New York City; and I shoot with a 23-mm Fuji X100F, so if I want an intimate picture, I simply follow the fixed-lens mantra: If you want to zoom in, just get closer.

As I walk about with my Fuji, I have a few rules, one of which is that I don't talk up anyone who's picture I take, I just take it. So sometimes I can get close, in a crowd, say, where my camera flies up and captures somebody's face inches from where I am. And I like close, like the intimacy a photograph can bring, but I also need my anonymity. I don't go so far as a Walker Evans to grab my subway photos—Evans painted his Contax camera black and hid its body under his coat—but I also don't have to.

A lot of people on the NY subway have cameras these days, I'm just one of them. But I also agree with Evans when he wrote about the book of his subway shots, *Many Are Called*: "The guard is down and the mask is off."

Stripping away the mask, getting as close to human truth as you can, is one of photography's highest aims.

Evans certainly got close, but there was still the width of a subway aisle between him and his subjects. A photographer who really gets close, in every possible way, is the masterful Swedish photographer Anders Petersen, an artist for whom I have the purest admiration.

I'm flipping through his *City Diary* now. Close for Petersen is: a plump nude woman on her bed, a *Nosferatu* tattoo on her shoulder; a man with a heavily bandaged right eye talking on his cell phone; a bride with a bouquet juxtaposed with a close-up of a surgeon's hand going into a body; an odd-looking balding gentleman, his comb-over curling curiously between eye and ear; and, oh, right next to him, a spare tire leaning against a building wall.

A *City Diary* indeed, Petersen walking about camera in hand, grabbing whatever's interesting, but also pushing in … talking to subjects, getting them to pose, getting involved … really involved. Look, a few pages later, a picture of Petersen himself looking beat-up, blood dripping down his chin.

Petersen's known for full immersion. His best-known book, *Café Lehmitz*, is Petersen learning his craft by spending a lot of time in a bar in Hamburg in the late 1960s, heading home only to process his film. He tells us that he slept in the kitchen, no doubt drank as heavily as the café's regulars, and ended up publishing a book that basically forevermore makes further bar photography redundant. We get incipient brawls, a woman raising her top and squeezing her naked breasts, some slinky dancing, breast nuzzling, a hand up a woman's skirt as another woman delightedly leans around a post, and finally the last shot, an empty table, beer bottle coasters and a sparsely filled ashtray on it, as a few feet back a jukebox nearly as radiant as Robert Frank's glows over two men's legs. Other photographers have tried to capture bar culture, but nobody will do it as well, as completely, as timelessly as Petersen did.

And that's the thing, at bottom *he was there*. Living there. Hanging out. No doubt drinking, maybe hitting on women. Getting ragged on for always taking pictures, but never an interloper, a dispassionate observer. *He was there*.

In his photobooks, Petersen continues to be there, fully there, wherever he is. He always passes the basic test: Every photo in every book is interesting, revealing, vital. You have to admire his unerring eye, his quick shutter finger, the extremes (and sometimes banalities) of his subject matter, his heavy-contrast black-and-white shots, his always-right editing in his photobooks.

But most of all Petersen goes places, places I don't go (and I bet, most of you reading this also don't go); and if you do hang out in such disreputable joints, think about how difficult it be to photograph anything coherent, let alone artful. I mean, Petersen gets the shit beat out of him and still takes powerful shots!

But that's only one reason Petersen's great. Every shot he brings back from his sojourns tells us something nobody else can, and also makes it clear that what he's discovered are things we need to know. It's kind of a miracle, isn't it?

10 – Theaters of the Mind

Awhile back I went to a talk with Hiroshi Sugimoto in honor of the latest issue of his *Theaters* photobook series. He talked about sleeping in cheap motels, having to stand in theaters for two hours at a time while a movie played and he captured its passage on his eight-by-ten camera, then going back to his cheap motel, developing the negative, realizing he hadn't gotten what he wanted, then going back the next day to do it all over again—dedication.

But what caught me was one of the last exchanges, about how Sugimoto has these visions in his inner mind that he uses his camera to try to capture in the real world; to, as he put it, "Let everyone see what I see."

What intrigued me was this question of the balance between

inner vision and the outside world, and how photography can bridge the two. And what really grabs me is the question of how much the camera isn't simply a tool to make manifest on paper what one wants or hopes to see, but is an actual actor in that process; that is, how much the camera itself enters into the magical melding of inner intent and external, real world.

I think about this because in my own work with my Fuji X100 I let the camera have its way as much as it wants. Sometimes I just fling it about. The second day I owned the camera I trained it on a copper sculpture inside a pop-up gallery in Soho a friend and I had wandered into, and when I looked at the pictures I took I saw nothing but shards of light flying off abstract copper-colored shapes.

My mind was blown. I didn't intend these pictures, I just pointed this camera I barely knew how to operate at the sculptures. (Again, this was my first day of shooting with the camera I'd scrambled to purchase the day before; at first issue, the Fuji X100 was as hard to get as a new iPhone.) Some of the shots show the copper plates hanging from the ceiling just as they were, but the next few photos were nothing but bursts of brilliant light and abstract shape. I didn't create these, the camera did. And yet it's my camera, and I pushed the shutter button.

So whose photos are they? And where did they come from?

Yes, they're my photos, since I did the bare minimum of effort to get them. (And, no, I have never taken a photo that demanded I spend a week watching movies unspool one after another in a dark theater. And, no, my photos don't yet fetch tens of thousands at auction houses.)

Where did my shots come from? That's the truly intriguing question, perhaps in all artful photography. We rarely call a photographer an artist who is sent out by a publication (or even themselves) to capture an actual image and bring it back for some useful purpose. That's just work.

And we may not call a photographer an artist when he or she has a vivid inner vision that they painstakingly work to realize in a print we call can look at—if that's all they do.

No, the art comes in when the mystery and magic also come in. When the photographer is surprised, either by the moment

they've captured on the street, or, say, the heaven-glowing movie theater screen put perfectly onto a print. The unknowable mind and soul of the camera have to be involved in the art. Of course it's the person working the camera who takes the credit, but the camera often times does just what the camera wants. At best, all we may do is simply set it loose.

Which is as it should be.

At his talk, Sugimoto waved his hands, smiled, and said, "Yes, it's all there in a relationship between what I see in my head and what's out there in the real world and what the camera itself does." He laughed. "The exact nature of that relationship is always changing, never certain."

So that's why I love photography, and why I love a good photobook. Because photography is such a perfect medium for inner vision made manifest. Because it's so full of serendipity, the kind of serendipity implied in the famous Cartier-Bresson "decisive moment" quote: the unexpected instant of revelation that a great photographer can grab because they're inside that moment; more, that they're inside the whole flow of moments—inside time itself—that lead to the actual picture we're looking at.

Photographers grab lots of moments, then choose which ones work. Spending time with *Looking In*, the essential companion to *The Americans*, is hugely instructive. In *Looking In* we can study Frank's proof sheets. Look at them. Sometimes there are three shots of any given subject, of which two of them are duds but one has everything going for it and ends up in his masterpiece. But quite often there are two snaps, sometimes only one. These photos in *The Americans*, so present to me that they often pop into my head at random, as familiar as an old Beatles song, are one of three, two, sometimes the only take.

Here's the question: Would it make a difference if the shots of Frank's we know so well were the product of dozens of attempts at that photo?

I think it would. One, if it took so many tries, what're the chances Frank would have gotten just the right arrangement of heads inside the New Orleans trolley, just the right glimpse of the bald gentleman between two wide-shouldered gents on the club car to Washington, just the right puckered lips

on one of the top-hatted politicians in Hoboken, New Jersey?

No, too many tries means you're at best guessing, at worst foundering about. A gazillion smartphone snappers can shoot all day and post like mad to Pinterest and not come close to a great photo. No, you have to be fully in the moment, flowing with it, seeing not simply the world around you but the world organizing itself into possible photographs. Look, there's one. You anticipate it electrically, then flick down your finger on the shutter at just the … right … moment—and hope that what you end up looking at (on the screen on a digital camera, in the darkroom) has, well, let's say that mysterious quality that simply blows your mind. Something moving, telling, ineffable….

Humbly knowing that you didn't really choose what the photograph ends up to be, you were there, the camera was there, the outside world was there … and the photograph happened.

It's this mechanical necessity of having to have a camera turned out in some factory to make a photo (how crude compared with Michelangelo's hands!), along with the uncertain relationships of intention and result, thought and practice, and the long unrecognized—and basically inexplicable—desires of the camera itself that made it take so long to treat photography as an art form.

That's because in photography, personal agency—the toiling work of the artist—is at best ambiguous.

Photography is not a ballet, shaped and endlessly rehearsed. It's not a painting, oils scraped off and reapplied to get what the painter wants. It's not a novel with draft after draft filling up files on your computer. (It's not even this paragraph, which I've been retooling for the last hour.) And it's certainly not a movie with a script written, then rewritten, again and again; producers butting heads in; actors cast, fired, new actors hired; a whole army of camera- and soundmen working to shoot dailies; and finally scenes cut and reshaped and moved around, followed by test screenings and box office obsessing. It took a long while for movies to be considered art because so many people were involved, and they were a big business, and who was really the artist anyway? (Turns out it was John Ford and Alfred Hitchcock and Martin Scorsese, directors with manifest and inescapable vision.)

It took photography a long time to be seen as art because wasn't it just somebody out there pushing a shutter button? And what did a photographer do but just that?

No, you can't repaint a portion of a photograph, you can't rewrite it or edit it in a new way. The photograph is a record of an instant (or with Sugimoto, a stream of instances). Nonetheless, it is what it is.

But then there are photobooks. It's in a serious photobook that you can find an artist's thought and intention and purpose. To make a book, you have to edit and move around photographs. You rework it. You can bring all your subtle intentionality and instinct toward the project … your personal agency. You can guess and second guess a book in the way you can't when making anything but the most studio-bound photograph.

Simply, you can make a photobook say a lot more than any one shot. You can orchestrate it, play with a reader's focus, their engagement, even their emotions, humor and sadness, delight or confusion (or both together, as in my Provoke heroes) … you can make a photobook a true theater or museum of the mind.

One glowing Sugimoto theater screen is a lovely thing. Thumbing through a book of them is a near hypnotic experience. The sameness of the eternal white screens, the differences in each theater. The thrilling leap to drive-ins, then the unsettling return to actual indoor theaters toward the end of the new book, this time the glorious theater palaces in ruin, the movie-going public in multiplexes or at home with their huge Samsungs and Netflix.

I'm sure Sugimoto, with his joking asides about being a poor artist and even now staying in cheap motels, will understand another great thing about photobooks: While it's now understood a great photobook is a work of art in its own way, even the most collectible ones are far less expensive than an original Sugimoto or Diane Arbus or Robert Frank print.

Which is great for me, and for all of us who love photobooks.

But the key point is that a print of a photograph is a whole other thing from any photobook that intends to be more than just a catalogue of shots.

That's what I'm getting at in this piece, in this book. That

photobooks are not a new artistic discipline, they're just a somewhat newly recognized discipline. The Badger and Parr history of photobooks has helped a lot in letting us all see this. The flood of new books each year (a number of which I've written about in the rest of *Mysteries of Light*) testifies to how essential this new art form is.

You of course can't have a photobook without photographs, though it's my argument here that there's a huge difference between the two. A straight-up photographer tries to shoot the best photos they can. A photobook artist may or may not be interested in "good" photographs, but the final intent is to make the best book possible: either one composed of nothing but strong shots, such as *The Americans*, or one put together with nothing but nothing shots like Ruscha's white books, or even John Gossage's aptly titled (and fascinating) 2016 book, *A Dozen Failures*.

The book is all. The order of the photos, the way they're laid out, the paper, the cover, the overall tactile experience, the size, the binding, the elements laid in, the surprises (think Warhol's *Index*, with its fold-out castle, Velvet Underground flexi-disc, and that damn red balloon that glues two pages of all extant books together), the way each photobook tells us how it should be read. (My own *Angel Parade* series puts two books back to back, the same way 1950s paperbacks often contained two separate novels; and it burns me no end to have someone stand there in front of me looking at the book, and just keep going forward, not even noticing the pictures have suddenly flipped upside down.)

At bottom, there are near infinite choices in putting together a photobook, and artists today are exploring them all as never before.

But of course, even taking into account the manifest power of the book as a book, it still all comes down to the photos inside the books, the strength, surprise, and mystery of the range of shots, the themes that hold them together, the order they're in, the way one photo plays off the next, building to the best cumulative experience.

An intriguing conundrum, what comes first, the photo or the book, the chicken or the proverbial egg?

The Mysteries of Light is a book on photobooks, and clearly I have my own ideas. Simply, a great photobook is far more than the photos within. A great photobook is a form of literature. Why not?

As I first wrote this, Bob Dylan had just won the Nobel Prize for literature. Some carping voices say he's just a rock and roll musician, what does that have to do with literature? But anyone who knows his work understands he's sui generis, that his songs possess the weight, complexity, and sheer brilliance of the best literature.

So why not photobooks? The best are analogues to a novel, say, or maybe a collection of poems. Frank's *Americans* is at the least a collection of short stories, part Sherwood Anderson, part Faulkner (not to mention the obvious comparison to his pal Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*). Ruscha's *Twentysix Gas Stations* is a collection of short, demotic poems, if not Walt Whitman, certainly William Carlos Williams. Klein's *New York* is a big, galloping novel of the city, part John Dos Passos, part Hubert Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. Daido's books howl like Allen Ginsberg's poems and Dylan's coruscating songs.

I love and cherish my favorite photobooks as I do the novels that first blew open the world for me, the poems that showed every twist and turn of consciousness, the songs I hum when I'm at my most expansive.

A great photo lifts me … and I hope in *Mysteries of Light* to begin to get at the power putting a lot of them together in one book, in the right way, can capture.

So let's let one of these estimable novelists, Jack Kerouac, coming up with a few pages to introduce *The Americans* over sixty years ago, have the last word:

"What a poem this [book] is, what poems can be written about this book of pictures some day by some young new writer high by candlelight bending over them describing every gray mysterious detail, the gray film that caught the actual pink juice of human kind. Whether 't is the milk of human-kindness, Shakespeare meant, makes no different when you look at these pictures.…

"Anybody doesn't like these pitchers don't like potry, see?"

See.

Out on the Street: Rules of Street Photography

Back in January 2020 I wrote about Jeff Mermelstein's *Hardened*, his grand exploration of all things shot out on the street. I mentioned some coincidences between Mermelstein's street work and my own, and also wrote about what separates photographers simply snapping pictures on the street from those who create masterful books of street photography. After spending so much time with Mermelstein's book, I want to set down some of the rules of street photography I've gleaned from his work, as well as from others. I'll start with a general rule, then talk about what we can learn from Mermelstein, and finally add a number of ideas of my own.

1) The first rule, indeed, commandment of taking shots on the street is to ignore any of the dumb rules you've read about what you should do on the street. Here are a few: Only shoot with film, never digital. Don't crop. Don't shoot into the light. Don't shoot color, it's not serious. Always shoot people, and always their faces. You've probably heard more. Twaddle. There really are no rules for street photography, there are only interesting photographs and boring photographs. Indeed, it's always a good idea to not photograph what everybody else seems to be shooting, and it's also probably reasonable to ignore everything I'm saying here, too. That is, as Bruce Springsteen puts in the song that gives this piece it's title, *When you're out on the street, you gotta walk the way you wanna walk*. Go out with confidence, purpose, swagger. And always shoot what *you're* interested in, not what somebody else says is interesting; do your best to make it truly compelling; and don't have too much in your head while you do it. Instinct is all!

On to what I picked up from Mermelstein's *Hardened*, leavened by some thoughts of my own.

1) Details! Study and learn how just a whiff of the right detail can most intriguingly evoke the whole shot. I just now opened *Hardened* to a picture of a hand holding both a white-filtered cigarette and a long cucumber, with a women's shoe in the bottom left corner. There's oddness, tension, and not a waste of a millimeter of space in this photo. Here's a spread a few photos on: a woman's hand with a diamond ring and green nail polish holding some bright orange feathery thing. That's the whole photo, except for the perfectly color-harmonized pale-blue sky. And next to it? Another of Mermelstein's close-ups of near-phantasms, this time a black-and-white chancred foot, with gross nails and a blistery red sore. Yuck! But also far more effective as a photograph than a full shot of a small-in-the-frame destitute man.
2) And next … more details. I titled the Mermelstein piece "In Your Face," because that's often what he shows us. Not a bunch of people full-length with a lot of negative space around then, but souls in orifice-popping detail, hands, feet, pore-cavernous skin, even just hairs on a scalp. And not just people. Here's a shot of a skin-puckered red bell pepper lying by a curb in a Little Italy street, the pepper taking up almost half of the page (with a smoked-down cigarette butt next to it). Why a red pepper in a gutter? Because it's a striking image, an intriguing play of color and shape, and as is usual with Mermelstein, evocative of its origin story, as in, What's that damn pepper doing in the gutter, how'd it get there? Details like this both command our attention and invoke little mysteries.
3) And one more time, Get up-close … even right in people's faces. There's a video out there of Mermelstein shooting on the street where he does just that, time after time, just walks up to somebody and throws his camera

in their faces. Sometimes he gets yelled at. Sometimes flipped off. But that's how he gets those vivid, personal, revealing shots.

4) Be fast. Strong street photos might only make themselves manifest for seconds, even milliseconds. You have to see the shot, then manipulate your camera/phone to capture it. (And you're of course picking up on all the hunting words associated with street photography; obviously no coincidence.) Some of the photos in *Hardened*, like the title shot, are of actual signs … ah, signs on the street. They don't go anywhere, don't move, you can focus and simply take the photo. People doing interesting or exceptional things? Not so simple, not so slow. That red-headed girl, eyes squinched, mouth howling, as she gets her hair grabbed just right? Flash, you got it; blink, it's gone. That great third-eye shot a few pages later, two men talking, the left eye of the man facing us captured in the eyeglasses of the man facing him … that eye floating there, yes, a third eye … I've gone for shots like that myself. A whisper of a breath later and the floating eye is bisected by the rim of the glasses, or simply not there. Fast … yep, up-close and fast, and—

5) Then know when to pull back. Mermelstein is out there shooting without any agenda other than to take pictures, so when he sees something compelling, he goes for it. Most often they're the close-ups of people or vegetables or even cutlery and broken glass (as in one shot), and the closeness helps make them interesting. But in other photos it's simply what's going on that makes it worth our attention. A woman in a wide bell-shaped hat before a Chinatown nut and candy store, a bright yellow happy-face balloon in a corner. A woebegone girl between two puffy-sleeved arms. Another girl almost flying out of a taxi window, held back by her mother. Mermelstein knows also how to layer photos. Another striking one has a plastic cup and arm sleeve on the right, and behind it in full view a black man lying back while talking on a phone, what looks like a prone scooter between his legs.

These are all shots in the moment, photos grabbed on the street, something strange or interesting catching his eye and … he goes for it.

6) Which leads to another important rule, you don't need (or even want) people to pose for you, or really even know you're taking their picture. You want to capture a consciousness that is about *their* business, not yours. I've rarely seen a posed picture that tells me more than, Here I am, posing for a picture. Or, Here I am, showing the world what I want to show them. Sure, we love posed pictures of beautiful celebrities (with their penumbra of presumed intimacy by dint of their fame), but the souls shot on the street are mostly just whoever's walking by, as interesting as Aunt Sue's shopping mall pal or an office worker scampering to lunch.
7) Though to be fair there are a few photographers who shoot set-up street portraits and are able to make each photo their own, to pull out of the characters they photograph something deeper and truer than what their poses want us to know. I'm thinking of Diane Arbus, of course, but also Jamal Shabazz, with his proud street shots, and Hiroh Kikai, in *Asakusa Portraits*, gentle and profound photos of the quirky souls who populate the Asakusa district of Tokyo. But powerfully revealing portraits as those from these masters come from a full-time pursuit by dedicated artists, not from just asking somebody on the street if they'd like their photo taken, then focusing carefully and snapping it.
8) Which means you don't actually have to look through your camera's viewfinder, or what passes for it on an iPhone. Just snap away with your camera or phone from any position. See what happens. Surprise yourself.
9) Which is to say, Why not shoot digitally? It doesn't cost anything, you can experiment, make terrible shot after terrible shot and delete them, and also get all kinds of effects less easy to come by than if you're beholden to actual film. (Just for the record, you can always use a digital camera as if, mentally, it's an old-school camera,

as in pretending that you're shooting expensive film, and upon each shot your dinner and rent depend.) Mermelstein went from a Leica to an iPhone. These days, Daido Moriyama shoots with a small digital camera. I only use my Fuji X100F, and with more pride than not, I know very little about how it works, just that I can wrench or conjure from it the photos I want.

10) What I do know, though, is that when I'm out with my camera, I'm always looking for pictures. Mermelstein has to be the same. It's a kind of vision thing, where you do your best to take in everything around you, always gazing about for what will make a good shot. Seeing the whole street is essential, and speed is all important, too. At bottom, I find it a joy to enter into a sort of Zen-like street-photography mindset, where I'm floating along the streets at heightened awareness, always looking, always ready to react with a snap of my shutter, both fully in the moment and yet artistically just a bit removed from it, too. All this is also good for you. Being fully involved in a scene or situation is a goal of all kinds of religious and New Age disciplines. Don't go away to a How to Embrace the World in All Its Wholeness retreat, instead put your money into a camera and go out and grab every smidgen of detail and motion and character of the world before you. Here's Mermelstein on the rewards of street photography: "In my opinion what is most important is to stay true to your personal vision and create a body of work that expresses that. I never believed in making pictures with the goal of showing those to obtain commercial work. Do what you do best and love the most and you will be doing all that you can to be happy."

11) And don't simply enjoy taking the photos, embrace the editing down, choosing, ordering of your street shots. Mermelstein also says, "Of course going out and making the pictures is exciting. But what is even more exciting is the feeling that I get in viewing pictures I made for the first time. Sometimes it is more than a month or two

before I first view pictures I have taken. There is a perpetual thrill of catching up."

12) All of which adds up to: love taking pictures; anticipate and delight in seeing what you come up with; and also love editing them into books. A complete life. What's not to like?

And all good lessons for street photographers. Now I'll add additional rules/thoughts wholly my own.

1) Move to New York City. O.K., that might be asking a lot, but there are reasons so many great street photographers live here, the always-ness of life on the streets, the endless parade of characters, the complex press of bodies moving in interesting ways, the abundance of different windows and materials to shoot through for different effects, the different ethnic neighborhoods (lots of quick trips around the world) … I can go on and on. But of course one can find good photographs everywhere. I've done books set in Japan, Bangkok, Tuscany—pretty much wherever I go. So I shouldn't be so New York–centric. The basic rule is, Just get out there and shoot, and always—
2) Be hungry for photographs. I take my camera with me everywhere, and if I haven't been out seriously shooting for a couple days, I'm champing at the proverbial bit to start getting new shots. I also walk a lot, an added benefit; 10K- to 12K-step days is a norm when I'm out working. (Step count … *that* I use my iPhone for.) I will also often tie in a lunch or dinner at a favorite restaurant, and a stop into a bookstore or two. At bottom, this rule is: Go out and take a long walk … and bring along your camera, and your photo-head (see No. 7 below).
3) Here's another thought: expand the scope of photography you know. If you don't know Japanese Provoke-era-inspired masters such as Daido Moriyama and Takuma Nakahira, check them out immediately. Ideally, get the current reprint edition of Provoke magazine, as it was published 50 years ago. Then check out Moriyama's and Nakahira's and Shomei Tomatsu's books. The essential

lessons from these masters: focus is often irrelevant (it might even get in the way of mystery and magic); your own vision is key; and that you can do *anything* in a photobook … even, as with Daido's *Bye-Bye Photography*, renounce photography altogether.

4) But don't stop there. Look at everything. Collect photobooks, and study them, the ones you like right off and others that you might not immediately get. Also dive into art as deeply as possible. Spend time in museums. And always ask yourself what you're responding to, or not, in a celebrated painting or photo. The ultimate idea is to find how to see arrangements of actual reality in the street that have the force of art. In the *Hardened* review I mentioned flippantly Winogrand's famous park bench photo; in truth, I've spent a lot of time gazing at it. Everyone in the photo is in the perfect position relative to the others, and making the perfect expression. Look at it hard. Take out one person and watch the shot fall apart. Imagine the girl with her hand on the back of her hair and the one next to her lowering her eyeglasses a moment later, no motion, glasses back where they belong—less interesting, yes? The deal is, to know photos when they present themselves you have to have looked at a vast amount of photos to get a feel for what works; then, of course, move fast to snap them. Just the other day I was walking through the East Village past a loading dock and from the corner of my eye saw seven or eight men there arrayed in a way that intuitively grabbed me. Before I gave my impulse a thought, I quickly spun and took two shots of them. The photos are still in my camera, and might not work out, but what if they do? (By the way, I'm hardly the only one fascinated by Winogrand's photo. Check out *The New Yorker* magazine article about "The Girls on the Bench"; in it, the author tracks down two of the then-young women in the photo.)

5) As I mentioned in Mermelstein Rule No. 8 above, go digital and shoot fast and intuitively. Film? I know, it looks great … but these days it seems an unnecessary

hassle, or worse. Fast? Would I have shot the guys on the loading dock if I had to worry the cost and trouble of film? Probably not. But with digital, if it comes to nothing, so what. And then there's this: In the photobook course I teach, one of the students brought in her photos from a roll of film that was ruined by the place she had the film developed; something about processing the color film as black and white, or vice versa. Why worry about that? See what you did right away if you wish to. I delete photos as I go, enjoying making the decision as to whether the shot is hopelessly terrible or maybe, just maybe within tolerance of worth keeping and looking at more closely later when I dump everything into Lightroom.

6) And … embrace mistakes! The woman in my class bemoaning her ruined film, well, the student next to her took a look at what she had and said, "This will make a great book, these messed-up photos." She was right. The student turned in two photobooks: a conventional one with nice photos capturing "solitude in the busy city," and the wholly unexpected one of blurs and seeping color and an intriguing abstraction … which was far more moving. (Again, check out Daido's *Bye-Bye Photography* to see what I'm getting at.)
7) As I wrote above, broaden your horizons with Japanese photographers, but still study all the masters, Winogrand, Frank, Mermelstein, Levitt, et al. When I was first getting going with my shots on the street, I used a book I have of Walker Evans and Henri Cartier-Bresson photos called *Photographing America* as a talisman. I would pick the book up every day on my way out the door with my camera, both to look at great enduring photos and to jog my own mind into street-photography-think, that Zen-like floating state of seeing photos in the world instead of just seeing (or not seeing, you folk all the time buried in your phones as you walk along) the world itself.
8) And study the history of street photography. There are lots of good books out there on the subject, but I learned

the most from *Bystander* by Colin Westerbeck and Joel Meyerowitz. Pick it up.

9) Don't stop with just great photographers or their photobooks. I find I've learned as much, and fed my photographic ideas as richly, with great literature and even music. Read poetry, highly imagistic or metaphoric poetry (Keats, Shelley, Blake, Dickinson, Eliot, Plath for instance.) Listen to all kinds of music, but especially classical and jazz, the first for the sweep of musical tensions, the long emotional ride; the second for the rich complexities of harmonies and rhythms … I mean, just try to fill up a photograph the way John Coltrane fills up (and batters and splatters) bars of music. Then there's Bob Dylan, who has written whole songs that can be read as photobooks—see, for instance, "Visions of Johanna," with its ladies playing blind man's bluff with key chains, night watchmen clicking flashlights, ghosts of 'lectricity howling in face bones … three vivid, strange images, and that's only the second verse.
10) Back to Cartier-Bresson, you know, the Decisive Moment guy. Personally, I long ago stopped worrying much about decisive moments. Sure, if you can capture a once-in-a-lifetime image (that French guy leaping off a floating ladder, his foot floating inches above the puddle), go for it. But one of the beauties of photobooks is that they don't depend on one photo, but a string of them, the right ones in the right order. So shoot everything, and after the fact decide which ones belong in which book. And if your photo is of a decisive moment, great; but also keep in mind that Cartier-Bresson never liked that title, which Simon & Schuster slapped on the first American publication. Cartier-Bresson's title for the book? *Images à la Sauvette*, which roughly translates as images made hurriedly or furtively, a perfect instruction for the budding street photographer, as in: Get out there on the street, and grab photos as you walk/run about. Photograph them in the spirit of, There are targets out there, and you're shooting at them as they

flit past. Then back home you can hope that they're "decisive."

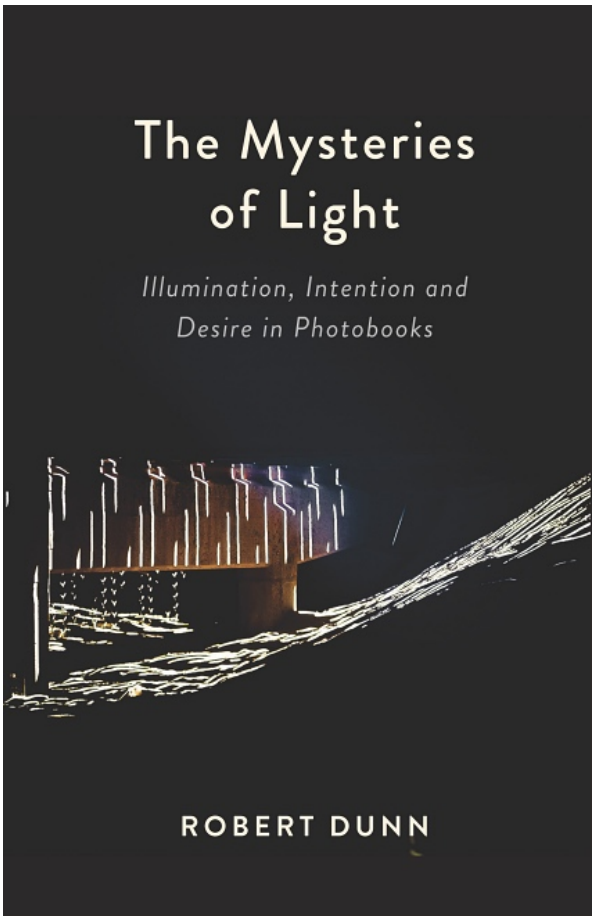
11) Which leads again to Mermelstein's point above in Rule No. 10. A lot of the fun of street photography is finding out later what you've actually gotten. As Mermelstein says, he gets as much or more thrill out of seeing his photos as taking them. It's the excitement of discovering you've actually taken some strong, good photos, and starting to think of what you can do with them. As I said, I use a digital Fuji, and I will glance at shots right after I snap them, and delete manifest duds, but mostly I wait till I accumulate enough new shots—usually hundreds and hundreds—then pour them all into Lightroom, where I can slowly start getting to know them, work to make them look a little better. It's always a delightful surprise to find a good photo amongst the ones I've overlooked the first few times through a new batch. Be quick on the street, but don't be hasty when editing your work. Take your time, then—
12) Make a book. The way I most often do it is, I get an idea, a title or theme, and I go looking through my Lightroom files to see which of my photos will fit it, in which order, etc. This editing is as much or more fun than taking the shots. Of course, I'm by background a novelist, used to spending all my working hours staring at an empty Word page and trying to fill it up from my imagination. Editing actual photos is blithe fun after that. Still, it is real work, making books, and the perfect culmination to all the wandering, snapping, and hoping that street photography demands.
13) Which leads to a final point: Have fun taking street photos. I mean, what's not to like, you're out on a nice day (or an intriguingly Saul Leiter–ish snowy one), sun's shining (that October light! That May, June, July, August, September light!…) or not, and you're filling yourself up with everything your eyes can take in and trying to do literal magic by stopping time. Think about it, you're out there actually stopping time.

14) O.K., one more thought. Like any good magician, don't think about your magic too much. Have I said this already? Bears repeating. The hardest work isn't taking the photos (or worrying about processing them), it's working to get your head into the place where you take in as much of the world around you as you can, then see photos within it. Fun, yes, but, again, work. This kind of full, abundant, ever-focused vision isn't our natural state. It isn't there on our phones. It's in learning ways of seeing. Study up, look at all the photobooks you can, dig into how masterful photographers see, decide what works for you, fool around, experiment, see where your own lens takes you … and overall, remember: You do not want to take photos already taken. You do not want to take the photos everyone else will be taking. At bottom, you simply want to take the shots only you can.

That is, practice Mermelstein-vision, as I put it in my last piece. He has his way of seeing the world, Cartier-Bresson does, Robert Frank does, Helen Levitt does, Daido Moriyama does. That's any street photographer's ultimate task: to find *their* way of seeing the world, and then use some form of camera to capture that.

Easy? Nope. Simple? Certainly not at first.

But the more pictures you take, the more photobooks you own and read, and, well, again, the more photos you take, the easier and simpler the process becomes. You get into a flow. You stop obsessing about the photos you take, only the ones you miss. Yet with all of that, the joy increases, too. There's nothing like getting closer to what really matters, your own vision, your own singular body of work.



The Mysteries of Light is an original literary meditation on photobooks. It's personal and passionate, fun, lively, informative, inspiring, and will help you understand photobooks—and get you jazzed about them—in a whole new way.

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