

# Cartier-Bresson, Senior, Trump (Gaps)

By J.R. Sumser

The famous French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson writes that the attraction of a photograph is not that it captures reality but that it just barely glimpses it. His photograph *Derrière la Gare Saint-Lazare* captures, in mid-air, a man in a suit and hat attempting a hopeless leap over a large puddle of water.<sup>1</sup> If we had been standing behind the Saint-Lazare train station we would not have been able to see what the photograph shows us—we cannot register images in 1/64th of a second. The camera cuts the world in ways that our eyes—and our brains—do not, and so Cartier-Bresson leaves us, and the man, hanging between “what in the world was he thinking?” and the enormous expected splash.

I think of Cartier-Bresson when I am confronted with the work of the British artist Gordon Senior. Senior, born in 1942, spent most of his career in Great Britain but for the last 14 years has divided his time between England and California where he is a professor of art at California State University, Stanislaus. I met him and began buying his work when he showed in a gallery in a nearby city. Primarily a sculptor, Senior seeks the space between *where does this come from?* and *what do we do with it?* In his series *Handtools of Unknown Use* Senior creates from found objects things that appear to be tools but are also parodies of tools—absurd non-tools.<sup>2</sup> The objects must surely be for some purpose and the odder they are, the more specific that purpose must be . . . and yet these tools seem incapable of doing anything. Senior’s tools are like the man caught over the puddle who is trying to do something that is absurd on the face of it, trying to clear a twenty-foot puddle with a three-foot leap.

Looking at Senior’s work puts us over the puddle as well. We are caught in a contradiction: we see an obvious tool that serves no obvious function. But surely it must because it is a *tool*, for Pete’s sake. Well, then it is not a tool at all, although it has a handle and a very deliberately shaped business end to it. And so Senior brings us to a screeching halt, stuck between categories and unable to move.

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Derrière la Gare Saint Lazare* (Behind the Gare St. Lazare), 1932. A gelatin silver print from the 1950s is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Dimensions: 13 7/8 x 9 1/2" (35.2 x 24.1 cm).

<sup>2</sup> Gordon Senior showed in 2008 *Tools of Unknown Use and Other Works* at the First Street Gallery, Eureka, Humboldt State University, CA. *Tools of Unknown Use* is scheduled to be shown again in 2018.

*John Sumser has degrees in philosophy and sociology and is primarily interested in the ways meaning is created and maintained. His most recent book is The Conflict between Secular and Religious Narratives in the United States: Wittgenstein, Social Construction, and Communication (Lexington Books, 2016). He is presently the acquisition editor for the International Journal of Motorcycle Studies.*

Art, I think, lives in the spaces between, in the cracks in our certainties. Similarly, Roger Shattuck, a writer who was particularly interested in French culture, proposed that the “typography of notation of Apollinaire’s, E.E. Cummings’, and Ezra Pound’s poetry leaves gaps which let us read through the surface of their verse back into the intermittent texture of experience.”<sup>3</sup> Here are two examples from a Cummings poem (first line [Inthe,Exquisite](#)):

- inthe,exquisite; / morning sure lyHer eye s exactly sit,ata little roundtable . . .
- and, b etw ee nch air st ott er s thesillyold / WomanSellingBalloonS

One of my favorite Gordon Senior examples of this gap can be seen in his *Birds on a Branch*.<sup>4</sup> What is obviously one branch is severed, its continuity ruptured, leaving one bird isolated from the rest. Without the gap, the postures of the birds are not noteworthy, but we focus on the break—the leap—and so we wonder what has happened and what happens next.

Maryanne Wolf, a Tufts University developmental psychologist interested in the ways people read, writes that the incompleteness of writing forces readers to fill in the gaps in the narrative structure. In so doing, we can note, readers tie themselves to the story.<sup>5</sup> And all stories, of course, are incomplete in varying degrees; we are always filling in to some extent, supplying motivation or appearance or a sense of what is normal. Brian Boyd, a professor of literature at the University of Auckland, writes about a forty-foot long bit of graffiti in New Zealand; in letters four-feet tall someone spray-painted the message **Ralph, come back, it was only a Rash**.<sup>6</sup> This is funny—or poignant—Boyd says, because we fill in all of the missing information. More generally, he proposes that it is through completing the gaps in messages that we create meaning. Mark Turner, a professor of cognitive science at Case Western Reserve University, says we do this to make sense of the world. It is the stories we tell to fill in the gaps in experience, Turner argues, that transform the chaotic nature of events into meaningful sequences. This filling in, Turner argues, reveals the “literary” nature of the human mind; our basic interactions with the world, Turner believes, are essentially artistic.

Compare the two sentences:

- “Then she turned around and he said good morning.”
- “Then she turned and . . . ”

The completed sentence gives us Aristotelian closure; it is a story easily packed away and forgotten. Fragments, in contrast, leave us hanging, wondering how we got here and what comes next. Fragments demand involvement as Wolf, Boyd, and Turner suggest. Almost anything follows from “Then she turned and . . . ” She turned *and burst into tears*. She

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<sup>3</sup> Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France – 1885 to World War I* (Vintage, 1968).

<sup>4</sup> From my personal collection. *Birds on a Branch* (2012) is a sculpture about six feet long. The branch is wood and the birds are cast bronze.

<sup>5</sup> Wolf, 15.

<sup>6</sup> Boyd, 8.

turned *and saw it was raining*. She turned *and shot him twice in the chest*. She turned *and turned and turned, spinning in rhythm to the music*.

It is not possible, I think, to wonder what comes next without considering what came before. Why is she turning? What happened the instant before the turn? The instant *before* determines the moment *after*. Art allows us to separate the two in ways that daily life generally does not. In the more mundane aspects of our lives, the leap and the landing are perceived as one fluid arc.

The overlap between art and life is one that waxes and wanes. We now find ourselves in a moment in which the distinction is particularly difficult to make. Donald J. Trump will be the forty-fifth president of the United States, and the whole world hangs over the puddle asking, “How did we get here?” and “What happens next?” Had Hillary Clinton been elected, tomorrow would have looked pretty much like yesterday, the differences so slight as to be unnoticeable, the branch unbroken—Obama’s third term, as so many have said. But Trump’s success is a Cartier-Bresson moment that throws into question the past and future. It raises questions about where we were before the leap and what we will do when we experience the inevitable splash.

The art of Henri Cartier-Bresson and Gordon Senior locate us in slices of moments not ordinarily recognized. We are forced to consider our places in the relentless movement of time. At the present moment, as ever, we need to throw ourselves into the gaps in order to make sense of them.

## References Cited

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