

# Time, Space, Chaos & Contemplation in New Media

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## **Abstract**

Susan Derges' work with the photogram is about a frozen moment in time, seemingly like much photography. Several different artists use time and space as subject matter in their artwork. Those who capture a moment or slow down time in space are of special interest to me. Through their medium they do not represent time and space but slow down and capture what is fleeting in this world.

## **Introduction**

Time is the ever important theme of this paper, whether it be documenting important moments of social and historical purpose, or freezing the constant flow of water to create an ethereal space in an image. Photography is the initial medium that comes to mind with the concept of capturing time, because of its immediacy and precision. From photography I will turn to installation, a younger artistic vehicle with the ability to manipulate time through the duration of a film or with the passage of real time showing age and decay.

To be more specific, I am very interested in focusing on artists and their work whose concepts incorporate slowing down time and contemplating, not just in their subject matter, but in life as whole.

## **Susan Derges & The Frozen Moment**

The temporality of Susan Derges's photograms struck me as beautiful and innovative--her works show moving water, not out of focus but sharp and detailed. Derges creates entire worlds in her images, landscapes that appear to reference the inner body, works that emanate

otherworldliness and a sense of calm by manipulating the chaos of nature, the constant flow of rivers and waterfalls, through photography.

In Susan Conde's article *The Fractal Artist*, she praises Derges' work for being an example of Fractal Art. Fractal artists seek to reflect the condition of space in their time as they perceive it, with its fractal dimensions and qualities<sup>i</sup>. The artwork is static, a photograph, a frozen moment yet depicting movement and natural growth such as in her works about the development of tadpoles and the ebb and flow of bodies of water. The images captured will never be recreated in the same way under the same circumstances. Derges attempts to capture worlds in transition that use the language of fractality of form. Her images are projections of turbulence and instability, and at the same time are harmonious and calming.

The artist's process involves seeking out a space in the natural world and making observations on currents and weather and other environmental factors. Much time and patience is spent preparing for the particular moment when all the chaos comes together and creates the harmonic images the artist decides will be represented in the work. Gooding writes,

“In each complex and beautiful image is thus inscribed a dual time-scale; moments of dark night time and the brilliant instant of flashlight. What we have in front of us, then, is a direct index, the trace of the thing itself whose image we contemplate. We are looking at an actuality revealed, a moment of the process of reality apprehended, a marvelous fact presented, not represented to the viewer”<sup>ii</sup>.

### Camera-less Technique

The removal of the camera is important in the issue of time and space in Derges' pieces. Rejecting the camera bypasses the distance of the mechanical process and the works suggest an intuitive immediacy. These images appear timeless and other worldly, in part because they are not a traditional photograph. The viewer may find it difficult to orient themselves in this landscape or stand in the place of the artist as there was no viewfinder to look through; this effect envelopes the viewer into the imagery, almost skipping over the intermediary of the artist as voyeur. The ambiguousness of the observed and observer plays up the artists interest in comparing the microcosm and the macrocosm.

In my research, I came upon images of the Derges' works paired with the following quotes that seem to resonate with the theme of this paper. It is from *Slowness* by the Czech writer Kundera, "There is a sacred bond between slowness and memory, between speed and forgetting..."<sup>iii</sup>. I believe that the artist is not just creating these beautiful photograms for her love of



*Susan Derges, Stream, 1996*

nature, she is focusing on the passage of time, and creating sacred spaces. The other quote that was paired with the image of her photogram *Rhododendron* is from the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges, “*Time is the substance from which I am made. Time is a river which carries me along, but I am a river; it is a tiger that devours me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire*”<sup>iv</sup>. These quotes paired with Derges’ work further present a feeling of calmness when viewing the works and make me appreciate them that much more.

### **Henri Cartier-Bresson**

Although Henri Cartier-Bresson is also a photographer, he and Susan Derges are unlike in most aspects of their work. One is from France, the other England, they work in different time periods, and employ different techniques. The two photographers also chose very different subject matter, Derges focusing on the biological, the microcosm versus the macrocosm, and nature; Cartier-Bresson taking his photographs from a photojournalists perspective of people and their actions during societies historical events. He describes his work as supplying information to a world in a hurry, a world weighted down with preoccupations, prone to cacophony<sup>v</sup>.

The common thread is that both these photographers took a conceptual interest in capturing the fleeting moment. What is important about Cartier-Bresson’s images is that he came along with his camera in a time where camera technology was changing and it was easy to use and travel with, encouraging a generation of photojournalists. His work spans the twentieth century and he has captured significant moments in history all over the world. Cartier-Bresson operated a small Leica brand camera that could take quality photos very quickly. As a result he snapped fleeting moments, refusing to stage his compositions or retouch the photos<sup>vi</sup>.



*Henri Cartier-Bresson, West Germany, 1962*

### **‘The Decisive Moment’**

Cartier-Bresson’s own definition of what makes a photograph great is ‘the decisive moment’ which he explained as “the stimulus recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as the precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression”<sup>vii</sup>. His aim was to create a single picture that told a whole story<sup>viii</sup>. The pictures he took were more than a matter of being in the right place at the right time with a lightweight camera, but a reliance on his ability to see and record an event literally taking form. He was able to create order out of the chaos and bustle of life, with intricate precision and style. This style, unlike arranged photographs, establishes immediate intimacy and common human experience<sup>ix</sup>. His images are often oblique, but because of this, far more suggestive than one

single shot. Cartier-Bresson's photography not only captured many of the decisive moments in a tumultuous century but often gave a glimpse of the off beat or the off guard. He shows us the secret thoughts and actions that, had he not captured them, would be lost forever<sup>x</sup>.

### **The Decisive Moment as a Contemplative Moment**

In an obituary for Cartier-Bresson, the author of the article describes his work as creating another dimension to photography: the decisive moment as a contemplative moment. This is described as the captured moment in a fraction of a second, but that summarizes and stands as the index of long stretches of time--suspended and timeless--a concept of time in Western civilization of media and 'infotainment', that is rarely accessible. Some of Cartier-Bresson's photographs are particularly considered to be 'decisive' images, decisive because they were caught and lay beyond the surface of things, the surface of events and people. These images succeed in stretching time beyond its known limits. They scratch the thin surface of things upon which most eyes make daily ricochets, missing the point. Cartier-Bresson had the intuitive and then trained knowledge of how these fleeting instants and prolonged observations could be transformed into icons by the craft, intelligence, experience, and intuition of their maker. The author writes, that for photographers like Cartier-Bresson, the essence of what happens in front of the camera can only be conveyed by its rendition within an aesthetically mastered frame, it cannot be modified after the fact in the darkroom. Cropping after the fact creates "something else, an image, a two-dimensional object with a different existence and a different meaning altogether"<sup>xi</sup>.

With Cartier-Bresson, photography had become a way of looking, a way of living, a philosophical approach and metaphor for life: the frame strictly defined by the viewfinder stands is an illustration of the strict context of our lives regarding time, place, and background<sup>xii</sup>.

### **Jan Vormann & *Dispatchwork***

Jan Vormann's project titled *Dispatchwork* involves patching repairs to deteriorated architecture all over the world. Vormann is a modern *Bricoleur*, his patches are made from Lego brand building blocks and add intense color to the original, typically neutral toned facades. He has created many of his works in Europe, where the architecture is often older, historically significant and has been ravaged by time. The importance of his work is not solely in the finished product of filled in cracks, bricks and grout made of an unconventional material, but in the duration of the installation, which is done during the day including the participation, discussion and audience of the passerby.

The basis of the *Dispatchwork* project is to find structures and spaces in disrepair, these structures have varied from the historically important and architecturally impressive to common buildings that have been neglected over time. Vormann's work goes hand in hand with deterioration and the passage of time. The work introduces a plastic, modern material into a surface patinated by time<sup>xiii</sup>. *Dispatchwork* is like a "playful skin graft, rejuvenating a surface..."<sup>xiv</sup>. The artist has said about his work, "But times have left their visible imprints on it [an impressive palace] as well. I tried once more to make an effort to counteract decay"<sup>xv</sup>. The language used to describe the work references how the work brings the old and new together and provides a whimsical update to the structures.



*Jan Vormann, photograph of Dispatchwork-Tel Aviv, 2008*

While looking at his work, it is hard to not think of the past and present colliding. His work in Europe seems very significant to time, for example, in Berlin where he has created installations, and I have visited, history is reflected in the architecture, a mixture of modern with the old, and with that of the Nazi and Communist occupations. The city is still in the process of rebuilding after reunification, Vormann's work all over the world reflects the chaos and balance of the old with the new and the passage of time.

Another interesting aspect of *Dispatchwork* is that the artist encourages others to assist him while he is working. The people that stop to assist him while he works range in age from toddlers to the elderly. This brings up the topic of "art for everyone". Due to the well known material Vormann works with--Legos--the simplicity to use the material, the attraction to it by

children, along with the performance aspect of the work, is why I believe that in the context of this artwork, art can be made and appreciated by a variety of individuals, without regard to age, artistic background or abilities.

The artist goes one step further and encourages others through his website to create works like his all over the world and document their work using film and photography to be shown alongside his. This not only opens the discussion up to what is art, and who is an artist, but for me, establishes Vormann as a New Media artist apart from using methods of installation and performance, but because of an embrace of technology to spread his concept and artwork.

It is the ravages of time and the elements that provide the spaces for his installations, and time will play a part after they are completed. Will the improvements he makes last, and does this matter? Vormann's pieces could be seen as definitively completed when the last Lego is fit, but the deterioration that inspired the "repair work" could also be a means to it's end, with the possibility of his repairs failing or being tampered with expected or supported. Structurally the Legos are not meant for this purpose, eventually they will crumble away, or perhaps be taken by viewers and passerby as mementos or to be used for their original purpose as toys.

### **Slowing Down the Chaos**

What I think is most important about *Dispatchwork*, what connects it to Cartier-Bresson's and Derges' images of the decisive and frozen moment is that the *Dispatchwork* project has the ability to force the viewer--who may not even know that they are looking at a piece of artwork--to stop and notice. The person who walks by the same place everyday is "defamiliarized and

then reintroduced to the walls” when coming upon the installation<sup>xvi</sup>. Whatever plans they had or errand they were running are temporarily delayed to stop or slow down and view this curious and subtle artwork. These artworks scream to the viewer to stop and look, to notice something that they might have easily passed over amid all the hustle and bustle of city life. In a New York Post article, a passerby said she couldn't believe she had walked by it [one of the installations] for days without noticing. "That's a New York thing. There are random things all across the city, but we're so quick getting around that we tend not to notice them"<sup>xvii</sup>.

In a video which was submitted to the artist's Dispatchers Worldwide website, a participant follows through with Vormann's work and films the process. During the spectacle of the installation, people stop to watch, but I was more interested in seeing the people react to the work after it was installed. I was amazed at how many people stopped, even momentarily, to look at the work for whatever reason. The video can be watched here:

<[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLI-LqOK3LY&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLI-LqOK3LY&feature=player_embedded)>

## **Conclusion**

In Derges's work she uses the photogram to freeze the chaos and temporality of nature to create ethereal, quiet works. Cartier-Bresson was a pioneer of photojournalism, capturing images of great global and historical significance candidly alongside less dramatic but equally decisive moments that had great social impact. Vormann's work uses the old and the new, and the process of breaking down and building up to create surprising graffiti style installations.

Slowing down our lives and noticing the small things, and appreciating those things is what I get out of these works. It is what connects a new media artist who works with

installation to the two photographers who work in a more traditional style. Stopping and taking the time to look, slowing down and noticing the minute details of life all around us to contemplate, discuss and simply enjoy is the concept that I think is of extreme importance in these artists works, and in many new media art today as well as our society.

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