

The Indecisive Moment

At a time when photography can, perhaps, be described as one of the essential activities of the 21st Century, it feels all the more urgent to consider whether photography has evolved into something radically new and progressive. While there can be little doubt that more and more people appear to take more images, it remains somewhat uncertain as to why this might be happening. However, uncertainty may very well be the kernel of this activity. In increasingly unpredictable times, an unconscious desire for things to symbolically remain unscathed and intact appears to be expressed through our now automatic uploading and sharing of images. This desire to create photographic memories is surely linked to how memory itself appears threatened. As if we are now fuelled by an anticipation of impending nostalgia and of the things that will feed it. Of course, the idea of a photograph being a memory prosthetic has always been closely linked to photography. But memory and its continued association with photographs does not really offer an especially new insight into how photography operates today. What the compulsion to photograph opens up is the question as to what needs to be remembered and what should be forgotten. However, here is where uncertainty manifests itself, at a mostly invisibly level. Since during the moment of taking a photograph, a certain anxiety emerges in which image becomes an undecidable notion. But rather than halting the process, the reaction is the opposite. Which is to suggest that we take more photographs simply because we are unsure which ones we should really be taking. As image is a matter of choice, any imposition on the photographer to choose is resolved by the action of choosing everything; by making everything a subject of a photograph. Thus, Henri Cartier-Bresson's expression of the 'decisive moment' now feels curiously incompatible with today's photography; a photography of continuous and incessant image making.

For Cartier-Bresson the 'decisive moment' was the split second of inspiration when a photographer would capture a specific event. It was in this moment that all the formal compositional elements of the picture would, miraculously, come together. He wrote: the photographer 'composes a picture in very nearly the same amount of time it takes to click the shutter, at the speed of a reflex action' (Cartier-Bresson, cited in Clarke, 1997:207). The term 'the decisive moment' would subsequently summarise a new way of seeing, capturing and understanding the events of the world. However, I claim we now live at a time of the 'indecisive moment.' But this is not necessarily to invoke a sense of indecision or of hesitancy. Rather, it is to

suggest an uncertainty as to when a specific instant may occur.

The above is, of course, a simplification but nevertheless, it offers a sketch of something of the impossibility now imposed upon the practice of photography. In the light of the over production and over supply of photographic images, it is interesting to consider the problems, not only of photographers themselves but also of selecting a shortlist for a photographic prize.

This year, the eight nominees of Fotonow's South West Photography Graduate Prize have managed to differentiate their work against the increasing background noise of so much photography.

Shannon Mundy's "Supplemented Society" is a bold and colourful study of food, diet and Western consumer culture. The vivid images, rooted in the colour codes of advertising, present us with a materiality of consumption. A consumption that, at once, sustains capitalism and its hungry consumers.

The photographs Alexander Mourant explore the interiors of British butterfly houses in an abstract form. Mourant's ethereal images capture something of the atmosphere of these spaces but they are also suggestive of a materiality of light and colour.

The work of Katie Mordan is a formal exploration of the built environment. What we see is an incursion into concrete of urbanised plant life. What is absent is any human activity in these silent descriptions of the suburbs. What we anticipate is the inevitable decay and spread that time will bring to these spaces.

'Hidden' by Josh Huxham considers the dysfunctional family and the condition of depression. It is, therefore, in part, an examination of the workings of the unconscious. Through his use of found imagery, one cannot help but consider how the symbolic structuring of our unconscious is rooted, not in anything personal to ourselves but to that which we haphazardly come across.

The metaphorical birth, depicted in 'A Three Week Labour' by Lauren Booth, is a work that requires close examination; since what it first appears to show is not what it shows. Uncertainty pervades this work as the construction of a handcrafted doll into a new-born human 'replicant' depicts a disturbing amalgam of human (re)production. The feelings of the uncanny and alienation are not just by-products of the

labour involved, they are at the heart of the process of production we are being shown.

Jessica Ashley-Stokes work is a gentle observational piece entitled 'Miles Away.' The work shows a rural setting and the universally familiar but transitory performances of childhood. In an age of screen-based entertainment, these images have a kind of rural purity. It is, perhaps, the presence of photography itself that serves to disrupt this innocence.

'Flirting with Monsters' by Megan Wilson-De La Mare, juxtaposes portraits with the Icelandic landscape. The work expresses a dialogue between femininity and beauty and goes onto re-site two distinct genres of photography - the landscape and the portrait.

Hannah Blissett's video 'Welcome Home Kevin' is inventive, funny, disturbing and very watchable. The contrapuntal soundscape she builds is every bit as urgent and pressing as the image video portrayals. Once attuned to the unsettling visual and audio, it is the conversation that becomes the most authentic and honest aspect to this wonderful piece.

From the many entries that Fotonow received for the South West Graduate Prize, to arrive at a shortlist inevitably means some notable work is missing. All of us who take photographs are striving to have our work seen, recognised, or considered, if not in national or regional competitions then certainly by means of a Facebook like or an Instagram follow. There is always one more image to take and one more moment to take it in. Unfortunately, living in the indecisive moment makes us take more images for fear of never having taken enough.

John Hillman
Head of Photography
Birmingham City University

References:

Clarke, G., 1997, *The Photograph*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.