THOUGHTS
ON
CAPTURING THE MOMENT IN PHOTOGRAPHY

Ahmet ILGAZ
Research Assist. in Photography and Graphic Design
MARMARA UNIVERSITY
Faculty of Communications

*Stories are all the same, but story-telling definitely has no
limits and can always be rejuvenated.*
Michel Chion, **Writing a Script** (1987)

After Edward Muybridge succeeded in taking moment-by-moment
photographs of running horses in 1878, it was realized how wrong we percei-
ved the motion of these animals. Those images not only paved the way to the
invention of the motion picture, but also proved the inferiority of the human
brain and eye in "capturing the moment."

This superior skill of photography is not always praised however.
Gündüz Vassaf, tells people not to capture the moment:

*There are no "moment"s. There is (no) time. There is life
flowing infinitely.... "Moment"s stop the flow of life. They
stop life.....Live the moment, but do not try to capture it.*(1)

Even though these words are not intended to comment specifically on
photography, they are able to raise the following questions in one's mind abo-
ut photography, a technology that captures the moment:

1.Does taking pictures in the split of a second affect the objectivity of
the work?

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2. Is learning to press the shutter button at the right time, at the right place enough for being called an artist in today's world? Doesn't the photographer take advantage of the uniqueness of the lived moment?

3.What should the photographer with an artistic motivation do to eli minate the weaknesses and limitations in his/her work? More impor tant, how can photography free itself from the dull and static qualities, so it will be respected as a more progressive art form?

Let us look at an example in trying to answer the first question. You want to take portraits of your sister, and without moving the camera you take 36 consecutive shots during 15 seconds of her talking. The shutter speed is 1/125th of a second, a split of a second in other words. The results are going to look like the Muybridge's "running horse" shots except that you are going to see your sister talking instead of a horse running. In the 36 pictures you will probably have some shots that your sister is going to like, some that she finds so-so and some that she will say, "These look awful! They do not look like me at all." She is probably right, but it does not mean that those "bad" pictures are unreal and do not reflect the truth. All of the 36 images are equal in projecting the "real," but we prefer some of them. The process of selecting images by the photographer, the editor or anybody, introduces subjectivity to the "real." In a sense, an image captured just at the right time does not express the "real," but the photographer's interpretation of the "real." Choosing the instant to be photographed makes photography subjective.

This subjectivity is limited, however. But not because of its instanta-neous character. Unlike painting, literature and other forms of expression, photography is dependent on nature. This situation is best described by the following words of Henri Cartier-Bresson: *"Photography is the imaginary according to nature.(2)*

Photography tends to present nature in its original form, whereas dra-wing, painting, literature or electronic imaging often chooses to go beyond original. Its dependence on nature draws the boundaries of its subjectivity. That is probably why it is sometimes looked down upon among other fine arts.

Our second question deals with timing and art of photography. Captu-ring the moment has long been a trend in photography. When I was first inte-rested in photography, like many new enthusiasts, I considered pressing the shutter at the right time as the best formula for taking good pictures. Many

"how to..." books, especially the photo-journalism-oriented ones, talk about the virtue of being at the right place, at the right time. The most used soccer photographs are the ones that show the moment of goal. Robert Capa's picture showing the soldier's moment of death in the Spanish Civil War is one of the most memorable photographs ever. Henri Cartier-Bresson gave great importance to the instant he took his pictures and called it the "decisive moment." While it is not hard to give other examples of praising the "snapshot" approach to photography, there are other artists and critics who mention the instantaneous quality of photography as a weakness. David Hockney refers to photographs taken in the split of a second as "traditional photographs" and points out their limitations.

> *The main dissatisfaction I feel is this lack of time in traditional photographs. Your eye is very very aware of the frozen moment, which is unreal to me. The photograph does not have a life in the way a drawing or painting does.(3)*

Then he contrasts Rembrandt's making a self-portrait, sitting and drawing hour after hour to photography.

> *Photography is the other way around. It is the fraction of a second frozen. When you are looking at something for four seconds, you are looking far more than a camera did. To me that is visible. The more you become aware of it, the more this is a ter^rible weakness. Drawings and paintings do not have this.(4)*

John Berger also compares photography negatively with other communication means.

> *Yet unlike the story teller or artist or actor, the photographer only makes in any one photograph a single constitutive choice in a single photograph: the choice of the instant photographed. The photograph, compared with othermeans of communication, is therefore weak in intenionality.(5)*

Nazif Topçuoğlu states similar concerns about the lack of time inherent in traditional photographs and implies the coincidental aspect of photog-

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raphy.

> *Each photograph expresses an artificial interruption of*
> *the flowing time-span. Most of the time the image reflected*
> *by a photograph is not even seen clearly by the photograp-*
> *her him*self.(6)

These stated limitations and disadvantages of traditional photography have made me reflect on the artistic quality of traditional photographs still being taken today. Knowing that there are millions of photographers taking billions of pictures each year, I find it hard to ignore the dullness of most photographs. For many years photography has been taking advantage of the uniqueness of the past moment. That alone, cannot turn the photographer into an artist anymore.

An interesting approach, which is observed in Hockney's photo-collages called "joiners," can help us answer the third question about the elimination of limitations. As a painter and graphic designer, he is able to look at photography from a different perspective. He finds a creative solution to the "lack of time" problem he mentions. He starts creating his joiners by taking hundreds of pictures of his subjects - a scrabble game, a highway landscape or a nude. He uses different points of view, focal lengths, exposures and settings in his shots. Of course it takes much more than splits of seconds to take that many pictures, thus overcoming the "lack of time" problem inherent in traditional photographs. He then collages the prints in the order and design he chooses. Taking pictures at different intervals enables him to reflect the different facial expressions of his portraits on the same joiner:

> *I realized I could make portraits more and more complex,*
> *showing different expressions on the face using the passa-*
> *ge of time. They opened up enormous possibilities.*(7)

They surely did. Another progressive advantage of his joiners is their ability to free the works from their usual rectangular boundaries, giving the artist more freedom in the usage of space.

These works of Hockney are not just photographs. They are created with the aid of the photographic technology, but they are turned into another type of artwork without the drawbacks faced by traditional photographs. His viewers cannot say that his work reminds them of other works. The joiners

show clearly that the future of art with photography lies in experimenting with new artistic and technical approaches.

The 21st century photography artist, conscious of the weaknesses of his medium, cannot be a photographer only. He or she should feel the obligation to find new approaches and ways of interacting with other forms of expression. The works of photographers who want to be classified as modern artists should therefore carry the concern of not looking like any other work previously seen. There is no single way to achieve that. Artists of photography should continuously question their medium, coming up with more progressive forms of photographic expression. Photography invites innovation. As Topçuoğlu declared, *"Once we escape the dead-end street we are in, who knows what can be done with photographic methods and technology?"*(8)

ENDNOTES

(1) Vassaf, G. **Cehenneme Övgü-Gündelik Hayatta Totalitarism** (Prisoners of Ourselves- Essays on the Psychology of Totalitarianism in Everyday Life), İstanbul, Ayrıntı Yayınları, 1992, pg.224.
(2) Favrod, Charles-H. **Passages** Magazine, No:14, Zurich, Pro-Helvetia, 1993, pg.5.
(3) Hockney, D. British TV program.
(4) Ibid.
(5) Berger, J. **Another Way of Telling**, Pantheon, New York, 1982, pg.89-90.
(6) Topçuoğlu, N. **İyi Fotoğraf Nasıl Oluyor, Yani?** (So, How is a Good Photograph Taken?) İstanbul, Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 1992, pg.52-53.
(7) Hockney D. British TV program.
(8)Topçuoğlu, N. **İyi Fotoğraf Nasıl Oluyor, Yani?** (So, How is a Good Photograph Taken?) İstanbul, Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 1992, pg.55.