

## CHALLENGE & RESPONSE

Sixty years after its publication, *The Decisive Moment* remains one of the most influential books in photographic history – even if its central ideas are often misunderstood and out of fashion. **William Ewing** assesses its legacy ahead of a new show he has curated, reflecting Henri Cartier-Bresson's struggle with the emergence of colour photography, and considers how a diverse group of photographers – contemporaries and later generations – met that challenge

By anyone's reckoning, Henri Cartier-Bresson would have to figure as one of the greatest photographers of the 20th century, but he was not merely a supremely talented image-maker, he was also a pioneer, proposing a new way of looking at the world. Already in 1947, Lincoln Kirstein could write of him as belonging to a small group of contemporaries "united towards formulating a new approach to deliberate photography". The great American impresario suggested that Cartier-Bresson was the leading European exponent of the group, who "...by his denial of the academic 'artistic' or salon taste of modern art photography, has taken sequences of pictures which, in their freshness, elegance and truth, remain works of art within their own radical aesthetic".

While no one speaks now of "a radical aesthetic" – after all, we have had more than a half-century to absorb it – the continuing

high level of public and professional interest in Cartier-Bresson's work proves his enduring power and relevance. And if all but specialised historians have forgotten the reigning aesthetic that the photographer was helping to displace in the 1930s, it would appear that Cartier-Bresson's own position in history has all the security of bedrock. The "freshness, elegance and truth" acknowledged by Kirstein 65 years ago are qualities that still shine through today. So when *Le Monde* communicated the news of his death on 03 August 2004, it could, with justification, write: "The eye of the century has closed."

Not that photography itself has stood still all these years. It has evolved rapidly in hardware and software, so to speak – in constant, indeed explosive, mutation since the opening of the digital age. Today's photographers have all kinds of new models to inspire them – artists in other fields, performers, filmmakers, digital

gurus, theorists, and so on. As the young always do, they absorb or reject influences at a furious pace; they question dogmas and received wisdom, and are more likely to tear down monuments than worship at their feet. And for better or worse, Cartier-Bresson is a monument. If, as *Le Monde's* art critic noted recently, he had already become more of a national monument by 1960 than a practising artist, how has that monument stood the test of time?

### Legacy or burden?

If anything, as a number of French critics and photographers have complained, the living Cartier-Bresson was already too great an influence, too monumental a presence, casting too long and too heavy a shadow for young plants around to take root and blossom. In 2006, Raymond Depardon complained that photographers of his generation had been bathed

in the France éternelle of Robert Doisneau and the instant décisive of Cartier-Bresson. He concluded with a rhetorical flourish: "I don't wish such suffering on young photographers."

Frank Horvat also had "it up to here with this Cartier-Bresson business", and even Robert Delpire, the photographer's loyal publisher, felt that the adulation was at the expense of genuine appraisal of the work, and he vowed to dynamite any statue erected by the state. However, this anguished state of affairs in France does not seem to have spilled over its borders.

Young photographers tend to look at the past rather sketchily, as efforts rightly go first and foremost to production. But it would have to be a very naïve autodidact to practise photography as a creative act and not have run up against the master at some time. For better or worse, Cartier-Bresson is, quite simply, a benchmark, and from any point of view an imposing one. In my

experience as a curator, young photographers are perhaps less likely to acknowledge him as an influence today than they would have 30 or 40 years ago, but they certainly are familiar with his most iconic images. And as influences are often absorbed unconsciously, it makes me wonder how many contemporaries are indebted to his vision without acknowledging it, even to themselves. His vision can be confronted, but it cannot be ignored.

### Imperfect beauty

Contemporary photographer Carolyn Drake has a critique that addresses a wider issue than Cartier-Bresson himself, and suggests a sea-change in attitude about photography that characterises the current generation. "Since Cartier-Bresson," she writes, "we have become more critical of photographs, not just because we never know what might have been done to them



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1 Harlem, NY, 1947 © Henri Cartier-Bresson / Magnum Photos, Courtesy Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson

2 Brooklyn, NY, 1947 © Henri Cartier-Bresson / Magnum Photos, Courtesy Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson



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in Photoshop, but also because what is perfect and decisive is not really our ideal anymore. We can empathise better with flaw, with proof that the world is not symmetrical, or one-sided, or two-sided – that truth is not absolute. We want to arrange things in a way that [question] control, power and the authoritative view.”

I suspect that Cartier-Bresson would object to that characterisation; in fact, he would most likely protest that what Drake wanted to do was a pretty fair description of his own quest, but the point I am addressing here is the perception of things. Clearly Drake, and I imagine many others of her generation, sees this master as belonging to a different time, an era irrevocably in the past.

Paul Graham told *Le Monde* recently that, “Photography often searches for the perfect moment, then petrifies it forever.” The British photographer then goes on to state the obvious:

“Life can’t be contained in a simple, frozen rectangle – it continues, it flows. One thinks one’s found the perfect moment, and then another one arrives a few seconds later.” But this is not what Cartier-Bresson was doing. He was not freezing or petrifying anything; he was lifting the veil on conventional perception, enlarging our vision, opening our eyes, unfreezing life.

That word “decisive” in Drake’s critique is key, but actually very problematic, both for Cartier-Bresson and his critics, such as Graham. If few photographers and photography lovers are unfamiliar with the work of Cartier-Bresson, fewer still are unfamiliar with the concept of “The Decisive Moment”, indelibly associated with his name. Like the word “art”, it is one of those terms we think we know what we are talking about – until we begin talking about it. Since it appeared in 1952 on the cover of the English edition of his seminal book, the term has

become a general shorthand for a spontaneous approach to photography, where, like a hunter, the photographer waits patiently for his prey. Ironically, the person most exasperated by the term was the great man himself.

#### Shoot on instinct

But notwithstanding Cartier-Bresson’s frustrations, the term remains firmly established in photographic discourse. One can critique it vehemently, argue that it is clumsy, ambiguous, or even misleading, but one cannot will it away.

He spoke often and eloquently of his view, which had to do with the search for meaning in the geometry and rhythm found in the real world. The eye, he explained, makes the picture; the camera merely confirms and records it. “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 organisation of forms

which give that event its proper expression.”

And elsewhere, “For me, content cannot be separated from form. By form, I mean a rigorous organisation of the interplay of surfaces, lines and values. It is in this organisation alone that our conceptions and emotions become concrete and communicable.... Visual organisation can stem only from a developed instinct.” In reality, there was infinity of “moments” for a sharp-eyed photographer to seize. But it didn’t amount to a decision to snap the shutter – that implied rationality. Rather, it was instinct that was the determining factor. “Thinking and feeling should be done beforehand and afterwards,” he argued, “never while actually taking a photograph.”

Later, Cartier-Bresson would discover a book that crystallised his thoughts. In *Zen and the Art of Archery*, Eugen Herrigel wrote of a mental state: “... The archer ceases to be conscious of himself as the one who is engaged in hitting the bull’s-eye

which confronts him. This state of unconscious is realised only when, completely empty and rid of the self, he becomes one with the perfecting of his technical skill, though there is in it something of a quite different order which cannot be attained by any progressive study of the art...”

As curator Clement Cheroux tells us, the book was a revelation for Cartier-Bresson: “Mais, c’est un manuel de photographie!” Furthermore, he recognised that it could apply to “a way of living, of being...”. Cheroux argues that the metaphor of the photographic shot applies much more accurately to Cartier-Bresson’s approach, but neither during the photographer’s lifetime nor since has it been possible to dislodge that limited prism of The Decisive Moment.

And perhaps for good reason – aren’t all photographs at some level decisive moments? This claim is worth examining. In the sense that the pushing of the shutter is a conscious act – yes,

of course. But clearly there is a big difference between being in a situation where you have no idea what is going to happen, only perhaps a vague idea of what might or could happen, and a situation that is essentially static, such as being in front of a landscape, a still-life arrangement, a nude, or a person expecting a portrait. One can, of course, argue that lighting effects are fleeting (when lighting isn’t artificial), but this is hardly of the order of objects and bodies in motion. Photographers who put themselves in fluid situations, like street photographers, have to be fleet of mind and body. If all photographs were decisive moments, then the term would be meaningless. But they aren’t and it isn’t. This is why the term continues to enjoy currency.

Given that the term sticks to Cartier-Bresson’s name like glue, perhaps we should go with the flow. It does function as useful shorthand; it captures, if awkwardly, the



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3 Tehuantepec, Mexico, 1985  
© Alex Webb / Magnum Photos

4 Man with bandage, 1968  
© Fred Herzog, courtesy Equinox Gallery, Vancouver

5 New York City, USA, 1981  
© Ernst Haas Estate, New York

6 Dog, Moscow, 2007  
© Boris Savelev, courtesy Michael Hoppen Gallery

spirit of Cartier-Bresson's method, which was to approach the subject with, as he put it, "velvet paws and a sharp eye", remaining "invisible" so as not to disturb the natural order of things. The photographer reminded any readers who might practise fishing that the last thing one should do is disturb the waters before casting one's hook.

### Vulgar eye

For the upcoming exhibition I am curating at Somerset House in London, I am taking that spirit, or ethos, and asking myself how it played out in colour. Why colour, given that Cartier-Bresson was wedded to black-and-white? First, because colour is the dominant medium of our age, and second, because Cartier-Bresson did not believe it would prove to be up to the task. "There's an incredible madness with photography," he said to an

interviewer in 1991, long before camera phones were invented. "Everyone is a photographer now. And why not? But a good, vibrant and rigorous image is so rare."

My proposition, therefore, is simple: take the ethos of The Decisive Moment, and look at how colour photographers have actually fared. Put differently, if we take Cartier-Bresson's scepticism about colour photography as a challenge, how convincing is the response?

It was taken for granted, for much of Cartier-Bresson's career span, that photographing in an artful manner meant capturing one's subject in black-and-white. Colour was something reserved for commerce – documentary or reportage at best, publicity and advertising at worst. To some extent, this may be seen as a case of necessity being the mother of invention; colour photography was simply too rudimentary on every level.

But there was more to it than that. By the middle of the 20th century, black-and-white photography had been elevated to an almost sacred status. "Black and white are the colours of photography," argued Robert Frank. Colour photography was "vulgar" and "corrupting", weighed in Walker Evans as late as 1969 (in fairness, he changed his mind a few years later, seduced by the wonders of Polaroid). Although understandable in the context of the age, it was unfortunate that the heralds of black-and-white felt the need to disparage colour, instead of judging it on its own merits. This bias was tenacious; while a small number of superlative colour photographers were emerging in the 1960s and 70s, every effort was made to keep them out of museums. For the most part curators maintained the same prejudice, and some photographers even felt the need to suppress their colour work. Historian

Daniele Meaux points out that Jean-Philippe Charbonnier actually made black-and-white prints of his colour images for two retrospective exhibitions, the second as late as 1983. This betrayed an astonishing naivety, which is to say a belief that a colour image was simply a coloured version of a black-and-white. But it also well illustrates the confusion, even anguish, over colour aesthetics at the time.

However, as long as the illustrated magazines such as *Life* in the US and *Paris Match* in France had been restricted to black-and-white reproduction, the fidelity to monochrome posed no problem. But when improvements to colour reproduction, including reasonable cost and relative ease, led to increasing demands for it in the postwar period, the black-and-white photographers found it hard to resist the pressure to switch. The magazine *Modern Photography* was forthright in introducing

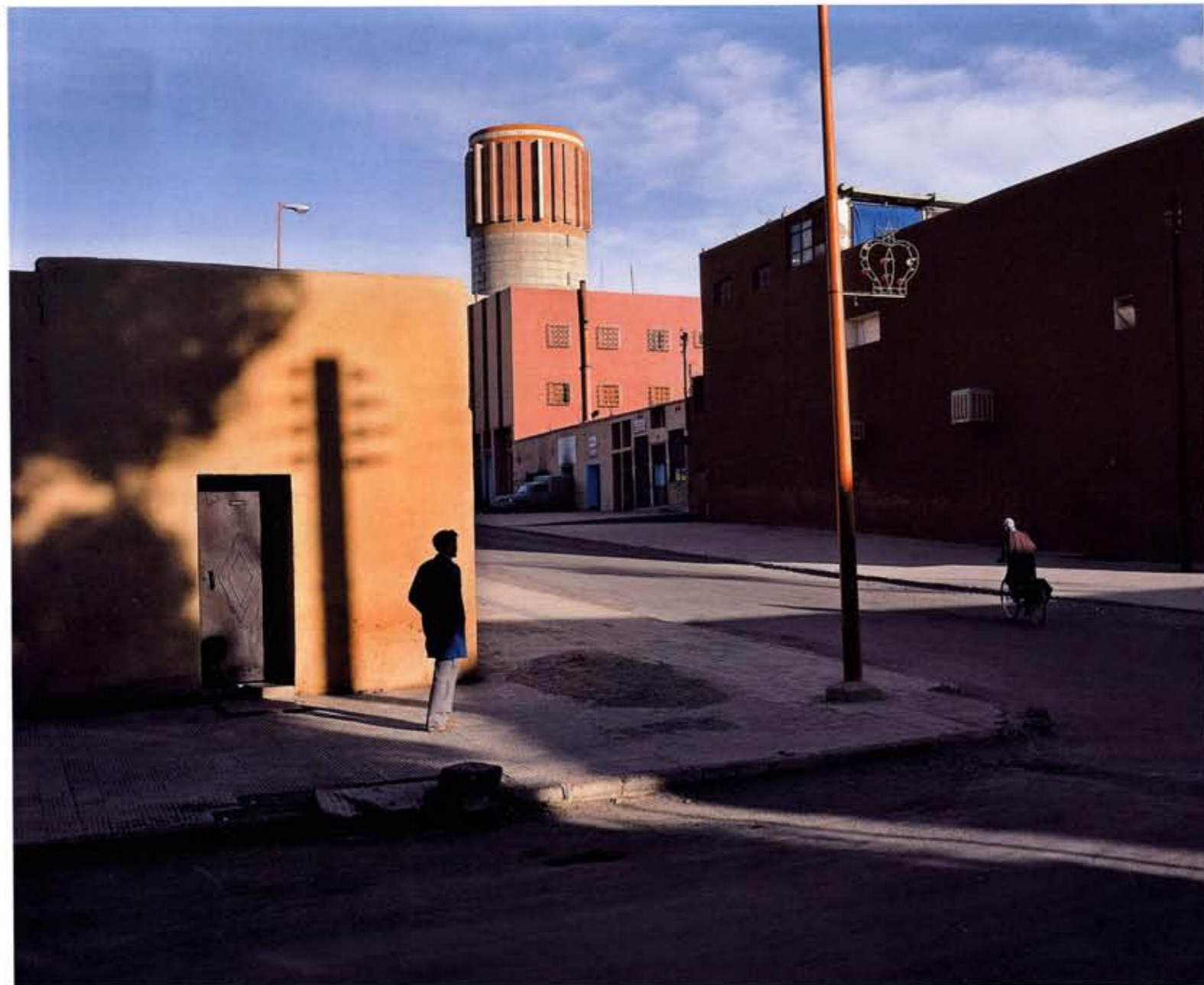
an article as follows: "... As Cartier-Bresson became more established in a commercial sense, the commercial world began to demand more of him, and one thing they demanded was coverage in colour."

### A personal defeat?

Like many other photographers of his time, Cartier-Bresson was sceptical about colour's art potential. He believed substantial technical obstacles remained, both in the taking of the picture (the film was too slow and usually needed artificial light, so one could say goodbye to spontaneity, for example, as the slowness pushed photographers to deal with static subjects) and its reproduction (colour film was less responsive to light; plate-making was laborious and registration on the page was a nightmare). He concluded, "A colour photograph reproduced in a magazine... sometimes gives

the impression of an anatomical dissection that has been badly bungled."

More seriously, especially for an artist, Cartier-Bresson confessed to deep misgivings about colour film as an expressive medium. He believed it was too realistic, seriously compromising the element of abstraction and the distancing effect that black-and-white permitted. He believed that colour was the prerogative of painting and went out of his way to denigrate colour photography. Using it grudgingly, he maintained: "In its present state of development, the medium of colour photography is for me only a means of documentation." It lacked emotion. Worse, it was "emasculated vision... of interest only to merchants and magazines". It was extremely ironic that *Modern Photography* had titled its article, 'Cartier-Bresson finds in Color', because from the lacklustre results, it was clear that he



7 Morocco, Town of Ouarzazte, 1986 © Harry Gruyaert / Magnum Photos

8 Sean Kelly, Art Basel Miami, 2010. Artist: Kehinde Wiley © Andy Freeberg, courtesy Kopeikin Gallery

9 Untitled (Package Pile Up, New York City), 1995 © Jeff Mermelstein, courtesy Rick Wester Fine Art, New York

### On show

Henri Cartier-Bresson: A Question of Colour runs from 08 November until 27 January 2013 at Somerset House, London. Curated by William Ewing, it is the first exhibition presented by the Positive View Foundation, a new charity that emerged from an initiative begun at the Saatchi Gallery 17 years earlier, which stages photography exhibitions in support of disadvantaged young people. A programme of talks and events will run alongside the show. Positive View will stage a second photography show at the venue next year, Landmark: Field of Change (14 March–28 April), also curated by Ewing. [www.somerset-house.org.uk](http://www.somerset-house.org.uk) [www.positiveviewfoundation.org.uk](http://www.positiveviewfoundation.org.uk)

had most certainly not found it. And yet he must have given permission for the article.

Much could be written on his conflicted relationship to the question of colour. Peter Galassi (who curated two Cartier-Bresson exhibitions as chief curator of New York's Museum of Modern Art's photography department) relates how he experimented with it independently of assignments, and confessed to an almost guilty enjoyment of its pleasures, while Daniele Meaux has argued that a close study of his work in China (both colour and black-and-white) shows two distinct aesthetics in play. She has shown that the photographer's dismissal of colour as "only a means of documentation" simply does not stand up to the evidence. Galassi argues, however, that in the final analysis, although further research will undoubtedly uncover some surprises, colour for Cartier-Bresson was "a marginal matter – an irritant, or at best a passing temptation...".

But I propose that he saw it as a personal defeat, or at least a terrain that exceeded his reach.

### Next generation

Despite his personal scepticism, Cartier-Bresson admitted that colour photography was "only in its infancy", and further experimentation was justified. It required "...a new attitude of mind, an approach different than that which is appropriate for black-and-white... Colour photography brings with it a number of problems that are hard to resolve today, and some of which are even difficult to foresee... We must continue to feel our way."

This challenge was taken up by a number of his contemporaries and by a generation of younger photographers. In their eyes, black-and-white photography had had its day. The world was in colour, and they finally had the appropriate tools. The visual field of popular culture, of television, magazines, reportage,

advertising and publicity, was increasingly characterised by colour, and it seemed pig-headed to resist the tide.

Joel Meyerowitz set himself a test in the late 1960s, taking the same subject in black-and-white and in colour, then comparing the results. Of the six pairs, five he thought were more effective in colour; only in one did he feel the black-and-white to be superior.

Taking a workshop with Lee Friedlander in 1974, Robert Walker remembers thinking, "Black-and-white can't get much better than this... The switch must be to colour."

A younger photographer, Andy Freeberg, also made the transition: "As for colour, I used to be in agreement with HCB. Black-and-white for me simplified the shapes and didn't distract so much from the elements and people's expressions and gestures as strong colour might. When I got my first full-frame digital camera in 2005 and started my Sentry series with the white desks, I realised that the subtle colour in all the whites was really beautiful. I don't think it would be as effective in black-and-white. I learned how to print in colour from that project, and I was hooked."

But Freeberg also reveals how far we have come technically since Cartier-Bresson's day: "I think the quality you can now get with 35mm digital cameras is quite a major shift. These photographs would not have looked very good with 35mm high-speed colour film. The light was just too low and there would be very little detail in the shadows. If I had used a large format camera on a tripod I would have lost the spontaneity and decisive moments."

There are, of course, many ways to photograph in colour, but only one concerns us here: approaching one's subject with a small camera à la Cartier-Bresson – armed and ready for the sudden gesture, the fleeting movement, the simultaneity of diverse gestures which somehow lock together in an almost balletic manner, the

sudden spark that animates the scene, all over in the blink of an eye. This is the valid core of the term "decisive moment" as I propose to use it, and this exhibition looks at a number of colour photographers either inspired by the ethos, or who share something of its essence.

Put slightly differently, I propose the project in terms of challenge and response. We might paraphrase Cartier-Bresson's position as follows: "I don't think colour photography is up to the mark. Prove me wrong, if you wish." The great master of black-and-white was throwing down the gauntlet. Happily, a number of equally passionate colleagues picked it up and, with eagerness and conviction, did prove him wrong.

*Cartier-Bresson: A Question of Colour* features the work of a select number of photographers whose commitment to expression in colour was – or is – wholehearted, sophisticated, and measures up to Cartier-Bresson's requirement that content and form were in perfect dynamic balance. A few, like Helen Levitt, were his contemporaries, or even, like Ernst Haas, a friend. Others, like Fred Herzog in Vancouver, knew Cartier-Bresson across a vast distance, essentially through his seminal books. Others were junior colleagues, like Harry Gruyaert, who found himself debating the merits of colour ferociously with the master. And still others, like Andy Freeberg or Carolyn Drake, never knew the man first hand, but understood his genius.

The exhibition could certainly be expanded to include other photographers who have been affected by Cartier-Bresson in some way. It was never my intent to be fully inclusive. It was, instead, to show a wide range of approaches within the band of our "Decisive Moment" ethos, each represented by a photographer who has worked in depth, gone his or her own way, while clearing the bar set high by the master and leaving us with imagery that is "vivante and rigoreuse". *BJP*

10 *Madison Avenue, New York City, 1975*  
 © Joel Meyerowitz 2012 Courtesy  
 Howard Greenberg Gallery, NYC

11 *Girl in window, orange reflection, New York, 1972*  
 © Estate of Helen Levitt



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