

Routine vs. Wandering

What's poppin', people? It's Dante. Currently walking through Shinjuku here in Tokyo, Japan. Ricoh GR IIIx, GoPro Mini. Trust in God, and submit to Him, and everything else will fall into place.

Following the Light

Today I'm thinking about my routine versus wandering in Tokyo, and how I undulate between these two approaches to street photography. With street photography, it's very simple: you want to wander without any preconceived notions of what you'll find. You follow your curiosity, your intuition, and you obey that.

But eventually there comes a point in the practice where you become hyper-aware of the patterns—whether it's in nature or in human behavior. You study the light, you study the foot traffic, you study the movement of people, and you start to understand where you need to be and at what time of day to anticipate moments.

This ability to not only wander aimlessly but also cultivate a routine is critical. It's how you put order into chaos—how you embrace the unknown but still force your luck in a way where fortune favors the prepared.

Sunny Days vs. Cloudy Days

Yesterday was a cloudy day. And what I like to say with my practice is simple: **follow the light**, follow God. **God is light**. I determine my routine based on the light.

Today is sunny, so I'm going to follow the sun. I know where the sun will be hitting. I know that right now, if I go to Shinjuku Station, there will be a lot of foot traffic and the sun will be pouring into the station beautifully. I'll be able to play with light and shadow and execute my technique using the Ricoh GR IIIx with the 71mm crop mode.

With the GR IIIx, I'm using crop mode and capturing slivers of people's faces as they pass in and out of the light—at the station or at Shibuya Crossing—using the background crushed into shadow and exposing for the highlights with highlight-weighted metering. I'm creating these abstract Japanese woodblock-print-looking, Caravaggio-inspired candid portraits. Snap focus at 1 meter, 1/1000 or 1/2000, f/16, extremely close with the crop mode.

Because there is beautiful light today, I'm going to go out and play.

Wandering With Flash

However, yesterday was a cloudy day, so I wandered. I put a flash on top of my camera. Flash is entirely new to me, and I've been exploring it these past couple of days. Now I find it to be a really good solution to the visual problem of photography. When I don't have light, flash gives me the ability to etch shape and form onto the surfaces around me—faces, details, textures in the alleyways.

So yesterday I spent the day wandering instead of routinely revisiting the same streets where I know I can anticipate moments. Wandering is the art of discovery. And while navigating the alleyways of Shinjuku, following my nose and letting the wind blow me wherever it wanted, this character emerged out of the shadows—crazy piercings, gauges, a full presence. I approached him and made a photo of his face using flash. It was extremely new to me to get that close.

Later, I experimented with 71mm crop at night using flash. I got extremely close to a guy whose eyes bulged toward the frame. It reminded me of another frame I made of a woman—her lips, her collar. These details, these abstractions of faces, are new to me, and they're emerging from wandering and tinkering.

Discovery at the Train Station

Then I shifted back into routine. I hopped on the subway to Shibuya. Instead of going straight to the crossing, I photographed the alleyways. And then, as I returned to the station to head back to Shinjuku, I saw a woman standing by the train doors with extremely long nails—curved, wrapped around her hands. Her feet were long too.

I made pictures of her hands as she held her phone. I have no idea how she uses that phone. We talked about her nails—she said she might have the longest nails in Asia. The first photo I made was spontaneous, just a quick snap of her nails. It was one of the new flash experiments from the day.

Both images—close details of faces and hands—were radical departures for me, and they came from the wandering.

Working Without Wasting Time

When I'm on a dedicated street photography trip, I don't want to waste time. I can't get myself to look up locations or chase tourist spots. I've eaten at the same restaurant every day. Carnivore, no breakfast, no lunch, fasting all day. I'm not here on vacation—I'm here to work. From morning to nighttime.

It's hard to sleep because I'm shooting thousands of pictures a day and staying up late culling and making slideshows. My gear is simple. No decision fatigue. Cameras on the neck and wrist. Batteries in the pockets. Flash in the bag. Shinjuku and Shibuya—that's where I'll be. Why waste time going anywhere else?

Tokyo has shifted my entire paradigm. Each trip shifts me. The experience of staying put in one neighborhood intensifies everything. It creates familiarity. It gives me breakthroughs.

A New Paradigm of What a City Can Be

And honestly, Tokyo is blowing my mind. The people are kind. The streets are clean. Everyone is respectful and beautiful. The city is quiet, orderly, alive. It shows me what a city *can* become.

In Philadelphia—my hometown—I love the city, but I can get jaded by the grit and grime, by the things I see that weigh down my spirit. But here, I feel hopeful and optimistic about urban life. The contrast is huge.

Even the yakiniku spots have iPads so you don't need to interact—you just tap for water and it comes instantly. The service is insane. Tokyo feels like New York on steroids—like what New York wishes it could be.

Out of all the places I've photographed—Mexico City, Hanoi, Napoli, New York—this is near the very top. I still recommend a new photographer start in Mumbai for the raw novelty, but Tokyo? It's right below Mumbai.

Routine and Wandering, Carefully Balanced

Routine versus wandering. I think that's the essence. For me, the big thing is avoiding decision fatigue. I hate wasting time. I haven't stepped into a single 7-Eleven. I'm not here for sightseeing or snacks or tours. I just want to be on the street.

The routine is consistent. The wandering is always alive. And ultimately, I follow the light. I respond to the light. If the light is good, I work one way. If the light is bad, I work another.

It's all about following the light. Following your inner child. Following God.