CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

THE ISSUE OF DISTANCE IN PHOTOGRAPHIC COMPOSITIONS

A project submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Art

by

James Turner Parker

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ABSTRACT

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This project was concerned with the issue of established distance; a problem that most students of photography are confronted with at one time or another. It is a unique problem created by the interjection of the camera between the photographer and his subject. The rectangular format of the viewing frame isolates a limited area of space. The composition of the photograph must be determined within the confines of this frame. The camera thus becomes an artificial barrier which plays a part in the development of the established distance from which the photographer chooses to photograph most of his work.

Most students unintentionally establish this specific distance. The actual distance may be great as in a landscape or small as in the close-up. It can vary from
II

Identification of the Problem

The sense of spatial monotony in the beginning photography students' work was recognized while observing a high school photography class throughout a full semester. The reasons for this particular type of monotony became evident while teaching high school photography. The individual progress in photography by many students was thereby observed. It was apparent that the inexperienced student placed most of his attention on the mechanics of the camera, instead of the compositional elements of the subject. The established distance was usually assumed with little or no knowledge of the student. It was an unintentional kind of error that most beginning students of photography eventually develop.

By photographing most of his work from a determined range of space, the photographer actually limits the possibilities for compositions. Inherent in any composition are possibilities for other compositions of equal aesthetic quality and value. When the subject is photographed from varying distances the spatial relationships of the objects change. One student's photographs can be taken from a lesser or greater distance than the photographs taken by another student. Each individual usually will explore both the distance type photograph and also the close-up. He must consider the intermediate distances
or many possibilities for additional compositions may be lost. The student must also learn to break the pattern of his established distance. He may then more easily recognize that any subject can be photographed in many different ways and still remain interesting.

The issue of established distance, from which the beginning student photographs most of his work, was discussed with several other photography instructors. They were in agreement that such a situation did exist and was an important problem in beginning photography. A search of published literature did not reveal any works concerning established distance or related concepts. The need for such an investigation into a solution to the problem thus became evident.
III
Development of the Project

Following considerable experiments and trials in the area of spatial approach, an exercise was devised which required the photographer to break his established distance by requiring him to take series of photographs. The first photograph taken in each series consisted of a broad overview of the subject, with each succeeding photograph taken closer to the subject. Several intermediate photographs were required to be taken with the close-up as the final approach. The importance of maintaining interesting compositional elements in each individual photograph was stressed. By using this specific process the students approached the subject at various distances and thus perceived the compositional elements from different viewpoints. In this manner, they conceived related but different compositions in an area of space where normally only one photograph would have been taken.

This specific exercise, "Compositions through Distance", was presented to three high school photography classes at Birmingham High School in Los Angeles, California. The classes consisted of students in the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades which comprised one beginning and two advanced photography classes (a total of forty students). None of the students had previously
been given an assignment concerning this particular approach. The concept of established distance had not been discussed before and was therefore unfamiliar to them. The exercise was successful in the majority of cases with students producing photographs of related but different compositions utilizing one specific subject. Many individual photographs with a respectable degree of aesthetic interest were produced. These were extracted from an area of space which would have been unexplored without the use of the guidelines in the exercise.

The students verbally expressed their experiences during the involvement with the exercise. Most believed they gained a greater awareness in perceiving possibilities for compositions. A student evaluation form was given to the beginning photography class on the last day of the semester. This date was approximately one month after they had completed the exercise. The evaluation form consisted of ten questions concerning various aspects of the class. Completing the evaluation was optional and no name was required. The fifth question was as follows: "What do you feel you gained from the assignment, 'Compositions through Distance'?" One student responded, "I gained a greater sense of perspective and imagination. I began to see things that I never looked for before; new frontiers in photography could be gained, in addition to a more critical analysis for taking pic-
tures, as well as looking at life in general." All of the responses by the students completing the evaluation form are included in the Appendix A.

The most difficult area in giving the exercise was getting the students to fully understand how they were to create different and interesting compositions by using one subject only. The idea of changing the distance from which the subject was photographed did not seem a plausible solution to them. Therefore, it was apparent that further explanation was needed.

The most informative type of understanding and learning can usually be gained through the use of audiovisual aids. Thus, the decision was made to produce a set of slides accompanied by a tape cassette sound. It was expected that these would clarify and explain the concept and exercise more thoroughly. There are very few audiovisual instructional aids available in the area of photography. Most of those that are available only deal with the basic techniques of photography. Therefore it was evident that there was a great need for instructional aids in photography, and this project could prove to be a valuable addition.
IV
Composition and Distance

The camera is the apparatus of the photographer to record images on film. This is not just a mechanical operation; for even in the simplest photographic reproduction of a perfectly simple object, a feeling for its nature is required which is quite beyond any mechanical operation. It is the skilled eye of the photographer that selects the proper angle for the best representation of the images. In photography, artistic consideration is needed in relation to the angle of view that the camera records the subject. The angle of approach is a most significant factor contributing to the final composition of the picture. With careful consideration, things that previously remained unnoticed are the more striking because they appear strange and unusual. The viewer is thus brought to see something familiar as something new and interesting. By stimulating the interest through the unusual qualities of the objects, the objects themselves become more vivid and therefore more capable of eliciting a response from the viewer.

It is the nature of photography that it must represent solids as a reduction of the three-dimensional image to the two-dimensional image. This type of reduction is the means by which the photographer can achieve special effects in his work. By reproducing the object from an
unusual and striking angle the photographer forces the viewer to take interest which goes beyond mere noticing. The subject being presented in a different way usually causes the viewer to look more closely and observe how the new perspective shows the objects as various shapes. The three-dimensional masses are represented on a two-dimensional surface and create a pleasing arrangement of outlines with light and shadow detail.

The presentation of solids upon a flat surface requires that they be shown from a specific angle. The relative position of the various objects and the way that they cut into one another must also be considered. If the camera is placed in a particular spot, it views the objects one behind the other, one object obstructing the view of another. The photographer must decide upon a particular camera angle and select which objects he will allow to appear in the photograph. He must also decide exactly what he considers most important and then attempt to emphasize it. He may hide objects he considers to be disturbing or unimportant. Through camera angle and distance, the photographer is able to show the relation of the objects to one another. He can achieve aesthetic interest with careful consideration for composition. The linear quality of the composition and its relation to the light and shadow areas of the composition is given concern. All of these elements are balanced to produce the
interesting visual effects. The photographer has a valuable means of expression in the ability to choose the distance from which he photographs the subject. The subtleties that may have gone unnoticed can be brought to attention and create interest for the photograph. The photographer must decide how he is to treat each object and every aspect of the objects. He must have some knowledge as to how these objects will look as a two-dimensional form. The response of the viewer must also be taken into consideration. Minor White (12) refers to all of these actions as a part of the previsualization by the photographer. Ansel Adams (1) refers to this process as visualization. Adams feels that it is a very complicated feedback of perception and experience. He has written about composition and the various factors that contribute to it. He believes that along with the aesthetic factors are the, just as important, emotional factors. The difference between the creative approach and the factual approach is one of purpose, sensitivity, and the ability to visualize an emotionally and aesthetically exciting image. Aesthetic and emotional factors accent the informational content of any image; they create interest and this spurs the desire for comprehension. Composition, as Edward Weston stated, is "the strongest way of seeing".
The Technical Matters

The major problem encountered in the production of the slide-tape presentation was the method used to produce slides from black-and-white photographs. There are many films available on the market, but most produce a negative image. A positive film is needed for the projection of a positive image on the photographic screen. The photographs used throughout the project were all done in black-and-white, therefore a normal slide film such as Ektachrome or Kodachrome could not be used. Experiments were conducted with these films and the results were a black-and-white rendition with either a blue or green tint. This tint resulted from the color base of the film used. Therefore, a black-and-white film was needed in order to produce a true black-and-white image.

With ordinary processing, black-and-white still camera films yield negative images, provided, of course, that the original subject was a positive. Negatives can be printed onto another black-and-white film, such as Eastman Fine Grain Release Positive Film 5302, in order to obtain positive slides. Whenever there is a transfer of an image from one film to another film, there is a degree of quality lost in the process. With reversal processing you can obtain positive transparencies directly. The film used in this process is Kodak Panatomic-X Film.
This particular method was used in producing slides from the original photographs.

Kodak Panatomic-X Film (35mm) is developed by the reversal process, using the Kodak Direct Positive Film Developing Process for black-and-white. The film speed or American Standards Association (ASA) rating of this film is ASA 32. This is the conventional setting used when the film is processed for negatives. In the reversal process it is necessary to use speeds which are different from those given in the instructions packed with the film. The difference in film speed is due to the changes in the development process and chemicals used. The instructions packed with the Direct Positive Developing Outfit recommended speeds of: ASA 80 for daylight and ASA 64 for tungsten lamp. The results when using these new speeds were a very high degree of contrast in all film processed. There was also a loss of detail in the light areas of the film. These were undesirable effects. After experimenting with several other speed settings, it was found that ASA 400 produced the best results. Therefore, ASA 400 was used for the film speed.

The light source used for illumination were two photoflood lamps (3400K), EBV No. 2. The lamps were placed at about a 45 degree angle between the lens and lamp axis. The exposure was determined with a Leica-Meter M reflected-light meter, used with the Kodak Neutral Test
Card (18% gray side) at the copy board. A 35mm camera, Minolta SR-T 101, was used with close-up lenses in front of the regular 58mm lens. This and the other specific technical information was obtained from the Kodak Audiovisual Data Book, *Producing Slides and Filmstrips* (6).

The sound portion of the presentation was recorded on Scotch Magnetic Tape 202 (reel-to-reel) and transferred to Scotch Highlander/Low Noise H-C-45 Cassette Tape. The cassette tape is used for play-back.
VI
The Format of the Presentation

The first half of this slide-tape presentation centers on and explores the issue of established distance, and then gives specific directions for completing the exercise. Only slides produced from student photographs are used in this first part of the project. This particular approach was devised in order to give the viewer or student a feeling of self-confidence. In this way he can see that other students have successfully completed the exercise, therefore he should also be able to do so. Several series of students' photographs are included in the first half of the presentation. Each of the series deals with one subject being photographed from varying distances. Although the photographs within each series are of the same subject, they maintain interest and quality through a variation in composition and spatial approach to the elements.

One particular student's series of photographs is examined in order to determine how he completed the exercise. The various elements of composition are discussed and related to their function in the photograph. The continuity of images and idea between the photographs is described and explained in regards to the concern for composition.

Photographs taken by a professional photographer
are utilized in the second half of the presentation. These photographs illustrate how one subject can be treated differently by an individual working with it. Two entirely different approaches dealing with the same subject matter are shown. The specific problems and final decisions concerning the two series are discussed. The two series demonstrate how one basic subject can be used in all the photographs of the series and be represented in a different manner in each photograph. Each composition is different from all others in respect to the visual arrangement of the compositional elements and the resulting lines of view. Each composition stands as an individual photograph retaining its unique points of interest.

The presentation ends with a summary of the ideas related throughout, and one additional motivational stimulus, i.e.; "It is now time for you, the photographer, to apply your knowledge and produce series of quality photographs."
Summary

Working with this project has been a rewarding experience. The results of the students' work was of good quality when working within the guidelines of the exercise. The success of this project, along with the potential of its future use, makes the time expended all of worthwhile value. Difficult problems were encountered, but much was learned working with them to find the best solution. The product of the project, the slide-tape presentation, can be of value to anyone teaching photography. It is expected that it will be of service to those individuals who will use it in their classes. The issue of established distance in photography is a real problem and one that needs to be worked with as early as possible. Assumed habits are hard to change and therefore the need to explore new approaches is most important. If this exercise and follow-up instruction are utilized then there will be positive results. Students have expressed how they have benefited from the exercise, and this has been reflected as improvement in the quality of their photographic work.

This project could serve as the basis for further investigation into the possibilities of follow-up exercises. These could reinforce the student's experimentation with the variation in spatial approach. A project
dealing only with photographic composition would be helpful to the student. In most art forms the composition is worked with over a period of time. It can be changed or altered at almost any time within the period of its development. The situation is different in photography. In working with the camera, the photographic composition is determined within a very short time when compared to other art forms. When the subject is framed in the camera and the shutter is released the image is recorded on film. In that short period of time the composition is completed. It can now only be altered by cropping into the photograph. The arrangement of the elements of the composition cannot be changed. Therefore composition becomes a critical matter for the photographer. The issue of distance in photographic compositions has been dealt with in this project. It is evident that there are other issues of photographic composition that need to be investigated and presented to students of photography. There are very few audiovisual aids in the area of photography, therefore any good addition in this area would be of aid to all who work in the teaching field of photography.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


(2) Arnheim, Rudolf, Film as Art, University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 1969, pp. 16-20, 44-46, 73-76.


The following comments were all written by students in a beginning photography class. The comments were obtained from a student evaluation form that was given on the last day of the semester. This date was approximately one month after they had completed the exercise. The evaluation form consisted of ten questions concerning various aspects of the class. Completing the evaluation was optional and no name was required. The fifth question was as follows: "What do you feel you gained from the assignment, 'Compositions through Distance'?" The following comments were written.

"I gained a greater sense of perspective and imagination. I began to see things that I had never looked for before; new frontiers in photography could be gained, in addition to a more critical analysis for taking pictures, as well as looking at life in general."

"I found myself looking at things more distinctively, more observant."

"I gained a lot. I now can look at a photograph and appreciate what I see, like composition, print quality, etc."

"That one particular thing is not one particular thing. There are many aspects to everything, each of which might be considered."

"A different perspective of one object or scene."

"A new insight to looking at what I normally overlook and take for granted. I enjoyed looking at something and analyzing it from different views."

"One had to look at an object from many different angles."

"Looking at one object in different ways gave me the ability to look at things objectively."

"I see that there are many good things to take pictures of if you really look, and nice pictures can be taken of anything."

"One picture doesn't show as much as four of the same thing at different angles. Also it is more interesting."
"Being able to look at objects from different angles."

"I learned that what can look very ugly or uninteresting from far back can look very interesting from close-up or the other way around."

"A different way of looking at things."

"It taught me that before I take a picture of something, to examine each angle, because the picture will look different. It also taught me to take a few shots of each subject."

"Made me more aware of what objects were getting into the picture without me realizing it. Now I can control the elements of the picture and compose it to fit what I want."
APPENDIX B

CREDITS

Narration Voice by.................Jim Wilson

Slide No.
3, 8..................................Carl Vidnic
4........................................Mark Pearlman
5, 9, 21-24............................Steve Hunt
6........................................Dave Sterling
7...........................................Kevin Williams
10-13.................................Nils Geisse
14-17.................................Kirk Roderick
18, 19.................................Scott Bulmer
25-29.................................Nick Tepelidis
30-39.................................Jim Parker
APPENDIX C
SOUND-TAPE NARRATION

Slide No. 1 (Start and Focus)
Slide No. 2 (Compositions through Distance)

Slide No. 3 "A situation unique to the photography student is the interjection of the camera between the photographer and his subject: the camera becomes an artificial barrier. (4) When one looks through the viewing system of a camera, the rectangular format of the viewing frame creates a limited area of space. The composition of the photograph must be determined within the confines of this frame.

(5) The inexperienced student places most of his attention on the mechanics of the camera, instead of the compositional elements of the subject. (6) Most students unintentionally establish a distance from which many of their photographs are taken. This distance may be great as in the landscape or small as in the close-up. (7) It can vary from student to student, but for the individual the distance he establishes usually remains consistent: he will retain his established distance within the determined range of space, thereby producing monotonous photographs. This monotony results from the lack of variation in spatial approach."
(8) One student's photographs can be taken from a lesser or greater distance than the photographs of another. Each individual usually will explore both the distance photograph and the close-up. He must consider the intermediate distances or many possibilities for further compositions are lost. (9) Therefore, the student must learn to break the pattern of his established distance. One solution to the issue of established distance is a series of photographs of the same subject matter.

(10) Inherent in a composition are possibilities for other compositions of equal aesthetic value. (11) When the subject is photographed from varying distances the spatial relationships of the objects change. (12) Between the distance photograph and the close-up are other possibilities for good compositions. (13) This exercise will require the photographer to break his established distance by requiring him to take series of photographs.

(14) The first photograph in each series will be of a broad overview. (15) Each subsequent shot is closer to the subject. (16) There will be the intermediate photographs with the close-up as the final approach. (17) It is important to maintain interesting compositional elements in each individual photograph.

(18) Through this process the student will have approached
the subject from varying distances and thus he will have perceived the compositional elements from different vantage points. (19) He can now comprehend the value of related but different compositions extracted from one basic subject.

(20) This is the assignment: Produce a minimum of two series of photographs, each series of a different subject, photographed from varying distances. Include an overview, intermediate shots, and the close-up.

(21) The first photograph of each series will be taken from the greatest distance, and will include all subjects comprising the subsequent photographs of that sequence. Therefore, it is a broad overview. (22) Each succeeding photograph will be closer to the subject and will isolate a smaller area than the preceding one. (23) These intermediate photographs will create a transition of space culminating in the final approach, the close-up. The minimum number of intermediate photographs is two. There is no maximum. (24) The final approach will be the close-up and will be taken at the least distance from the subject, isolating a small area and containing one main subject or one main element of the subject. Each photograph must retain good composition and strength as an individual photograph.
To further clarify the assignment we will examine one student's solution to the problem. In this particular series the student chose to concentrate on one building. The first photograph of the series isolates the building, leaving ample foreground to dictate the space in which the building projects its presence. The photograph is further balanced on the vertical axis by the inclusion of the trees in the upper right corner. These also serve as elements in the horizontal balance of the photograph. Notice the repetition of pattern created by the arches.

In the second photograph a smaller portion of the building was isolated. Here the main emphasis is on the repetition of form in the arches. This is further dramatized by the play of light and shadow. The elements of this composition are aligned on opposing diagonals. Approaching this same area of the building from a different angle creates an entirely different effect. Here a great sense of depth is created by the posts leading the viewer from the foreground inward. This depth is emphasized further by the shadows of the posts on the brick wall. The posts and wall enclose the viewer restricting his movement to the depths of the photograph. Though of minor importance thus far, an object likely unnoticed, becomes the subject of the next photograph.
(28) This produces an entirely new element in the series, an abandoned cart, implying the remote human element of the building. Its placement and isolation imply people, their use of it, and its relationship to the building. It is framed by the wall and thus contained for the concern of the viewer. The action of light further defines the form and creates a contrast with the other elements. A major element of all the photographs of the series has not been isolated and presented to the viewer. It has been a distinctive part of each photograph, creating variety in pattern and tonal range. Here we are given the final approach to the series.

(29) In this composition it has been treated differently. It is a supporting element no longer, but the major concern. Before, it interplayed with the light and dark areas of each photograph. It now becomes the photograph.

(30) All of the previous photographs were taken by high school students. They show how several beginning photo students have successfully completed this exercise. This series and the following photographs were taken by a professional photographer. They will illustrate that one subject can be photographed from varying distances to produce different and interesting compositions. In this series, the visual effects created by the lines, angles, and perspective have been utilized. Each composition
produces a different sense of space. This helps the viewer to perceive the various feelings of the environment created by the structures.

(31) The first photograph reveals the subject matter and gives an indication of what is to follow. This structure is recognized as one that stands upright; therefore it becomes evident that an element of distortion is present. The photographer must determine if he is to use this element or correct for it. In this series the distortion is utilized and becomes an element of unification for the series.

(32) These compositions were selected as possibilities for the intermediate photographs of the series. There is too much similarity between the photographs. The repetition of the windows and the white vertical supports in each photograph create a sense of monotony. To alleviate this, it is necessary to omit one of the compositions. The first photograph is different from the other two in respect to the distance, level, and angle from which it was taken. The third photograph is from the least distance and isolates the smallest area. It also creates the most dynamic angle and distortion. In addition to these factors, the second photograph is the only one to be presented on the horizontal format. For these reasons, the first and third compositions will be used
as the intermediate photographs of the series.

(33) The final approach is the close-up. The distance between the viewer and the building is very small, yet a great sense of space is created in this photograph. The reflection of a building on the glass creates one dimension of space. The left third of the composition involves a different area of space, giving a sense of depth to the photograph. The viewer's focus moves between the area of the converging lines on the left, to the building on the right. This creates a visual sensation which further adds to the interest of the composition.

(34) The problems and resulting decisions concerning this series have been discussed. The results are four compositions, each having different points of interest. This was achieved through the change in distance and angle from which the subject was photographed. Upon reviewing the series, another unifying element becomes evident. The first photograph contains two buildings which are repeated in the final photograph. The treatment of these two structures was changed, resulting in two distinctively different photographs. Although there is a repetition of images, monotony is avoided through the variety in approach and composition.
To illustrate how this series could be further developed, or could have taken an entirely different direction, consider the last photograph. The reflection of the building in the upper right corner becomes the subject. Working with the idea of the reflected image, the series is continued.

(35) The converging lines draw the viewer's attention to the center of the photograph. The lack of an image in the white space, in combination with the distortion makes it difficult to focus on any point in this area. The eye scans the photograph and the attention is changed to the reflection of the building on the left side. The idea of the reflected image has been carried to this photograph and is repeated in the next.

(36) The reflection is the center of interest in this composition. It is actually a double image which makes it even more interesting. A different dimension of space and sense of depth is created by it. The upper right portion of the photograph is another reflection. It interplays with the other images establishing a relationship in line, pattern, and contrast.

(37) In the final approach a reflection of the building is again present. Here it is more important as a shape than an image. It becomes an element in the design
created by the light and dark areas of the composition. As an image it establishes a relationship with the reflection of another building in the lower right corner of the photograph. This can become the subject for even further development of the series. Leaving this to speculation, the series is concluded.

(38) This series of four photographs begins where the previous series ended. It is now easy to understand that one subject can be photographed in more than one way and remain interesting. A reflection of one building appears in all of the photographs, but a sense of monotony is avoided. Each reflected image has been photographed differently, and each composition maintains interest. This has been achieved through change in distance and careful consideration for composition.

(39) In summary, we have observed that inherent in a composition are possibilities for other compositions of equal aesthetic value. The issue of established distance from which the photographer photographs most of his work has been explained and related to the limitations of extracting compositions from a selected area. We have seen how other students have solved this through the direction of the assignment given within. It is now time for you, the photographer, to apply your knowledge and produce series of quality photographs."
APPENDIX D

DIRECTIONS FOR SLIDE-TAPE PLAYBACK

The intervals for the change of slides are indicated on the tape by an audible tone. There are three tones before the narration begins. The first tone indicates the beginning of the tape and the interval for the first slide, "Start and Focus". On the second tone the slide is changed to the title, "Compositions through Distance". At the sound of the third tone the slide is changed to the first photograph of the presentation and the vocal narration begins at this point. Each additional change of slide will be indicated by the sound of the tone. Continue in this manner to the end of the presentation.
ADDENDUM

LOCATION OF SLIDE-TAPE UNIT

The slide-tape unit for this project is located with the archival copy of the project in the library of California State University, Northridge.