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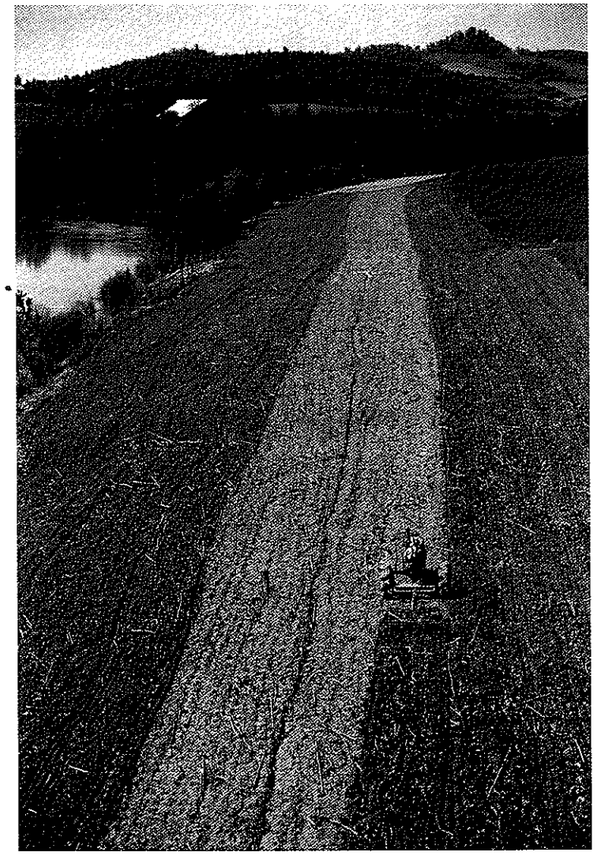

MARION POST WOLCOTT Planting Corn Along a River in Tennessee, 1940

This is among the earliest examples of color documentary photography. *Wolcott worked for the FSA (Farm Security Administration), which made a well-known record—in black and white—of the American Depression of the 1930s. Less well known are the group's color photographs made within a few years of the introduction of Kodachrome film.*

This chapter explores the visual choices that can improve your photography.

Basic Choices
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Framing the Subject
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Perspective and Point of View 328

"It's good." "It's not so good." What else is there to say when you look at a photograph? **Looking at—and Talking About—Photographs** **330**

What does someone like an editor or gallery owner look for in a photograph? **Showing Your Work to Editors and Others** **332**

How do you learn to make better pictures? Once you know the technical basics, where do you go from there? Every time you make an exposure you make choices, either deliberately or accidentally. Do you show the whole scene or just a detail? Do you make everything sharp from foreground to background or have only part of the scene in focus? Do you use a fast shutter speed to freeze motion sharply or a slow shutter speed to blur it?

Your first step is to see your options, to see the potential photographs in front of your camera. Before you make an exposure, try to visualize the way the scene will look as a print. Looking through the viewfinder helps. The scene is then at least reduced to a smaller size and confined within the edges of the picture format, just as it will be in the print. As you look through the viewfinder, imagine you are looking at a print, but one that you can still change. You can eliminate a distracting background by making it out of focus, by changing your position to a better angle, and so on.

Try to see how a picture communicates its visual content. Photography transforms a three-dimensional event into a frozen instant reduced in size on a flat piece of paper, sometimes in black and white instead of color. The event is abstracted, and even if you were there and can remember how it "really" was, the image in front of you is the tangible remaining object. This concentration on the actual image will help you visualize scenes as photographs when you are shooting.

Basic Choices

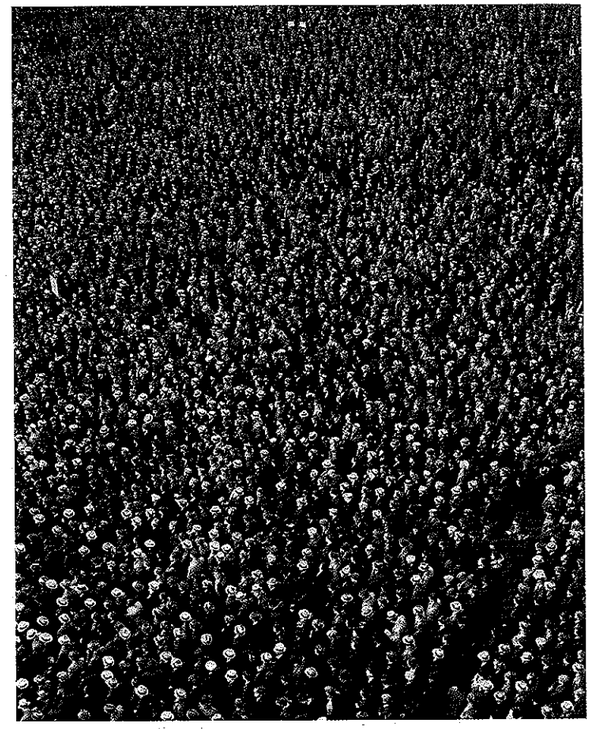
Content

One of your first choices is how much of a scene to show. Whether the subject is a person, a building, or a tree, beginners often are reluctant to show anything less than the whole thing. People often photograph a subject in its entirety—Grandpa is shown from head to toe even if that makes his head so small that you can't see his face clearly. In many cases, however, it was a particular aspect of the subject that got the photographer's attention in the first place, perhaps the expression on the face of the person, the peeling paint on the building, or a bent branch of the tree.

Get closer to your subject. "If your pictures aren't good enough, you aren't close enough," said Robert Capa, a war photographer known for the intensity and immediacy of his images (see his photograph on page 105). This simple piece of advice can help most beginning photographers improve their work. Getting closer eliminates distracting objects and simplifies the contents of a picture. It reduces the confusion of busy backgrounds, focuses attention on the main subject, and lets you see expressions on people's faces.

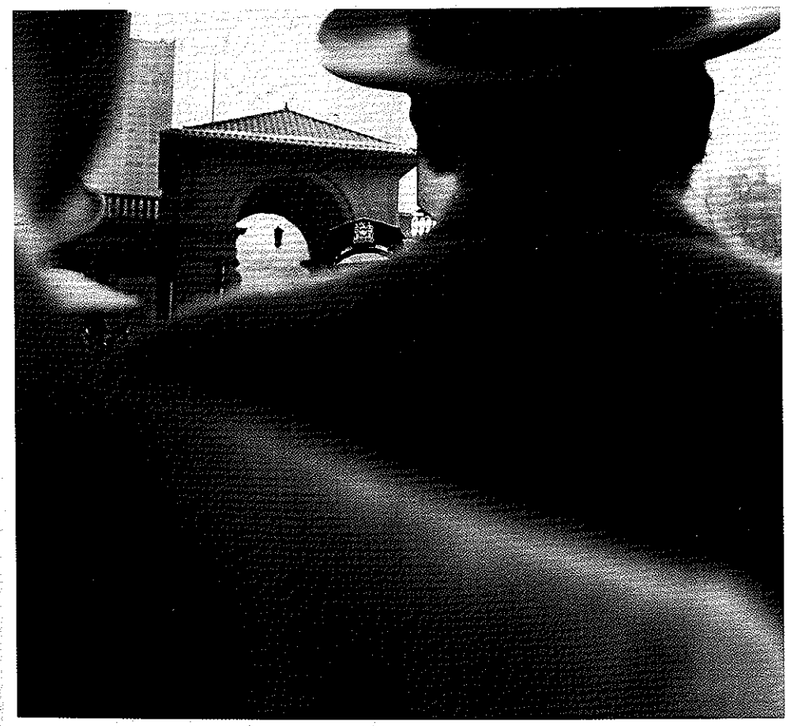
What is your photograph about? Instead of shooting right away, stop a moment to decide which part of a scene you really want to show. You might want to take one picture of the whole scene, then try a few details. Sometimes you won't want to move closer, as in photographing a prairie landscape where the spacious expanse of land and sky is important or in making an environmental portrait where the setting reveals something about the person.

Try to visualize what you want the photograph to look like. Then move around as you look through the viewfinder. Examine the edges of the image frame. Do they enclose or cut into the subject the way you want? In time, these decisions come more intuitively, but it is useful at first to work through them deliberately.



ARTHUR SIEGEL Right of Assembly, 1939

Siegel shot from a high vantage point to get in as much of this street demonstration as possible. *He wanted to show each demonstrator to be an individual expressing a common belief, so he filled the frame with them and tried to get them all in sharp focus.*



JEROME LIEBLING Cop's Hat, Union Square, New York, 1948

A detail of a scene can tell as much as and sometimes more than an overall shot. *Liebling shot from below eye level, a humble vantage point, and intentionally used a very wide aperture to get very shallow depth of field. In the entire photograph, only the policeman's hat is in focus and the eye is drawn to it. A very small part of an image—like the badge here—can carry considerable symbolic weight.*

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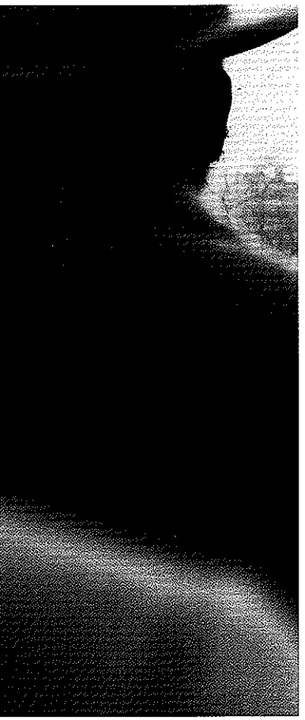

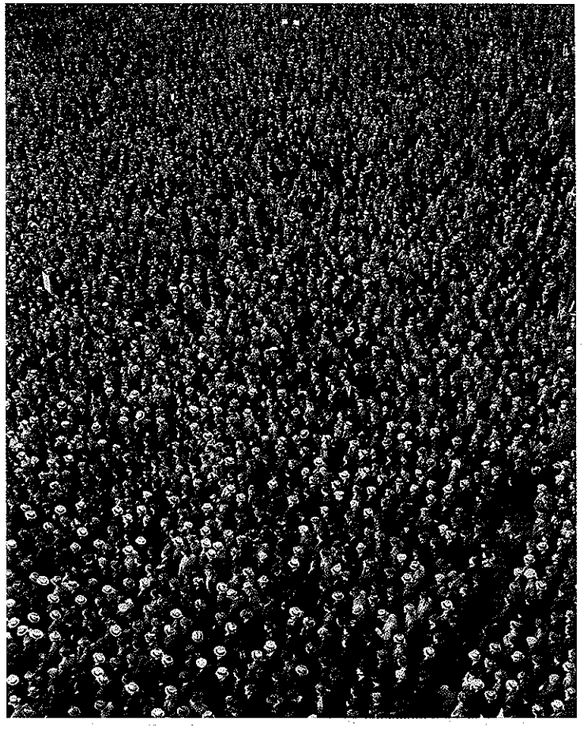

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LEE FRIEDLANDER Route 9W, New York, 1969

Combining different elements in a scene can bring order out of chaos or sometimes a sense of dislocation to the ordinary. *Lee Friedlander wrote, "The camera is not merely a reflecting pool. . . . The mind-finger presses the release on the silly machine and it stops time and holds what its jaws can encompass and what the light will stain. That moment when the landscape speaks to the observer."*

The frame (the edges of a picture) isolates part of a larger scene. Photography is different from other visual arts in the way in which a picture is composed. A painter starts with a blank canvas and adds marks or shapes until it is complete. A photographer generally starts with a complete and seamless world and uses the frame of the viewfinder to select a portion of a scene so everything else is discarded. One process adds, the other subtracts.

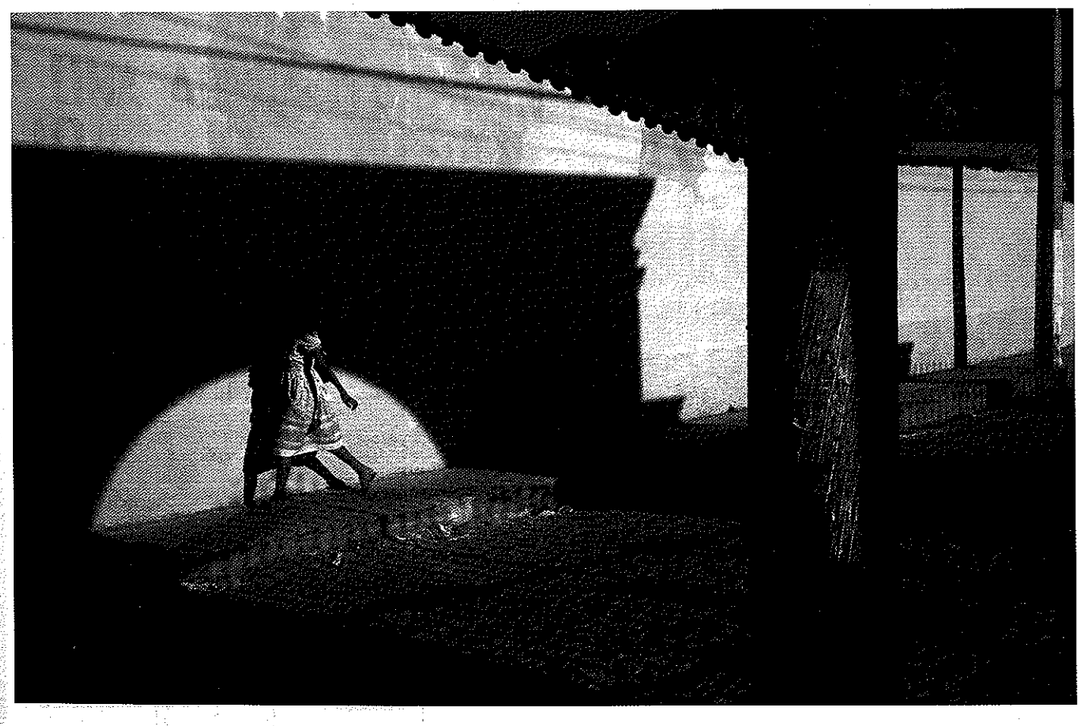
Every time you make an exposure you make choices about framing—consciously or not. How do the edges of the picture influence the part of the scene that is shown? You can leave considerable space between the frame and a particular shape, bring the frame very close so it almost touches the shape, or use the frame to crop or cut into the shape. You can position an edge of an object or a line within an object so that it is parallel to one edge of the frame or position it at an angle to the frame. Such choices are important because the viewer, who can't see the surroundings that were left out of the picture, will see how the frame meets the shapes in the print.

There is no need to be too analytical about this, but be attentive. Try looking at the edges of the viewfinder image as well as at the center of the picture and then move the frame around until the image you see through the viewfinder seems right to you. You can also cut a small rectangle in an 8 x 10-inch piece of black cardboard and look through the opening at a scene. Close one eye when you do, to see more like your lens. Such a frame is easier to move around and see through than a camera and can help you visualize your choices.

Judicious cropping can strengthen a picture but awkward cropping can be distracting. Ordinarily it is best not to cut off the foot of someone in motion or the hand of someone gesturing, but the deliberate use of such unconventional cropping can be effective. Some pictures depend on the completion of a gesture or motion and make it difficult or impossible to crop into the subject successfully.

Portrait photographers recommend that you do not crop a person at a joint, such as a wrist or knee, because that part of the body will look unnaturally amputated or will seem to protrude into the picture without connection. It can also seem awkward if the top of a head or an elbow or a toe just touches the edge of the frame. Generally, it is better to crop in slightly or to leave a space.

Should your picture be horizontal or vertical? It is common for beginners to hold a camera horizontally, and only occasionally turn it to a vertical position. Unless you have a reason for doing otherwise, hold the camera horizontally for a horizontal subject, vertically for a vertical one. Otherwise, you are likely to create empty space that adds nothing to the picture.



ALEX WEBB Ajijic, Mexico, 1983

How does the frame of a photograph (its edges) enclose a subject? *How much space, if any, is needed around a subject? You may overlook framing when you are shooting, but it will be immediately evident in the final picture. Left, would you crop anything in this picture, or do you like it as it is?*

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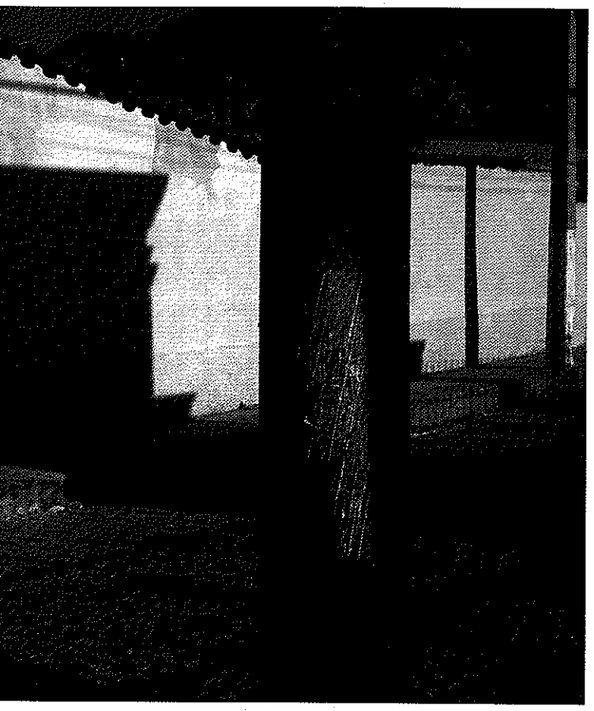

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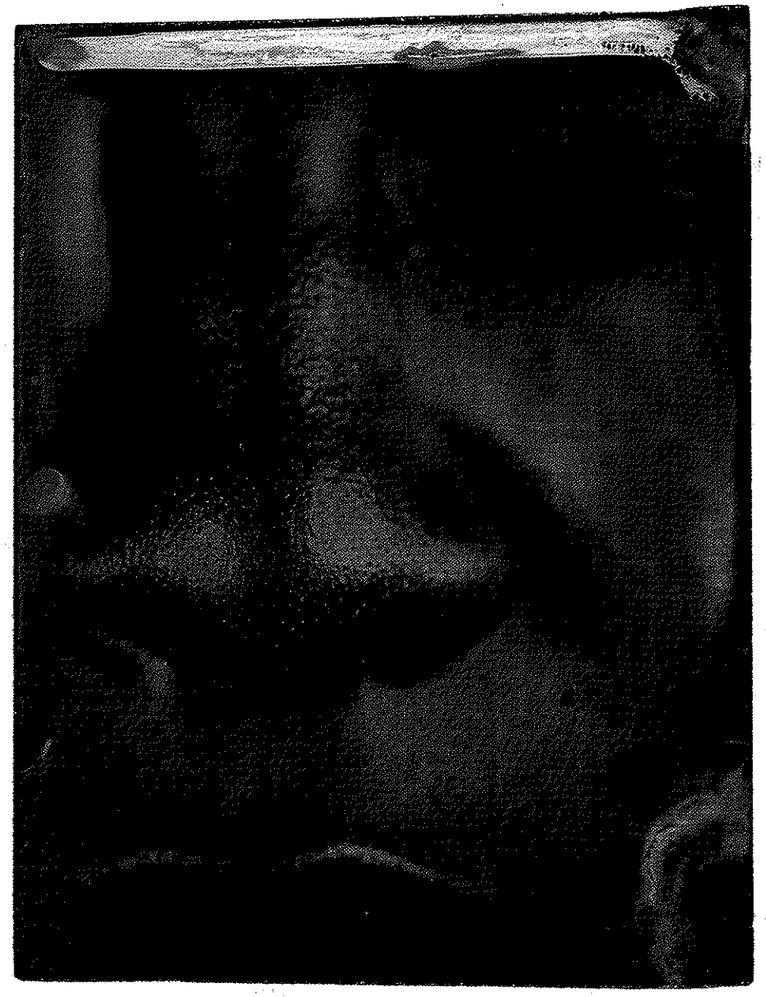


MYRA GREENE Untitled, from the series *Character Recognition*, 2006

The frame can create a confrontation. *Here, the tight framing suggests it is the photographer confronting herself. "Using a photographic process linked to the times of ethnographic classification," says Greene, "I repeatedly explore my ethnic features." In this series of ambrotypes (page 267) she asks, "what do people see when they look at me?"*

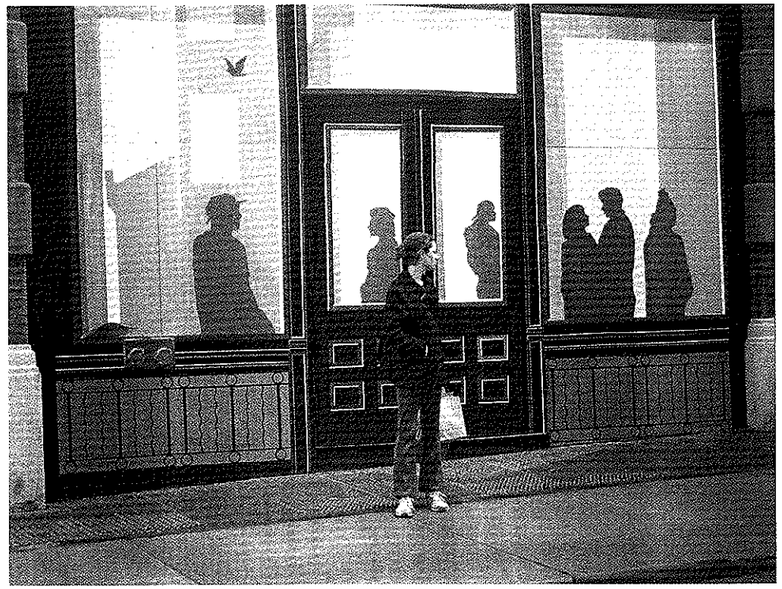
Compare the decisions made in this image to the one on the opposite page: vertical or horizontal? Black and white or color? The most recent technology or some of the oldest? Does the camera analyze or capture?

The background is part of the picture—obvious, but easy to forget. Most photographs have a particular object or group of objects as a center of interest. When we look at a scene, we tend to focus our attention on whatever is of interest to us and ignore the rest, but the lens includes everything within its angle of view and the picture consists of everything included within the frame.

What do you do when your subject is in front of a less interesting or even distracting background? If background objects don't add anything to a picture except visual clutter, do what you can to eliminate them or at least to minimize their importance. Usually it is easiest to change your position so that you see the subject against a simpler background. Sometimes you can move the subject instead.

A busy background will call less attention to itself if it is blurred and indistinct rather than sharply focused. Set your lens to a wide aperture if you want to make the background out of focus while keeping the subject sharp. This works best if the background is relatively far away and you are focused on a subject that is relatively close to the camera. The viewfinder of a single-lens reflex camera shows you the scene at the lens's widest aperture; if you examine the scene through the viewfinder, you will get an idea of what the background will look like at that aperture. Some lenses have a preview button that stops down the lens so you can see how much of the scene will be sharp at any aperture.

Use the background when it contributes something. Even though many photographs could be improved by shooting closer to the subject, don't always zero in on a subject or you may cut out a setting that makes a picture come alive. An environmental portrait like the one on page 226 uses the background to tell you something about the subject. Backgrounds can give scale to a subject, or vice versa. And some backgrounds are what the picture is all about (this page, top).

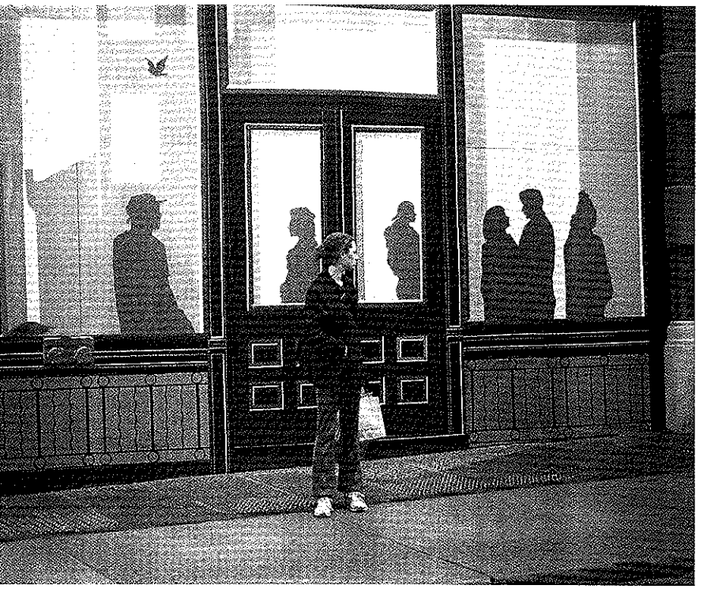


GRAHAM NASH
Shadows, Milan, 1992

Painted shadows in the background join the person on the street. Nash says of the photo, "It's all complete, not posed. I'm just moving through my world and trying to be 360 degrees open to everything."

ARTHUR TAUSSIG
Valencia, Spain, 2009

Foreground and background form a visual pun; we see each triad as referring to the other.



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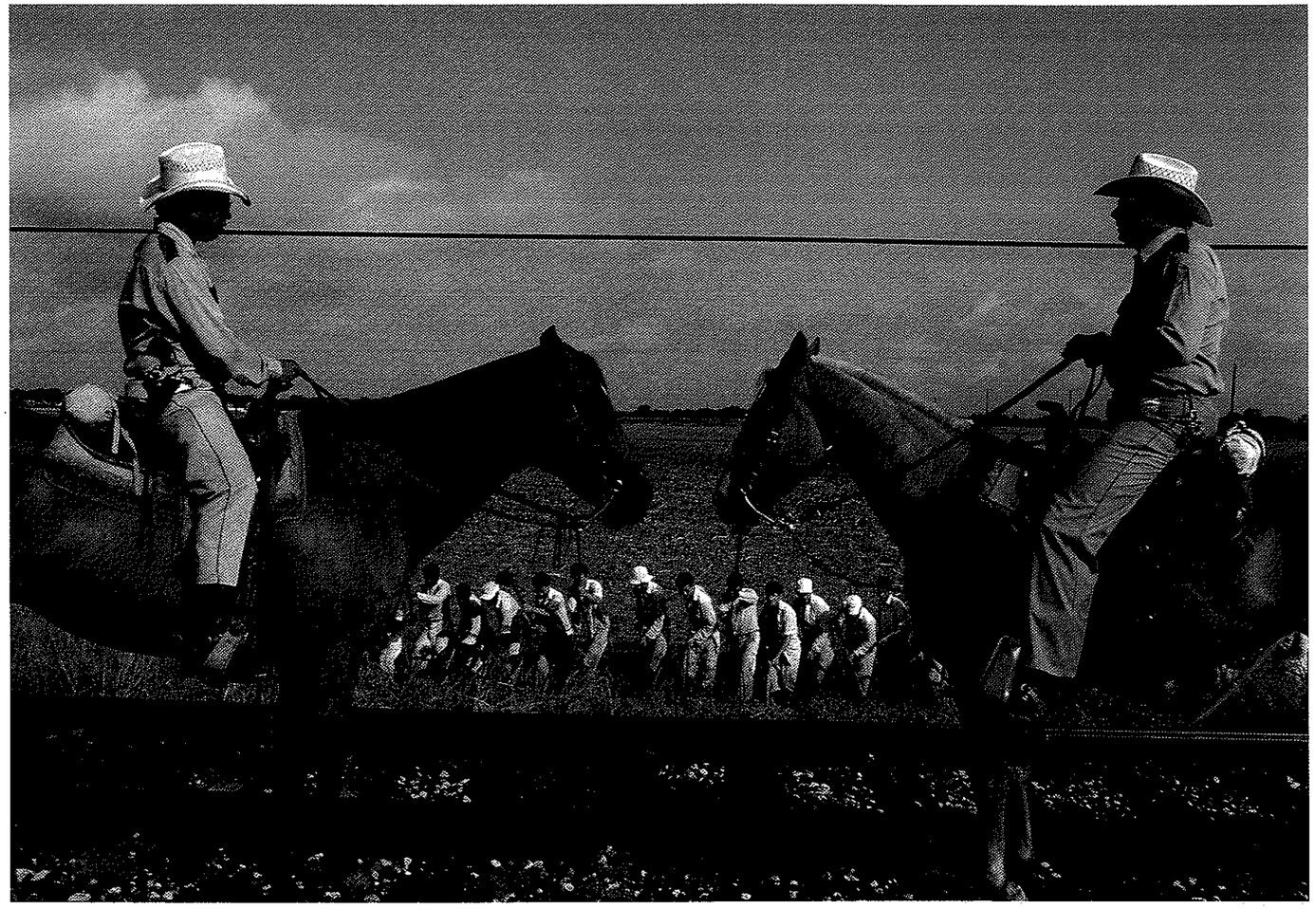


EVE ARNOLD Prisoners, Sugar Land, Texas, 1982

These prisoners at work seem enclosed by their guards' horses in the foreground. The men are confined by the structure of the photograph, restricted even when they are not behind bars.

What good is design? Most photographs are not constructed but are taken in an already existing environment from which the photographer, often working quickly, must select the best views. Nevertheless, it is still important for photographers to understand design concepts such as spot, line, shape, pattern, emphasis, and balance because certain elements of design are powerful in their ability to direct a viewer's attention.

Knowing, for example, that a single small object—a spot or a point—against a contrasting background attracts attention will help you predict where attention will go in a photograph. Even if you want to work fast and intuitively rather than with slow precision, basic knowledge about design will fine-tune and speed up your responses and will make you better able to evaluate your own and other people's work.

A single element of design seldom occurs in isolation. Although one can talk about the effect of a spot, for example, other design elements are almost always present, moderating each other's effect. Attention might be drawn by a spot and then attracted away by a pattern of lines elsewhere in the print. The simpler the subject, the more important any single element becomes, but one element rarely totally dominates any composition. The human element may attract the most attention of all; people will search out human presence in a photograph despite every obstacle of insistent design.

Any small shape, not necessarily a round one, can act as a spot or point. The word spotlight is a clue to the effect of a single spot against a neutral or contrasting background: it draws attention to itself and away from the surrounding area. This can be good if the spot itself is the subject or if in some way it adds interest to the subject. But a single spot can also be a distraction. For instance, a small bright object in a dark area can drag attention away from the subject; even a tiny, dark dust speck can attract attention if it is in a blank sky area.

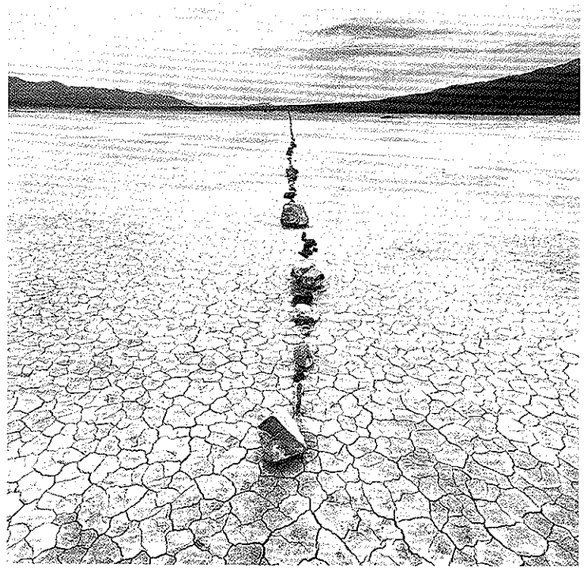
The eye tends to connect two or more spots like a connect-the-numbers drawing. If there are only two spots, the eye continues to shift back and forth between them, sometimes a confusing effect if the eye has no place on which to settle attention. If there are three or more spots, suitably arranged, the brain will make shapes—a triangle, a square, and so on—out of them.

A line is a shape that is longer than it is wide. It may be actual or implied, as when the eye connects a series of spots or follows the direction of a person's gaze. Lines give direction by moving the eye across the picture, like the lines in the two examples at right that lead bottom to top. The eye creates shapes by connecting lines that meet in the picture, even if they didn't meet in the scene (see the photograph on page 325). In a photograph, lines are perceived in relation to the edges of the frame. This relationship is impossible to ignore, even when the lines are not near the edges of the print.

According to some theories, lines have psychological overtones: horizontal (calm, stability), vertical (stature, strength), diagonal (activity, motion), zigzag (rapid motion), curved (gracefulness, slowness). Horizontal objects, for example, tend to be stable, so we may come to associate horizontality with stability. In a similar way, yellows and reds conventionally have overtones of warmth by way of their associations with fire. However, such associations vary from person to person and are as much dependent on the subject as on any inherent quality in a line.

TORRANCE YORK N41°21.621' W073°20.217' 11/19/07 550ft. (Symbol Z)

A line can make a path that is easy for the eye to follow. *To York, marks on the road suggest a question, narrative, or metaphor, but she reveals only a date and GPS coordinates.*



STEVE DZERIGIAN Rock Alignment, California Desert, 1996

This line of rocks is a sculpture *that local residents and passersby change from time to time, sometimes a line, sometimes a spiral.*

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RIGIAN Rock Alignment, California Desert, 1996

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RUSSELL LEE Hidalgo County, Texas, 1939

The eye tends to connect two or more spots into a line or shape. *Above, the spots formed by the dark hardware against the light cabinets are an insistent element. Russell Lee often used direct flash on camera, especially in his work, as here, for the Farm Security Administration (see page 349). Lee liked direct flash because it rendered details sharply and was easy to use. It also produces minimal shadows and so tends to flatten out the objects in a scene into their graphic elements. The scene above has a harsh, clean brightness that is appealing in its austerity and to which the direct flash contributed.*

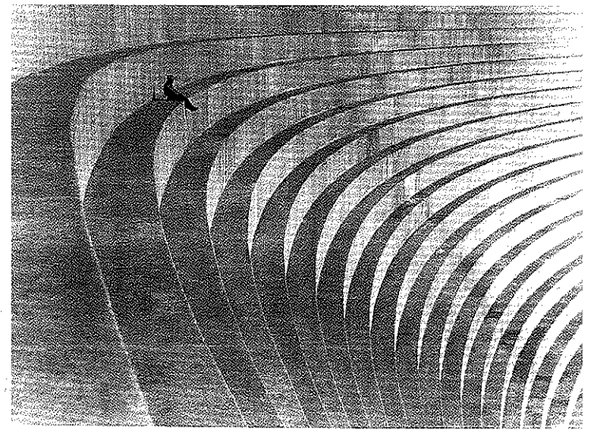
A shape is any defined area. In life, a shape can be two-dimensional, like a pattern on a wall, which has height and width; or three-dimensional, like a building, which has height, width, and depth. In a photograph, a shape is always two-dimensional, but tonal changes across an object can give the illusion of depth. Notice in the illustration at right how flat the large leaf, with its almost uniform gray tone, looks compared with the light and dark ridges of the smaller leaf. You can flatten out the shape of an object entirely by reducing it to one tone, as in a silhouette. The contour or edge shape of the object then becomes dominant, especially if the object is photographed against a contrasting background.

A single object standing alone draws attention to its shape, while two or more objects, such as the leaves at right, invite comparison of their shapes, including the shape of the space between them. The eye tends to complete a strong shape that has been cropped by the edges of the frame. Such cropping can draw attention repeatedly to the edge or even out of the picture area. Try cropping just into the left edge of the large leaf to see this effect.

Objects that are close together can be seen as a single shape. Objects of equal importance that are separated can cause the eye to shift back and forth between them, as between two spots. Bringing objects closer together can make them into a single unit; see for example, the women on the opposite page. Portrait studio photographers try to enhance the feeling of a family as a group by posing the members close together, often with some physical contact, such as placing one person's hand on another's shoulder.

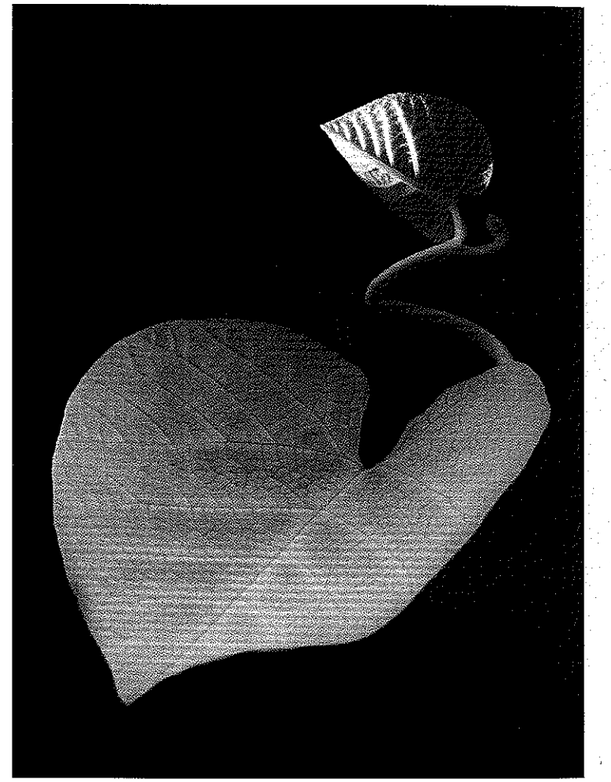
Groupings can be visual as well as actual. Aligning objects one behind the other, intentionally or not, can make a visual grouping that may be easy to overlook when photographing a fast-moving scene, but which will be readily apparent in a photograph.

Multiple spots, lines, or shapes can create a pattern that adds interest and unites the elements in a scene, as do the small, dark squares in the photograph on the previous page. A viewer quickly notices variations in a pattern or the contrast between two patterns, in the same way that contrast between colors or between light and dark attracts the eye.



HIROMU KIRA The Thinker

Repetitive patterns can reinforce a singularity. *Here, the movement of your eye along the curved lines is arrested for a moment at the seated figure.*



PAUL CAPONIGRO Two Leaves, 1963

What route does your eye follow when it looks at a photograph? *One path in the photograph above might be up the right edge of the larger leaf, up the curved stem, around the smaller leaf to its bright tip, then down again to make the same journey. Take a small scrap of white paper and put it over the bottom tip of the larger leaf. Does your eye follow the same path as before, or does it jump back and forth between what are now two bright spots?*

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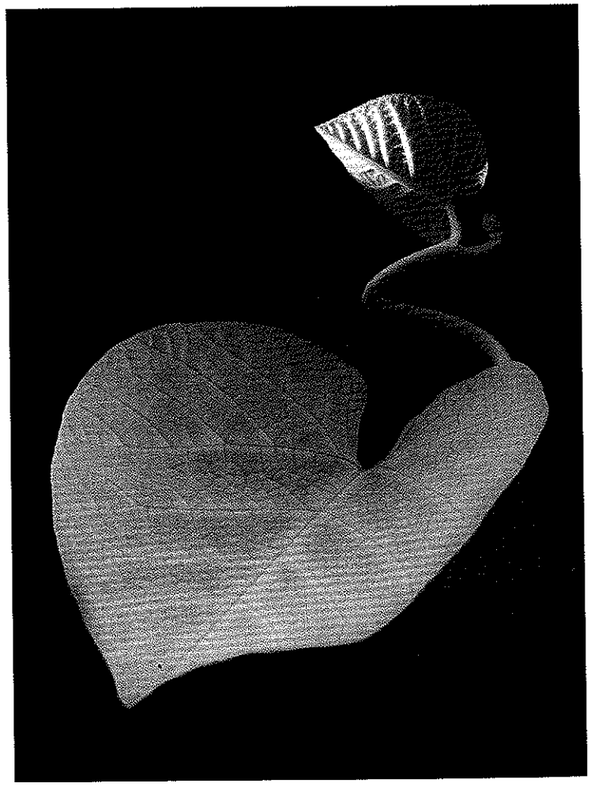

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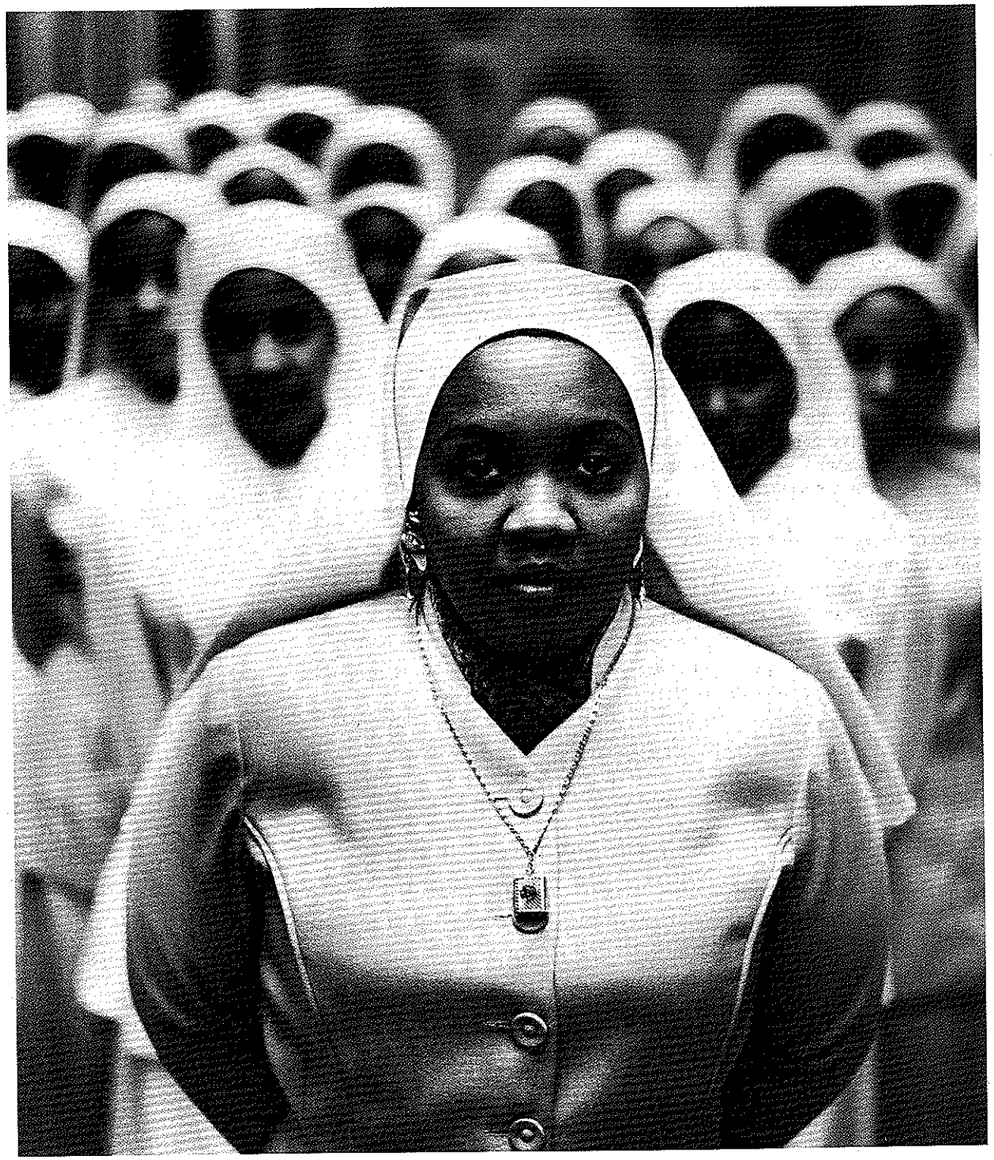

GORDON PARKS Ethel Shariff in Chicago, 1963

Repeated shapes can form a pattern. *A group of Black Muslim women form a solid band behind one of their leaders. Gordon Parks's camera position was closer to the woman in front than to the others, which made her appear larger. Being closer to her also reduced the depth of field so that when Parks focused on her, only she was sharp. The individual identities of the other women have been submerged by their being out of focus and by the repeated shapes of their head-dresses forming a pattern. The picture clearly identifies the leader and makes a visual statement about the solidarity of her followers.*

How do you emphasize some part of a photograph or play down another so that the viewer knows what is important and what isn't? If too many parts of a photograph demand equal attention, a viewer won't be sure what to look at first.

Contrast attracts attention. The eye is quick to notice differences such as sharp versus unsharp, light versus dark, large versus small. If you want to emphasize a subject, try to show it in a setting against which it stands out. Viewers tend to look at the sharpest part of a picture first, so you can call attention to a subject by focusing it sharply while leaving other objects out of focus (see page 310, bottom). A contrast of light and dark also adds emphasis; a small object can dominate a much larger background if it is of a contrasting tone or color.

Camera angle can emphasize a subject. If unnecessary clutter draws attention away from your subject, get closer. Shooting closer to an object will make it bigger while eliminating much of the surroundings. Sometimes shooting from a slightly higher or lower angle will remove distracting elements from the scene.

Use surrounding parts of the scene to reinforce emphasis. Objects that are of secondary interest, such as fences, roads, or edges, can form sight lines directed to the subject (right, top). The point at which two lines (real or implied) intersect attracts notice (see page 316, bottom), as does the direction in which people are looking. You may be able to find something in the foreground to frame the main subject and concentrate attention on it (see page 315). A dark object may be easier than a light one to use as a frame because lighter areas tend to attract the eye first, but this is not always the case.

People know when a picture is in balance even if they can't explain why. A picture that is balanced does not call attention to that fact, but an unbalanced one can feel uncomfortably off center or top-heavy. Visually, dark is heavier than light, large is heavier than small, an object at the edge has more weight than at the center (like a weight on a seesaw), and a picture needs more apparent weight at the bottom to avoid a top-heavy feeling.

Except in the simplest cases, however, it is difficult to analyze exactly the weights and tensions that balance a picture, nor do you need to do so. A viewer intuitively weighs complexities of tone, size, position, and other elements, and you can do the same as you look through the viewfinder. Ask yourself if the viewfinder image feels balanced or if something isn't quite right that you would like to change. Move around a bit as you continue to look through the viewfinder. Even a slight change can make a big difference.

Some tension in a picture can be an asset. A centered, symmetrical arrangement, the same on one side as it is on the other, will certainly feel balanced and possibly satisfyingly stable, but it also may be boring. Perfect balance, total harmony, and exact symmetry make little demand on the viewer and consequently can fail to arouse interest. Try some off-center, asymmetrical arrangements; they risk feeling unbalanced but may succeed in adding impact (right, bottom).

ROY CLARK Troublesome Creek, Kentucky, 1965

Lines formed by the sides and planks of the bridge focus attention on the man, *as does his placement near the center of the picture. The quiet scene gets added interest from the man's dark form against the lighter boards of the bridge, his foot just raised in midstep, and the house in front of him as his visible destination.*

R.O. BRANDENBERGER Skier, Idaho, 1966

An off-center, asymmetrical composition can have a dynamic energy *that is absent from a centered, symmetrical one. Take some sheets of white paper and lay them over the bottom and right side of the photo above so that the skier is centered in the frame. The picture is still interesting but lacks the headlong rush that it has when the long slope of the hill is ahead of the skier.*

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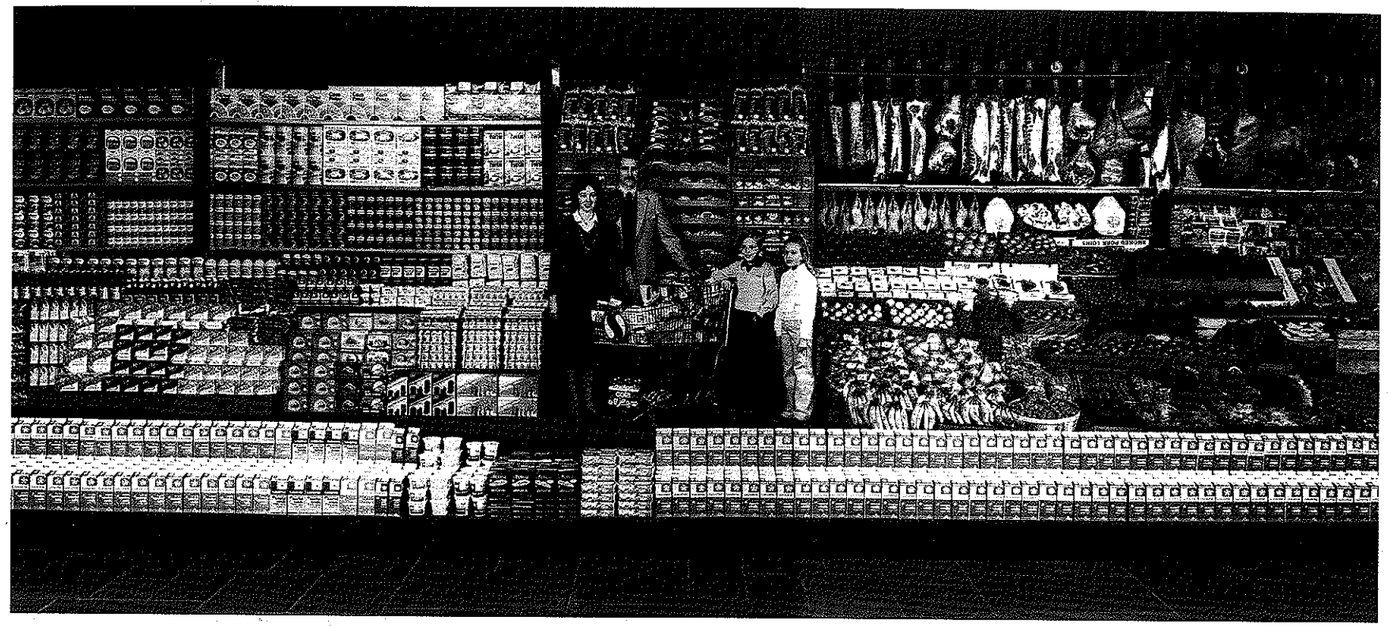
NICK BRANDT Lion before Storm – Sitting Profile, Maasai Mara, Kenya, 2006

Sharp focus emphasizes the expression. *Brandt thinks of his African animal photographs as portraits, "I am interested in capturing a moment of being, of quiet contemplation, rather than of doing." They are black and white because he believes color feels too modern to convey the disappearing world of African wildlife. He never uses telephoto lenses. "I get as close as I can, inching my way forward, often to within a few feet of the animals." Brandt controlled the sharpness of the image with aperture and selective focus at the time of exposure.*

More Choices

Using Contrasts of Sharpness



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE Family and Food, 1981

Pictures that convey data are often sharp overall. *The United States Department of Agriculture photographed (left to right) Cynthia, John, Clint, and Valerie Schnekloth of Eldridge, Iowa, surrounded by the two-and-a-half tons of food an American family of four can consume in a year.*

The sharpness of a photograph or of its various parts, is immediately noticeable. This is unlike ordinary life where, if your eyes are reasonably good, you seldom have to consider whether things are sharp or not.

People tend to look first at the sharpest part of a photograph. If a photograph is sharp overall, the viewer is more likely to see all parts of it as having equal value (this page, top). You can emphasize some part of a subject by making it sharper than the rest of the picture (see opposite).

Depth of field affects sharpness from near to far. If you focus on an object and set your lens to a wide aperture, you will decrease the depth of field (the acceptably sharp area) so that the background and foreground are more likely to be unsharp. Or you can use a small aperture to have the picture sharper overall.

Motion can be photographed either sharp or blurred. In life, moving objects appear sharp unless they are moving extremely fast, such as a hummingbird's wings. In a photograph, you can use a fast shutter speed to freeze the motion of a moving object.

Or you can use a slow shutter speed to deliberately blur the motion—just enough to indicate movement or so much that the subject's shape is altered (this page, bottom). Although the sharpest part is usually emphasized because the viewer tends to look there first, blurred motion can attract attention because it transmits information about how fast and in what manner the subject is moving.

A gain in motion sharpness can mean a loss in depth of field. If you change to a faster shutter speed to render motion sharply, you have to open to a larger aperture to keep the exposure the same. Since a larger aperture gives less depth of field, you may have to decide whether the motion sharpness is more important than the sharpness of depth of field. It may be impossible to have both.

ROBERT LANDAU Roller Coaster, Knott's Berry Farm, Buena Park, California, 1990

Even a "still" photograph can give an impression of time and movement. *In this photograph of thrill seekers on a roller coaster, Landau attached his camera to one of the cars and used a relatively slow shutter speed. With the camera moving at the same speed and in the same direction as the people, the stationary background appears to be swirling, capturing the sensation experienced by the riders.*

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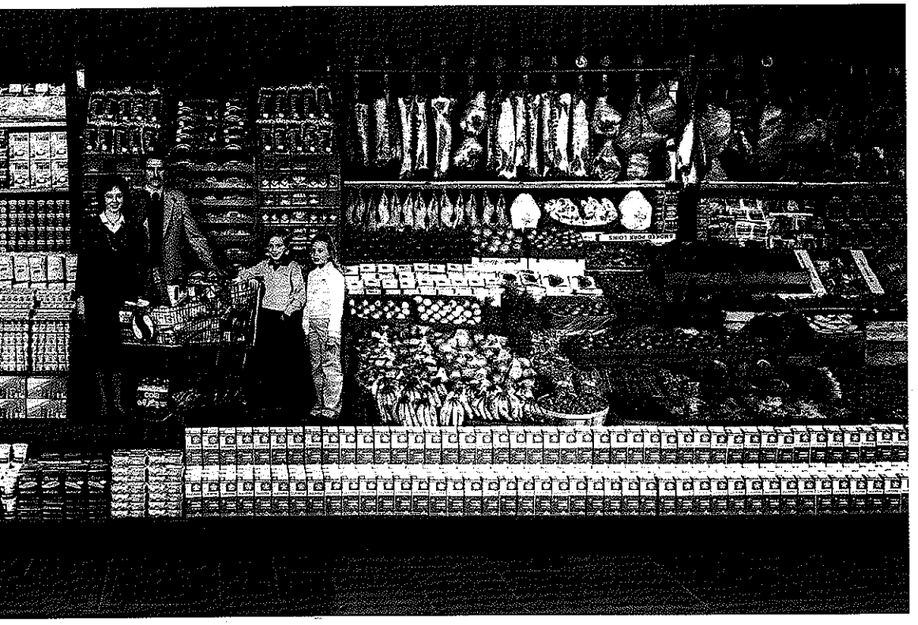

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PAUL SHAMBROOM B83 Nuclear Gravity Bombs in Weapons Storage Area, Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana, 1995

Contrast in a photograph can be part of the subject. *The ordinary human activity of tidying up seems jarring next to a row of the most powerful weapons in the U.S. arsenal. The slightly blurred human motion underscores the impassive weight of the sharply focused bombs.*

Most documentary photographers agree that, with challenging subjects, getting through the door is the biggest obstacle. Shambroom had produced several series on hidden places of power—factories, corporate offices, police stations—that were good preparation for starting to photograph America's nuclear forces.

Contrast between light and dark draws a viewer's eye. A farmer's hands against a dark background, the outline of a leafless tree against a bright sky, a rim of light on someone's hair, a neon sign on a dark street—light not only illuminates a subject enough to record it with a camera, but by itself can be the subject of a photograph.

Contrast sets off one part of a scene from another. Would you put a black ebony carving against a dark background or a light one? The dark background might make a picture that would be interesting for its somber tones. The light one would make a setting against which the carving would stand out prominently, just as a dark background contrasts with and sets off light tones (photograph, right). If you squint as you look at a scene, you can often get a better idea of what the tones will look like in a print and whether you should change your angle or move the subject to position it against a better background.

Contrast between two objects may be more apparent in color than in black and white. A red flower against green leaves is distinctly visible to the eye but may merge disappointingly into the foliage in a black-and-white print. The brightness of the flower is very similar to that of the leaves even though the colors are different. A lens filter or digital editing can adjust the relative darkness of different colored objects.

Light along the edge of an object can make its shape stand out. If you chose to work with a dark background for an ebony statue, you could use edge lighting to make sure the statue didn't merge into the shadows behind it. Studio photographers often position a light so that it spills just over the edge of a subject from the back, making a bright outline that is effective against a darker background. Outdoors, the sun can create a similar effect if it illuminates the back or side of an object rather than the front.

Shadows or highlights can be shown as separate shapes. The contrast range of many scenes is too great for photographic materials to record realistically both dark shadows and bright highlights in one picture. This can be a problem, but it also gives you the option of using shadows or highlights as independent forms.

You can adjust contrast somewhat during film processing, conventional printing, and digital editing. Once film has been processed, the relative lightness or darkness of an area is fixed on the negative, but you can still change tones to some extent during conventional printing by such techniques as changing the contrast grade of the paper or printing filter, burning (adding exposure to darken part of a print), and dodging (holding back exposure to lighten an area). Contrast control with black-and-white prints is relatively easy; wet-process color prints allow less manipulation. Digital imaging provides even more control. Precisely selected areas can be manipulated, as well as the image overall.

FLOR GARDUÑO Basket of Light, Guatemala, 1989

A photograph may show shadows as darker than they seemed during shooting. *Our eyes make adjustments for differences in light level, but photographs can emphasize details in only a fixed range of brightnesses. So a photograph may emphasize shapes of light and dark that in life do not seem so prominent.*

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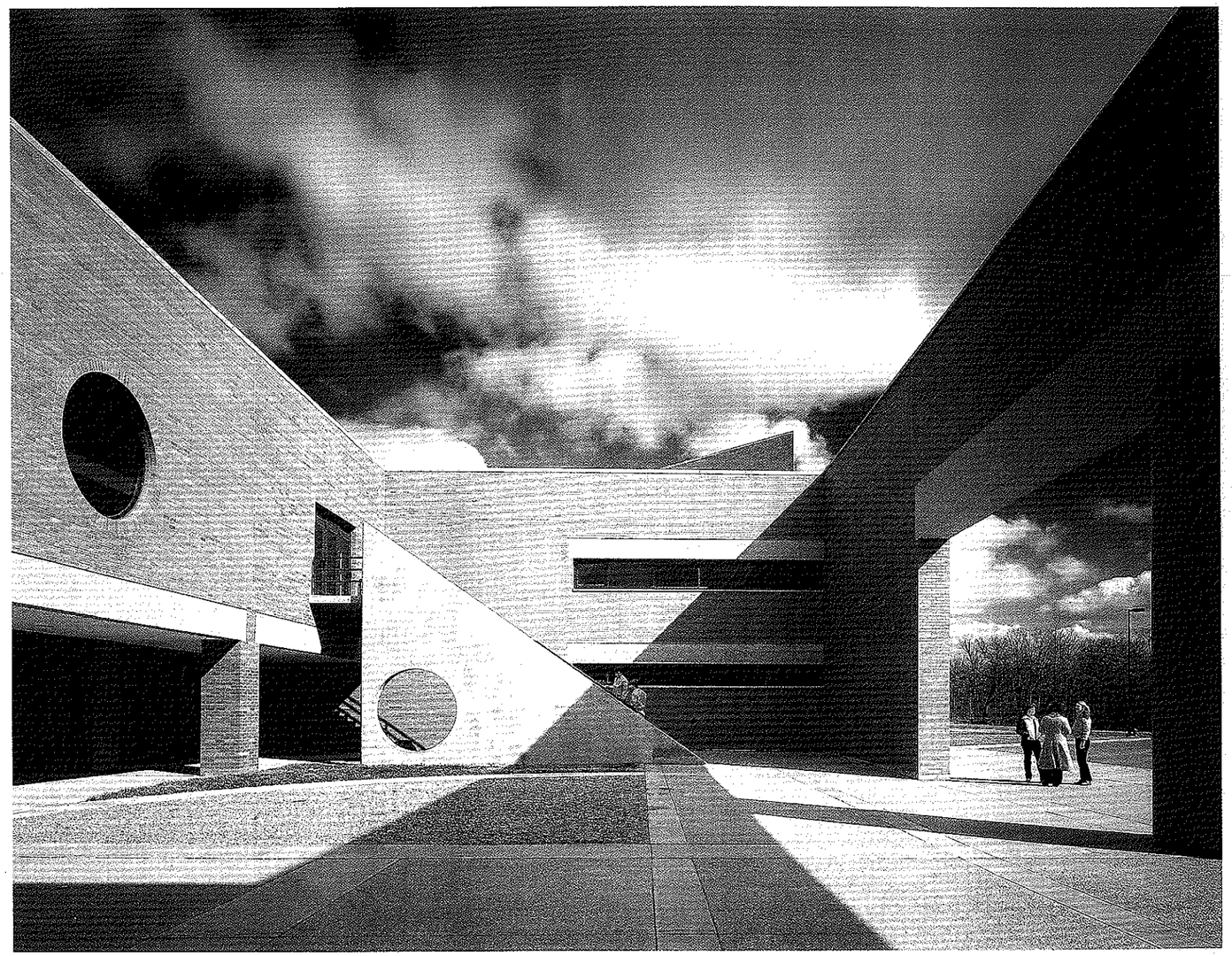


BILL HEDRICH Oakton Community College, Des Plaines, Illinois, 1981

Contrast between light and dark attracts the eye. *The photographer chose a time of day and vantage point that emphasized the diagonal line of the stairs crossing with the building's own shadow. Notice how he placed two people at the crossing point and positioned the people at right so their shadows line up with the edge of the building. Bill Hedrich's architectural photographs are noted for being dramatic, but they are also truthful renditions of a building's features.*

More Choices continued

Placing the Subject within the Frame

Careful placement of a subject within the frame can strengthen an image. If you look at a scene through a camera's viewfinder as you move the camera around, you will probably see several choices for positioning the subject within the frame of the film format: dead center or off to one side, high or low, at one angle or another. Placement can draw attention to or away from a part of a scene. It can add stability or create momentum and tension. Some situations move too fast to allow any but the most intuitive shooting, but often you will have time to see what the effect will be with the subject in one part of the frame rather than another.

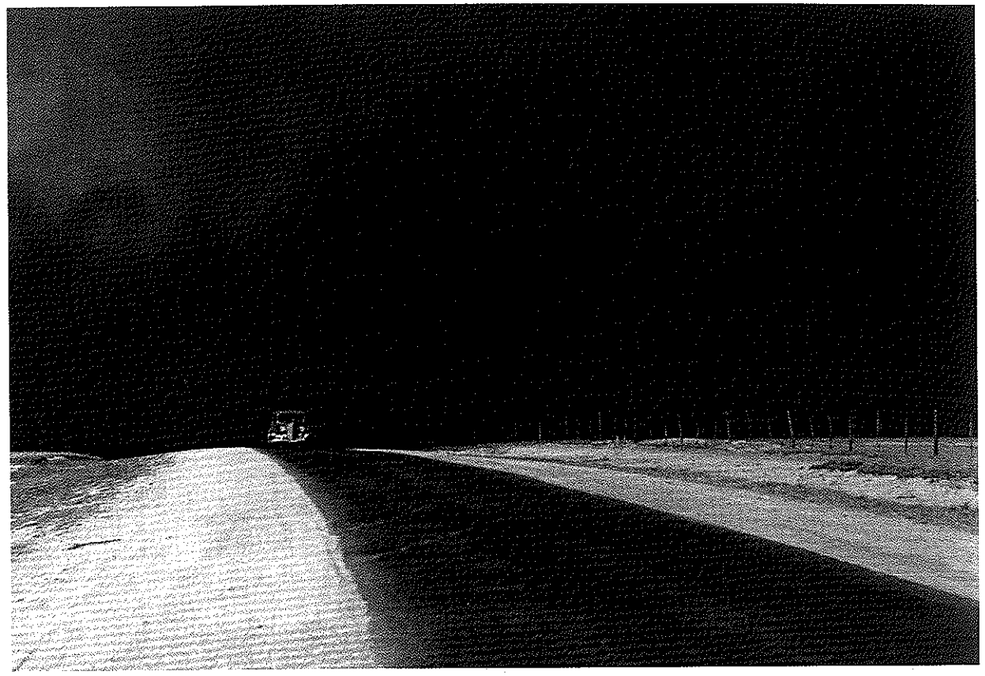
The most effective composition arises naturally from the subject itself. There are traditional formulas for positioning the center of interest (see box, right), but don't try to apply them rigidly. The goal of all the suggestions in this chapter is not to set down rules but to help you become more flexible as you develop your own style. The subject may also have something to say if you can hear it. Minor White, who was a teacher as well as a photographer, used to tell his students to let the subject generate its own composition.

The horizon line—the dividing line between land and sky—is a strong visual element. It can be easy, without much thought, to position the horizon line across the center of a landscape, dividing a scene into halves. Some photographers divide a landscape this way as a stylistic device, but unless handled skillfully, this can divide a picture into two areas of equal and competing interest that won't let the eye settle on either one. One suggestion for placement is to divide the image in thirds horizontally, then position the horizon in either the upper or lower third (photograph, this page). You can also try putting the horizon very near the top or the bottom of the frame.

Stop for a moment to consider what you want to emphasize. A horizon line toward the bottom of the frame emphasizes the sky. A horizon toward the top lets you see more of the land but still includes the strong contrast of sky. Omitting the horizon altogether leaves the eye free to concentrate on details of the land. Even without a horizon line, a photograph can feel misaligned if the camera is tilted. Unless you want to tilt a picture for a purpose, always level the camera from side to side.

Motion should usually lead into, rather than immediately out of, the image area. Allow enough space in front of a moving subject so it does not seem uncomfortably crowded by the edge of the frame. The amount of space depends on the scene and your own intention. In a photograph, the direction in which a person (or even a statue) looks is an implied movement and requires space because a viewer tends to follow that direction to see what the person is looking at. Although it is usually best to allow adequate space, you can add interest to some scenes by framing a subject so that it looks or moves directly out of the picture area.

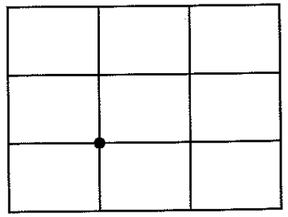
A subtler tension may be added by movement of a subject from right to left. For example, for people whose written language reads from left to right, a subject with strong left-to-right movement may seem slightly more natural or comfortable than a subject with strong right-to-left motion. You can see if you get this effect by looking at the photograph of the skier on page 320 and then looking at it in a mirror to reverse the subject's direction.



ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN
Dust Clouds over the Texas Panhandle, 1936

The horizon line is conventionally placed about one-third of the way up or down in the frame. *This is less a rule than a reflection of the fact that, visually, asymmetry is more interesting than dividing the picture in half. Rothstein, like Marion Post Wolcott (pages 309 and 329), and Dorothea Lange (page 349), made many photographs for the Farm Security Administration to document the Depression of the 1930s.*

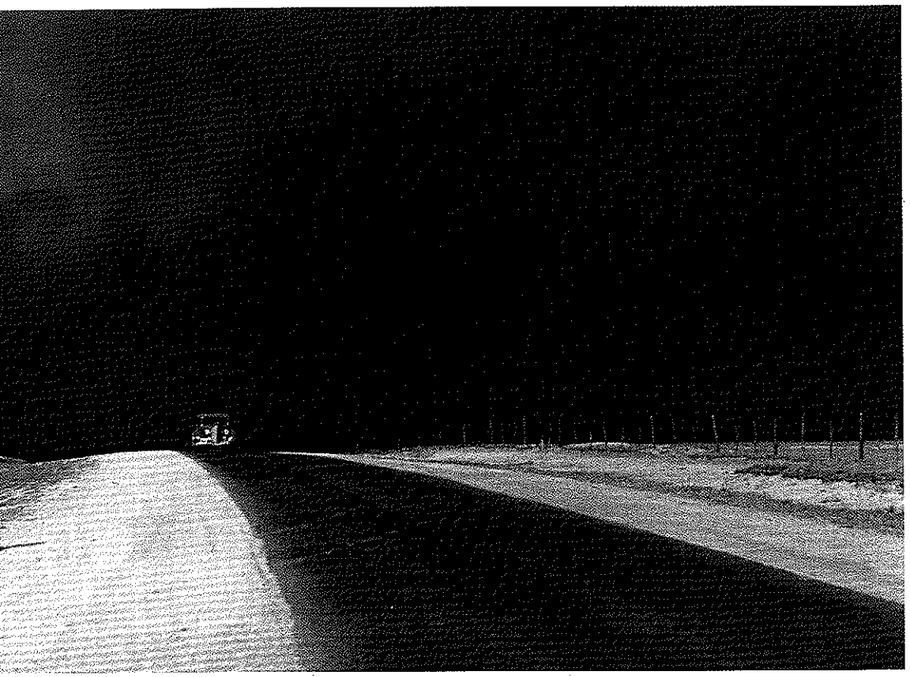
COMPOSITIONAL FORMULAS



Rules of photographic composition were proposed in the nineteenth century based on techniques used by certain painters of the period. The rule of thirds, for example, was (and still is for some photographers) a popular compositional device. Draw imaginary lines dividing the picture area into thirds horizontally, then vertically. According to this formula, important subject areas should fall on the intersections of the lines or along the lines.

A person's face, for example, might be located on the upper left (theoretically the strongest) intersection, a horizon line on either the upper or lower horizontal line, and so on.

Try such formulas out for yourself. Experimenting with them will make you more aware of your options when you look at a scene, but don't expect a compositional cure-all for every picture. Look at photographs that work well, such as the one opposite or on page 43, to see if they fit a particular rule. If they don't, what makes them successful images?



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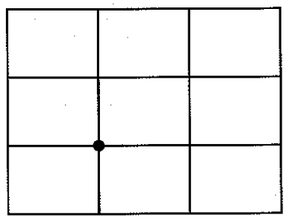

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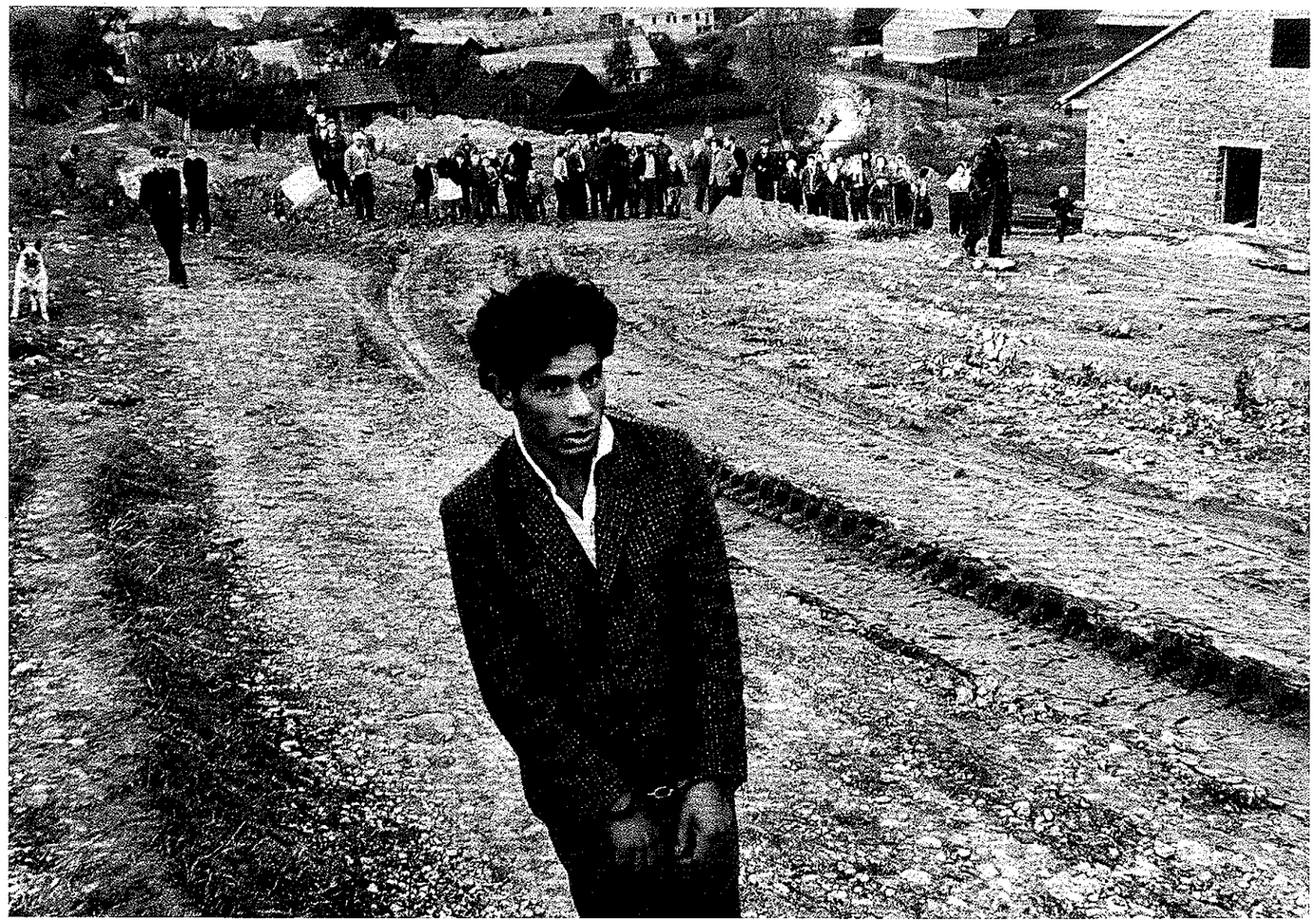


JOSEF KOUDELKA Jarabina, Czechoslovakia, 1963

The most extraordinary photographs merge composition with content on a level that rules do not explain. *Above, one of many photographs made by Josef Koudelka showing gypsies of Eastern Europe. The man, suspected of murder, is led through a reconstruction of the homicide.*

John Szarkowski wrote about this photograph, "The handcuffs have compressed his silhouette to the shape of a simple wooden coffin. The track of a truck tire in the earth, like a rope from his neck, leads him forward. Within the tilted frame, his body falls backward, as in recognition of terror.

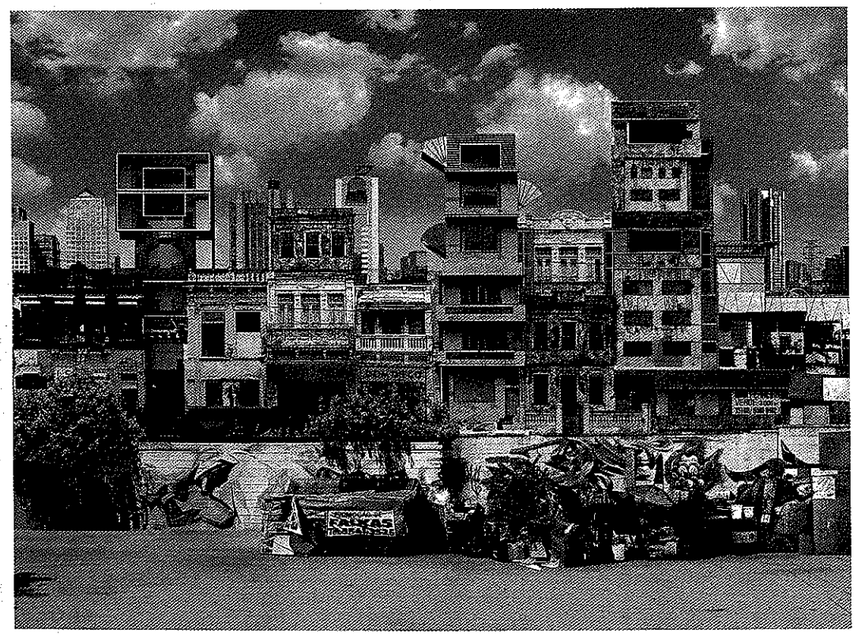
The relative distance of objects from the lens and from each other affects perspective, the illusion of three dimensions in a two-dimensional photograph. The brain judges depth in a scene mostly by comparing the size of objects in the foreground with those in the background; the bigger the apparent difference in the size of similar objects, the greater the distance between them seems to be. Move some object (or some part of it) very close to the lens, and it will look much bigger and therefore much closer than the rest of the scene. Parallel lines that appear to converge (to meet in the distance) are another strong indicator of depth (see photograph, page 86). The convergence is caused by the nearer part of the scene appearing bigger than the farther part.

Other factors affect perspective to a lesser degree. A sharply focused object may appear closer than out-of-focus ones. Side lighting enhances the impression of volume and depth, while front lighting or a silhouette reduces it. The lower half of a picture appears to be (and generally is) closer than the upper half. Overlapping objects also indicate which is closer. Warm colors (reds and oranges) often appear to come forward, while cool colors (blues and greens) appear to recede. In general, light-toned objects often appear to be closer than dark ones, with an important exception: atmospheric haze makes objects that are farther away lighter in tone than those that are closer, and a viewer recognizes this effect as an indication of distance in a landscape. Another factor is less consciously perceived by many people but still influences their impression of depth: objects appear to rise gradually relative to a viewer's position as they approach the horizon (see landscape, opposite page top left).

Photographs of landscapes often gain from an impression of depth. When depth is absent, for example in most people's vacation snapshots, they have to tell you how wonderful the scenery was because their pictures make even the Grand Canyon look flat and boring. To extend the impression of depth, especially in landscapes but also in any scene, try some or all of the following. Position some object in the foreground; if similar objects (or others of a known size) are farther away, the viewer will make the size comparisons that indicate depth. Position the horizon line in the upper part of the picture. Introduce lines (particularly converging ones), such as a road or a fence, that appear to lead from foreground to background.

Your point of view or vantage point can have a strong influence. An eye-level point of view is unobtrusive in a photograph (below), but shooting from higher or lower than eye level is more noticeable. Photographing an object by looking up at it can give it an imposing air as it looms above the viewer. Vertical lines, as in a building, appear to converge when the camera is tilted up, increasing the feeling of height. Looking straight down on a subject produces the opposite effect: objects are flattened out.

A moderate change in camera angle up or down can give a slight shift to the point of view, making a subject appear somewhat bigger or somewhat smaller without unduly attracting the viewer's attention. When you approach a scene, don't always shoot at eye level or in the first position from which you saw the subject. Look for interesting angles, the best background, or other elements that could add interest.



DIONISIO GONZÁLEZ
Paulistana Ajuntada, 2006

A conventional point of view is appropriate for an unconventional photograph. *González began this invented urban landscape by photographing the irregular neighborhoods and chaotic shantytowns of São Paulo, Brazil that are giving way to demolition and rebuilding by the government. He proposes a recycling "intervention" by digitally inserting segments that appear to be modernist structures into the threatened spaces.*

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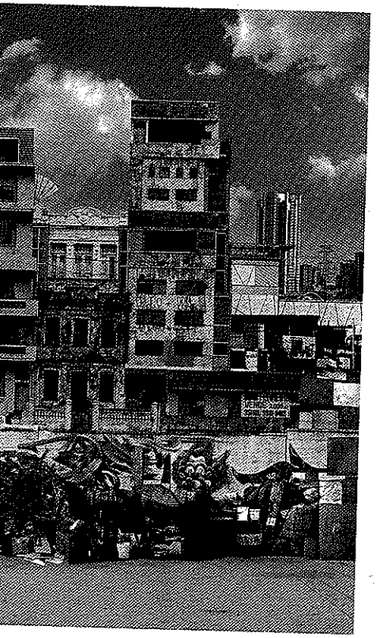
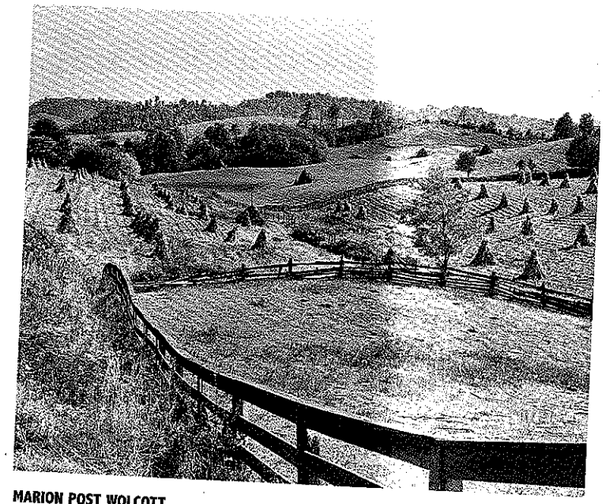
Your point of view or vantage point can have a strong influence. An eye-level point of view is unobtrusive in a photograph (below), but shooting from higher or lower than eye level is more noticeable. Photographing an object by looking up at it can give it an imposing air as it looms above the viewer. Vertical lines, as in a building, appear to converge when the camera is tilted up, increasing the feeling of height. Looking straight down on a subject produces the opposite effect: objects are flattened out.

A moderate change in camera angle up or down can give a slight shift to the point of view, making a subject appear somewhat bigger or somewhat smaller without unduly attracting the viewer's attention. When you approach a scene, don't always shoot at eye level or in the first position from which you saw the subject. Look for interesting angles, the best background, or other elements that could add interest.



DIONISIO GONZÁLEZ
Paulistana Ajuntada, 2006

A conventional point of view is appropriate for an unconventional photograph. *González began this invented urban landscape by photographing the irregular neighborhoods and chaotic shantytowns of São Paulo, Brazil that are giving way to demolition and rebuilding by the government. He proposes a recycling "intervention" by digitally inserting segments that appear to be modernist structures into the threatened spaces.*



MARION POST WOLCOTT
Corn Fields, West Virginia, 1940

A standard recommendation for landscape photography is, "Put something in the foreground to give the scene depth." *The reason that this device is used so often is that it does give a feeling of depth. Our perception of depth in a photograph is mostly due to size comparisons between near and far objects, and in the photograph above, it is easy to compare the size of the fence rails in the foreground with those at the end of the field.*

It is your handling of whatever you put in the foreground that can rescue a well-used device of this sort from being a cliché. So many photographers have sighted along a fence or randomly included a branch of a tree across the top of a scene that it can be hard to see past the device itself. Here, the device gains interest because the line of the fence also draws the eye from the foreground deeper into the scene, and then down the rows of corn even farther away.

NEAL RANTOUL
Peddock's Island, Massachusetts, 2004

Shooting from below the subject can exaggerate its height. *The photographer also used a wide-angle lens to amplify that sensation.*

TOSHIO SHIBATA Grand Coulee Dam, Douglas County, Washington, 1996

Looking down on a subject can appear to flatten space and reduce a subject to its graphic elements. *Looking down along the front of this dam without any clues about its height flattens it almost into a roadway flowing to the horizon.*

Looking at—and Talking About—Photographs

Photographs are made in order to convey a certain vision or idea, perhaps the beauty of a transcendent landscape or the gritty look of a downtown street. Even snapshots are not made randomly: "I was in Paris" is a typical message from a snapshot. What vision or idea can be found in a particular photograph, and what graphic elements convey it to the viewer? You may never know exactly what the photographer intended, but you can identify the meaning that a photograph has for you. Following are some questions you can ask yourself when you look at a photograph. You don't need to ask every question every time, but they can give you a place to start. The box at right lists some terms that can help describe visual elements.

1. **What type of photograph is it?** Sometimes this is clear from the context: an advertising photograph in an ad, a news photograph on the front page. A caption or title can provide useful information, but look at the picture first so that the caption does not limit your response.
2. **What can you tell (or guess) about the photographer's intention?** For example, is an advertising photograph intended to convey specifics about the product? Or is it meant to say something about the beautiful (or macho or lovable) people who use this product, with the implication that if you use it you will look and feel just like they do?
3. **What emphasis has the photographer created and how has that been done?** For example, has selective focus been used so that the most important part of the scene is sharp, while less important parts are not?
4. **Do technical matters help or hinder the image?** For example, is the central element—perhaps someone's expression—lost in extraneous detail because the photographer was not close enough?
5. **Are graphic elements important, such as tone, line, or perspective?** What part of the photograph do you look at first? How does your eye move around the photograph? Does it skip from one person's face to another, follow a curved line, keep returning to one point?
6. **What else does the photograph reveal besides what is immediately evident?** If you spend some time looking at a photograph, you may find that you see things that you did not notice at first. A fashion photograph may give information about styles but say even more about the social roles that men and women play—or are encouraged to play—in our culture. A scientific photograph of a distant star cluster may have been made to itemize its stars but can also evoke the mystery of the universe.
7. **What emotional or physical impact does the photograph have?** Does it induce sorrow, amusement, peacefulness? Does it make your skin crawl, your muscles tense up, your eyes widen?
8. **How does this photograph relate to others made by the same photographer, in the same period, or of the same subject matter?** Is there any historical or social information that helps illuminate it? Is there a connection to art movements? Such knowledge can lead to a fuller appreciation of a work.

One caution when talking or writing about photographs: Eschew obfuscation. In other words, speak plainly. Don't try to trick out a simple thought in fancy dress, especially if you don't have much to say. See how you actually respond to a photograph and what you actually notice about it. A clear, simple observation is vastly better than a vague, rambling dissertation.

VISUAL ELEMENTS

Following are some of the terms that can be used to describe the visual or graphic elements of a photograph. See the page cited for an illustration (and often a discussion) of a particular element.

LIGHT
Frontlit: Light comes from camera position, few shadows (page 223 top)
Sidelit: Light comes from side, shadows cast to side (page 223 bottom)
Backlit: Light comes toward camera, front of subject shaded (page 222)
Direct light: Hard-edged, often dark, shadows (page 224 right)
Directional-diffused light: Distinct, but soft-edged shadows (page 224 left)
Diffused or revealing light: No, or almost no, shadows (page 225)
Silhouette: Subject very dark against light background (page 321)
Glowing light: Light comes, or seems to come, from subject (page 359)

TONE AND CONTRAST
High key: Mostly light tones (page 358 top)
Low key: Mostly dark tones (page 366)
Full scale: Many tones from black to white (page 127 bottom)
High contrast: Very dark and very light areas, with few middle tones (page 379)
Low contrast: Mostly middle tones (page 329 top)

TEXTURE
Emphasized: Usually due to light hitting the subject at an angle (page 248 top)
Minimized: Usually due to light coming from camera position (page 248 bottom)

FOCUS AND DEPTH OF FIELD
Sharp overall (page 322 top)
Soft focus (page 355 bottom)
Selective focus: One part sharp, others not (page 321)
Shallow depth of field: Short distance between nearest and farthest sharp areas (page 51)
Extensive depth of field: Considerable distance between nearest and farthest sharp areas (page 47)

VIEWPOINT
Eye-level (page 344)
Overhead, low level, or unusual point of view (page 377)
Frame: The way the edges of the photograph meet the shapes in it (pages 312–313)

SPACE AND PERSPECTIVE
Shallow space: Most objects seem close together in depth (page 45)
Deep space: Objects seem at different distances in space (page 144)
Positive space or figure: The most important form (page 361)
Negative space or ground: That which surrounds the figure. Figure and ground are not always fixed and can reverse (page 282)
Compressed perspective or telephoto effect: The scene seems to occupy an unusually shallow depth (page 61 left)
Expanded perspective or wide-angle distortion: Parts of the scene seem stretched or positioned unusually far apart (page 61 right)

LINE
Curved (page 318 bottom), **straight** (page 316 bottom)
Horizontal (page 379), **vertical** (page 316 bottom), **diagonal** (page 323)
Implied: such as by the direction someone is looking (page 86)

BALANCE
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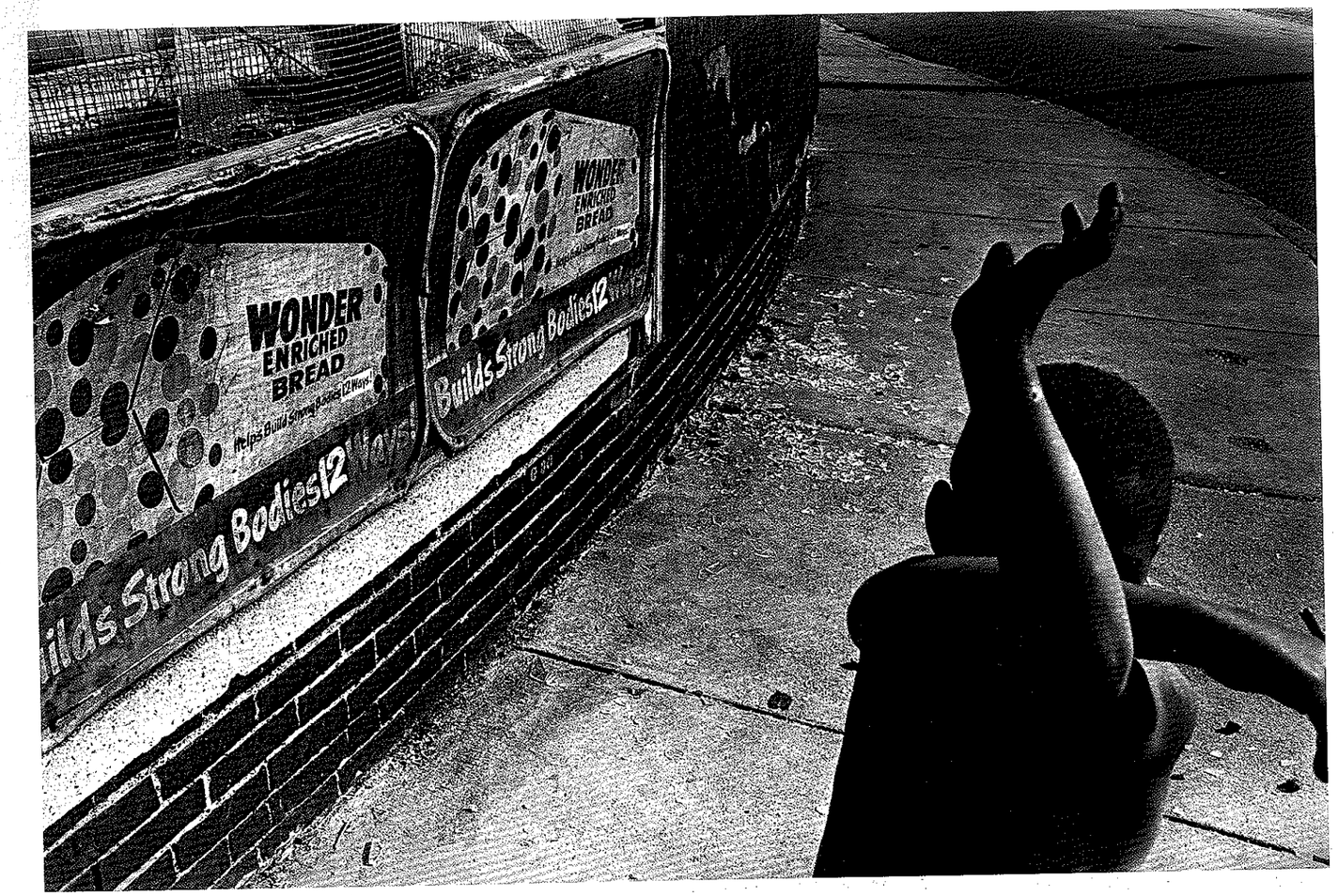

EUGENE RICHARDS Wonder Bread, Dorchester, Massachusetts, 1975

What does a photograph say to you? *Suppose you didn't know anything about this photograph. What does it reveal? What do you notice first when you look at the picture?*

How does the photographer's technique affect the image? How does the depth of field affect your response, with every scrap on the sidewalk and every bit of the crumbling wall sharp from near to far? Does the photograph being in black and white rather than color have any effect?

How does the composition move your eye? What parts of the photo attract your attention? Does the boy's gesture or that his arms are in front of his face or how he is cropped have any effect? Does the perspective (the narrowing shape of the sidewalk) draw your eye?

How does your knowledge, culture, and life experience affect your interpretation? Does the play between the boy and the peeling Wonder Bread ads contribute to your reaction?

Eugene Richards is well known for his many documentary projects. *He was born in Dorchester, Massachusetts and returned many years later to record how the town had changed. His book,* Dorchester Days, *shows the town as he found it in the 1970s. "I'm no kid, and the old neighborhood isn't the same as it was. . . . I walk around and around in these streets. . . . People who are instinctively hospitable or curious about my camera or very lonely invite me in. . . ."*