

INTERVIEW WITH ARIEL LEUENBERGER

BY DON SPRINGER

What inspired you to become a photographer?

The world around me. I have always been visiting new places, first with my parents as a kid, then on my own as I grew up.

Photography has helped me to remember all those wonderful moments and encounters when I'm back home.

I started shooting the streets of my hometown only three years ago, when I realized that you don't have to go far away to find interesting subjects and take good pictures.

What age are you and at what age did you start your journey as a photographer?

I am 34 years old. My journey to photography started more than 20 years ago when my father gave me his father's old foldout camera and a roll of 120 film.

I went out to photograph the flowers in our garden, took the film out, went to the shop and waited impatiently until the prints arrived a few days later.

Since then I've always carried a camera.



Would you mind sharing some of the things you feel helped you along the way with your photography, (lessons, workshops, books etc)....and also some of the things that may have hindered you that you overcame on this journey?

First, my father helped a lot. He was and still is a passionate photographer when time allows.

In the past ten years I have been looking at a lot of good photographers, their work inspired me a lot. Nowadays this is easy, thanks to the internet, Flickr and your magazine.

Recently, I had the pleasure to go on a couple of photo walks with fellow Swiss street photographer Thomas Leuthard.

I think it is the best thing you can do: Meet other, better photographers and learn from them.

What hindered me was the gear. Like a lot of people, I was obsessed with gear rather than photography. Now I have been using the same



cameras for three years. Also, it took me a while to discover that you don't need exotic backdrops to take interesting pictures.

I always thought my city is boring, but actually it is very inspiring when you know how to look at it.

If we are speaking specifically of photographers, which are the ones of the past and present do you admire?

I have always had a weak spot for the Japanese, especially Daido Moriyama, Tatsuo Suzuki and Junku Nishimura.

I love the dark atmosphere and the graphic approach they incorporate. But I admire more classic photographers like Bruce Gilden and René Burri too, especially their portrait work.

What purpose does photography serve for you?

Photography helps me to open my eyes, to walk around fully awake and aware of my world.

I see so many people who are constantly staring on their smartphone and miss everything that goes on around them. I don't want to be like this.

So even if I do not carry a camera I'm always checking my surroundings for potential

pictures. It helps to stay focussed. And of course, photography is a means of expressing my view of the world. While traveling, photography helps me to discover, preserve and to remember new places, new people.

What Genre' of photography are you most comfortable working in?

Street photography. I like to find an interesting backdrop and then I wait until something happens.

I don't feel very comfortable walking up to strangers and taking their picture, although I really like the outcome. And I almost never had any negative experiences.

But I still have to encourage myself, every time I want to take a street portrait. That's part of the fun though.

When you work, are you working on different series or just finding photos that fit the way you feel at the moment?

At home, I try to work on series. But while traveling, I just shoot whatever I see. Most of the time, the pictures of one place fit nicely together and series just happen.

In the future, I would like to do some more project work, both as a new challenge and as the desire to go deeper.





Can you describe a few of your trigger mechanisms that make you want to stop and shoot?

Interesting light like in the early morning or evening, patterns in architecture or nature, beautiful and/or friendly people, unusual things happening around me like children working on construction sites or roasted ducks hanging from street stalls.

How strong of a connection do you have with your subject matter and can you describe that connection?

Most of the times I have no connection and this bothers me. The “nice backdrop with some random people” scene may look good, but it gets boring to shoot because I lack a specific connection.

Especially if it's not in my hometown. So I try to get more personal, to tell a story, work on series. In Myanmar I met a lot of very kind people. They made it very easy to connect and this connection shows in the photographs.

Or I worked in Phnom Penh, Cambodia for two months. During that time I felt a strong connection to this wonderful city and was able to capture this feeling in a mix of portraits and more distant photographs.

Right now I'm in Tokyo, where it is more difficult to connect. I think my best shots happen when I have some kind of relationship to the subject, when I care about it. That's why I try to get to know a city before I photograph it. It takes time, but it's worth it.







What are your recurring themes?

I'm always drawn to patterns, so a lot of my shots turn out rather graphical, minimal and clean. Sometimes I love it, sometimes I wish I would be able to shoot more dirty...

What is the distance to your subject you are most comfortable with while working?

I started from a distance with a 50mm lens, then switched to the 40mm and got closer. Last

week I bought a 35mm. I'm very curious how it will influence my photography.

I hope it makes me walk even closer into the action. But for portraits I tend to use the 90mm which helps to isolate the subject.

What camera are you working with currently?

The original Olympus OMD has been my workhorse since more than three years now.

It is a perfect match for my style and I love that little cam. At home I occasionally use a Konica Hexar and my father's old Leica R5 for my film shots.

All my cameras have prime or fixed lenses. I don't know why, but somehow I can't shoot with zoom lenses.

How do you see the relationship with your camera? Is it a friend, tool or whatever?

When I'm out on the street, my camera is a tool, sometimes

a stubborn one. Most of the time, it does what I want it to do. Therefore, when I get home and look at the pictures it took, my camera is more like a friend.

I know it's odds and how to work around them. So it captures what I want and I'm thankful for that. We have a long relationship.

I even attached a nice leather strap. But ultimately I take the pictures, my camera is just a tool.

Are you self taught, educated or a little bit of both?

I wouldn't say I'm self taught, although I never attended photography classes. I work as a public relations consultant.

Communication is a visual process as well, so a lot of people told me a lot about photography, graphic design and visual arts. I am very thankful for all that knowledge.

How do you feel about being photographed?

Don't like it too much if it's not a professional photoshoot for a renowned fashion brand.

Just kidding, most of the time I don't mind being

photographed, although it's not very pleasant.

Do you like to work by yourself or to have someone with you? Please explain why.

On the street, I'm better on my own. I like to go wherever my instincts or the light takes me and spend as much time as I feel is needed at a certain place.

But sometimes it is very inspiring to work with other photographers and see how they go around.





Do you have a preference for images as an analog or as a digital state?

As for the final image, the outcome, I don't care. I love the analog process, the care you have to put into every step, the time it takes until you can see the result, the feel.

This helped to sharpen my eye, my vision. But on the road I prefer digital for its convenience. And the outcome is not

too different if you look at the pictures on a screen, like most of us do.

Where in the world are you located?

Usually I live in Zürich, Switzerland. At the moment I am very lucky: I'm on a two years journey around the world, together with my wife.

Where is your favorite place to work?

I like cities with beautiful architecture, wide spaces, friendly people and a lot of diversity. Zürich is such a place, albeit not a very big city.

But there are others around the world: Phnom Penh and Tokyo are both wonderful in their own ways. And I can't wait to go to New York for the first time...





When you're feeling somewhat slow or lost, how do you find your way back to find inspiration to get working again?

Put the camera away for a couple of days, then the urge to go out and shoot will come back. Also, it helps to find inspiration with other photographers, art exhibitions and magazines.

Do you exhibit your work in any form?

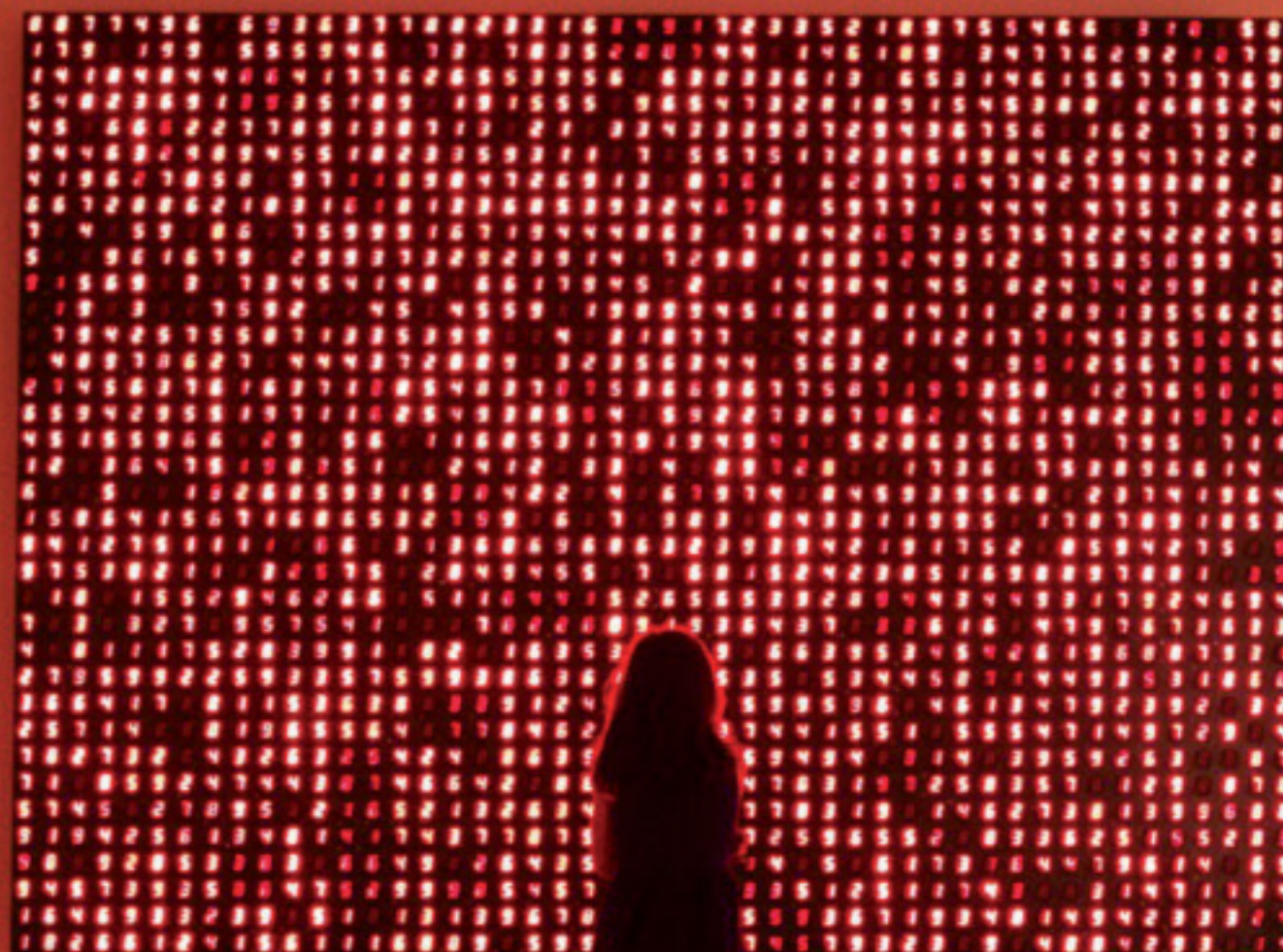
So far only on the internet.

How satisfied are you in your current state in photography and what would you like to improve upon?

Right now I am very happy because I have a lot of time to go out and shoot some of the best places in the world. I'd like to get more personal, to do more series and projects, but I'm working on that and hope to improve.

Can you describe how you judge the success or failure of your work?

It's very easy: I look at my photographs and if I don't like what I see, I delete it from my harddisk.



I am very strict. The rest, I show to my wife for comments. If she likes it, it's good. And then there is the feedback from online, but I don't give too much on that.

How do you feel about the current state of photography?

I'm not a photographer who gets paid for his work, so I can not judge photography as a business.

I think it is easier than ever before to take pictures. Everyone does it, even in Myanmar. But not a lot of people know how to read a good photograph.


We should be spending more time looking at great pictures, not selfies. And less time just snapping away without knowing what to do with our pictures.


If you would like to make a closing statement, we'd love to hear what you have to say.

Thank you very much for the interview. It was a pleasure to reflect on all these questions. I never answered most of them for myself, so I learned a lot doing so.

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