

Momentary Capture: Chicago Street Photography by Jonathan Elderfield
—Katherine Jentleson

About 20 times a minute our vision is corrupted. The involuntary act of blinking limits our capacity to see the world around us, and it is only the basest way that our acuity is plundered. Take into account the distractedness that accompanies a daily agenda or the defensiveness of a city dweller, and our narrow vision is actually perpetuated as a survival tactic. The photography of Jonathan Elderfield exposes the deficit of our nearsightedness. In his photographs, the unseen moments that transpire in and around urban Chicago come into focus.

Elderfield often feels overwhelmed by the infinitude of moments that could be caught on film. He says, “I sometimes think, right at this moment, there are all these things happening in the world that could probably be captured in an interesting way, and I’m not there to do it.” But in this project, Elderfield concentrates on Chicago, where he lived between 2004 and 2006 while he was employed as a photo editor by *The Chicago Tribune*. There is no doubt that his process has been greatly influenced by this involvement in photojournalism—the experience of culling thousands of photographs a day has allowed him to become a ruthless arbiter of his own work. He discloses that the 20 photographs in the CUE show were winnowed from nearly 7,000 exposures. As Henri Cartier-Bresson once said, “You must make a lot of milk to get a little cream.”

Working in news photography has also allowed Elderfield to draw a distinction between the photojournalism he edits and the art of street photography to which he aspires. After shooting the South Street neighborhood of Philadelphia from 2002 to 2004, Elderfield understood how he wanted his photographs to stand apart from photography as illustration. He says, “What changed for me in Philly is that a lot of news photographers think in a narrative way. It was very important to me to reject that and say each picture can be equally strong and independent.” In Elderfield’s work, the singularity of each shot comes from its impeccable composition and the intimacy it invites.

Elderfield’s habit of planting himself for long periods of time in public places permits him to linger and examine the attributes of a specific location. By staying put, he can envision how he might retell the story of the latticed walkway of a construction site, or the lighted tiers of a baseball stadium, at the precise moment when a catalyzing subject appears. The harmony between a studied space and a random event is particularly evident in a shot of two people on a street corner that is overwrought with litter, signs, newspaper vending machines, and the moldings and windows that dot the surrounding buildings. But within Elderfield’s frame, the quotidian muddle that threatens to engulf the two pedestrians becomes an orderly, if baroque, backdrop. The patterns of lines are so variously dynamic that the shot could serve as a textbook illustration used to teach children about the properties of parallel versus perpendicular lines: A drawn cigarette strikes a right angle with a lamppost that divides a window, which meanwhile reflects a billboard across a building’s vertical edge. The chain of interacting lines continues for as long as you study the scene.

Disorder begets order in Elderfield’s compositions, but simple situations also become complex. His picture of a group of people, posing for their own photograph by a waterfront, brings to mind the words of Stephen Shore, who remarked in *The Nature of Photographs* that a photographer captures “a complex web of visual juxtapositions that realign themselves with each step the photographer takes.” In this instance, Elderfield discovers a vantage point from which the five humans and two bags form a distended parallelogram that teases the edges of the water. The result is an exceptional perspective, in which the humans spring forth from the depthless convergence of concrete, water and horizon to create the illusion of three dimensions.

If the deft compositions catch your attention, the action depicted in each shot keeps your gaze. The alluring quality of Elderfield's subjects is never more apparent than in a photograph of four young black girls who part their circle just enough to invite you in on their secret. Looking at this picture, it is impossible not to feel part of the gang and invigorated by the unmerited inclusion in the reverie of strangers. What is so powerful about this *ex post facto* voyeurism is that it allows you to enter the moments that you missed, either because you weren't paying attention or were too inhibited to intrude. After all, social conventions dictate that strangers shall not join a group of somebody else's children, look too long at a man lying prostrate in the gap of a rock ledge or ogle a couple having a romantic moment at the water's edge.

While Elderfield's shots enable us to trespass upon the moments of others, bringing us into the lives of strangers can be an alienating experience. When I visited Elderfield in his Jackson Heights apartment, where he currently lives with his wife and two young sons, he pulled down a book by a photographer he admires, Eugene Richards. He read me the following passage from *Americans We*:

"I didn't sleep well the night before going away. I lay awake for hours and listened to the undefined rumbling and thumping of our Brooklyn neighborhood, and to Janine and Sam's breathing. My confidence had gone. Inexplicably after all these years I'm still a shy, doubting, anxious child when I have to go out and confront people I don't know."

While Richards's brand of photography relies on cultivated relations with his subjects—whereas Elderfield's work consists of insights often taken anonymously from the hip—the task of excavating what's buried in other people is unnerving no matter what kind of grip you have on the shovel.

But without Elderfield these events would not exist beyond the moment they occur. Although he hardly shares the pretensions of George Berkeley, the 18th-century philosopher who pioneered the idea that to be is to be perceived (*esse est percipi*), his street photography engages in the same relation between perception and existence that Berkeley proposed. The camera becomes the charge of reality, authenticating the brief and mundane moments that would otherwise elude our negligent perception and thus fall into the abyss of the nonexistent. Without the affirmation of Elderfield's lens, for instance, the young girl brandishing her newly acquired cotton candy would be just another tree falling in the forest, with no one to hear it. Instead her ferocious victory emblazons the cover of this catalog, provoking us to enter upon Elderfield's world, where ho-hum scenes of the everyday become impeccably choreographed dramas of empathy.

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