

Where Journalists Won't Go

Introduction to Gary Mark Smith's
Travelogueing the Dark Side (2018)

by James R. Hugunin

*A lot of people think I'm crazy, and some of them even
say so out loud.*

— Gary Mark Smith



Gary Mark Smith

I've been following and commenting upon Gary Mark Smith's life-project ever since I first met him during his final MFA critique panel at Purdue University. I first became a fan of his images and his daring; he has a gutsiness that I admire and which has served him well during situations of maximum danger. I'd never met anyone like him before. The level of intensity he exudes is only matched by the extreme situations he manages to get himself into and out of. Smith writes: "I've been forced by my endeavors [*global street photography*] to perfect the practice of being prepared at all times to operate in a unique air somewhere between vulnerability and invincibility," putting, as he says, "the need for artistic access ahead of the need for personal safety."

Speaking of the global reach of his dangerous life-project, Smith says, ". . . there are numerous streets . . . that aren't even safe to hurry down with your hands in your pockets, much less saunter about with two cameras hanging around your neck taking pictures of just about everything worthy of documenting in that place at that time. . . ." He goes on to salute "travelers who go to so-called 'risky' places for broadening their horizons in an aggressive and rewarding manner" and advises us to "throw caution to the wind and *get out there* ..." So how does he get away with it, traversing, as he terms it, the "inaccessibly unsafe"? As Smith tell us, it's sheer chutzpah — "Swagger is an asset among pirates" — gate-crashing, manipulating "Danger-World Circumstances" to meet his access needs. To make access easier, he

always carries a real (or properly faked) laminated media ID card, “raring and ready” to throw around his neck at yet another roadblock crashing encounter.

When I think of Gary Smith on one of his well-researched, meticulously-prepared-for danger missions, I think of him as one of those cartoon characters who, being chased, runs off a cliff and remains suspended in space before looking down and taking the plunge — but Gary never looks down. Had he been on the Titanic, he would’ve survived. Had he gone down in Pan Am flight 103, he’d have been the sole survivor, turning up minutes later at a local Lockerbie pub with a camera and pint in hand. He’s that kind of guy. So I am honored to speak on his behalf.

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“I saw it.” (*Yo lo vi.*)

— Francisco Goya (*The Disasters of War*)



Soufrière Hills Volcano Erupts (1997)

Smith’s adventures recall stories found in editor Keath Fraser’s 1991 collection, *Bad Trips: A Sometimes Terrifying, Sometimes Hilarious Collection of Writing on the Perils of the Road*. “The nagging rational voice inside my head kept cursing me over and over and over again . . . RUN AWAY FROM THIS THING! . . . JUST RUN NORTH RIGHT NOW” So confesses pirate street photographer Smith in his field notes for September 21, 1997, when confronting the most dangerous place on the face of the Earth at that moment — the Montserrat’s Soufrière Hills Volcano in the Caribbean, which was about to erupt, sending a pyroclastic cloud of Hell’s Fire his way, a chaotic event in which this Extremophile photographer, holding his ground, hung out at a bar within the “death zone” gathering information and trading stories with locals. In his images, Smith found a visual order that emerged from the crazy disorder of destruction, pressing his shutter at just the right moment, from just the right angle. But just as amazing, are the stories Smith tells of these local barflies, “juiced volcano holdouts” with their “volcano-junkie eyes” (like “Style,” who tells Smith about surviving hurricane Hugo back in 1989), conversing about “the expanding catastrophe

and their deteriorating predicaments," . . . yet at the same time, "retelling of the miracles that they had personally been given the opportunity to see that morning ..."

This dance with death in the Caribbean is just one of many dire situations Smith has gotten himself into over the course of forty years of travel around the globe propelled by a vital need to overcome chronic pain from a leg injury by obsessively performing a scripto-visual dance among hazardous contexts, often remaining weeks, and sometimes months, among the most miserable and dangerous streets on Earth "taking as big a risk as possible," he writes, "to be able to adequately (in my mind) reach out and touch the flame of the place." Smith survived his encounter with the volcano without a scratch; prior to that, as he was growing into what he became, he survived being hit by lightning — twice.

Travelogueing the Dark Side: The ExtremeOphile Field Notes of a One-of-a-Kind Lifetime Art Project is a tome recording this intrepid photographer's adventures across time and space, a sedimentation in paper and ink of his multifarious *performances* as a global street photographer, where danger is a key ingredient of such performances: "It's something inside me that pulls me toward recording violent moments on 'inaccessible streets,' areas photojournalists either won't go or where they remain for a short time." Hence, one must understand Smith's accomplishments not just in an analysis of his superbly composed imagery *per se*, but of the *whole performance* of his global trekking activity into the world's most dangerous places: Cuba in the 1960s; East Germany just after the fall of the Berlin Wall, prior to unification; Prague emerging from Communist rule; El Salvador during the bloody civil war (in 1982 for 3.5 months and in 1984 for two weeks), documenting victims of Right-Wing death squads; Rio de Janeiro's infamous Rocinha *favela*, where he was roughed up by machine-gun toting minions of a local drug lord, his camera grabbed; Peshawar near



Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo (2015)

the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, just after 9-11, with Taliban fleeing U.S. attacks adjacent to Tora Bora into Pakistan's tribal areas; and, more recently, life on the destitute streets of an impoverished Goma and in the Mugunga Refugee Camp in North Kivu in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, boldly ignoring a travel ban due to armed conflict in the area, which included



Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo (2015)

the shelling of Goma itself, to “photograph people in the wild going about the poetry of their everyday lives.”

Smith embeds these diverse, probing images of his risky travel experiences in his highly readable, gripping, yet often humorous, field notes embodied in his books and on his comprehensive website www.streetphoto.com — billed as “The Most Far Flung Street Photography Website in All the Land.” Not all of Smith’s trips are danger-filled. One field note entry reads: “My Impressions of Moscow: Despite Maggots in the Stew.” His field notes delight in recording ecstatic moments, like his presence in post-Communist Budapest on August 20, 1990 for the renaming of the Communist “Constitution Day,” back to its original pre-Communist “Saint Stephen’s Day,” and the massive celebration thereof: “Some estimates say that as many as five-and-a-half million Hungarians kicked up their post-Cold War heels under firework skies on a very special St. Stephen’s night on the banks of the Danube River.”

In Smith’s field notes we get inside information, and personal insights into, major global events that we would never hear from the usual news services. For instance, in “Basketball and Ball-busting on the Train Ride to Belgrade,” Smith serves up a dramatic story about Serb-Croatian tensions between Yugoslavian soldiers (this was just prior to the civil war there) he’s befriended on an overnight-train. Then there



Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo (2015)

is his written record "Cologne SWAT Squad: Manhandled at the Reunification Opera Riot": "Even when an authority stops me, I'm nearly always able to go over that authority's head to his or her boss and get where I need to go to get the pictures I want to get. However, an exception to that standard occurred on the night of October 3, 1990, German and European Reunification night in Cologne. That night I found myself caught in a demilitarized zone between a huge angry mob of raging M-80-tossing German anarchists and about a hundred camouflaged and fully-armed (rubber bullets) West German SWAT team members." What ensues is a chilling tale of extreme street wisdom in avoiding potential harm.

Smith's scripto-visual production recalls 1970s conceptual art in its wedding of text to image in ways that both anchor and relay meaning through various contexts. Therefore, to understand the most unique aspect of Smith's accomplishments, his life-work should not be seen simply as a collection of street photography *à la* Garry Winogrand, but as an extensive body of *document-travel-survival over time*, a performance, shaped into a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total artwork.

Smith writes about how he was "challenged by an idea to twist documentary photography into fine art street photography, using literal and empathetic imagery in my own experimental way. Taking street photography global . . ." His field notes

detailing this project, his encounter with what he terms “authentic risk” (e.g. “Holding out and waiting for death by fire . . .”), are as compelling as narratives as the accompanying images are as astute revelations of, as Smith writes in his Mission Statement, “. . . the variety of culture and similarity in character of urban elements and order that one encounters out on the seemingly chaotic streets of a single planet at the turn of a millennium.” Form in writing (confessional/diaristic) and form in visual terms (“decisive moment” shots) combine to place the reader/viewer as a fascinated audience to Smith’s camera and notebook-in-hand global adventures — at times terrifying, but also comical. As Smith tells us: “Just because the subject matter of this is serious, doesn’t mean I didn’t end up having quite a bit of fun along the way while I was getting my work done.”

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The gunman just told me, ‘If you take my picture, I’ll shoot you through your head.’ Well, this was a once in a lifetime opportunity . . .

— Field note from Guazapa, El Salvador, 1984



Suchitoto, El Salvador (1984)

In 1984, during El Salvador’s civil war, Smith was driving from San Salvador to the village of Suchitoto with a UPI reporter, white flag and media banner reading “PRESS: Don’t Shoot” on prominent display, when they were “showered with a mortar barrage that for certain would have ended us both right there if not for the concrete drainage trench we’d pulled up next to and dove into that shielded the car from the shrapnel whizzing around us.” They’d escaped *cierta muerte* (certain death) by sheer luck. A little later Smith stared down an FMLN (rebel) guard at a roadblock (see epigraph above), taking his photograph despite the warning and the M16 aimed at him; letting his camera drop, Smith then raised his hands in compliance, asking the guard with a wink and a smile (in Spanish) “Hello, how are you today?”



Carrying a Dead Campesino, El Salvador (1984)



Suchitoto, El Salvador (2009)



Street Sweeping, San Salvador, El Salvador (2009)

which got a hearty laugh from the gunman and suddenly all was OK — *the bad don't fuck with the crazy.*

While in El Salvador, Smith photographed everyday city life (with a keen eye for the incongruous) and the horrors of the civil conflict (death-squad victims), in both color and black-and-white. Smith's field notes read: "In all, the government said it had killed two dozen rebels in the battle for Suchitoto, but refused to show reporters evidence to back up the claim."

Besides Smith's images of dead bodies, he always makes time to record people sweeping the streets — a perennial topic of his as he sees the activity as a metaphor for his own "sweeping the streets" with his eye and camera for compositional possibilities and the persistence of humanity to insert itself into nature. Moreover, this mundane manual labor, pervasive in all locales, contrasts with the violence and danger in those streets and humorously links the diverse places recorded throughout Smith's global project.

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About a half a kilometer away from the last Pakistan Army and Peshawar Police check point, Shahid asked me to put on the clothing I'd bought in Islamabad to disguise myself as an Afghani, as I'd be turned away as an illegitimate foreign visitor if I were discovered.

— Field note from Afghanistan, 2001



Border Negotiation, Afghanistan-Pakistan Border Near Peshwar, Pakistan (2001)

reading, and keep you on the edge of your seat — we hear of a British journalist who had recently been nearly stoned to death by Afghani refugees; but then there is the delightful moment when this intrepid photographer gave a “surprise” human rights speech at an Afghanistan refugee camp high school, dancing delicately over the topics of religion and the education of girls so as to avoid being stoned to death: “Education is difficult,” he told the teens, “Ignorance is easy.” For his efforts, Smith received



Murmuration of Fear, London, England (2015)



School yard scene in Alfred Hitchcock’s film *The Birds* (1963)

Taking a breather to photograph in the gentle streets of Amsterdam, Smith’s “vacation” is interrupted by the terrorist attack in New York City. After that terrible event of 9-11 and the U.S. military response in Afghanistan, Smith knew he had to risk penetrating this new global danger point. He gained access using his usual array of chutzpah and disguise. The field notes for this trip make fascinating

eager handshakes from the 250 students present. “It had been among the most astounding hours of my astonishing life,” he noted.

Since 2001, global terrorism has become a common occurrence. Our collective sense of safety has been shaken. Photographs of horrific events have filled our news media. But no one as far as I know has *figured* the sense of impending danger as Smith has in an image shot in London in 2015 after several terrorist attacks there. *Murmuration of Fear, London, England* is not a direct record of violence like Smith’s images of combat and death shot in El Salvador. Rather, it hints at the threat of future violence.

For me, given its title, it cleverly evokes scenes from Hitchcock’s eerie film

The Birds (1963), where the protagonists never know when the terror will occur, when a seemingly innocent bird will turn and kill. It is a premonition of terror to come to London streets (what the average Londoner must fear). The black birds and the two women, backs to us, clothed in black *boshiya*, evoke Western symbols of shrouded Death, while the touches of red on either side of the dark figures suggest blood. The photograph symbolizes a post 9-11 world where a mood of anxiety accompanies us city-strollers in the West, where a sudden burst of birds into the air can suggest the sudden explosion of a bomb in a backpack.



Europe, 2015, Oxford Street, London, England picks up on the same theme. A *Boshiyda* clad woman walks among other Londoners in front of a large store window ad poster showing a man in a T-shirt that reads "Have No Fear." The T-shirt could be Smith's own mantra as he enters dangerous streets on the dark side.

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I was a first responder to (and ultimately a casualty of) the biggest natural disaster [Hurricane Katrina and flood] and the most embarrassing and deadly government breakdown in U.S. history. . .

— Field notes from New Orleans, LA, 2005, rewritten in 2015



Post-Katrina Morning Busker Big Easy Fist Bump, New Orleans, Louisiana (2010)



Pearl River, Louisiana (2005)



Mississippi Gulf Coast Highway (2005)

Qualified as a Red Cross first responder, Smith was the first person in Lawrence, Kansas to volunteer to assist during the Katrina tragedy of 2005. He was a frontline witness to government incompetence and bureaucracy, to gangs of marauding hoodlums with guns, police stretched too thin to intervene, and the resulting deaths therefrom. He relates all this in explicit detail in his passion-filled field notes: "It was my third day on the ground at the disaster and already I'd experienced enough Red Cross insolence and government incompetence that when a bright young college girl I'd met two days before (a Red Cross volunteer from out West) came up to me crying hysterically, I was barely surprised. She was that upset due to mistreatment by angry shelter residents and Red Cross volunteers alike." Spurred on by such incompetency, Smith and some frustrated local firemen managed to circumvent bureaucratic red tape by raiding Red Cross stores just sitting unused, taking it upon themselves to distribute these much needed supplies to people suffering from thirst and hunger in areas as yet untouched by any form of

relief.

In a later note, Smith describes a scary moment starring down an armed National Guard soldier who had marched with spit-shined boots, officious and intimidating, into the Red Cross shelter he was assisting in, further traumatizing the victims there: "Well, of course, it was another one of those shit-hitting-the-fan moments I seem to run into on a regular basis here and there in my life." This is where Smith's global street smarts served him well. He grabbed the gun-toting martinet by the shoulder, spinning him around, and face-to-face firmly suggested this dude march



Canal Street, New Orleans, Louisiana (2005)



Shiva

back out the door he came in: "GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY GODDAM SHELTER . . . NOW!!!!!" It worked. After helping immediate victims of the disaster, Smith took time to photograph the effects of Katrina in a variety of locales along the Gulf Coast. *Pearl River, LA* juxtaposes the church spire's crucifix with a looters-will-be-shot sign; *Mississippi Gulf*

Coast Highway ironically places a smiling and waving Ronald McDonald standing, oblivious, before a wrecked McDonald's concession. However, *Canal Street, New Orleans, LA* captures a surreal moment in the flood when land and sky conspire to astonish us, producing within a reflection of tree limbs that appropriately figures Shiva, the Destroyer and Creator in Hindu mythology. The image, like Smith's *Murmuration of Fear* shot in London, is more a symbol for the destruction and the eventual reconstruction of New Orleans than just a document of its disastrous flooding.



Jatari Campesino, Chimborazo, Ecuador (2007)

Not every image by Smith bespeaks danger. In 2007, he spent a month in Ecuador recording life there, as in the *Jatari Campesino*, an impoverished community high in the Andes. Smith notes, "In South America they push their poorest of the poor above the tree-line, where growing season is too short to yield much profit." He spent a week there during a month-long Ecuador shoot where he recorded quieter moments, as in *Jatari Campesino, Chimborazo, Ecuador (2007)*, which suggests the closeness of the peasants to the earth by recording one in hat and cloak from behind, so as to appear to be growing from the very soil he works. The folds of the cloak formally mimic the terraced hills behind him. Body, mind, and earth powerfully congeal here. I am reminded of a famous image by Robert Frank, *Platte River, TN (1959)* of a farmer standing in silhouette, back to the camera, contemplating a cow along the river.



Alleyway Poverty Post Clutter Girl, Jatari Campesino, Ecuador (2007)

In *Alleyway Poverty Post Clutter Girl, Jatari Campesino, Ecuador (2007)*, a child fuses with her impoverished barrio. These two images bespeak, on the one hand, of soil (nature) and, on the other, of "soiled" living conditions. In these images form and content elegantly work together to speak of the conditions these people live in.



Quito, Ecuador (2007)

The motion and color of city life in Ecuador's capital, Quito, is captured in a shot that figures a well-dressed, briefcase toting, businessman in black walking from frame-left toward frame-center; approaching from the opposite direction is a traditionally garbed woman in a bright yellow blouse, bent over, toting a heavy white bag over her shoulder. Different classes bear different loads. Dead center between these two social opposites (modern versus traditional) doing the urban hustle for coins is a seated musician in a red shirt plying his accordion. Smith creates here a powerful tension of forces pushing from each side of the frame toward the center, squeezing the musician who himself squeezes a musical instrument. Class, color, and vectors of motion masterfully come together here to give the viewer a sense of urban life as well as the sheer diversity and energy of the street-life in a land where social inequality is rampant.

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Well, I could go on to fill pages of commentary like this on Smith's vast collection of powerful images and page-turner text as contained in this book. But it's

better you now page through this hefty book yourself, which is the culmination of his global-encompassing life-project during which Smith has repeatedly risked the toss of the cosmic dice. He's stared down a volcano, an angry drug-lord, suspicious border guards, terrorists, potential muggers, various gun-toting henchmen, and nervous revolutionaries, to see who will blink first. All in a maximum effort to get the whole-world access he yearned for, where human life is challenged by extreme situations; and so he can fairly say he's photographed life on all the variety of streets in the world during his lifetime, not just the safe ones.

Besides danger and chaos, however, the artist has found humanity struggling to survive, creatively overcoming, harsh conditions (the Andes, the Congo) across linguistic, territorial, and political divides. Over his many years of travel, in the end, Smith has earned a global citizenship learned in the school of hard knocks. This book is his gift to us, a record of all that wandering, working, and wondering.

In sum, Gary Mark Smith has become known as the Pioneer of Global Street Photography, one of the most prolific, accomplished, and daring of street photographers. Who else has *premeditatedly* factored in near-certain-death into his lifetime artwork? He's an artist who will go anywhere when inspired — even where journalists won't go.

— The End —