

Rochester Institute of Technology

RIT Scholar Works

Theses

5-1-1986

Sequence: strategies for order

David J. Joseph

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses>

Recommended Citation

Joseph, David J., "Sequence: strategies for order" (1986). Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology.
Accessed from

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by RIT Scholar Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of RIT Scholar Works. For more information, please contact ritscholarworks@rit.edu.

SEQUENCE:
STRATEGIES FOR ORDER
BY
David J. Joseph

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MFA PHOTOGRAPHY PROGRAM
SCHOOL OF PHOTOGRAPHIC ARTS AND SCIENCES
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
ROCHESTER, NEW YORK
May, 1986

Charles Werberig

Charles Werberig, Chairman
Associate Professor
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences

Elliott Rubenstein

Elliott Rubenstein
Associate Professor
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences

Glenn Knudsen

Glenn Knudsen
Exhibition Staff
Memorial Art Gallery

Permission Statement

SEQUENCE: STRATEGIES FOR ORDER

I **David J. Joseph** prefer to be contacted each time a request for reproduction is made. I can be reached at the following address.

c/o Mr. and Mrs. Richard M. Joseph

May 4, 1986

Introduction

Sequence: Strategies for Order was an exhibition of photographic sequences that explored different strategies for their organization. Structural and narrative qualities of the photographs and their interactions within the sequences formed the basis for the different organizational approaches. The photographs were bound within the sequences by these interactions. However, throughout the exhibition there was no overriding concern towards a particular subject matter or ideological approach. I was more interested in seeing how separate images could be juxtaposed in order to expand their expressive and narrative potential, rather than conveying one central idea or emphasizing one particular strategy.

Different strategies for the organization of photographs are identified with specific examples of sequences. Not all the sequences are illustrated, but the strategies identified in one are common to others. The sequential process I maintained, and the problems associated with it, are also illustrated.

My interest in sequence began during my first quarter as a graduate student. I was dissatisfied with the time/space limitations of the single print and began exploring means to extend it. During that time I was studying the work of Bart Parker whose photographs are, in his own words, "shaped by multiple printing or by sequence and combination."¹ As a consequence, I began working with combination color printing where I was printing three or four photographs on one sheet of paper. The project, however, was short-lived. I stopped after six pieces primarily due to technical problems, but never lost interest in combining photographs sequentially.

Later that year I started photographing in Canandaigua, NY and began arranging the photographs into short sequences. I was not photographing with particular sequences in mind, but I was trying to make photographs that were representative of the place so that I would have a variety from which to choose. I photographed with both 35mm and 2 $\frac{1}{4}$ inch cameras making contact sheets of the 2 $\frac{1}{4}$ inch negatives and enlarging the sheets of 35mm negatives onto 16 by 20 inch paper. Both the enlarged and regular contact sheets were cut up into individual pictures from which I would arrange and rearrange them into tentative sequences. Once I settled on a particular order, I would enlarge the photographs into finished prints.

The procedure that I followed for constructing sequences provided the opportunity to easily alter the number and order of the groups, and I could see the effects of changes instantly. From a nonrepresentational point-of-view, I was learning about

the effects of structure: color, form, space, and texture; and from a representational point-of-view. I was developing strategies for the order of visual narratives. It was a process I continued to utilize and benefit from throughout my thesis project.

From the beginning, I was intent on developing the process to a point where I could produce a sequence of photographs that would be bound together through both structure and visual narrative. The formal considerations of the separate photographs and the sequence as a whole should, in other words, aid or complement the narrative process. Just as the structure or formal considerations of the single image can emphasize the order in which to consider the elements within it, the structure of the sequence can also emphasize the order in which to consider the elements within the group of pictures. In doing so, it can also establish the order and emphasis of the narrative. However, sequence also emphasizes structure. The individual photographs acquire meaning within the context of the sequence. If the abstract qualities of a photograph are emphasized, and it is viewed in the context of similar photographs, then those qualities become dominant. They will obscure or preclude any other interpretation. The narrative is lost within so many pretty pictures. To combine the two then, was perhaps, the nemesis of my proposal.

In Japan Air Lines, slide number one, there are four color photographs taken in San Francisco. Each photograph includes some element that deals with flight. The first picture is of people walking along the wharf with kites flying in the background.

Next is a close-up of a street vendor's wares including plastic flamingos and kites. The third picture is of a city park with flags waving in the wind and pigeons scattered along the walkway, and the final picture is of a street scene with the facade of the Japan Air Lines building as the backdrop. Their logo, a circle with a bird's head in it, resembles the heads of the plastic flamingos in the second picture. By juxtaposing the four photographs, I tried to develop a visual narrative that contrasted the flightless and flimsy plastic flamingos and kites probably "Made in Japan," and the character of pigeons with the strength and power of a major airline. The narrative, however, was not meant to stop there. Considering the rash of recent airline tragedies and their recently publicized maintenance records, the narrative becomes more than a ludicrous comparison. It suggests a second or closer look at the comparison. Perhaps too, it does none of the above. The only thing ludicrous about the narrative may be my analysis of it. On paper it may make sense, but the photographs seem to want to have nothing to do with it. The juxtapositioning of the four photographs emphasizes their abstract qualities, not their narrative attributes as I have described them. One photograph flows freely into the next as your eyes follow the path created by the colors and patterns. There are no barriers set up to restrict your flow, however. No visual pointers to suggest the narrative outlined above.

Perhaps a more realistic interpretation of the narrative would be a tourist's view of San Francisco, starting with a walk

along the wharf and ending with a walk through the city. The colors and scenes are light and airy, complementing, rather than obscuring, the narrative. This version is too easily interpreted though. The sequence may start with a walk along the wharf and end with a walk in the city, but there is no real beginning and end to the narrative. It is just a visual comparison of four photographs with similar subjects and abstract qualities. Beyond the visual experience there is nothing to maintain my interest. After a quick glance, I am ready to go on to the next group.

In Tete a Tete, slide number five, the visual experience is different. The logic for the order goes beyond the abstract qualities of the prints. The sequence is again made up of four photographs, but there is a beginning, middle, and an end to it and the narrative which are easily identified and interpreted. It begins to take on qualities of a literary narrative. The first photograph is of a woman walking along a sidewalk with her head turned to face the photographer. She confronts the photographer and audience, becoming a real character to be developed and identified with throughout the narrative. The second photograph is of the same woman walking along the same sidewalk, but now the photographer is closer to her and her back is to the audience. Next is a picture of a road that follows the course of a lake off into the distance. The last photograph is along a sidewalk that appears to be in the same neighborhood as the first two. The sidewalk is empty though, and upon closer examination you can see that it is, in fact, the same location as the first photograph taken from the opposite

direction. The audience follows the course of the woman through the first two photographs. They do not know who she is or where she is going, but they do know she is being followed, and perhaps they empathize with her. Not much information is provided, but together, the first two photographs form the beginning of the narrative. The third photograph, forming the middle, represents a different time and place. Even less information is provided. It does not answer any questions about who the woman is, where she is going, what happened to her, and what her relationship to the photographer was. That is left for the audience to decide. Seen in the context of the sequence, it represents an interim of unknown time and dimension. The final photograph returns the audience to the original scene and represents the end of the visual narrative. It does not, however, necessarily represent the end of the narrative. The audience is left pondering the questions and can fill in the blanks any way they choose.

Although, in this example, the narrative qualities of the sequence may be dominant, it is the abstract qualities of the photographs that facilitates the transition from one to another and consequently, from the beginning to the end of the narrative. Visually, the aspect and color palette of the photographs are similar. The movement of one is not interrupted by the stasis of the next. Each one recedes into the distance, suggesting perhaps, their continuation in both time and space. Even the third photograph, which is visually distinctive, does not interrupt the dynamics of the whole. Its likeness to, and

affinity for, the other photographs guides your movement through it. In Japan Air Lines, where the structure of the photographs was dominant, there was nothing to restrict your movement through it, and consequently little to maintain one's interest beyond the visual experience. In Tete a Tete, the structural and narrative qualities of the sequence complement each other. The abstract qualities of the photographs may facilitate the transition through the sequence, but it is the narrative that maintains my interest. It is the mystery of the information not provided; the unanswered questions, that keeps me coming back for more.

I want to stress that there is no formula for producing a sequence of photographs that successfully embody the concepts of structure and visual narrative as I have described them in the preceding examples. In both, I described abstract qualities of the photographs that facilitated the transition from one to another, but each in their own way. Neither one is necessarily better than the other. One was more capable of corroborating the narrative I described. What is important, I believe, is recognizing the limitations of the process. There are terms to the degree and complexity of information that is available in any sequence. The greater the number and complexity of the photographs, the more likely it will be to confuse your intentions.

In Japan Air Lines I said there were no barriers or visual pointers to interrupt your flow through the sequence and corroborate the narrative. In Opportunity, slide number six, I believe the opposite is true. Each photograph remains separate,

retaining its own identity. The transition from one to another is, for the most part, dependent upon their physical proximity. The visual clues identified in one, point to, and clarify those of the next. The narrative, then, is contingent upon recognizing and building upon the visual clues in each photograph. To a certain degree this is the case with all sequences as the meanings of individual photographs are affected by the context of the whole. In this case, however, the validity of the sequence is dependent upon the narrative process. Without it, the sequence would appear as a group of disparate photographs.

Opportunity, a sequence of four photographs, begins with a shot of a woman about to cross a street that runs diagonally from lower left to upper right through the photograph. Across the street, forming the background, are storefronts. She is walking away from the photographer through a roadside bank of snow that follows the same diagonal path as the road and storefronts. Next is a middle-distance shot of a mural painted on the side of a building. It depicts women from all walks of life performing in many different occupations. The mural is on the same plane as the storefronts in the preceding picture facilitating the transition from one to the other, but not obscuring their individual identities. The former is still a picture of a woman crossing the street and the latter of a mural. In the foreground of the second picture is a sidewalk that corresponds to the snowbank in the first. Their paths diverge though, forming an apex where they meet, but even so, easing the transition. The third photograph, also a middle-

distance shot, is a facade of an early twentieth century farmhouse. The front yard forms the foreground. Hanging from a tree in front of the house is a white paper-mache effigy of a woman with her arm stretched out straight, pointing to the house. The last photograph is a close-up of a tuxedo shop window display. Three male torsos clad in tuxedos are displayed on pedestals surrounded by all their accoutrements.

The subjects of the photographs are different: a woman crossing a street; a mural depicting women performing in various occupations; a hanging female figure prominently displayed in the front yard of a farmhouse; and a tuxedo shop window display with three male torsos catching the eye of their audience. When considered separately, each may be noteworthy, but when considered in the context of the sequence, they reflect the characteristics of their neighbors in addition to their own. Their reaction is synergistic as they act as catalysts in the development of the narrative. The woman in the first photograph is the implied subject of the mural in the second and the hanging figure in the third. Together they form the body of the narrative and establish the basis for the comparison with the last photograph. Opportunities identified in the second photograph are contrasted with the lack of opportunities implied in the third. The figure hanging from the tree is pointing to the house. It suggests that the home, and family life associated with it, stifles opportunity; that women are tied to and trapped by it. The last photograph identifies the male figure and serves as a reminder of their role in this

scenario.

The narrative in Opportunity, as in Tete a Tete, also has a beginning, middle, and an end, but they are not as easy to recognize and liken to their literary counterparts. In the latter, the visual narrative implies a course of events and tracks it over a period of time. In Opportunity, the photographs do not follow the course of a common event and consequently, the narrative is more difficult to interpret. Instead, it is generated by piecing together isolated events from each photograph that, collectively, communicate or suggest a central idea. Once the idea is understood, the divisions of the narrative are identified. When describing the photographs, I identified qualities of the first two that facilitated the transition from one to the other. They do not follow a specific event through time, but do form the beginning of the narrative, laying the groundwork and arguing the logic for the third photograph. It in turn, forms the middle of the narrative, contrasting the message of the first two and setting the tone for the conclusion.

In the preceding examples I discussed different methodologies for sequencing photographs and described how each interacts to generate a visual narrative. In Japan Air Lines, the first example, I also began to illustrate how the sequence can obscure or preclude a particular interpretation. The implication is that the sequence also has the ability to obscure or preclude specific qualities of individual photographs. It is inherent to the process and must be considered when orchestrating the

sequence. The extent of this tendency is dependent on structural characteristics which are defined by the physical arrangement of the photographs in space and their visual affinities. All three examples were linear arrangements and, with the exception of the tuxedo shop window display in Opportunity, were equally sized and spaced. Their organization placed equal emphasis on each photograph and established a rhythm for their viewing. The cadence could be varied by varying the space between the photographs and by interrupting the visual pattern from one to another. However, the sequence would still emphasize particular qualities of the photographs, accentuating the structure of the whole and further neutralizing the individual character of each. No matter how strong, the individual qualities of a photograph are subjugated by the structure of the sequence. Some will necessarily be emphasized at the expense of others.

The organizational structure of The Giant's Castle, slide number six, is extended in two dimensions forming the basis of a grid. By emphasizing its repetitive structure, however, a grid can be more restrictive than the linear arrangements of the preceding examples. The character of the photographs may become homogenized, limiting the interpretation of the sequence to little more than a photographic tapestry. The format also affords the opportunity to break from traditional linear interpretations, however, which was my reason for experimenting with it. I wanted to interrupt the path of a linear progression and hoped that two rows of photographs would interact from top to bottom and across a diagonal, as well as

linearly. The Giant's Castle, I believe, illustrates these interactions while simultaneously demonstrating how the organizational structure confines the photographs.

All six photographs were taken with a wide-angle lens which distorts space, expanding it in all directions. Four of them were taken on or near the beach with little more than recreational vehicles, their antennas, empty camp chairs, and a solitary figure to disrupt the expanse. Each one, it seems, defies the borders of the print, but there is no escaping. The grid constricts their movement, delineating their position in space. Their individual structures are, in fact, incongruous within the structure of the grid. Visually though, the narrative qualities of the sequence compensates for the strictures of its organization. Specific relationships are not over-emphasized. Rather, they highlight the narrative which compares the freedom and mobility that recreational vehicles afford with the solidity and permanence of the homestead. The audience is left to wander freely throughout the arrangement. Three photographs of recreational vehicles on the beach follow a diagonal path from one corner to another, crossing the path of three photographs of homesteads following the alternate diagonal. The aspect of a house opposes that of a recreational vehicle in the photograph next to it, while the empty camp chairs in it highlight the lawn chairs in the photograph above. Statues of cherubs adorning the front patio of one home become the hanging figure adorning the front yard of another, which, in turn, becomes the solitary figure on the beach in yet another.

There is no overriding visual emphasis among the photographs to signal these relationships. The audience may be left to wander freely, but they must spend some time wandering in order to see.

In the last example, I mentioned that all six photographs were taken with a wide-angle lens. It did not pose a problem in that case, but throughout the project I had difficulty juxtaposing photographs with similar spatial characteristics. I photograph primarily with a wide-angle lens because I am always trying to include as much as I can in my photographs and I seem to be more interested in what is happening at the borders than in the middle. Seeing how I always seem to approach my subjects from the same vantage (which is to say I am always between here and there), the wide-angle lens always had more going on at its borders. Therefore, it was the natural choice. But as I found out, it was not necessarily the best choice. I needed close-ups. I had a plethora of middle-distance and long-distance shots, many of which were successfully juxtaposed in sequences, but the expressive and narrative quality of the imagery lacked definition. The close-up, by confronting the audience, provided the answer. It involved the audience in the narrative, elucidating particular qualities of the imagery, and it visually broke the redundant pattern of similar spatial characteristics that had emerged among the photographs.

The difficulty I experienced juxtaposing photographs with similar spatial characteristics is indicative of the problems associated with my sequential process. I said earlier that I

did not photograph with particular sequences in mind. There were no story-boards to follow; no outside influences dictating what photograph to make. The sequential process was post-visual. I photographed first and sequenced later. Generally, I photographed what, when, where, and how I wanted, but as I was attempting to construct sequences, I discovered that the how, and to a lesser degree the what, of my photographs were strikingly similar. The subjects were variable, but I lacked certain types of photographs. Interiors and portraits, for example, were virtually missing from my visual vocabulary, and close-ups, as I mentioned earlier, were poorly represented. Middle-distance and long shots of urban and rural environments, on the other hand, were well represented. I tended to photograph quickly with little regard for subject matter and detail. If something caught my eye it most likely caught the eye of my camera, but the photographs, it seems, did little to identify it. They often lacked the type of definition that was necessary to form the basis for, or complement, a visual narrative. Singularly, they may command attention, but collectively, they formed a hodgepodge of visual rhetoric.

Identifying these discrepancies was easy. Rectifying them, however, involved altering my visual predilections. In some cases that only meant changing locations, moving in closer to the subject for example or moving inside. But in others, it meant taking time to clearly identify the subject. It meant slowing down and, if not thinking in terms of specific sequences,

at least thinking in terms of sequence. I resisted the storyboard approach because I wanted to preserve as much spontaneity as possible. I did not want to search for or stage a particular photograph or group of photographs for the sake of a narrative I invented. The process, I believe, would have been too formalistic and the photographs would have suffered. They would be too concerned with the document rather than the manner in which the document transcends itself. They would reveal the subject or event rather than the psyche of the image maker. The sequence would be too concrete or didactic, lacking the elusiveness and mystery that is present when the photographs invent the narrative. The photographs had to be paramount to any design they were privy to.

The sequential process, as I mentioned earlier, was one of change. I would often start with a particular photograph and construct the sequence around it. It was the impetus behind initiating the process, but as often as not, it was not part of the final construction. When I started the project, I believe I was more dependent on the visual qualities of the imagery and would look for photographs that were complementary. The process was flexible enough at this point to start and finish with different photographs. There was no format to follow; no beginning, middle, and end dictating the order and complexity of the imagery. The narrative was secondary. It often did not figure into the process until the final stages of assembly, after some aspects of the photographs suggested it, and is responsible, in part, for their elusiveness.

Untitled, Canandaigua Trailer Park, slide number four, exemplifies this approach. It was one of the original sequences resulting from my photographic foray in Canandaigua, and its construction is, like The Giant's Castle, extended in two dimensions. I started with three photographs of house trailers from the same park. I was attracted to their bold colors which stuck out from their surroundings in defiance of the neutrality of their neighbors and the grayness of the day. I then looked for photographs with complementary characteristics, choosing three that shared some characteristics with the house trailer photographs, and contrasted others. All six were taken under similar conditions; on gray days in late winter or early spring after the snow has begun to melt exposing the detritus of winter's harvest, and leaving puddles of water and mud to bargain with. They also share the common spatial characteristics of photographs taken with a wide-angle lens by a person hedging against confrontations with his surroundings. No wet feet for this guy. For all we know, he could have taken the pictures from the front seat of his car. Two are of large warehouses, or factories from a distance, that seem to show the same cold metal construction as the trailers, and the other is of a farmer's field with snow remaining in the furrows of last autumn's plow. The narrative results from the inherent differences of the photographs and the organization which emphasizes them. It compares and contrasts spaces lived and worked in with the expanse of a farmer's field, Perhaps it also reminds us that one is being replaced by the others.

There is no format to the narrative organization, however. Whatever is suggested beyond the visual comparisons is for the audience to decide.

The exhibition consisted of 14 black and white and color sequences containing 61 photographs. Organizing the space and arranging the work within it was not unlike the sequential process I have been describing. The concerns for visual harmony that I had been working with throughout the project were echoed in the exhibition. The consistency of the imagery made it relatively easy to combine color and black and white sequences side by side. They were not threatened by the dogma of individual ideals that would, I believe, have accompanied the imagery had the narratives been preplanned.

I wanted the space to echo that of the photographs, not necessarily that of the sequences. I did not want it to confine or restrict the interaction of one sequence with that of another; by its side or across the room. There were free-standing flats that broke up the space and provided the opportunity for the groups on one wall to interact simultaneously with those of two or three others. There was no real order to follow from beginning to end. Nothing, I had hoped, to inhibit the viewer's interaction with the work.

Conclusion

The project accomplished what I had hoped. It identified and illustrated different strategies for order and, I believe,

successfully organized them within the exhibition. It represents a body of finished work, but also has laid the groundwork for its continuation. I have only alluded to the potential for the development of visual narratives. The examples have served as models and starting points from which to expand the range and scope of their dialogues.

Notes

Parker, Bart, "Bart Parker: 'I Subsist on Analogy'",
Afterimage, November, 1976.

Bibliography

- Bourdon, David, "Sequenced Photographs", (Photo) (Photo)²...
(Photo)ⁿ Sequenced Photographs, Baltimore: University of
Maryland Art Gallery, 1975.
- Brumfield, John, "Apples and Oranges There May Be; And
Maybe Not-Photography Too.", Photography and Language,
Edited by Lew Thomas, San Francisco: Camerawork Press,
1976.
- Coke, Van Deren, The Painter and the Photographer, From
Delacroix to Warhol, Albuquerque: University of New
Mexico Press, 1964.
- Desmarais, Charles, Foreword to The Portrait Extended,
Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1980.
- Hagen, Charles, "Photographs And Time", Afterimage, April, 1980.
- Lond, Harley, "Structuralism and Intermedia", Photography and
Language, Edited by Lew Thomas, San Francisco: Camerawork
Press, 1976.
- Lyons, Nathan, Untitled Lecture, Camera Austria, 4/80.
- Parker, Bart, "Bart Parker, 'I Subsist on Analogy'", Afterimage,
November, 1976.
- Rotzler, W., Photography as Artistic Experiment from Fox Tabot
to Moholy-Nagy, Garder City: American Photographic Book
Publishing Company, 1976.
- Scharf, Aaron, Art and Photography, London: Penguin Press, 1968.
- Searle, Leroy, "Images in Context: Photographic Sequences",
Target III: In Sequence: Photographic Sequences from The
Target Collection of American Photography, Houston: The
Museum of Fine Arts, 1982.
- Tucker, Anne Wilkes, Introduction to Target III: In Sequence:
Photographic Sequences from The Target Collection of
American Photography, Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts,
1982.