

Performance Standards for Stage 2 Creative Arts: AT2 - INQUIRY

	Knowledge and Understanding	Practical Application	Investigation and Analysis	Evaluation
A	<p>In-depth knowledge and understanding of creative arts concepts specific to relevant creative arts discipline(s).</p> <p>Astute and accurate understanding and use of language specific to relevant creative arts discipline(s).</p> <p>In-depth knowledge of a variety of creative arts media, materials, techniques, processes, and technologies, and understanding of their possible applications.</p>	<p>Creative and clear expression and communication of ideas and opinions relevant to the program focus.</p> <p>Discerning use of the creative arts process in the development and presentation of well-refined creative arts product(s).</p> <p>Highly productive and proactive approaches to the creative arts process.</p> <p>Refined and integrated development and application of a variety of practical skills, techniques, and processes.</p>	<p>Purposeful investigation, selection, critical analysis, and full acknowledgment of a variety of appropriate sources and ideas.</p> <p>Astute and detailed exploration and analysis of appropriate creative arts media, materials, techniques, processes, and technologies within and/or across creative arts forms.</p>	<p>Insightful and knowledgeable evaluation of creative arts products, with reference to practitioners' intentions, processes, outcomes, and contexts.</p> <p>Insightful critical reflection on personal creative arts ideas, processes, and products.</p> <p>Discerning and well-informed appraisal of others' creative arts ideas and processes, and highly effective communication of aesthetic opinions.</p>

Henri Cartier-Bresson

The founder of Modern Photojournalism,
the Master of Street Photography
and the Maestro of The Moment



Creative Arts INQUIRY

TASK: Investigate the social/economic/political background and artistic output of a noteworthy Artist/Art Movement/Genre/Technology and further examine the influence this choice has had on both contemporary culture and your own development as an emerging artist.

Assessment Criteria

- . KU1 Knowledge and understanding of creative arts concepts specific to relevant creative arts discipline(s).
- . KU2 Understanding and use of language specific to relevant creative arts discipline(s).
- . IA1 Investigation, selection, critical analysis, and acknowledgment of different sources and ideas.
- . IA2 Exploration and analysis of creative arts media, materials, techniques, processes, and technologies within and/or across creative arts forms
- . E1 Evaluation of creative arts products, with reference to practitioners' intentions, processes, outcomes, and contexts.
- . E2 Critical reflection on personal creative arts ideas, processes, and products.
- . E3 Appraisal of others' creative arts ideas and processes, and communication of aesthetic opinions.

Topic: Photography

Guiding Question: To what extent can Henri Cartier-Bresson be considered the founder of 'street photography' and what impact has he had on contemporary appreciation of photography as an art form?

Introduction

Henri Cartier-Bresson is one of the most treasured photographers in the profession, and one of the first to elevate photojournalism and street photography to the level of art. Through his photos he captures naturalistic human behaviour, boils down greater social problems to simple compositions, and creates aesthetically stunning and highly memorable images completely without posing his subjects or really doing anything but being in the right place at the right time, with the well-worn skill to capture the "decisive moment" of a situation, as he called it.

Street photography now is a very different beast from when Cartier-Bresson was working, and is now far less technical, allowing far more artistic focus. However, Henri Cartier-Bresson's photos have retained a singular quality above the glut of street artists, even as the field has become more accessible. It is useful, then, to look at the techniques used in street photography and how Cartier-Bresson used them to create immortal images.

As a casual enthusiast of street photography myself, I think there's a lot to learn from Henri Cartier-Bresson, both in his body of work and his philosophies about the field, and he has long been an influence on my own photographs.



A Brief Biography

In 1908, Henri Cartier-Bresson was born in Chanteloup, France, a little village not far from Paris. His first love was painting, a passion he pursued all the way to André Lhote's academy in Montparnasse in 1927. In 1931, he picked up a camera, and his passion switched very quickly to that of photography: he mastered a 35mm Leica and began to travel the world taking pictures^[5], selling his photos to newspapers as photojournalism but also developing a photographic style, a merging of precise careful aesthetics and often-socially significant content, that would make him the most famous and influential candid street photographer of all time.^[5] In 1947, after a brief stint in the French Army during World War II, and off the back of an important photography exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art, he co-founded the Magnum photography agency with several of his contemporaries

and spent 19 years travelling the world on assignment, continuing to find success both as a journalistic and artistic photographer.^[4] In 1966, he retired and focused primarily on traditional visual art.

Modern Street Photography

Aside from sports photography, street photography is quite possibly the field of photography that has benefitted most from the film-to-digital transition. The central difference between the two mediums is of consumption of resources; namely, that traditional photography eats up film whereas digital photography only eats up camera space.^[6] This frees the photographer to take as many pictures as they want, even setting the camera to burst mode (in which pictures are continuously taken for as long as the shutter release is held) then prune the pictures down to the best one/s, whereas traditional photographers (including Cartier-Bresson) would need to shoot conservatively or else spend a fortune on film.^[7] This has somewhat lessened the 'art' and mystique of street photography, as the 'decisive moment', as Cartier-Bresson dubbed it in his photography book of the same name, is no longer an elusive, tricky beast that you practise for years to capture with accuracy but rather something that you'll inevitably capture if you point your camera in the right direction at roughly the right time and set to burst-fire. It has also, however, made the field much more accessible, and perhaps improved its results: after all, you can be much pickier when you have many more photos to choose from.^[8]

In addition, photography is much less technical than it once was (at least for the photographer), thanks to the advents of automatic exposure and autofocus lenses. This is highly beneficial for the art form, as street photographers can now concentrate on capturing their subjects well and composing the photograph instead of worrying about the picture being properly exposed and focused. These are mixed blessings, of course. Autofocus may decide that the picture's subject is not in fact Bigfoot but instead that pigeon over there, and auto exposure can ruin pictures by trying to properly expose a subject that the photographer might prefer to be a silhouette. As a result, many street photographers continue to stay in manual, trading speed for control.^[1]

Photography is also a lot cheaper and more efficient in another way with the advent of digital: with digital photography, the image is usable as soon as it is captured, where traditional photographers would have to either develop the photos themselves in a darkroom or pay to have them developed, both money-consuming processes that took time.^[8] With digital photography, the photographer is also able to instantly view their photos, even zooming to analyse focus and certain details. This was impossible with traditional photography: before the film was developed, the content of the pictures was a complete mystery.^[7]

The Core Elements of Street Photography

Composition

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of street photography is composing shots on the fly, in an uncontrolled and spontaneous environment that you cannot bend to your artistic whim as in studio portrait photography. Even worse, in most cases, composition benefits from minimalism, crisp lines and strong shapes, and is muddled by complexity; this, then, makes effective composition in street photography an even greater feat, as most public spaces are inherently visually dense.



One of the most iconic marks of Cartier-Bresson's work are his immaculate compositions, a skill he no doubt developed from his origins in painting.^[2] Whereas other street photographers may value revelation of the human element more highly than the picture's aesthetics, Bresson's work regarded them as equal, and indeed the entirety of his work is carefully and artfully composed,

with mixes of straight and curved leading lines, pleasing use of positive and negative space and intelligent use and disuse of the rule of thirds. Indeed, some of Cartier-Bresson's pictures completely ignore the human or journalistic element, and are purely exercises in visual beauty and elegance, as the ones above and to the right.^[3]



Visibility and Invisibility

A major concern of the street photographer is **visibility**. While street photography can be approached with many different philosophies, most photographers subscribe to the idea that the street photographer does best when he fades into the background, therefore able to capture people in their most unguarded moments without the self-consciousness that comes with being photographed.^{[9][10]}

Above: One of the strongest leading lines I've ever seen in a photograph. The curve of the stairway, the road and finally the bicyclist all lead the eye in one long smooth leftward curve. street

This is a philosophy that Cartier-Bresson embraced fully; he would often cover his camera with a handkerchief or black sheet so as to better blend in to the background, and made a point of using as little equipment (light meters, etc.) as possible. Videos of him working show him to take his photos with incredible speed to the point where the subject might be photographed without even noticing, wearing unobtrusive clothes to blend in with the background.^[2] Precious few photos that he has taken include people who have noticed the camera, but those that do benefit from this visibility instead of suffering from it, such as the photo on the next page.

Remaining invisible as a street photographer is easier today than ever before, thanks to the sheer quantity of people innocuously walking around with their cameras out, especially in major tourist cities: it's even easier if your camera of choice is a smartphone, which are more and more becoming viable options for photographers. It is also much easier due to the speed with which photos can now be taken and the lack of equipment needed to take a decent photo: light meters, for example, are a thing of the past.



Visible: This photo shows how a photograph in which the photographer has been noticed can sometimes be more revealing than a candid one: in this case, the “fat cat” Wall Street banker has sighted C-B taking a photo and has struck an arrogant, condescending pose, puffing out his chest while sneering at the camera. This is much more telling of the banker’s elitism than if C-B had captured the banker simply conversing with his friends.

Subject/Meaning

One of Cartier-Bresson’s most startling abilities was an ability to find mundane subjects and frame them in ways that imbued them with a kind of transcendence or intense human meaning: take the photograph to the right, taken at a circus in the Soviet Union, where a crowd presumably witnesses some acrobatic spectacle. With Cartier-Bresson’s framing, his omission of whatever it is that is actually enthusing them, this mundane event takes on an almost religious significance, as if the sky had just opened up and God had begun to speak. Another example is below, where a photograph at a bullfight has significance as a metaphor for class relations.



There is no real way to ensure that you capture these moments in these specific ways, given how slippery and quick they are; I doubt that Bresson had known the full power of the images when he captured them. They come suddenly, and they leave suddenly: in the end, it’s mostly luck.



Above: My favourite photograph of all time, an absolute gut-punch of an image, taken by Cartier-Bresson at a bullfight in Pamplona. C-B's framing of this moment creates a poignant and damning metaphor for class relations, as the lower-class, the bullfighters in the lower 4/5 of the picture, stare down their own deaths as the upper-class in the top 1/5 look on with mild disinterest.

HC-B & Me

Henri Cartier-Bresson has been an influence on me ever since I saw an exhibition of his work years ago, but it was only this last year on a trip to Europe that I got the courage to actually explore his medium of street photography, largely due to the anonymity and decreased visibility that major, foreign cities afforded me. While I had not yet studied his work as I have for this investigation at the time, it is still useful to compare the techniques I used in my photography with techniques visible in his.

Composition

On-the-fly composition is an easy thing to pick up, but a hard thing to master. I am far from mastering it myself, though I have managed to train myself to instinctually snap to the rule of thirds:



...and recognize leading lines:



Both of these were shot while moving at a brisk walk; both were composed very, very quickly. This shows how instinctual and instant composition becomes when you're doing it constantly (as I had been in Europe). None of my compositions, however, have the assuredness or mathematical perfection of Cartier-Bresson's. All of these photos were taken in big cities, and so it's notable that all of them are fairly tight so as to avoid the chaos present in most public spaces. In most of these photographs, an extra person in the frame would make the composition fall apart completely.

Visibility and Invisibility

I didn't really consider visibility in Europe, and I stuck out like a sore thumb, wearing a big black trenchcoat and trousers; a more subdued look might have helped me get closer and capture more candid moments. My visibility wasn't always a bad thing, though. One of my favourite photographs I took was this one:



...where almost an entire tour bus looks at me accusingly at the same time, creating a kind of Kafkaesque mood of paranoia, of being “watched”.

Subject/Meaning

Along with the tone of paranoia in the above picture, I also created an amusing picture of two people in Paris near the Eiffel Tower, one obviously a Parisian and one obviously a tourist:



...where the humor comes from the juxtaposition of the stereotypical “cultured Parisian” reading Antigone with the also-stereotypical “annoying tourist” taking a photograph of his plastic souvenir next to the actual Eiffel Tower. Like most street photography, this was just a matter of capturing two people next to each other at the right time.

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