

# CHF STUDY GUIDES

The **Chicago Humanities Festival** is committed to creating and fostering interest in the humanities. To this end, the Festival provides study guides to help teachers to bring the humanities into the classroom. Every year, the CHF brings an amazing array of authors, thinkers, and artists to Chicago. We hope you will seize the opportunity to bring the excitement of their works and knowledge to your students.

“Artists on Time”—explorations of Henri Cartier-Bresson, Salvador Dalí, and Andy Goldsworthy—appeared in the 2004 Chicago Humanities Festival spring study guide.

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# Artists on Time

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Artists relate to time in many ways. This section highlights three artists, each of whom raises questions about time. For some artists, time is a thing to record. The great French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson is famous for his uncanny ability to capture what he calls the “decisive moment.” Sometimes time is an artist’s subject. Salvador Dalí’s painting of melting clocks, *The Persistence of Memory*, suggests the intangibility of time. Some artists use time as a medium, just as others use paint or charcoal. Environmental artist Andy Goldsworthy relinquishes his artful assemblages of natural materials to the ravages of time.

Each of these artists can open a door to deeper questions of our human relationship of time. On the following pages you’ll learn more about each artist, and find related classroom activities for each.

## HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON (1908 - )

*A legendary photojournalist, Bresson is synonymous with the phrase “the decisive moment,” which he coined in a 1952 book by the same name. He understood intuitively how to capture images with his camera that seem to suspend the flow of time. His photos are composed as precisely as if they were drawn, which may begin to explain how despite his fame, he gave up photography in the 1970s to turn his energy to drawing and painting. In the passages below, Bresson discusses his approach to photography and his relentless attempt to document an experience before it’s relinquished to the hands of time.*

### Excerpts from *The Mind’s Eye: Writings on Photography and Photographs*

There are those who take photographs arranged beforehand and those who go out to discover the image and seize it. For me the camera is a sketch book, an instrument of intuition and spontaneity, the master of the instant which, in visual terms, questions and decides simultaneously....

To take photographs is to hold one’s breath when all faculties converge in the face of fleeing reality. It is at that moment that mastering an image becomes a great physical and intellectual joy.

To take photographs means to recognize—simultaneously and within a fraction of a second—both the fact itself and the rigorous organization of visually perceived forms that give it meaning. It is putting one’s head, one’s eye, and one’s heart on the same axis....

The picture-story involves a joint operation of the brain, the eye, and the heart. The objective of this joint operation is to depict the content of some event, which is in the process of unfolding, and to communicate impressions. Sometimes a single event can be so rich in itself and its facets that it is necessary to move all around it in your search for the solution to the problems it poses—for the world is movement, and you cannot be stationary in your attitude toward something that is moving....

Memory is very important, particularly in respect to the recollection of every picture you’ve taken while you’ve been galloping at the speed of the scene itself. The photographer must make sure, while he is still in the presence of the unfolding scene, that he hasn’t left any gaps, that he has really given expression to the meaning of the scene in its entirety, for afterward it is too late. He is never able to wind the scene backward in order to photograph it all over again....

For each of us, space begins and slants off from our own eye, and from there, enlarges itself progressively toward infinity. Space, in the present, strikes us with greater or lesser intensity and then leaves us, visually, to be closed in our memory and to modify itself there. Of all the means of expression, photography is the only one that fixes forever the precise and transitory instant. We photographers deal in things that are continually vanishing, and when they have vanished, there is no contrivance on earth that can make them come back again. We cannot develop and print a memory....

We see and show the world around us, but it is an event itself which provokes the organic rhythm of forms....

In photography there is a new kind of plasticity, the product of instantaneous lines made by movements of the subject. We work in unison with the movement as

though it were a presentiment of the way in which life itself unfolds. But inside movement there is one moment at which the elements in motion are in balance. Photography must seize upon this moment and hold immobile the equilibrium of it.

The photographer's eye is perpetually evaluating. A photographer can bring coincidence of line simply by moving his head a fraction of a millimeter. He can modify perspectives by a slight bending of the knees. By placing the camera closer to or farther from the subject, he draws detail—and it can be subordinated, or he can be tyrannized by it. But he composes a picture in very nearly the same amount of time it takes to click the shutter, at the speed of a reflex action....

Composition must be one of our constant preoccupations, but at the moment of shooting it can stem only from our intuition, for we are out to capture the fugitive moment, and all the interrelationships involved are on the move....

The camera enables us to keep a sort of visual chronicle. For me, it is my diary. We photo-reporters are the people who supply information to a world in a hurry, a world weighted down with preoccupations, prone to cacophony, and full of beings with a hunger for information and needing the companionship of images....

To me, photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as

well as of a precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression....

Photography is, for me, a spontaneous impulse coming from an ever-attentive eye, which captures the moment and its eternity.

The photographer can merely show the clock's hands, but he does choose his moments. "I was there, and this is what life was at the moment that I saw it."... Our need for joy and good will, and our savageness too, are manifested through minute and infinitely numerous details. These details strike us with their novelty, but also with their familiarity, almost like memories....

In photography, creation is a quick business—an instant, a gush, a response—putting the camera up to the eye's line of fire, snatching with that economical little box whatever it was that surprised you, catching it in midair, without tricks, without letting it get away....

That moment, that fraction of a second, is valuable for the freshness of its impression—but does it preclude a more studied experience? Is it possible to find that same freshness if you stay for a long time in one spot? Whether you are on the move or in one place, in order to show a country or a situation, somehow you need to have established close working relationships, to be supported by a human community; living takes time, roots form slowly. Thus that fraction of a moment can be the fruit of a long acquaintance, or one of surprise.

Source: Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Mind's Eye: Writings on Photography and Photographs* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1999), 15-54 passim.

# Bring the *chf* into the Classroom!

## The Decisive Moment: A Lesson Plan

By Carolyn Sommers

### Overview

This lesson plan investigates the camera as a tool that records time by freezing a fleeting moment. Students will consider the role intuition plays in recording an event. They will think carefully about a photo's context—the photographer's involvement on one hand; a variety of social, political, economic, or aesthetic factors on the other. Students will come to understand that while a scene may have been frozen in time, one's understanding of the image remains malleable. They will demonstrate how time is implicit in a photograph and how past, present, and future overlap.

General goals of this lesson are:

- To provoke a new way of seeing the world.
- To understand the way photography, as a tool for documenting history, can freeze a particular event in time, and demonstrate the passage of time.
- To understand how memory plays a role in the interpretation of historical records, specifically, documentary photography.
- To understand the “story” a picture tells.
- To consider events that may transpire before, during, and after a photo has been snapped.
- To move beyond the literal interpretation of an image and to investigate all possibilities that brought the image together.
- To recognize the simultaneity of events that coalesced in a fraction of a second.
- To become aware that humans seek to create a record and to make memories tangible.

The only required document is Bresson's photograph “Behind the Gare Saint-Lazare.” Teachers may also use other photos by Bresson or by other photojournalists.

## Step-By-Step Procedures

Begin by asking the students to look outside and tell you what time it is. Make sure they don't look at the clock. Have them explain their responses. This could be difficult, because they can probably gauge the time based on their knowledge of when they have your class. Some of them might discern the time based off of the position of the sun. Use their responses to open a conversation on photography and time.

Specifically, show them Henri Cartier-Bresson's photograph *Behind the Gare Saint-Lazare*. Ask students to describe what they see. Make sure they don't assume what the photograph is a picture of. Have them state the facts—there's a man leaping, he is suspended above a ladder, etc.

After they've described the components of the image, ask them to tell you how they interpret this photo.

Next, explore how the elements in this photo may have come together as they did. Ask them why Bresson may have selected that precise moment to release the shutter and capture the image. Imagine the photographer's anticipation—his sense of when to seize the picture.

Present a different perspective: What was happening before Bresson photographed this instant? And happened next?

What's inside the frame? Ask your students to think about peering through the window frame to guess what time it was.

Think more broadly about the transitory nature of time. How can we preserve a single incident? Why do we take pictures... for memory's sake? as art? to document of history?

How do the angle, lighting, level at which picture was shot, etc. affect the way the viewer interprets the image?

Ask students to use their imagination to write a story inspired by the Bresson photograph. Some helpful prompts to get their ideas flowing might be:

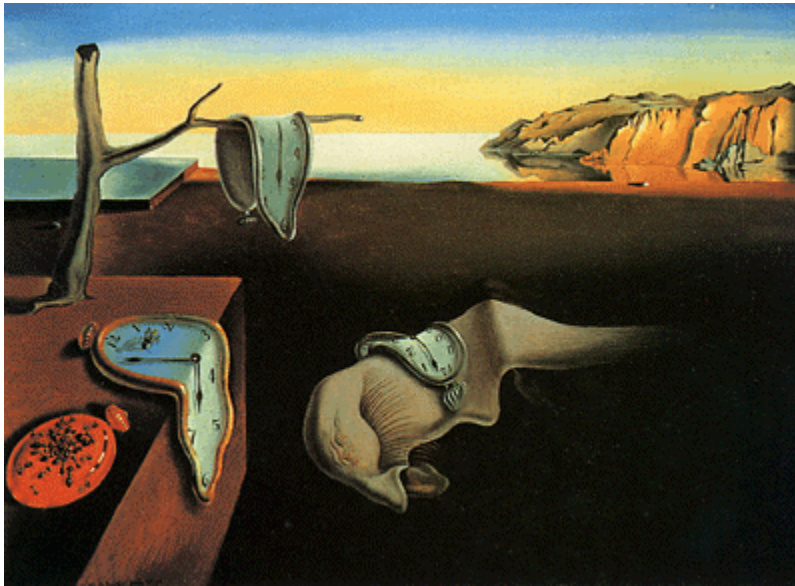
- Write a story about what just happened.
- Write a story on what is about to happen.
- Write a story about the events leading up to the picture.
- Write a news story that accompanies this photo as though it were published in 1953, today, or in 2047.



Henri Cartier-Bresson  
*Behind the Gare Saint-Lazare, Paris, 1932*

## SALVADOR DALÍ (1904 - 1989)

One of the most famous artists to emerge from the Surrealist art movement was Salvador Dalí. The surrealists were interested in depicting dreams and the unconscious, using fantastic, enigmatic images to do so. The prefix “sur-” means farther than, so “surreal” describes something that is beyond real. One classic example of surrealist art is Dalí’s painting *The Persistence of Memory*. The commentary below ponders the time motif in relation to Dalí’s painting and suggests different vantage points from which to understand this complex work of art.



### On *The Persistence of Memory*

Against a background of the cliffs of Cap de Creus an amoeba-like head lies in the landscape.... A fob watch drops over this head in profile with its long eyelashes, while to the left of the figure we recognize a clay-colored plinth, over the edge of which another timepiece has “melted.” On the far edge of the plinth stands a dead tree with another soft watch draped over its single branch. In contrast to these floppy timepieces is a solid, closed fob watch on the front part of the plinth, with numerous ants crawling over it. They and the fly that sits on the light blue, apparently water-

filled, dial constitute the only living things in this dismal, melancholic painting.

—Frank Weyers, *Salvador Dalí: Life and Work*

Dalí’s famous painting *The Persistence of Memory*... brings the eternity and permanence of the landscape of Cap de Creus, and the purely technical measurement of time in clocks, into powerful juxtaposition with the fleeting moment which is temporarily captured in the melting timepieces. One of the

messages implicit in these images is that what is solid is ultimately without value or importance. It is what passes that remains in our memory; this is why the “timepieces” (the clocks) melt because, like every human creation, they are transitory, and so is time....

This painting, like so many others, is an illustration of an artist’s attempt to express reality beyond what is visible, a key principle of Surrealism with which Dalí identified strongly. In this painting, he sought to capture the way in which fixed norms and habits influence the appearance of reality and how they can be released from those bounds and opened up to

wider interpretation by softening them to embrace wider connections of ideas and possibilities, as in the free flow of dreaming. Fundamentally, however, Dalí’s painting illustrates a link between the perception of time and the perception of space. As [Anna C. Krausse, author of *The Story of Painting: From the Renaissance to the Present*] explains: “The clocks, flowing through space and time, prompt thoughts of the ‘flow’ of time, and give the impression of a time and space of memory dissolving into the distance, a zone invaded by the inexplicable, and one which unconsciously influences the experience of the present.”

Source: Elena Antonacopoulou, editorial, *Organization Studies*, November – December 2002.

## Classroom Ideas

Imagine you just stepped out of a spaceship. The landscape before you is the one depicted in *Persistence of Memory*. Write a “captain’s log” describing the environment and laws of nature on this planet.

Surreal images have a way of sparking the imagination. Show students an image from *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* by Chris Van Allsburg. Ask them to write a story about (or draw) what happened prior to and following the moment depicted.

## ANDY GOLDSWORTHY (1956 - )

*Sometimes art is part of the cycle of nature. Environmental artist Andy Goldsworthy uses nature as both subject and raw material. With just his bare hands, he creates art works from fragments of his environment, then relinquishes them to time. The transience of his creations is witnessed as a river carries off his floating spiral of leaves or, as the sun's heat melts away a giant snowball. Ephemeral but grounded, environmental art is a meditation on the ever-present cycle of growth and decay.*

### About the Artist

Since the late 70s, Andy Goldsworthy has been making site-specific work in nature, using nature itself as a 'found object', as the raw material for his sculpture. A photographic document is then made of the work, with its location and the date of its completion. . . Although Goldsworthy in his more recent, more monumental work, has used assistants and plant machinery, the majority of his work is produced by the artist's own hands at the designated location.

He has stated that his work could easily be realized within the environs of his home in Dumfriesshire, Scotland, although he has traveled extensively in Britain, Europe, America, Japan and Australia. However, a sense of place does in fact play a large role in the making of Goldsworthy's sculpture, such that each site is transformed, however provisionally, with each intervention. To this extent his work is at once both fleeting and permanent in that it alters the organization of the natural landscape.

Goldsworthy is interested in the 'movement, light, growth and decay' of

nature. He exploits its vital impermanence: changes in season, weather and terrain. The materials of Goldsworthy's work are in turn affected by change; he employs such transitory elements as leaves, wood, rock, ice, snow, peat and sand. By necessity, then, the majority of the sculptures must be completed and documented in one day as light and temperature would affect their very materiality, their existence. One example of this would be Goldsworthy's ephemeral performance sculptures, when sand, water or earth is tossed into the air, where the resultant photograph becomes the sole record of the work's brief apparition.

The artist has described color as a kind of energy. The vibrant colors found in nature are unstable. Like all organic matter they are consumed by time and erosion. Goldsworthy makes use of nature's seasonal or meteorological changes based on his geographical location. And as climate affects his color palette, so does it affect his work's form. For the past two decades, Goldsworthy has created works out of a given landscape by inscribing it with circles, lines and spirals: all based upon elemental forms that we see



in nature and that all organic matter is made up of at a molecular level. Goldsworthy has gauged long cracks in the earth bordered by a line of imbricated stones. He has also built up from the earth creating towering arches and cones set in water or on land with modified rocks or cut

rectangles of ice. And as Goldsworthy's sculptures are based on elemental forms, they also employ seriality or patterning in their construction. The effect of seriality, of something that extends over time, underlines the temporal, and temporary dimension of his work.

Source of text: [http://www.eyestorm.com/feature/ED2n\\_article.asp?article\\_id=28&artist\\_id=90](http://www.eyestorm.com/feature/ED2n_article.asp?article_id=28&artist_id=90)

*Andy Goldsworthy's work is documented in the acclaimed documentary Rivers and Tides (2001). His book Time (2000) is another good source of images, and many Internet sites contain images, articles, interviews, and the like. He does not have an official web site.*



# Bring the *chf* into the Classroom!

## Environmental Art Lesson Plan

### Objectives

Students will:

- Create their own environmental sculpture (in groups and individually)
- Become aware of artists who create site-specific works using natural materials
- Respond to and analyze contemporary works of art
- Understand the ephemeral qualities of environmental art

### Concepts and Terminology

Environmental art	Art that is part of the landscape that uses nature as both subject and raw material.
In situ	In the natural, original position.
Site-specific or instillation art	Art that is made for a specific place.
Found object	An object not originally intended as a work of art that is obtained, selected, and exhibited by an artist, often without being altered in any way.
Organic	Developing naturally: occurring or developing gradually and naturally, without being forced or contrived.
Ephemeral	Lasting a very short time.
Niche	A recess in a wall, a hollow in a rock, etc. Also, a habitat.

## Step-By-Step Procedures

Take students outside to find natural objects to use while constructing their own simple sculptures. Encourage students to work with whatever they notice: twigs, leaves, stones, snow and ice, reeds and thorns, etc.

If possible, create the sculpture outside, for instance, in a crack or on a puddle.

Think carefully before selecting a site. Is it exposed or protected? How will people approach it? What natural materials are found there? What is the natural or cultural history of this site? How has it evolved over time? What is it about this site that's most interesting?

The sculpture might be an assemblage of leaves, stones, or petals arranged by color, shading, or size. Or the sculpture might be a cairn (pile of stones intended as a monument or landmark). Explore patterns of nature by arranging its building blocks in unexpected ways.

Document the results with a camera.

Is the sculpture harmonious with its surroundings, or does it stand out? What role do humans play in creating the landscape, and what sort of landscape should that be?

Discuss the role of time in the sculpture. How long will it last? Seconds, minutes, hours, days, years? What will it turn into? When do the natural objects become art? When does the art cease to exist? (Or are those fair questions?)

Visit the site at different times of day—how does the light affect the site, how will your work interact with it? Revisit the installation sites a day or a week later. What has time changed?

A variation on this basic sculpture project is to create niches. Walk together with others in class to seek out hollows, crevices, and the like. Select a niche and create a sculpture using natural, found materials especially for that niche.