

Ⓜ OBSERVATION: Street photography

Decisive moments

New York

Andre D Wagner chronicles the twists and turns of life on New York's streets, focusing his lens on its characters and contrasts. Monocle tags along.

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“The most important piece of equipment as a street photographer is a pair of comfortable shoes,” says Andre D Wagner, striding across Manhattan in a pair of trainers. It’s 15.00 on a mild Tuesday afternoon and I’m trailing behind Wagner (*pictured*), my eyes glued to his bucket hat, as he weaves through the crowds towards Herald Square on the corner of 6th Avenue and 34th Street. It’s one of the city’s busiest intersections. “It’s really diverse over here; you’ve got New Yorkers, tourists – you get a little bit of everything,” says Wagner, eyeing his potential subjects.



Wagner, who grew up in Nebraska, has become known for his black-and-white street images, which are shot on film and developed at his studio in Brooklyn, where he now lives. Over the past decade, his chronicles of daily life across the city have garnered great attention, culminating in the launch of a book, *Here for the Ride*, in 2017, with another one, *New City, Old Blues* in the pipeline. Today he works editorially and commercially too but shooting on the street remains his passion.

We hit a busy intersection and I watch as Wagner slows his pace and pauses to observe the crowd. “Street photography is mostly bad photographs and it’s a lot of failure,” he says. “You have to have some faith in the process and be OK in believing something interesting is going to happen.”

On the corner, there’s a person selling hotdogs and a woman peddling ice lollies. A passerby on a scooter yells as he almost runs over a man sitting on the kerb. No one blinks. The light turns red, a traffic attendant blows his whistle and people surge across the street. It’s the perfect moment for Wagner to capture someone unawares. After a decade of pounding the pavements of New York, Wagner has mastered the art of being quick and tactful. As he crosses the road, he slides his Leica camera up to his eye line. He clicks the shutter. Snap. Then, he lowers the camera down to his waist with ease. “The Leica is very discreet,” he says. “It fits in the palm of your hand.”

We navigate another intersection to the opposite corner where we see two children clapping their hands in a criss-cross motion. Wagner slows down again and snaps them from different angles. They barely notice that he’s there. If you move too slowly or become too obvious, you’ll ruin the moment, he says. The subject will notice you and react and maybe even call the police (which has happened before). “If I don’t make eye contact with somebody, even if the camera is pointing right at them, they think that I’m taking a photograph of something behind them. It’s this social experiment.”

Although the pavements are still busy, the throng has thinned since the pandemic. “The crowd has changed,” says Wagner. “The action of what would happen on the street has changed.” He stops, moves, snaps. “The density brought the drama.” Regardless, New York still offers a kaleidoscope of characters and Wagner doesn’t miss a beat in capturing them. But it’s only in the darkroom that he will know whether the image is a success or not. He lifts his camera and swiftly snaps two women on the corner. One of them stops, as though realising she’s had her picture taken. But before the realisation has sunk in, Wagner is already a few steps ahead, vanishing into the crowd. — Ⓜ