



THE RIGHT TO BEAR SLRS

THOMAS HAWK DOESN'T LOOK like a troublemaker. With his hair neatly combed and a polo shirt tucked into his black corduroys, the 38-year-old father of four more closely resembles an investment adviser, which is his day job in San Francisco. But as his after-work alter ego – a budding photographer who roams city streets with a Canon EOS 5D in hand – trouble seems to find him. Usually it comes in the form of police officers or private security guards, who accuse him of trespassing while he's taking shots of buildings and public spaces. "Where I'm different from most photographers," says Hawk, who catalogs his most dramatic confrontations on his blog at www.thomashawk.com, "is that I'm not going to back down."

This afternoon is no exception, as Hawk (his photo-blogging pseudonym) wanders into the grimy Transbay bus terminal and begins shooting its interior artwork and graffiti. Within 90 seconds, a security guard approaches.

"Can I see a permit, please?" he says.

"I don't have a permit," Hawk replies amiably, eye pressed to the viewfinder.

"I'm just taking a few pictures. I'll move along in a minute."

"You need a permit here, sir."

"No, I don't need a permit," Hawk says, composing a shot.

"Sir, do you understand what I'm telling you?"

Overzealous rent-a-cops can't stop citizen photojournalists like Thomas Hawk. It's perfectly legal to shoot in public spaces.

"I do. Just taking a few pictures."

"I'm going to have to call the highway patrol," the guard huffs as he walks off.

Hawk wraps up his work and wanders out a few minutes later. "Most of the time, that's what you get," he says. "Guy comes up, says you can't take pictures. You have a little back-and-forth and then they go away." Shooting in public places, as Hawk says he's frequently forced to point out, is perfectly legal – neither private security guards nor police can prevent anyone

from taking photos unless a specific local ordinance prohibits it. (And, legally, no one can seize your memory card without a court order.)

Not all of Hawk's confrontations end so easily, however. In early June, he and two friends arrived to shoot an old train car next to an office tower at 50 Beale Street. When they began to photograph the building, too, a couple of security guards emerged and ordered them to cease. Hawk says he replied with his standard right-to-shoot-from-a-public-sidewalk mantra. Apparently unper-suaded, one guard grabbed him by the arm and dragged him into the street.

A few hours later, Hawk posted a crisp photo of the angry guard (who turned out to be employed by Bechtel, one of the building's tenants) and recounted the tale on his blog, which receives several thousand visitors daily. By evening, the story had made the rounds on the Net, and soon after, he had an apology from Bechtel in his inbox.

Hawk maintains that his obstinacy over public photography is about more than razzing local rent-a-cops. "I want to educate people – photographers and security guards – about their rights," he says. He tells me his artistic goal is to take 100,000 images of the Bay Area over the next 20 years, a schedule that should provide plenty of opportunities to raise awareness. (A few weeks after we met, Hawk also started moonlighting

as a marketing exec for photo-swapping site Zoomr.com.)

This afternoon, on a photographic trek that takes us down shady alleys and up to the top of hotel towers, Hawk decides to make a quick stop at 50 Beale. As he walks up, a passing bicyclist sees the camera and pauses next to him. "Be careful man," he says, conspiratorially. "The security here really doesn't like people taking photos." Hawk just smiles and pops off his lens cap. – **Evan Ratliff**