

ON THE MATTER OF TIME

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AN ESSAY

AN EFFORT TO COMPLETE

HISTORY AND THEORY OF THE PUBLISHED PAGE

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A particular story is recounted of the infamous rivalry between Michelangelo and Leonard da Vinci. In an argument regarding the “best” or “most natural” of the arts, the two Renaissance masters bitterly disagreed. Da Vinci said that anyone can paint or draw with anything; even a child will draw in sand or with a burnt stick as if they were born with the ability. In reply, Michelangelo, though a thoroughly accomplished painter in his own right, declared that sculpting was the greatest and most natural form of art. He reasoned that, for a sculptor to be successful, he must immerse himself into his work as one must immerse himself into life, working hard but with great mindfulness. Every strike of the chisel is significant. Inevitably, the artist will find himself covered in the dirt and grime of the endeavor but must not cease pouring his sweat and blood into it until he is finished. Sculpting, Michelangelo said, was the most genuinely human and natural form of art because it most closely resembles the human condition.

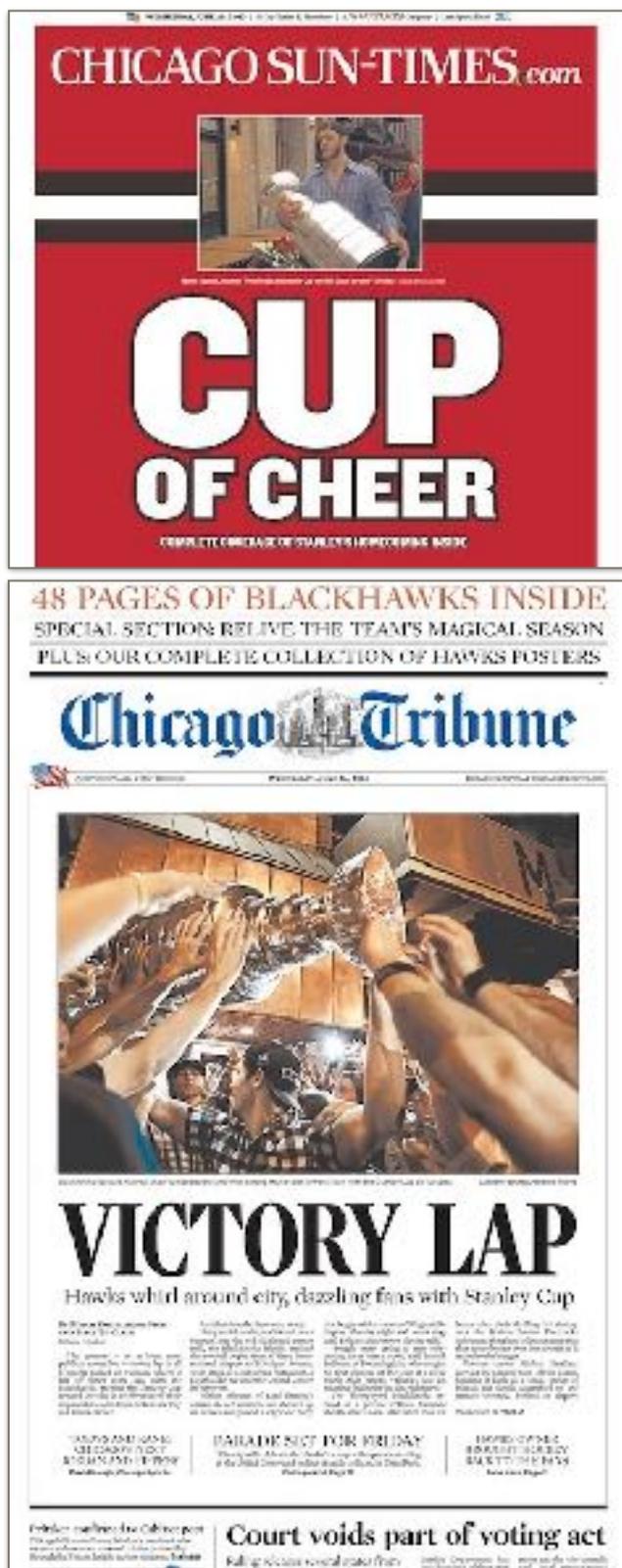
Perhaps Michelangelo would have been a very good photojournalist: the two professions are very similar in their labors. We, as viewers of a finished image, are viewing a frozen fragment of time that results from a potentially prodigious amount of work in order to make. The sculpture, liberated from the stone, is remarkably similar. Since the dawn of photography, the camera has been an intrinsic part of photojournalism and *usually* that means the photographer must be present, as well. The photojournalist creates an image by immersing himself (or herself) into the subject, investing far more than simply a few dollars and a few minutes. From conception to completion, the photojournalist, like a sculptor, has hewn a project from the unedited world until the dust and grime mixes with their sweat and (on occasion, unfortunately) blood.

To this definition, photojournalism is not simply “painting with light,” it is “sculpting with light,” and no one comes from the womb prepared to create the *Pieta*. As with Michelangelo’s argument against simple drawing or painting, just because someone can make an image with simple equipment does not mean that he or she would adequately create compelling, professional work that profoundly affects the viewer. This is the reality of the current newsroom where photographers are being fired en masse while reporters are receiving new iPhones. The ignorance of this strategy is that the leadership is expecting reporters to

seamlessly become “sculptors” and illustrate stories themselves. In reality they may quickly find neither photography nor writing being accomplished with much proficiency.

Do not misunderstand: I do not seek to lambast reporters. Many reporters and writers are also capable photographers. However there is something else at play here that is not being taken into account with all things (equipment, money, good-natured editors) otherwise being equal. Professional photographers and photojournalists are specialists. In a way reporters cannot, photographers are able to spend the *time* it takes, both in trained technical skill and intentional interpersonal interaction, forsaking even fortunes and families, to make compelling images that convey ideas and purpose.

The news broke on May 30, 2013, that the *Chicago Sun-Times* was dissolving the entire 28-person photography staff. The management of the 66 year old newspaper claimed that general beat reporters and freelancers armed with iPhones would do just as well as professional photographers with high-end equipment. (Channick, 2013) But this was not an isolated incident. There has been a great purge of photographers from newsrooms and agencies around the world from *The Washington Times* to *CNN*. Even so, the general readership has largely remained unconscious of the photographer firings because good photography still appears in the broadsheets and tabloids from the wire agencies and stringers. It was not until the morning after



the Chicago Blackhawks won the NHL Stanley Cup that the general public started noticing *something* was different. While the *Chicago Tribune* (and practically everyone else) announced the home team's triumph with a massive, dynamic photo above the fold made by a professional photojournalist, the *Sun-Times* ran a strangely designed red matte around a badly composed, grainy photo no bigger than the screen of the camera phone on which it was made. (Cassella, 2013)

Rationalizations vary. Newspaper owners and managing editors generally blame the ejections on anything from fresh emphasis on online content (with moving images taking priority) to simply admitting that the company cannot afford such a large staff due to dwindling circulation and paltry advertising dollars. Photographers, presumably viewed as the weakest link, or otherwise the most expendable, are the first to be shown the door. While not a completely new phenomenon—photographers have been seeing their job market fading for a while—this problem has gained quite a bit of inertia recently. (Asne.org, 2013)

Unsurprisingly, this policy is being met with a general uprising from those losing their jobs and the general media community, but little change has been seen from the fairly constant, vocal outcry. If the ever-zealous online community of blogs and pundit commentary is any indication, it would seem the impending “Demise of Photojournalism” continues to advance in the form of conglomerate umbrella companies run by bean-counting businessmen. These bastions of efficiency such as News Corp, Gannett, and random bored billionaires buying newspapers continue to absorb the floundering Fourth Estate and process them through the meat grinder of “cutbacks” in hopes that the antiquated—yet adorably nostalgic—daily may somehow turn a profit (or can at least be “benevolently” bankrolled), while the “unproductive” divisions such as copy editors and photographers fall out as chaff. Why not? After all, why pay a single photojournalist £30,000 plus benefits? All they do is take photos, right? Surely the beat reporters can do just as good if they have a little equipment upgrade and a iPhoneography class! At the same time, the world is being flooded with people willing to sell their photos for practically nothing. The Getty's, Corbis's, and microstock consortia are benefiting from exactly the same principle as major High Street stores in London in regards to their high-turnover sales associates: “We can pay you a pittance because there are dozens of other people behind you willing to do it if you won't.” (Cohen, 2011) The supply has eclipsed the demand exponentially.

Numerous odd lawsuits have been raised by professional unions and somewhat ironic “photo-less” newspapers have sought to voice their support. (*Libération*, 2013) Even subscribers are threatening to cancel their subscriptions. Alas, the results of these tactics are tentative (at best) and as of the writing of this essay the *Sun-Times* has only hired back four of its photojournalists as a result of



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collective bargaining agreements. (Channick, 2013) Support does exist, of course, but the trend is continuing no matter the picket lines. These measures have not suppressed the eradication of the professional news photographer, and photographers around the world are likely struck with heart arrhythmias each time an unexpected staff meeting is called. Photographers and photojournalists mustn't concern themselves so much with yelling louder over the incessant noise, they must wholly concern themselves with creating work that outlasts it.

I hope you, the reader, will pardon the irreverence of some of my introduction thus far, but these are the common complaints arising from the photography community. I decline to simply add more of the same words to the ongoing controversy and launch into a diatribe bemoaning the demise of classical photojournalism and damn the numb business tactics of newspaper owners: the blogosphere does that job well enough, whipping themselves up into a foaming frenzy with each passing pink slip. Instead, it is important to examine photojournalism that usually stands separate from the consequences of circulation and see what the difference really is between a professional photojournalist and the apparent alternative: the reporter with an iPhone.

The day the *Chicago Sun-Times* released their photo staff, *Chicago Tribune* photojournalist Alex Garcia wrote an article in support of the photographers (that he had, at times, been in direct competition with) and claimed the reporters are ill equipped to take over because:

“...the best reporters use a different hemisphere of the brain to do their jobs than the best photographers. Visual and spatial thinking in three dimensions is very different than verbal and analytical thinking. [...] (T)he reality is that visual reporting and written reporting will take you to different parts of a scene and hold you there longer. I have never been in a newsroom where you could do someone else’s job and also do yours well.” (Garcia, 2013)

Garcia goes on to predict¹ that thinning the newsroom in such a way provokes a death spiral. First the photographers are gone and the reporters are forced to make the images. *Any images*. Then the writing and story development suffers. It is not long before the once-esteemed paper which produced hard-hitting articles and received Pulitzer Prizes for investigative journalism is left a flabby shell of its former full-bodied fame. Garcia and others speak of the specific deficiencies that reporters with iPhones will possess; however, behind all of their words is a particular ingredient of good photojournalism only said in passing. The difference between a few preoccupied sketches in sand by an idle mind and Michelangelo’s *Pieta* is similar to the difference between a professional photojournalist on assignment and a reporter sent to a scene with a camera phone: a photojournalist dedicates *time*.

Some organizations such as the National Geographic Society and *The New York Times Magazine* still maintain a business model in which photojournalists are in a position to invest extended amounts of time into their stories. Aaron Huey’s visual contribution to the story “In the Shadow of Wounded Knee,” published in the August 2012 edition of *National Geographic Magazine*, features an image collection period of almost a decade. (Estrin, 2009) Huey’s highly intimate images of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation works outside the constraints of time. In fact, after a few images ran in *The New York Times Lens Blog*, Huey received feedback from the residents of the reservation – some positive, some negative. Huey revamped his collection methods and returned to South Dakota, this time putting more emphasis on the

¹ Garcia’s predictions have largely been prophetic. In the months following the firing of the *Chicago Sun-Times* photographers there have been a number of articles in newspapers and in online blogs reporting the quality lapses in the photography and writing as the reporters have been forced to pick up the slack. Some front-page stories and major events have run without a single photo.

Lakota people actively participating in the telling of their story. (Huey, 2012) Three years later the story appeared in *National Geographic*. In the online version preserved on the *National Geographic* website, there are extended audio interviews as Huey and writer Alexandra Fuller spent time with the Oglala Lakota people. The text is largely a first-person oral history, but it follows the *National Geographic* tendency of including a healthy serving of facts and figures. The photos, if read carefully, tell an intimate story of a proud society suffering a number of afflictions: alcoholism, government oversight (intentional or otherwise), youth suicide, and dying traditions. (Huey and Fuller, 2013) It is with *time* that he was able to return to the reservation so frequently that the members of the tribe opened up to him and allowed him to photograph their private world. One visit or maybe two, Huey would have been merely a tourist snapping images from the car window. Perhaps it took a dozen visits to make the people of this photojournalism essay get past the “oh, here’s that photographer guy again” and begin to think “you know, maybe he really cares about this stuff.”

Time is not only an important factor for complete long-form stories; there are other examples of vast amounts of time allowed to make a single image. Sam Abell, another celebrated *National Geographic* photojournalist, has been known to refuse to allow stories to go to print until a single photo is made (and remade) to his satisfaction. In a well-documented account, Abell famously spent approximately a year and a half to make a single image that he had in his mind in order to complete a January 1986 story on the cowboy painter Charles Russell. Russell, having been dead already for six decades, was unavailable to be photographed, so Abell was tasked to make representative images in the style and vein of the cowboy artist’s paintings; particularly, Abell envisioned the bison skull as a near necessity to be photographed in the story since it was so emblematic for Russell in his personal and professional artistic life. Many of the eight images that accompany the story are well-made, but the image that appropriately concludes the series stands unique in content and method of capture.

In a 2011 interview, Abell explains that the photograph took a year and a half from a simple idea in his head to the final image made on the plains of Alberta, Canada. (Hoyt, 2011) After searching an entire year and even going to such lengths as making radio and television appeals in Montana, he had found his

location. Then, having made one set of images in different light and times of day, he returned to Alberta in the winter to make another set of images in the snow. Finally, on his last chance (his editors were getting restless), and as the light was fading and blizzard conditions were worsening, a live bison roamed randomly into the frame. The Kodachrome photograph ran as a single full-page vertical with the snow-swept skulls of dead bison set in the foreground as a live bison stands resolute at a near distance. The image works on many levels. The dead bison in the foreground stand as a relic of the “Old West” while the live bison in its iconic side-on stance (paying homage to the image on the American



© Sam Abell / *National Geographic*

5-cent piece for years) gave a life to the photograph that had been lacking. The image is both melancholic, yet forward-looking. It speaks of loss and of death, while remembering that life remains even in the most austere conditions. In the telling of this particular story, Sam Abell is reminded of his father teaching him photography and challenging him to always set up the shot, then wait. And in his waiting, the image came together. Had he not been given the *time* to go back one more time, he would have not been able to make the image for which he was so desperately searching. He waited and the image presented itself to him. The image was not “taken” as it is so often referred to: the image allowed itself to be made.

The importance of time is certainly not restricted to long-form ethnographic documentary features like those in the glossy monthlies. From conflict photojournalists such as Tyler Hicks (who moved to Kenya) to perpetual producers of expansive monograph photobooks such as Josef Koudelka, these photojournalists exhibit the importance of *time* in their work. They have established a way in which they, as artists, are able to work on projects and live at the same time. These photojournalists embed themselves in an area in such a way that they are able to establish contacts, make friends in high places, or simply hang out

with the local people in order to hear the latest gossip which might lead to new stories. Hicks, for example, famously was on the scene inside an upscale mall in Kenya as it was attacked by terrorists in 2013. He accompanied the Kenyan security officials as they swept the shopping center for assailants. Someone with sufficient authority trusted Hicks enough to allow him to photograph from inside. Was it not *time* that opened that door?

Similarly, Josef Koudelka covered the invasion of Prague by Russian troops and later photographed the gypsy nomads of Eastern Europe. His images are often amazing simply for their boldness, so much so that it appears that the photographer had no regard for self-preservation. Could Koudelka have made such profound images if he had only spent an afternoon running around the streets chasing Soviet tanks? Could he have produced such brilliant work of the habitually isolated gypsy communities after a weekend of hanging out? His stories have helped define conflict and documentary photography in the 20th century because he stayed – risking life and limb – to photograph an international incident as it developed. Koudelka was successful because he took the *time* to make those vital connections.

Instances exist, on the other hand, that demonstrate the careful balance needed in the production of stories. Occasionally, even the greatest photographers can fall victim to *too much time* and too little restriction.

W. Eugene Smith is famous for his dramatic portrayal of life in the South Pacific during World War II and the “Nurse Midwife,” “Country Doctor,” and “Spanish Village” essays for *LIFE* magazine. These projects effectively established the structure for the modern photo essay. He crafted his stories by moving to his subject. (Morris, 2002) He spent more time than almost anyone previously (except possibly his contemporaries Robert Capa or Walker Evans). In some cases he would live and work for a month (or six months or a year), spending every day with his subjects in their homes and workplaces. He would experience their daily lives. Operating in this way, Smith simply became a friend that was just always taking pictures.

The darker side of this “no time restriction” idea is that a photographer runs the risk of creating a body of work that, for all intents and purposes, gets out of control. “When Stephan Lorant hired Smith to produce 100 photographs of a contemporary Pittsburgh for a book in honor of the city’s bicentennial, it was impossible for the job not to grow well beyond its assigned boundaries,” wrote Ellen Wilson upon the exhibition of the images in 2001. (Wilson, 2001, p.10) Eugene Smith’s *Pittsburgh* project was commissioned for a simple pictorial history of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; a city in as much transition as Smith, himself, having recently dealt with a messy resignation from *LIFE* magazine. And following in his typical mode of working, Smith moved to Pittsburg in order to photograph the city. A few weeks multiplied quickly and months rolled by. What few images that were eventually published of the 17,000 frames he made from 1955-1957 were superb, but the project took a massive toll on him both professionally and personally. Smith declared the project a disaster, writing to his friend Ansel Adams: “The presentation is the witness...and there it lies, a failure.” He tried rescuing it a number of times in the 20 years before his death in 1978, but it was never finished to his own uncompromising expectations. (Morris, 2002, p.185) What he had hoped would be his magnum opus became his thorn in the flesh.²

Was it the *time* factor that resulted in the nonfulfillment of *Pittsburgh*? Eugene Smith won back-to-back Guggenheim fellowships in 1956 and 1957 and was backed by a major agency: he had money. He had promises of publication: he had a specific audience. All the things were in place that would typically yield a



© W. Eugene Smith

successful project, yet the entire project withered. My belief is that Smith may have been a kindred spirit with the sculptor Michelangelo in reference to his method of working. Smith chose to live and work in Pittsburgh—as he had in Saipan and Spain for previous projects—and made himself available

² In the process of working on the project, he nearly bankrupted the Magnum Photo Agency and actually did go bankrupt himself. His health and his marriage deteriorated and, by the time he stopped working on it, he and his family were nearly penniless.

to be saturated in the dust and grime of his “sculpture.” That gritty city with all its disparity and growing pains served as a portrait for the struggles he was experiencing in his own life. Sam Stephenson, who eventually edited *Dream Street: W. Eugene Smith’s Pittsburgh Project*, the most complete edition of the project thus far published, wrote: “The haunting, eternal elements of an evolving, conflicted modern world—elements that first entered his photography in a much different setting during World War II—were on display every day in Pittsburgh.” (Stephenson, 2001) In this city, Stephenson seems to believe that Smith found a playground to express himself in Pittsburgh but, in doing so, hit a wall. His stubbornness defeated him. The declaration “I need more *time*...” was his ruination.³

I wonder if such angst and complications could have been avoided had he followed the original brief by spending three weeks to produce 100 images. (For many photographers, such time would be a luxury!) Instead, W. Eugene Smith threw away the calendar and labored to understand the complexities and anguish of a living organism—the living organism that is any growing, thriving city—and he sought to document the complex turmoil of that change because he was living within a change of his own; in the end, however, to show them photographically, he could never have enough *time*.

When any photographer enters the world, he (or she) is editing that world with the frame of his camera. The choices made are intentional to “show this” and “keep that out.” Perhaps Smith’s failure was not that he had too much time, but that he began to attempt to photograph everything – literally a whole city. When everything is photographed, and when the world has no boundaries and no frame through which to edit and be viewed from, the meaning of one image is lost. There is too much and therefore nothing is precious. The implications of that idea reach far, far beyond a simple discussion about photojournalism and the plight of a few photographers fired from a newspaper. In this vein, and in a world where the greatest photographs slide up the screen out of context, along with our friends’ lunch and a snapshot of a cute cat, what then can be said about the importance of a single image? Can one man photograph a city? Dare he?

³ It should be noted that it was during this time in Pittsburgh that Smith fell deeper into a pattern of substance abuse. Though it might be tempting to blame abuse of alcohol and amphetamines on the failure of the story, writers and friends have commented (such as John G. Morris, cited previously) that it was the grueling development and eventual failure of the Pittsburgh story in the mid-1950s that drove him deeper into his self-destructive tendencies.

A misunderstanding of the paradox that is *photography* may be causing this great decline in the photographer's job market: a photograph freezes a millisecond of time, why must it take so much time and effort to do it? The "tendency to value speed and acceleration as a distinctive requirement of post-modern society" has generated a world in which business models devalue arts that take time to produce. (Mah, 2010, p.17) Cynically speaking, newspaper photographs could be made in some future realm by a robot: still frames could be extracted from high-resolution video being pointed in all directions after the event has ended. After all, images from the Google Street View camera are already being shown in galleries. Is it unreasonable to suppose that the *Chicago Sun-Times*' administration might take advantage of such a low-effort collection method if such thing existed? Even now photographs can be made by anyone with a camera: the billions of photos Tweeted or uploaded to Facebook or Instagram is proof enough of that.

But the photojournalist is different. A photojournalist is different from "just a photographer" in the same way a writer doing journalism is a journalist: it is in the doing of the thing a particular way that confirms the definition. The photojournalist faces his fellow man to make images with purpose and to intentionally say something with them. The critical factor that these photographer-purging organizations are overlooking is that only a photojournalist will truly be able to spend the *time* necessary to develop ideas, spend *time* with subjects, and finesse stories in such a way as to convey stories with gravity, significance, and truth. By firing a photojournalist, a news-gathering agency is drawing the shutters on their window to the world. No matter how many iPhone snaps are returned from reporters or tweeted out from the crowd, there is a quality limit. Education, explanation, equipment, and even raw talent can only go so far. The final factor required is always going to be *time*.

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