

Eva Scherly
Unit 3 essay

IS THERE A 'DECISIVE MOMENT'?

The moment where it all falls perfectly into a harmony of beauty: this obsessive desire has persecuted artists during their entire careers. The idea of representation, first emerging in painting and moving on to photography has only been a growing concept throughout the years. Henri Cartier-Bresson, the famous French photographer, ‘father’ of the modern idea of photojournalism published his notorious book *‘Images à la sauvette’, ‘The Decisive moment’* (1952) in reach to share his unique reflection on the instantaneity of a moment and the importance of being in the right place, at the right time. Cartier-Bresson’s strongest motto turns towards the irreparability of this particular decisive moment when it has passed. However, this radical point of view towards something so free seems difficult to label in every photographic style. Sebastian Sussmann, East London based artist and photographic printer, would not initially fall into Cartier-Bresson’s criteria. His work. *‘Golden Ratio Bodyscapes’* (2012), shown at the exhibition *Analogue East*, confronts Bresson’s visual and methodological pathway. The absence of a ‘decisive moment’ in photography cannot be stated, yet in what way is it present in other photography approaches?

In order to understand the idea of the fleeting moment in relation to various visual concepts, it is necessary to define them. In Peter Wollen’s essay *‘Fire and Ice’* (1984) situations are not categorised as ‘past, present or future’ but as ‘states, events and processes’. Wollen describes each division: a ‘state’ can be compared to a ‘static situation’ or ‘something that is unchanging’, an ‘event’, ‘something of fixed duration’ with a start and finish, which ‘may take place in the past, present or future’ and a ‘process’, described as an ‘ongoing situation’ with ‘continuous change’. Wollen’s idea is that news photographs fall into the category of ‘events’, art and most documentary photographs with ‘states’ and some documentary images with ‘processes’. He continues by explaining that a ‘minimal narrative’ contains all three of these characteristics and that still images should be perceived ‘...as elements of narrative, with different types of photographs playing different roles within this

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narrative.’ (Fire and Ice) Since photography has evolved into such diverse paths, it could be argued that some stills may include all three of these divisions. All three categories do not have to be equally present in one single piece. They can fluctuate between what the artist decided to show and what the viewer sees. An example of this could be determined in Sebastian Sussmann’s work. The piece ‘*Golden Ratio Bodyscapes*’ (Figures 1,2,3,4,5 and 6) explores the theme of the figure and the denaturalisation of common body parts into simple intriguing details. The six pieces, forming a whole, can enclose all three of Wollen’s aspects. The ‘state’ could be perceived in the visual; the undeniable fascination of the detail and the skin that are clearly present as a guiding thread through the work. The ‘event’ is comparable to the method, specifically taking a determined period of time to photograph every body part. Each still is a narrative that takes the viewer, from beginning to end through a moment. The ‘process’ is the section that could be less evident yet seen through the ‘after’ life of the images and comes to life with the viewer. When the images are shown, Sebastian Sussmann’s idea to ‘Allow only people’s imaginations to dictate what they thought they were seeing and how they saw it.’ (Interview with Sebastian Sussmann) is the proof of an ongoing action of re-creation of the narrative through the audience.

Unlike Cartier-Bresson’s ‘moment of action’ relying on his surroundings, Sebastian Sussmann’s ‘decisive moment’ lies in the process used to develop the prints. The images were developed using Lith printing. With this particular method ‘...the formation and density of the blacks is controlled by when you ‘snatch’ [the print] from the developer.’ (Interview with Sebastian Sussmann) In relation to his work, the images ‘...relied heavily on early snatches and repression of too much black detail.’ The interesting aspect in Lith printing is that ‘...each print is unique, it’s very difficult if not impossible to duplicate.’ (Interview with Sebastian Sussmann) Like Sussmann, Cartier-Bresson’s eyes are trained and sharpened; yet the outcomes and motivations are different. One is thriving to capture the scenes unravelling

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in front of him and the other is in the search of the ideal grain and contrast. There is a confrontation between 'pre' and 'post' construction of 'the image'. What is captivating about Sussmann's prints is the notion of scale. The images are extremely cropped and the viewer is left with something so visually graphic that it is practically emanating from 'nature', comparable to a landscape, '...a topography of the human body.' (Interview with Sebastian Sussmann) The reasons for this focus, Sebastian Sussmann explains, '...I think you can fall in love with a calf or the small details of someone's back, with the fuzz of hair on their neck, with the way their earlobe hangs.' (Interview with Sebastian Sussmann) The act of falling in love with a person's specific body part can be parallel to a 'decisive moment'. The singular second where one's eyes meet an ankle, a crease in the neck and produces an instant of eternal time, where there's nothing *but* 'the' moment. Sussmann's 'moment' is interlinked with the search for the 'non 'perfect' human body [...], making it beautiful.' (Interview with Sebastian Sussmann), it is the 'imperfections' that catch our eye, make us fall in love with a detail and make someone so uniquely flowing with character. It is these little fragments in a person that become the 'trigger' for creation.

To be aware of the aspect of the 'decisive moment' it is important to explain Henri Cartier-Bresson's inspirations and thoughts. His idea of this special moment was to fuse '...a notion of instantaneity in photography [...] with an older concept from art history: story-telling with a single picture.' (Photography: The Key Concepts, p.56) Cartier-Bresson's opinions link strongly with the German dramatist and critic, Gotthold Lessing's idea of the '... 'pregnant moment' of a story, where the past, present and future of the story can be read, summed up, 'at a glance'.' (Photography: The Key Concepts, p.56) This idea is also known as the *peripeteia*, a Greek term defining a 'dramatic moment' or a 'sudden change of fortune' (Photography: The Key Concepts, p.56). The concept of the 'pregnant moment' is applied when the future of an event can be foreseen. It can be compared to the moment of

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‘anticipation’, the crucial moment of a story where everything is in a transitional phase. An example of this moment can be seen in an image taken by Cartier-Bresson, ‘*Jakarta, Indonesia*’ (1949) (Figure 7) the day before the people regained their independence from the Dutch occupation. In this image, the viewer can see two Indonesian men, carrying the painting of a Dutch governor out of one of the governor’s residence. David Bate compares this moment to ‘...the pregnant moment in action: the literal and symbolic representation of achieving independence, pictured as the weary end of colonial rule.’ (Photography: The Key Concepts, p.57) One could automatically think that examples of the ‘pregnant moment’ can solely be found in street or news photographs because the idea of a ‘change of fortune’ is linked to events occurring around us, politically, historically or socially yet fine art practitioners have an increasing yearn to depict a transitional moment. An example to illustrate this idea is Agnes Denes with her performance piece ‘*Wheatfield – A Confrontation*’ (1982) (Figure 8) where she planted two acres worth of wheat in Manhattan. This produced 450 kilograms of grains that were planted around the globe in association with the *The International Art Show for the End of World Hunger*. In this piece, Denes records the cycle of nature in confrontation to the evolution of the city life. She uses this opposition to bring awareness on ‘...human values and misplaced priorities.’ (Environmental Art Museum, Agnes Denes) Not only does she treat a social and political issue, she also blends the fine art world with these ideas. Her ‘pregnant moment’ lies within the viewers ‘participation’ in the evolution of the piece. People are aware of her project, and know what she will do once the grains have been harvested yet there is that gap of the ‘unknown’ where, what will happen between the plantation and the harvest is for the viewers to observe: the slow progression of nature. If Bresson’s idea consists in ‘...indicating a future event caused by the past.’ (Photography: The Key Concepts, p.58) then it can be said that it applies from street to fine art photography. Each encapsulating differences and purposes. In both Bresson and Dene’s

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pieces, the viewer can ‘...run their imagination between past, present and future across time and build a story.’ (Photography: The Key Concepts, p.58)

The definition of such a complex feeling as the ‘decisive moment’ is extremely hard to explain. Yet there have been countless writings trying to attach words to it. According to Koral Ward, author of *‘Augenblick: the concept of the ‘decisive moment’ in 19th and 20th century Western philosophy’* (2008), the word *Augenblick* signifies the ‘blink of an eye’, ‘moment’ or ‘...an experience of fleeting but momentous event, an occurrence usually accompanied by an altered perception of time...’ (Augenblick: the concept of the ‘decisive moment’, Foreword). This word is the equivalent of ‘decisive moment’ in the German language. If we refer to the idea of ‘altered perception of time’ it is easy to reminisce on a moment, so overpowering that time had stopped, or accelerated. The key concept of *Augenblick* is this separation between what we could call ‘actual time’ and what we think of as ‘eternal time’. ‘Actual time’, is referred to as the moment being ‘...over before we can know it, in reflection [...] already in the past.’ And eternal time ‘...the notion of escaping or transcending the temporal domain through an immediate and intense experience or in reflection.’ (Augenblick: the concept of the ‘decisive moment’, Foreword) We could then ask ourselves; in what reality does the ‘decisive moment’ exist? There is certainly more to this feeling than the altering of time. Koral Ward describes *Augenblick* as a ‘...failure of human understanding...’ or a ‘...collision at the limit of reason...’ but if we have such a hard time grasping this moment given that we are in a secondary state then, how do we know it really exists? We are aware that the feeling of ‘altering’ in time is surreal and only the product of our imagination, but none of us can tell if what we perceive is reality or not. Moments like these are compared to a ‘...hiatus of thought [...] and the pause of wonder leads to an act of surrender in the ‘leap of faith’.’ (Augenblick: the concept of the ‘decisive moment’, Foreword) This ‘leap’ can be associated to the photographer’s choice to photograph one

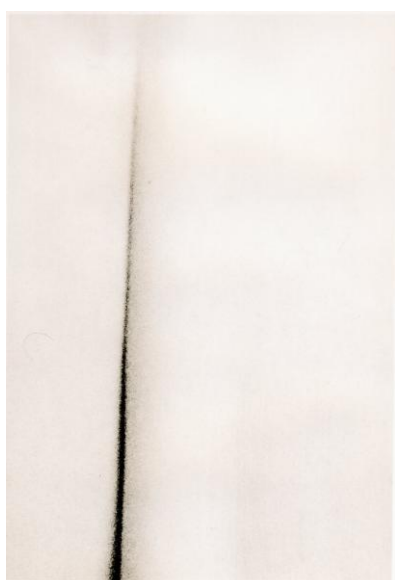
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particular moment over another. The instant in itself is so indefinite and surreal that there eventually is a submission of control where one follows the waves of their perception. The answer in the existence of such peculiar time frames comes within our thoughts, when ‘...we think about uniqueness and repetition, identity and difference, suddenness and duration, rupture and continuity.’ (The Moment: Time and Rupture in Modern Thought, p.2) the contradiction of these ideas are the cuts between ‘looking’ and ‘piercing’ with our eyes. The ‘decisive moment’ is only able to occur ‘...if it is noticed, grasped and seen.’ (The Moment: Time and Rupture in Modern Thought, p.2) There is a difference between knowing that we are witnessing and grasping a moment of inexplicable intensity and being unaware of what exactly is happening within this moment.

Specific instants like these are left unanswered; they are filled with such subjectivity that it is impossible to experience them to a ‘universal’ extent. The only way to be at peace with the questioning of their reality is to trust and understand that we are all who we are because of the baggage we carry and that someone’s dream could be another’s nightmare. What we have lived directly links with our ‘moment of transcendence’. The unique aspect that every human being has in common would be the Big Bang theory, which could be a metaphor of the first decisive moment, when ‘everything’ started. This instant created our world today, based on a single explosion. It is comparable to the first ever ‘creation’ of existence. It is impossible to say that there is *the* universal decisive moment, but *a* decisive one that is diversely experienced in each of our eyes.

Appendix

Figures 1,2,3,4,5,6 Sebastian Sussmann 'Golden Ratio Bodyscapes, 2012'



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<http://www.flickr.com/photos/sebsusmann/sets/72157629422245780/>

Figure 7 Henri Cartier-Bresson 'Jakarta, Indonesia, 1949'



<http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2010/henricartierbresson/#/themes/2/22.html>

Figure 8 Agnes Denes 'Wheatfield – A Confrontation, 1982'



http://www.greenmuseum.org/content/artist_index/artist_id-63.html

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