

THORSTEN VON OVERGAARD

# The Moment of Emotional Impact





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THORSTEN OVERGAARD

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MY PASSION has never been for photography “in itself” but for the possibility – through forgetting yourself – of recording in a fraction of a second the emotion of the subject, and the beauty of the form; that is, a geometry awakened by what’s offered.

HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON 1994

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# Foreword

By Thorsten Overgaard

*It is often forgotten that what hits you first when you see an image, is the emotional impact.*

*The greatest artists throughout history communicated emotions. You don't have to know if Mozart used an iPhone or a Steinway*

*This sort of cuts through all the discussions and questions of doubt about colors versus black & white, if your camera is big enough, if your image is sharp enough.*

*Photography has become one of the most popular subjects online in the twenty years since the Internet started. Social media like Facebook and Instagram wouldn't be if it weren't for photography.*

*The most important feature in any photograph is something a machine can't measure:*

*Emotional Impact.*

*You can instantly tell if it is there or not. That's why we make photographs. We communicate.*

*– Thorsten Overgaard*

# How I photograph

By Thorsten Overgaard

Let's just say I used to be a photographer in a past life and I got to play with all this new and magic technology back then. The wooden boxes with bellows, silver salts, sparkling lenses that would capture life and light with the same detail as the best Johannes Vermeer paintings, balancing wooden tripods on dangerous mountain sides and view the world from under a black cloth.



Back when a darkroom was one of the most private places in the world and a great place to take a lady and a bottle of wine and impress with the wonders of photography while the gramophone player filled the air with waltz music.

The technical side of photography was so much more exotic back when photography was young than today where more than every second photography page on the Internet is discussing pixels rather than the actual image.

### **The Emotional Impact of Photography**

It is often forgotten that what hits you first when you see an image, is the emotional impact. It always was, and that is why some of the greatest photographs throughout time are also not a great display of technical superiority. Nobody ever discussed how Henri Cartier-Bresson achieved such sharpness and amazing shadow details simply because he never did achieve any of that.



Technical skill alone can reach so high a level that that alone is enough to impress. But when it does, it usually boils down to the photographers skill rather than which firmware version the camera used.

There was a *what the heck!* Moment to photography back when it was pure magic that a camera could display the world upside-down on a matte screen, not to speak of the *what the heck!* Moment many have experienced (and a few still do) when the image appear on the paper in the darkroom wet baths.



Today the technology of photography is no big wonder. There is not many such moments today with the few exceptions of getting the first Leica camera, seeing the first print come out of an Epson printer or viewing the first images from a brand new camera. Or seeing ones photos on a gallery wall for the first time.

Mainly, what photography is about today is making photographs. As simple as that. One should know the basics of photography and ones tools so perfectly that one can produce photographs, but the main attention should be on seeing, preserving and sharing emotions.

Emotions.



## The Reason to Photograph

So many of my workshop students have as a fundamental reason to photograph, to **preserve beauty**. The number of busy people I know who take the time to buy a camera and learn how to use it, so that they may capture moments of beauty, surprises me. They are busy, and yet they take on the task of showing others beauty in the daily life that to most people is a repetition of the previous 365 days.



Why would anyone spend money and time doing that? Shouldn't it be people's own damn problem to see beauty?

It is in photography as in most areas of life you deal with, that you are trying to help others. The fundamental reason someone would spend their whole life running a shoe store is that they fundamentally want to help others get great shoes. If you are aware that this is what you do, and you are good at it, that's happiness. If you get sidetracked and think you are selling people shoes to make money so you can buy a car, you are not really helping anyone, and that's unhappiness.

No one survive alone. We're in it together.



I think I never met a single person who had as a goal to utilize all 24,000,000 pixels on their sensor with the best dynamic range possible.





*Boston portrait session: When I was in Boston, I saw the back of a woman in a fashion store, working her big afro in a mirror. I went in and asked if I could photograph her. She wouldn't, but we talked and exchanged information. Two days later I came back and she said she knew I would come back. Her sister was there, and she said she should let me photograph her. So we agreed to meet and do it. But then something came in the way, maybe shyness again, and it didn't happen. So I talked to her, and she agreed to come the following day before I had to leave Boston. And finally I got to shoot this shy woman who everybody turns their heads to look at on the street and quite a few has tried to capture but never succeeded. This beautiful woman is 64 years old.*





*Some times people's comments surprise me. After a long day of walking in Istanbul we stopped to zone out in a cafe. My daughter Robin Isabella stole my iPhone and sat upstairs, and I did this photo in a haze of tiredness and in an attempt to capture the light and the street life outside. When two people referred to "the amazing photo of Robin on her phone" as the Holy Grail and that if they could do something like that, they would be happy, I had to go back to find out which photo they talked about. It was just a snap and having been there, I would have thought of better ways of doing it. But I can also take the viewpoint of others and see what they like about it. They don't know the circumstances or what it could have been - or what I might have tried to do but didn't succeed in. They just see the photo that is, and they like it. That's all you need to know. Take a note.*

Over the years I have seen that it doesn't really matter if the moments are in black & white or color, if they are made with 3 megapixels or 37.5 megapixels. I think it is safe to say the happiness is not in the megapixels or the firmware version.

What matters is the emotional impact of the image. That is what hits me by images I stop to look at, and it is the images I sell the most of. Emotional impact.

It is also the reason I stop on the street and take a picture. Because, deep behind all the human mechanics of it, I recognized a possible moment now or in the imminent future I could preserve as a moment of hope and beauty.

Maybe the most advanced I have gotten in photography is that I have stopped wondering about what I see and stopped doubting that I saw something: I simply trust that when I have an instinct to photograph something, it may very well be exactly that. One of those moments that either will go by unnoticed and unpreserved, or one of those moments I capture that make you wonder, "How the hell did he do that?"



## The long answer to a short question

The short answer is that I took the picture.

The longer answer is that I was ready, and that I took the picture. And this is how:

First of all, many photographers have a thing with “hit rate” and being good enough. You think that some day you will be able to take 40 photos in a day that are all master shots, because that is kind of the idea you get when you look at an exhibition or a photo book and see the master shots. You somehow think they did them all on the same roll of film.

Reality is that every photographer who ever did any master shots only did a relatively few good photos and even fewer great photographs in a lifetime.





The famous photo of the "Napalm girl" by Huynh Cong 'Nick' Ut of Associated Press was taken on June 8, 1972 with his Leica M2 and Leica Summicron 35/2 on a Kodak 400 ISO B&W film.



The photo very much changed the view on the Vietnam War, though President Nixon doubted its authenticity - he thought it might have been 'fixed'.

The 9-year old girl in the photo, Phan Thi Kim Phúc, survived her burnings from the napalm bombing after 14 months in the hospital. Nick took her to the hospital before he delivered the film to AP. She later founded an organization to help children of war.

The image won the Pulitzer Prize.

If you look through the negatives, slides or digital files of master photographers, you will see plenty of photos out of focus, too over-or underexposed, empty streets (because the subject hasn't entered the

frame yet or has left before the photographer pressed the shutter release button). And mainly, when you study the really great photos that define history, you will see that the photographer actually fired quite a lot of photos of the same scene.

The napalm girl, the dying soldier, the kiss and more are all one great iconic image from a series of images.

The famous ones that aren't made from a series of images most likely was because there was no time or possibility to get more than one try.



*Frame no 23 of 24 on a roll of film that is all about the same image.  
The contact print of Elliott Erwitt in the book *Magnum Contact Sheets*.*

**"It takes a lot of photographs to make one good one,"** as Elliot Erwitt says in the book *Magnum Contact Sheets* where one can see the 24 pictures of the same subject he took to make one good one. And he wasn't referring to only the 23 other similar pictures on the film. He was talking about all the work he did the days and years before.

I am in a period where I study photographers lives, career and business model. I notice that Henri Cartier-Bresson had a period from 1931-1934 where his images were clearly inspired by cubism

and he did some really inspiring and impressive work. He seemed very enthusiastic.

Then he had a period with quite a lot of Mexican women that were mostly nude (which I guess was also an enthusiastic period. They are not generally known), then a serious political period. And then he had a period of commercial success doing portraits and reportages, but seemed less enthusiastic about it himself. And eventually he went back to painting.



1932 - Cubism



1933 - Cubism



1934 - Spanish and Mexican women



1946 - Reportage



1961 - Portraits



1966 - Painting

*Understanding Henri Cartier-Bresson in six seconds: From enthusiastic and able to implement advanced cubism into wordless images, then a few years with Mexican women, to the established years as a gifted portrait photographer, and finally back to his original purpose as a painter.*

The irony being that when he finally could spit out Henri Cartier-Bresson photographs and got well paid for them, the enthusiasm was gone.

As the writer Neil Gaiman said, "Remember to enjoy the moment". Enjoy the success and all the interest you worked for. Take a bow.

The book Henri Cartier-Bresson: "Here and Now" that went along with the 2014-exhibition in Paris of Henri Cartier-Bresson's paintings, drawings, movies, poetry and photographs gives a good idea of what went on behind the scene in his life.

As an overall observation, many photographers have done some excellent work in the beginning when their eyes were fresh and mainly their enthusiasm to the medium was superior to their technical skills. And when they finally knew exactly what to do and how, they had kind of lost the enthusiasm or had forgotten what it was they originally wanted to tell.

Often great photographs happen when you are just having fun or experience happiness in life. Think of Elliot Erwitts California Kiss and how that happened?



Maybe what you have to work on is your enthusiasm rather than technical skills. Except of course, that understanding the medium better and gaining control of a new technical skill, say getting the light right each time, is *also* a source for enthusiasm.

**"I am a professional photographer by trade  
and an amateur photographer by vocation."**

*– Elliot Erwitt*

Not much different than a 16 year old who is too young to conquer the world but wants nothing else than exactly that.

And the same guy when he is 40 and realizes he has achieved all materialistic and monetary goals, or at least somewhat can predict how well off he will be the next forty years. Nothing more to fight for, just a lot more of the same.

Pablo Picasso could be said to be an ideal. When he was in his 80's he lived and produced as if he was an enthusiastic teenager. With the experience of a lifetime.

How do you stay enthusiastic and keep creating that life spark?

Wouldn't it be helpful to have a 16-year-old enthusiasm, and at the same time all the experience to make it go right?







## **Reboot and be what you originally were meant to be**

The interesting thing in the subject of photography is that it doesn't follow the normal rules. You can be inexperienced and functionally illiterate when it comes to what a megapixel exactly is, how it looks and where it sits in the camera.

If you can stop worrying about all the stuff you think you need to know before you will be able to take great photographs, and just take some, it will be much easier and less frustrating.

I have yet to learn a lot more, to understand what it is that makes a "good Thorsten von Overgaard photo". I will have a photo that many people like and some buy, and I have only clues as to what it is that makes it work.

In the beginning you would think sharpness, proper control of tones, the right lens and a decent camera would count. Maybe a five-year cycle of introduction in some German photography school, plus a couple of years of art history in some French school would make you able to take good photos? All these things you think you need, before you can start.

But the fact of the matter is that most photographers are clueless to what worked, when they made a great photograph.



So you listen to what people say. To me, some will say, "Your pictures make me happy" and I look at my pictures and try to understand what on earth is it they see?

Others will say to me, "It's so elegant" and I look at my pictures and try to guess which ones they were referring to and what they meant by it.

After years of this, you start being able to recognize a good photo. And the awful truth is that you can't learn it in a school or by reading a book. You learn it by taking pictures.

What you realize is that the photos people like the best are usually the ones that just happened, and the ones that were the fun ones to do. The uncomplicated ones.



## Staying true to your own goals

Having goals, knowing to some degree what they are, and following them honestly is the source of enthusiasm. When I try to accomplish what someone else than I think is important, my enthusiasm is less.

I am very fortunate to be able to live as an artist and do (only) what I think should be done, the way I would like to do it. The mass media is a dying race, they don't commission photographers as they did back when, and their rates reflect it. You get \$8 for an image in a magazine, and the picture distribution agency takes the 70%. Which is why I stopped working with Getty Images in 2012 and pulled my archive of photos from them. They are now my own to be determined later what to use them for, and all Getty Images got are the few ones they commissioned me to do.



*World Premiere of Kylie Minogue's 'Les Folies Tour'. © Getty Images (Thorsten Overgaard)*



## Traveling with my Leica

But mainly I look ahead. I take more than 40,000 photographs a year and edit them down to somewhat 4,000 final images that I send to clients/magazines or store them in my archive. The majority of what I do is taking pictures and storing them in my archive for later use in books, articles, archive sale, exhibitions and prints.

Content is the king. You got content; you will find ways to use it.

If you want to make an interesting media, website or book, you have to have content. That's why the mass media is dying; they don't create original content anymore.

So many things will happen in the future. Look where New York Times was 20 years ago, and look where they are today. In the meantime, a single photographer with a Canon has built his **Humans of New York** with 9 million followers on Facebook (it was 1 million 18 months ago when I stumbled into him on the streets of New York and was photographed by him) and 50,000 - 250,000 likes on each of his human stories, documenting the human condition. Curiously enough, the UN sent him out to document the everyday life of people on a 50-day portrait/reportage trip in September-October 2014.

Note that it was *him* and not an experienced New York Times photographer that was sent out on a 50-day reportage travel to ten countries to show the world the state of the human condition. The noteworthy part of the story is that he started out without any idea why, with worried parents (as is how a great idea always starts), with just an idea he wanted to pursue.

Enthusiasm!

## The Times They Are A Changin' ...

In my view, the only fair goal to follow is your own. That's the key to enthusiasm, to doing it right and making something that might make sense to someone else now and tomorrow.

When you have something interesting to tell, people will listen.







## **I wish I were like you**

On dark days I can look at Elliot Erwitt photos and think, "I should have more dogs and humor!" Or I can look at Helmut Newton and think, "I should have a twist of something kinky to my photos" as he always has. Or I can look at Ralph Gibson and think, "I should work with nude women, shadows and textures" as he does.

In other words, I should do nude women with kinky dogs in funny situations, with interesting textures and light!

The reason this wouldn't work is that it's not original. It's something made-up and trying to be.

What works is being yourself and takes the photos you see. That's what is original and unique. You may not see it, but to others it is.

What does work is inspiration. To look at the world, the coffee cup, the people and dogs passing by, the images in books, magazines and newspapers.







## Talent

Which reminds me that when I used to look at a group of photographers in my workshop the first day, I thought I could predict who would do really cool photos.

Having seen hundreds of people I can tell that you can *never* tell from their experience, look or attitude who does really great photos.

Sometimes they are 16, sometimes they are 80, and sometimes they walk too slow, fumble and talk too much to notice what's going on around them. Some have a lot of money, some don't. Some have a background in graphic design; others have been working in a ships engine room for years.

You would think that the smart dressed graphic designer with the cool glasses would make those types of photos. But then when you see their photos, you realize the quiet guy in the beat-up sneakers did some really amazing photos.

The short answer is that they took the picture.

The longer one is that they did whatever they did, the way they do things, and photographed what they saw. As simple as that. That is factually what works. Photographing what *you* see.





## The reason why

I try to study artists and photographers to see what their breakthrough(s) were; what incidents in their career lead to the success we later take for granted. I look at why they began, what inspired them, how they worked. What was their masterpiece(s)?

In the case of Steve McCurry his masterpiece is the **Afghan Girl** from 1984.

For Henri Cartier-Bresson it is the jumping man at Place de l'Europe in 1932.

For Elliot Erwitt it is his California Kiss from 1955.

And so on, and often there are more than one masterpiece defining a career. Leonardo da Vinci's masterpiece was Mona Lisa.

For **Paul Wolff** one could say there is no single photo that is his masterpiece, his masterpiece was consistency in producing high quality photographs and building an archive of such photos (which unfortunately burned. What a bummer!).





There is the beginning where they may discover a camera by accident, or meeting a mentor by accident.

Then later comes the commercial success where some patron came an artist to support, a great magazine editor, a wealthy private collector, a company that commissioned them, or some incident happened in their life that made their career take off.

In all cases it is not the society as a collective that recognizes them, but one or a few persons that recognizes them and has the power to make them.

In the case of **Vivian Maier** nothing such happened while she was alive; her breakthrough was when someone found her archive after she had passed and made her what she is.

Few such things are planned or learned in a school; it's often coincidences.

In the case of Brandon Stanton with his *Humans of New York*, it was Facebook. In the old days he would have to get approval from an editor. In 2014 you just post it, and the audience decide.



***Humans of New York with UN:*** "My mother and I did not have a good relationship, but we grew much closer after my daughter was born. Because I had no idea what I was doing. When the baby was born three months early, my mom slept at the hospital with her." (Kampala, Uganda).





## **Wanting to look**

What could be said about them all is that they wanted to look and notice things.

And what more natural extension of that basic purpose than taking a camera and preserving what you see, the way you see it?

You may or may not have noticed that, but that may likely be the basic talent and purpose you have too: Wanting to look and notice things.

You don't have to understand what you are doing, or why.

It's more important to understand and respect how unique it is and keep doing it.

# Appendix

# Workshops

By Thorsten Overgaard

I try to teach as many workshops every year as I can. My free website, my books and this extension course is my way of trying to make more things available for more people.

30% of my workshop students are women. 98% are Leica users (the last 2% become after the workshop). 30% of the attendees in my workshops participate in one or more future workshops.

The workshops are usually people from all parts of the world. Yet it is interesting how compatible they are. Many friendships and even business relationships have formed after a workshop.

People who are interested in photography and who are ambitious enough to take the time and money to take my workshop usually have many other things in common.

My goal is to help people improve themselves. You are always welcome to e-mail me.

**See more info online →**



# Extension Courses

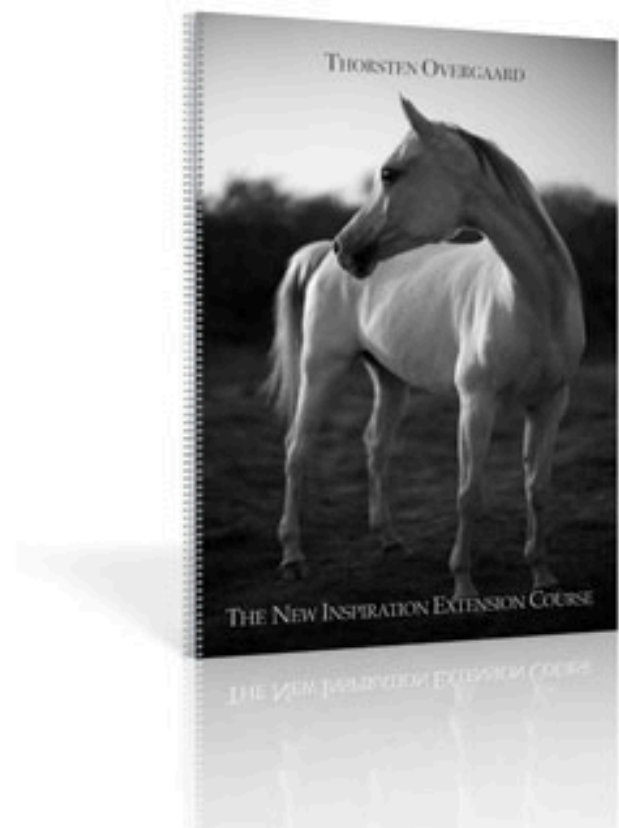
By Thorsten Overgaard

I am preparing more extension courses. Some are training in technique; others are more philosophical and inspirational.

Based on the response I get from workshop students and extension course students I try to compile extension courses that can supplement each other and expand your enthusiasm and knowledge in the directions you want to go.

Keep an eye out for my other extension courses.

**See more info online →**





# Books

By Thorsten Overgaard

My eBooks and books is a less time-consuming way of participating and get inspired.

My books are inspired by the feedback what people would like to know more about.

I intentionally try to make my books very concise and as short as possible. My goal is not to supply you with a huge dictionary of rules but to supply you with something you can have in your head for daily use and inspiration. I have no intention to show what a great photographer I am.

I have an intention to show how great a photographer *you* are.

Other books on composition, specific camera models, doing portraits and more are in the pipeline. More photography books are coming in 2016 going along with exhibitions. They will not just be photos but interesting stories and what else I might include to entertain and inspire.

**See more info online →**



# The Lightroom Survival Kit

**The Lightroom Survival Kit** is exactly what the name says. A manual and guide how to survive Lightroom: How to make high quality photos without having to sit in front of the computer more than necessary. To give you a basic understanding of what it's about, and how to ensure that your images are preserved for the future.

See more info online →



# Meetups

From time to time I arrange “Coffee & Leica Freaks Meetups” around the world when I am in a city anyways. It’s simply informal coffee meetups where we get together as a group and get to know each other. It’s free.

Often the meetups result in new contacts and people you would like to hang out with or go out photograph with from time to time.



*Meetup in Jakarta*

# Thorsten Overgaard



*The 6x6 wooden camera I build when I was 14 years old. Photo by Joy Villa.*

Thorsten von Overgaard is a Danish born feature writer and photographer who compose everyday life into impressive images in the themes of life and light.

He travels to more than twenty countries a year where his camera captures the instant moments at the backstage at a fashion week, a dinner for two, a reader absorbed in his reading, everyday life in a street in Bangladesh and many other classic Von Overgaard images.

The aesthetics of the world is something Von Overgaard skillfully reflects in his contemporary photographs. His work has been published in Vanity Fair, MTV, GQ Magazine, Vogue, The Times, CNN among others.

Thorsten von Overgaard is further known for his writings and books on photography as an international educator and photo competition judge for many years.

His first exhibition, The Salzburg Collection, at the Leica Galerie Salzburg, was the best-visited and best selling exhibition in the history of the gallery.



*"We look at his pictures and share in intimate situations, joy and sorrow."*

- Leica Gallerie Salzburg