

Gus Foster: Clocking in with Einstein

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Einstein held that time is what a clock says it is and a clock can be anything: the rotation of the earth, the phases of the moon, the seasons, sunspots, the sprouting time of crocuses, the rhythm of a jazz band, a Rolex or Timex watch and the vibration of a cesium atom.

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This is a continuation of a series of articles on the role of the artist which I first published under the heading of “Visual Conventions and Conventional Vision.”¹ Visual conventions change with the times and art inevitably reflects (and records) these changes. The exceptional artist is ahead of the times while there are other more conservative types who for various reasons lag behind and merely serve the interests of nostalgia. The function of those who are in the forefront is not so much to lead as it is to express visually things that are happening in society but which people have not put into words or found the means to articulate. In this way artists come to formulate the future so that the mass of humanity can begin to deal with the reality it will soon face in more tangible form.

Because Gus Foster has chosen a format associated with the late 19th and early 20th centuries—the panorama photograph, used for recording large groups of people gathered for various occasions—there is risk that his work will mentally be tossed into the nostalgia bin when it would almost better be described as futuristic.

My wife and I were first introduced to Foster’s work in Taos some seven years ago while visiting the studio of his neighbor Larry Bell. We met Foster and were immediately drawn to his work. Having walked or ridden on horseback over a good portion of north-central New Mexico, I found Foster’s 360-degree panoramic views of the area conveyed a special, very personal message to me. Taken from the tops of mountains I had climbed they provided me with a visual notebook of events, scenes and emotions that I was pleased to recall.

As it turned out Foster and I shared many interests. In addition to mechanical things, photography, and the outdoors we were both fascinated by certain aspects of Albert Einstein’s thought. It was Einstein’s observation that the man on the streetcar and the man on the sidewalk looking at the passing streetcar, do not see time in the same way. This notion, this insight originally written for physicists, had burrowed into Gus Foster’s mind and wouldn’t let go. Ultimately it motivated him to extend his obsession for the stationary panoramic view to the panorama recorded from a moving vehicle or platform.

It is the relationship between Foster’s “Time Photographs” and his panoramas taking with the camera rotating around a single spot that forms the corpus of his current passion. In one instance he and his wife, Ruth, actually reproduced Einstein’s argument as they photographed each other with panoramic cameras: one of them stood by the side of the road while the other drove by. The effect of viewing each image and concentrating on it revealed that they were qualitatively quite different. In precisely what ways they were different is not easy to describe because there is no vocabulary for this sort of thing. When I use the term “different” I do not just mean Foster’s images are

different from those of other photographers but they are also noticeably different from each other.

For years I have used photographs as a research tool when investigating unconscious behaviors such as the size of the bubble of personal space surrounding each human being as it occurs in a great variety of settings and contexts. For my purposes even snapshots taken by others as souvenirs, yield valuable data. It is the almost inexhaustible amount of information in photographs that makes them so valuable.

What Foster has done is to restructure photographic information in a unique way, providing us with new insights and feedback on how the world can be perceived. Now I must say something about what I mean by “restructuring” and why I use the term “unique.” Let’s begin with unique. I know of no one else who is doing what Foster does. He had to either make or design virtually all of the equipment that enables him to produce images up to 12 feet in length and 30 inches wide. In terms of restructuring how we use the information provided in photographs, it is first necessary to sort out how they differ from other uses of the medium that are concerned with freezing or slowing down time. Most students of photography are familiar with Eadweard Muybridge’s 19th-century, multiple images of racehorses and his series of naked men and women engaged in a variety of athletic activities such as running, jumping, boxing and wrestling. To analyze the interplay of the muscles used, Muybridge employed a battery of separate cameras, set up serially. The shutters were tripped by strings as the subjects moved through space. Perhaps even more familiar to most of us is the use of “strobe” camera to freeze motion: stroboscopic images of golfers swinging clubs (recorded in a single frame), or of bullets penetrating light bulbs as glass shards explode into the surrounding space, and of the circular crowns formed by droplets of cream. The motion picture does a similar thing. But, motion pictures (movies) are linear in the same way that a sentence is linear. This means that the viewer is held in the grip of the camera image as though it had a lock on the viewer’s eyes. One cannot break the sequencing imposed by the linearity.

With Foster’s “Time Photographs” (as well as with his more stationary panoramas) a modicum of control of perception and analysis is restored. That is, the panorama permits the viewer the same leeway that he/she has outdoors while taking in the actual scene. But for the time photograph the camera moves *through* space while it rotates *in* space so that one can see the same scene from different angles. Combining the two systems adds an entirely new dimension to photography, so that one can see both views simultaneously, as in the thought experiments conducted by Einstein.

Gus Foster has turned the camera into a new kind of clock, one which is rooted historically in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But, because of what Foster has done by tuning his clock to the dynamic universe, his camera is now more appropriate as an instrument for exploring the world of the future as it is forming than as a reminder of the past. Foster has given us a new way of recording the contemplating experience, trimming our visual sails to change.

NOTE

1-Edward T. Hall, “Visual Conventions and Conventional Vision,” *El Palacio*, Spring 1987.

Edward T. Hall is an internationally respected anthropologist and consultant on international relations. He is author of numerous books including *The Silent Language*, *The Hidden Dimension* and *Beyond Culture*.