

Tokyo, Light, and Letting Go

What's poppin', people? It's Dante.

This morning I'm just waking up back home in Philadelphia after the long flight from Tokyo to New York City and then back to Philly. I flipped the iPad Pro on and wanted to sit with you, almost in real time, and just talk through my time in Tokyo:

- break down some of the photographs
- look at the contact sheets
- peek at the behind-the-scenes
- and share some thoughts about what changed for me out there

I don't want this to be some super serious, over-produced "final word" on the work. Think of it more as a raw debrief: a stream of becoming, right after the trip, while the photos are still fresh and I still smell Shibuya on my clothes.

13 Days, 17,800 Frames, 646 Curiosities

First concrete thing: I was in Tokyo for **13 full days of shooting**.

I came home with **17,800 photographs**.

If you've ever wondered, "How many pictures does Dante make when he travels?" —there you go. Seventeen thousand eight hundred clicks of the shutter. That's why my workflow *has* to be efficient and minimal. There's no way I'm sitting in Lightroom massaging 17.8K RAW files.

From those 17,800 frames:

- I favorited and pulled **646 images** into a folder of "curiosities"
- From those, realistically, I'll probably end up with maybe:

- **5–7 “strong” pictures**
- **10–15 total** that feel like genuine keepers or breakthroughs

That’s just the math of this life. You shoot all day, every day, for 13 days straight, and you come back with a tiny handful of pictures that actually push you forward. And I’m totally okay with that.

Why I Shared the Entire Tokyo Archive (Open-Source Contact Sheets)

On my site, I’ve already posted:

“Tokyo Street Photography Archive by Dante Sisofo”

It’s a big open folder — **659 images, about 2.5 GB** — that you can download and flip through on your desktop. I want you to see:

- the **outtakes**
- the **mistakes**
- the **almosts**
- and the **weird in-betweens** that led to the more “successful” frames

I’m not interested in gatekeeping. The whole *“we will reveal only the chosen 20 images in a book or gallery in ten years”* thing feels so outdated when you can upload hundreds of photos instantly and let people dig.

Old model:

- Hoard your contact sheets
- Only show the final “masterpieces”
- Build mystique around scarcity

New model (for me):

- **Open-source the whole process**
- Let people see the stream, not just the polished stone at the end
- Share imperfect frames as part of the story

I want everything to be free, accessible, and part of one long **visual diary**.
Photography as a **stream of becoming**, not a closed-off museum box.

Wabi-Sabi, Imperfection, and Shooting From the Gut

A big part of the Tokyo trip for me was really doubling down on this **wabi-sabi** mindset:

- **Imperfection, embraced**
- **Grit and grain, embraced**
- **Misses, embraced**

Not just aesthetically (high contrast, harsh blacks, clumpy grain), but philosophically. When I'm out photographing, my goal is to drop out of the rational, overthinking brain and shoot from:

- **instinct**
- **gut**
- **childlike curiosity**

I'm not out there carefully composing these pristine, symmetrically balanced images with a clear "statement" behind each one.

I'm out there:

- following **hunches**
- moving **quickly**
- sometimes **not even looking at the LCD**
- letting the imperfections pick up the slack

The more I lean into that, the more the photos feel alive.

Photography as Life-Affirmation

At the core of all this: I photograph because it **affirms life**.

I'm not really thinking:

*"What do I want this project to **say**?"*

I'm thinking:

*"How can I say **thank you** for this day, this light, this moment?"*

Photography becomes a way of:

- saying **yes** to life
- **noticing** what's already there
- being present with the **sights, sounds, and smells** of the street
- letting my **internal state** be reflected in the pictures

I'm not trying to explain Tokyo. I'm not trying to explain the world.

I'm trying to use photography as a daily prayer of gratitude, a visual "amen" to whatever shows up.

Light as Subject: Returning to the Root of Photography

The deeper I get into this, the more I realize my true subject isn't people or buildings or cities.

It's **light**.

The word “photography” literally breaks down into:

- **phōs (φῶς)** – light
- **graphē (γραφή)** – writing or drawing

So, very literally: **drawing with light**.

On this trip, I set my camera up to **honor that**:

- **Ricoh GR III & GR IIIx**
- **High contrast black and white**, baked in-camera
- **Small JPEGs (around 4MB)** to keep things lean and fast
- **Highlight-weighted metering**
- **Aperture Priority (Av)** most of the time:
 - f/8 or f/9
 - Auto ISO
 - Minimum shutter speed around 1/500s

I'm not interested in babysitting RAW files. I want the photograph to be **finished at the moment of exposure**. The entire workflow is built to let light do the heavy lifting.

The First Breakthrough: Lips in the Light at Shinjuku Station

Day one, Shinjuku Station.

I found a patch of light where people moved from deep shadow into a sliver of sun. I stood with my **back to the sun**, watching faces drift into the glow against a dark background.

I wasn't in control of:

- who walked into the light
- how they were positioned
- what micro-expressions would manifest

All I controlled was:

- **where I placed my body**
- **where I pointed the frame**
- **how I set my exposure**

Then, out of nowhere, **this sliver of a face** emerged—a mouth and lips revealed in the light while the rest of the face dissolved into darkness.

I didn't see it clearly with my naked eye. It was a **gift from the camera** and the timing and the light working together.

That picture set the tone for the rest of the trip:

- **Light and shadow as the main language**
- **Abstraction over documentation**
- **Mystery over factual clarity**

Technical Constraints as Freedom

The reason this works for me is because the camera is set up to **get out of the way**.

My default setup:

- **Ricoh GR III / GR IIIx**
- **Aperture Priority**
- **f/8–f/9**
- **Auto ISO**
- **Minimum shutter: 1/500s**
- **Highlight-weighted metering**

- **Contrast & sharpness cranked**
- **Black & white JPEGs only**

Later, I added new modes to my toolkit:

- **Manual mode** for night + slow shutter work
- **Exposure compensation** bumped to +1 to +1.7 when backlighting people
- **Snap focus**, often at **1 meter** or **infinity**, so I never have to wait for autofocus

The philosophy behind all of this:

Photography happens at the moment you press the shutter.

Not at the desk later. Not in Lightroom. Not in some endless “tweak this slider” loop.

The Daily Route: Shinjuku → Harajuku → Shibuya

My Tokyo routine quickly settled into a loop:

1. **Morning** – Wander the streets of **Shinjuku**, especially around the station:
2. Using light and shadow as people pour through the city.
3. Warming up, getting loose, getting into the flow.
4. **Midday** – Take the train to **Harajuku**:
5. Walk the wide promenade full of fashion, faces, and flow.
6. Photograph architecture, reflections, little details of light.
7. **Afternoon / Golden Hour** – Walk from Harajuku to **Shibuya Crossing**:
8. Work the crossing in **golden light**.
9. People emerging from underground stations into the sun.
10. Light carving faces out of the chaos.
11. **Evening / Night** – Either:
12. Push slow shutter experiments in Shibuya or Shinjuku
13. Or wander alleys and backstreets, especially when using flash

I like working the **same locations over and over**. Routine isn't boring for me—routine is what increases the probability of making something.

The 71mm Crop Accident That Changed Everything

One of the biggest breakthroughs on this trip was completely accidental.

On the Ricoh GR IIIx, you can crop in-camera:

- 40mm (native)
- 50mm
- **71mm**

I had set the crop function to the side button, and one day I accidentally triggered it. Suddenly my frame looked way tighter. At first I was confused:

“Why does everything look so zoomed in?”

Then I realized: I was in **71mm crop mode**.

Instead of switching back, I decided to **lean into it**.

Compression at Shibuya Crossing

Where better to experiment with compression than **Shibuya Crossing**, one of the most photographed places on Earth?

Everyone has “done” Shibuya. Wide views. Overhead shots. Big crowds. Neon chaos.

I wanted to see:

- What happens if I **ignore the wide spectacle**
- And instead **hunt for fragments of faces in the crowd**

- Using **71mm crop** to **compress** and **abstract** those elements

I found this technique insanely addictive:

- Faces half in light, half in black
- Slivers of noses, lips, eyes
- Overlapping profiles compressed into one dense plane

Some of the resulting images feel like:

- black-and-white **Japanese woodblock prints**
- or **Caravaggio**-style **chiaroscuro** portraits
- but rendered digitally in a river of pedestrians

This started as an accident. It turned into one of the **core visual languages** of the trip.

And honestly, I genuinely feel like this is one of the more **original ways** I've ever seen Shibuya Crossing photographed. Not because I'm trying to be "different for the sake of it," but because I followed an instinct and stayed with it long enough to let it go somewhere.

Slow Shutter Experiments: Ghosts in the Crowd

The next breakthrough came from another "mistake."

Shooting in **Av mode at night**, my shutter speed naturally dipped lower:

- 1/40s
- 1/20s
- 1/10s

I started to notice that:

- some frames were **soft**
- there was **blur** and **motion trails**
- people's faces were smearing in interesting ways

Instead of treating this as a problem, I leaned into it.

I shifted into **Manual mode**:

- **Shutter:** 1/10s, 1/4s, even 1/3s
- **Aperture:** f/8–f/16
- **ISO:** Auto (or 800 when using flash)
- **Snap focus:** infinity for crowds or 1m for closer shots

Then I started:

- **intentionally moving the camera**
- **shooting while walking**
- **letting people streak across the frame**

At Shibuya and outside Shinjuku Station at night, this created:

- ghostly figures walking across still backgrounds
- blurred masses brushing past isolated, relatively static subjects
- a sense of **time smeared into a single frame**

One of my favorite photos from the trip came from this:

- construction site and skyline in the background
- still people in the midground
- a blurred subject floating across the frame in the center at **1/3s**

It elevated an ordinary street scene into something more **sublime** and **mysterious**, which is exactly what I want from this phase of my work.

Dual-Wielding: GR III on the Wrist, GR IIIx on the Neck

At some point, the gear setup evolved into:

- **Ricoh GR III (28mm)** – usually on my wrist
- **Ricoh GR IIIx (40mm → 71mm crop)** – hanging from my neck

I'm usually a "one camera, one lens" evangelist.

But in Tokyo, dual-wielding just made sense:

- 28mm for:
 - wider scenes
 - layered street moments
 - immersive, in-the-mix frames
- 71mm crop for:
 - **faces in the light**
 - compressed fragments of people
 - tight slivers of expression at Shibuya and Shinjuku

This combination opened up **infinite possibilities**:

- I could make a wide, layered atmosphere shot
- Then immediately switch and carve out a **single face from the chaos**
- All without changing lenses or overthinking it

This dual setup is something I'm definitely bringing back to Philadelphia.

Flash Enters the Chat: Night, Nails, Faces, and Plants

Another big shift on this trip: I finally started to **seriously use flash**.

The “Why Don’t I Have My Flash?” Moment

One night at Shibuya, I saw another street photographer using flash and thought:

“Why the hell don’t I have my flash with me?”

I almost never shoot flash, but that moment annoyed me enough that I went:

- back to the hotel
- grabbed the **Ricoh GF-2**
- returned to the streets to experiment

Flash Settings

With flash, I usually went:

- **Manual mode**
- **Shutter:** around 1/4–1/60s depending on motion
- **Aperture:** f/8
- **ISO:** often 800
- **28mm (GR III)** or sometimes **71mm crop (GR IIIx)**
- Flash in **manual**, not TTL

I started shooting:

- club promoters in the street
- random pedestrians walking toward me
- graffiti, signs, and textures in alleys

And then some magic moments appeared.

The Longest Nails in Asia (Maybe)

One of my favorite flash moments:

I was in the Shibuya underground tunnel near the crossing and saw this woman with **insanely long nails**, scrolling on her phone.

Before going straight in, I did a **test shot**:

- I photographed my own hand with flash against an ad to check the exposure
- Once I knew the flash power felt right, I turned toward her

I made:

1. A **quick, candid frame** of her hand while she was still on her phone
2. A second frame
3. Then we started talking

She told me she has some of the *longest nails in Asia*. We laughed, and I made more photos of her hands and feet as she showed them off.

The interesting thing?

- The **first abrupt, instinctive frame** ended up being the keeper.
- All the later, more “posed” shots were cool, but that first contact had the raw energy.

This moment, for me, is a good example of a hybrid approach:

- Photograph **candidly and boldly**, no hesitation
- Then **have a conversation**, show respect, and connect as a human
- Blend **permission-based** interaction with **decisive candid shooting**

Flash + Macro: Plants, Textures, and Grit

I also started using **macro mode + flash** for:

- cigarette butts
- leaves and dirt in Yoyogi Park
- tree bark and textures
- weird surfaces and infrastructure in back alleys

I've never really photographed nature with flash before. But on days with no sunlight, I realized:

"If there's no light to follow, bring your own."

So on gray, overcast days I:

- put the flash on the GR III
- wandered **alleys, side streets, and parks**
- treated flash like a portable spotlight for my curiosity

This is something I'm *definitely* carrying into my Philadelphia workflow—flash and macro on plants and small details is a whole new visual language for me.

People, Architecture, Texture: Photographing Everything

On this trip I wasn't just chasing "classic" street photos of people.

I was also:

- photographing **buildings**, cranes, skylines
- photographing **advertisements** and weird typography
- photographing **tiny textures**, rust, puddles, trash, soil
- photographing **kisses**, hands, cigarettes, silhouettes

I'm trying to see if, in one lifetime, I can photograph **everything**:

- macro
- micro

- human
- non-human
- light itself

The instinct is simple:

“I see something that intrigues me and I’m curious what it will look like photographed.”

That curiosity is enough. I don’t need a rational reason.

Work the Scene, Then Work It Again

One small but important field technique I kept using:

- If I see something and **it really resonates**, I don’t just take one frame and leave.
- I **circle back**, work the scene again, and make additional passes.

Example: the guy standing outside the club early in the morning in Kabukichō.

- First pass: I’m walking up the street and make a quick picture
- Second pass: I turn around, come back down the street
- I make another one or two frames, slightly different angle / timing

Often that **second or third attempt** is where the keeper lives.

Slow Shutter + 71mm + Movement: Final Night Madness

On the **last night** in Tokyo, I decided:

“Let me just go full force and screw around and see what happens.”

So I set:

- **71mm crop**
- **Shutter:** 1/4s
- **Exposure compensation:** +1
- **Manual mode**
- **Snap focus:** 1 meter
- Shot **while moving** through crowds at night

I:

- stopped worrying about sharpness
- stopped worrying about technical perfection
- tried to see what the crowd would look like **smearred, fractured, and compressed**

Some of these pictures feel more like **fiction than fact**, and that excites me.

These are images I never would've made in my old mode of working. It felt like a door opening that I now have to walk through here in Philadelphia.

Pre-Tokyo Dante vs. Post-Tokyo Dante

I really do feel like there's a:

- **pre-Tokyo Dante**
- **post-Tokyo Dante**

Before Tokyo:

- Color work, documentary style
- Classic layered scenes

- One camera, one lens
- Mostly natural light
- Very little flash or slow shutter experimentation

During and after Tokyo:

- Black and white as my main language
- **71mm compression** as a core technique
- **Slow shutter** experimentation baked into the process
- **Flash** in the streets and on nature
- **Dual-wielding** GR III + GR IIIx
- Much more **open abstraction** and **play**

The most meaningful part of the trip was not just the city or the culture (though both are beautiful), but the **creative breakthroughs**:

- new techniques
- new mindset shifts
- new ways of seeing

Detachment From Outcome: Prints on the Wall, Not Plans in the Air

What will I *do* with these photos?

Honestly, I don't know yet.

My process from here looks like:

1. Make **small thumbnail prints** of the images I'm curious about
2. Put them on the wall in my room
3. Live with them for a while
4. See which ones keep calling me back

I'm not:

- forcing a book
- forcing a zine
- forcing a gallery show

If something wants to exist as an object later, it'll reveal itself.

Right now, I'm detached from the outcome and immersed in the process:

*I photograph because I **love life**, not because I need a product.*

The Philosophy Books: “Abandon the World of Certainty”

One of the huge inspirations behind all of this is the **Japanese philosophical approach to photography**—especially the work and writings around the **Provoke** era.

On this trip, I picked up a book from Komiyama Bookstore titled:

“Abandon the World of Certainty”

The images are incredible, but what really intrigues me is the **philosophy** in the text. It's all in Japanese, so one of my upcoming projects is to:

- find a workflow to **translate and transcribe the entire book**
- publish that text on my website
- break down the ideas, line by line, in video and writing

It's not just about copying the aesthetics of Provoke. It's about understanding the **ideas behind the images**:

- uncertainty
- ambiguity
- rejecting pure documentation
- embracing grain, blur, and chaos as truth

That aligns perfectly with where my work is heading.

Open Resources If You Want to Go Deeper

If you're curious about the techniques, mindset, and process behind what I've been talking about here, you can head over to:

<http://dantesisofo.com>

On the **Books** tab you'll find free guides like:

- **Contact Sheets: Behind the Scenes** – look at the sequences, not just the final frames
- **Mastering Layering in Street Photography** – break down how to build depth and complexity in your photos
- **The Ultimate Ricoh GR Street Photography Guide** – all my GR settings, workflow, and philosophy in one place

And on the blog you'll find:

- the **Tokyo street photography archive** (659 images you can download)
 - daily posts and slideshows from each day in Tokyo
 - ongoing thoughts as I continue to process this trip
-

Where I Go From Here

Coming home from Tokyo, I feel like I've added a new **visual toolkit** to my practice:

- 71mm compression
- slow shutter speed experimentation

- flash on people *and* plants
- dual-camera workflow
- deeper trust in instinct over intellect

From here:

- I'll keep wandering Philadelphia with this same playful mindset
- I'll keep treating photography as **life-affirmation**
- I'll keep sharing the **mistakes, outtakes, and contact sheets**, not just the polished frames

No grand conclusion. No fixed statement.

Just a simple promise:

I'm going to keep walking, keep seeing, keep experimenting, and keep sharing the journey with you.

Thanks for being here.

Peace.