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VISUAL TECHNIQUES: THE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Content and form are the irreducible, basic components of all media, music, poetry, prose, the dance, and, as is our main concern here, the visual arts and crafts. Content is primarily what is being expressed, directly or obliquely; it is the character of the information, the message. But in visual communication, content is never detached from form. It changes subtly from medium to medium and format to format, adapting to the circumstances of each; from the design of a poster or newspaper or any other print format with its unique dependence on words and symbols, to a photograph with its characteristic realistic observations of environmental data, to an abstract painting with its utilization of pure visual elements in a skeleton structure. In each of these examples and many, many others the content may be basically the same, but it must respond to its setting, and in responding, make minor modifications in its elemental and compositional character. A message is composed with purpose: to tell, express, explain, direct, inspire, affect. In pursuit of any purpose, choices are made, choices meant to reinforce and strengthen expressive intentions for maximum control of response. This requires enormous skill. Composition is the interpretive means for controlling the reinterpretation of a visual message by those who experience it. Meaning lies as much in the eye of the beholder as in the talents of the creator. The end result of all visual experience, in nature but primarily in design, lies in the interaction of duplex polarities: first, the forces of content (message and meaning) and form (design, medium, and arrangement); and second, the effect on each other of the articulator (designer, artist, craftsman) and the receiver (audience) (6.1). In either case, one cannot be separated from the other. Form is affected by content; content is affected by form. The message is cast by the creator and modified by the observer.

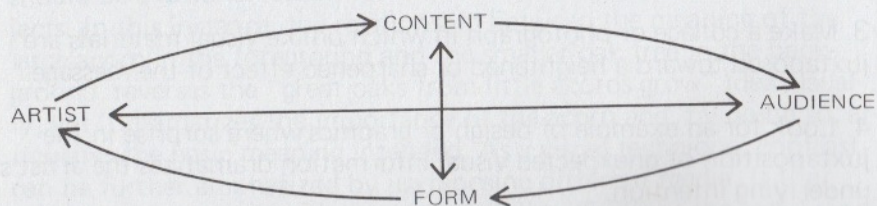


FIGURE 6.1

Symbols and representational information are weighted toward content as characteristic conveyers of information. Abstract design, the arrangement of the basic elements for an intended emotional effect in a visual statement, is the form revealed. The components of the form, that is, the composition, are concurrent or parallel aspects of every image, whether the structure is apparent, as in an abstract visual statement, or superseded by representational detail in realistic visual information, or dominated informationally by words and symbols. Whatever the basic visual substance, the composition is all-important informationally. This evaluation is supported by Susanne Langer in *Problems of Art*: "A picture is made by deploying pigments on a piece of canvas, but the picture is not a pigment and canvas structure. The picture that emerges from the process is a structure of space and the space itself is an emergent whole of shapes, visible colored volumes." Not in the physical substance but in the composition lies the message and meaning. The form expresses the content. "What is artistically good is whatever articulates and presents feeling to our understanding."

THE MESSAGE AND THE METHOD

The message and the method of expressing it depend heavily on the understanding and ability to use visual techniques, the tools of visual composition. In *Elements of Design*, Donald Anderson notes: "Technique is sometimes the fundamental force in abstraction, the reduction and simplification of complex and wandering detail to graphic relationships which can be grasped—to the form of art." Dominated by contrast, the techniques of visual expression are the essential means for the designer to probe the options available for expressing an idea compositionally. The process is one of experimentation and tentative selection toward an end of achieving the strongest visual solution possible for the expression of content. What happens is described by Leo Steinberg in his essay, "The Eye is Part of the Mind"*: "To bring his organizing powers into the fullest play, the painter must haul his perceptions out of their limbo and annex them to his plan." Not just in painting, but in every level of visual expression the problem is the same. Basically, pictorial or visual is determined by the visual information observed, the interpretation and perception of visual clues and data, the total visual statement. The designer-determined content and form represents only three of the four factors in the model of the visual communication process (6.1), artist, content,

*In *Reflections on Art*, Susanne K. Langer (ed.).

form. What of the fourth, the audience? Perception, the power to organize the visual information seen, depends on the natural workings, the needs and propensities of the human nervous system. While the whole body of work of the Gestalt school of psychology is called by the French, "la psychologie de la forme," it would be wrong not to give equal importance to the physiology of perception in the examination of how we retrieve visual information from what we see. The content and form is the statement; the mechanics of perception is the means for interpretation. Visual input is heavily affected by what needs motivate visual investigation and also by the state of mind or mood of the subject. We see what we need to see. Vision is linked to survival as its primary function. But we see what we need to see in another sense, that is, through the influence of mental set, preferences, and mood at any given moment. Whether in composing or viewing, the information in visual data must emerge from or be filtered by the net of subjective interpretation. "The words of a dead man are modified in the guts of the living," reflects W. H. Auden in his poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats." In order to truly control effect as much as possible, the visual composer must understand the complex ways the human organism sees, and, through this knowledge, learn to influence response through the visual techniques.

Intelligence does not operate in verbal abstractions alone. Thinking, observing, understanding, so many of the qualities of intelligence, are linked to visual understanding. But visual thinking is not a delayed system; information is conveyed directly. The greatest power of visual language lies in its immediacy, its spontaneous evidence. Visually, you see content and form simultaneously. They must be dealt with as one single force delivering information the same way. Darkness is darkness; high is high; meaning is observable. Properly developed and composed, a visual message is channeled directly to our brain to be understood without conscious decoding, translating, or delay. "What you see is what you get," is the trademark comment of the comedian, Flip Wilson. How apt in terms of analysis of visual communication his quip is. In fact, it in no way conflicts with the observation of the great philosopher of aesthetics, Susanne Langer: "... as one psychologist who is also a musician has written, 'Music sounds as feelings feel.' And likewise in good painting, sculpture, or building, balanced shapes and colors, lines and masses look as emotions, vital tensions and their resolutions feel."* What you see, you see. Directness is the incompar-

able power of visual intelligence. Recognition of this fact and potential reveals the key importance to control of that very special directness of expression unique in visual communication through the use of techniques which control the meaning in structure. Design, the manipulation of visual elements, is a fluid business, but the method of previsualization, of planning, illustrates the character of the synthesized message. It is a special kind of intelligence, nonverbal, and its quality is linked to the casting of content into form through the control exerted by technique. Again, Susanne Langer in *Problems of Art* describes the fact of visual expression so insightfully: "Form, in the sense in which artists speak of 'significant form' or 'expressive form' is not an abstracted structure, but an apparition; and the vital processes of sense and emotion that a good work of art expresses seem to the beholder to be directly contained in it, not symbolized but really presented. The congruence is so striking that symbol and meaning appear as one reality."

VISUAL INTELLIGENCE APPLIED

Previsualization is a loose process. Ideally, it is the stage of design when the artist-composer manipulates the pertinent visual element with techniques appropriate to content and message in a free-wheeling series of tryouts. Detail, maybe even recognizable connections with the end result, are abandoned as unnecessary in this period of development of a visual idea. Each artist develops a shorthand of his own. Probably because of the looseness and casualness of this step in seeking a compositional solution that pleases the designer, serves the function, and expresses the ideas or character desired, the making of visual statement has been associated with noncerebration. A series of rough, ostensibly undisciplined sketches certainly does not suggest intellectual rigor. The artist, after all, is considered to be in a kind of mesmerized state, "flying by the seat of his pants" as he makes decisions. What is really going on? The reality is that the artist, designer, craftsman, the visual communicator is engaged at this crucial point of decision in a highly complex process of selection and rejection.

Talent, artistic control of medium, and intuition have become somewhat confused. In fact, what we call intuition in art is extremely misleading. While the root of the word in Latin, *intuitus*, means "to look at or contemplate," the English usage has come to indicate a special kind of knowing, "knowledge or cognition without rational thought." The dictionary definition also lists such descriptions of meaning as "immediate apprehension or cognition" and "quick and ready in-

*In *Reflections on Art*, Susanne K. Langer (ed.).

sight." The combination adds to the confusion. Immediate apprehension of meaning in visual matters makes it all seem too easy to be taken seriously intellectually. And the artist is unjustly stripped of his special genius.

Any visual venture, no matter how simple, basic, or lowly, involves making something that was not there before, making palpable that which does not yet exist. But anyone can make or design something, even if it is only a mudpie. There are criteria to be applied to the process and to our judgment of it. Sudden inspiration, mindlessness, is not an acceptable force in design. Careful planning, intellectual probing, technical knowledge are necessities in visual pre-planning and design. The artist must seek through his compositional strategies solutions to questions of beauty and functionality, of balance and the mutual support of form and content. His quest is highly intellectual; his options through choice of techniques must be cerebral and in control. Creating in the visual mode at multiple levels of function and expression cannot be accomplished in a semi-comatose aesthetic state, no matter how blessed it allegedly is. Visual intelligence is no different than general intelligence and the control of the elements of visual media presents the same problems as the mastery of any skill. To accomplish it, you must know what you are working with and how to proceed.

Visual composition starts with the basic elements: dot, line, shape, direction, texture, dimension, scale, and movement. The first step in composition is based on a choice of elements appropriate to the medium to be dealt with. In other words, form is the elemental structure. But what to do in the making of the elemental structure? The options and choices that lead to expressive effect depend on the manipulation of the elements by visual techniques. Between the two, elements and techniques, and the multiple means they offer the designer, there are truly limitless choices for control of content. The literally infinite options of design make it difficult to describe the visual techniques in the rigidly definitive way we establish common meaning in words.

Seeing is a natural fact for the human organism; perception is an enabling process. Designing has to do with a little bit of both. To hear does not imply the ability to write music, and, by the same token, to see does not in any way guarantee the ability to make understandable, functional visual statements. Intuition is simply not enough; it is not a mystical force in visual expression. Visual meaning as conveyed by

composition, by manipulation of elements, by visual techniques involves a galaxy of specific factors and forces. The primary technique is, without question, contrast. This is the force that makes the compositional strategies more visible. But meaning emerges from the psychophysiological actions of outside stimuli on the human organism: the tendency to organize all visual cues into the simplest forms possible; the automatic relating of visual cues with identifiable similarities; the overriding need for balance; the compelling connection of visual units born of proximity; the favoring of left-over-right and the lower over the upper areas of a viewing field. These are all factors that monitor visual perception, and to recognize how they operate can enhance or negate the use of technique. Beyond operative knowledge of these and other human perceptual phenomena lies the form of all things visual in art, in manufacture, in nature. The character and perception of it creates the whole, the form. Paul Stern deals with the definition in his essay, "On the Problems of Artistic Form": "It is only when all the factors of an image, all their individual effects are completely attuned to the one intrinsic vital feeling that is expressed in the whole—when, so to speak, the clarity of the image coincides with the clarity of the inner content—that a truly artistic 'form' is achieved." Form, in its visual manifestation, is composed of the elements and their character and arrangement, and the energy they provoke in the viewer. The choice of which of the basic elements are employed in a design and how they are used has to do with both form and the direction of energy released by the form which results in content. The analyzed and stated objective of the visual composer, whether informational, or functional, or both, serves as a guideline for seeking the form a visual statement will take. If, as Louis Sullivan has proclaimed, "form follows function," then it would be a logical extension of his thinking to add, "form follows content." An airplane looks like what it does. Its form is governed and shaped by what it does. A poster for a church fair in summer should do the same. It should be shaped not so much by function in a mechanistic sense, but by function of content. Does it express the purpose for which it was made? It should be bright and gay and engaging and busy and amusing. It should represent and reveal its purpose. Not just through words or symbols but through the total composition. It would be quite within the creative options of a designer to compose a formal and unreadable poster for the purpose outlined (6.2), but the results would have little to do with what the poster was for. One can observe that the choices of techniques are ineffectual. What visual techniques can express the es-

*In *Reflections on Art*, Susanne K. Langer (ed.).

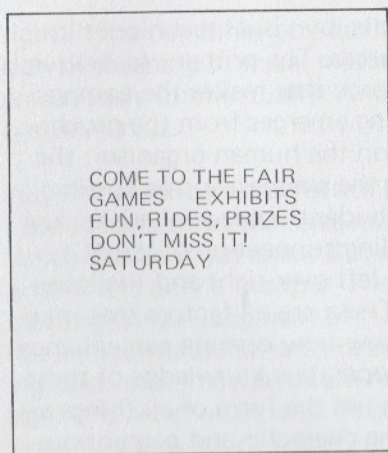


FIGURE 6.2



FIGURE 6.3

sence of the event through a poster? Brightness of tone and fragmentation suggest excitement; spontaneity indicates involvement and movement. Clear display of the verbal message responds to the function of the poster, namely, to solicit attendance. Put them all together and you arrive at one solution (6.3) which seems appropriate.

TECHNIQUES FOR VISUAL COMMUNICATION

The visual techniques offer the designer a wide palette of means for the visual expression of content. They exist as polarities on a continuum, or as unlike and opposite approaches to meaning. Fragmentation, the opposite of the technique of unity, is an excellent choice for the expression of excitement and variety as demonstrated in Figure 6.3. How would it function as the compositional strategy for the reflection of the character of a hospital? Analysis of that character and a plan to represent it compositionally would follow the same pattern for seeking effective verbal descriptions. Clearly, "fragmentation" is a bad choice of technique to associate with a medical center, but quite apt for the reinforcement of the announcement of a church fair. The inner meaning of both legislates the choices the designer has for representing them. Those choices represent the control of effect that ends in strong composition.

Visual techniques do not have to be thought of as either/or choices for constructing or analyzing anything that will be seen. The ex-

trêmes of meaning can be modified to lesser degrees of intensity like the step tones of gray between black and white. In these variations lies a highly expanded range of possibilities for expression and understanding. The subtleties of composition available to the designer are in part due to the multiple options, but also, visual techniques are combined and interactive in their compositional use. One point should be clarified and that is that the polarities of techniques should never be so subtle as to be unclear. While they do not need to be utilized only in their intense extremes, they should be clearly one way or the other. If they are not definable, they become ambiguous, bad conveyers of information. The danger is especially serious in visual communication, which operates with such speed and directness as an information channel.

It would be impossible to name all the visual techniques available, or, in naming them, succeed in giving them hard definitions. Here, as it obtains in every step of the structure of the visual means, personal interpretation is an important factor. But operating within those limitations, each technique and its opposite can be defined as a polarity.

BALANCE

Second in importance to contrast in the visual techniques is balance (6.4). Its primary importance is based on the operation of human perception and the intense need for it in both designing and reacting to a visual statement. Its opposite on a polar continuum is instability. Balance is a design strategy in which there is a center of suspension midway between two weights. Instability (6.5) is the absence of balance and a highly upsetting and provoking visual formulation.

INSTABILITY

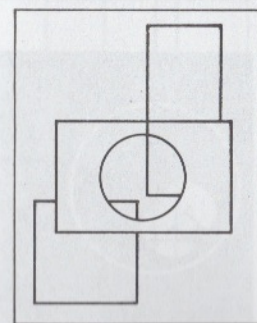


FIGURE 6.4. BALANCE

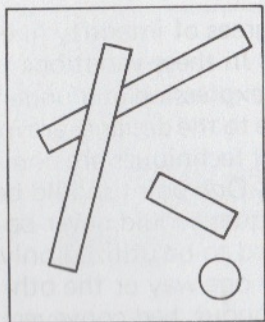
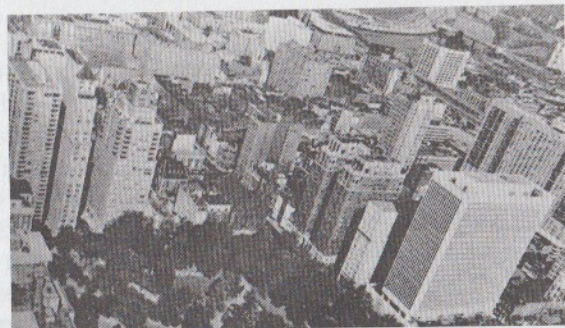


FIGURE 6.5. INSTABILITY

**SYMMETRY**

Balance can be achieved in a visual statement two ways, symmetrically (6.6) and asymmetrically (6.7). Symmetry is axial balance. It is a totally resolved visual formulation in which every unit on one side of

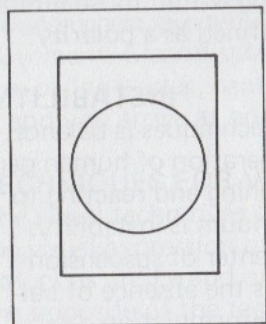
ASYMMETRY

FIGURE 6.6. SYMMETRY

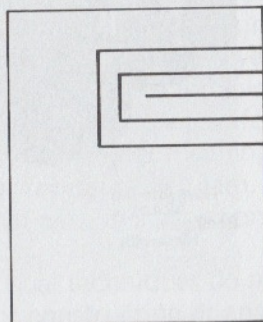
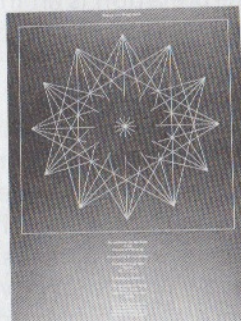


FIGURE 6.7. ASYMMETRY



a center line is replicated exactly on the other side. It is completely logical and simple to design, but can be static and even boring. Asymmetry would be considered ill-balanced by the Greeks, but, in fact, balance can be achieved by variation in elements and placement, which is a counterpoise of weights. The visual equilibrium in such a design is complicated by adjustment of many forces, but is interesting and rich in its variety.

REGULARITY

Regularity (6.8) in design is the favoring of uniformity of elements, the development of an order based on some principle or method that is undeviating. Its opposite is irregularity (6.9), which, as a design strategy, emphasizes the unexpected and unusual, not conforming to any decipherable plan.

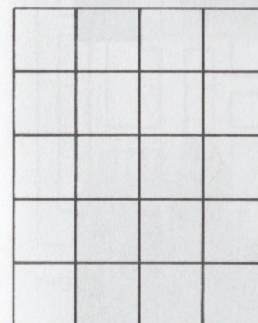
IRREGULARITY

FIGURE 6.8. REGULARITY

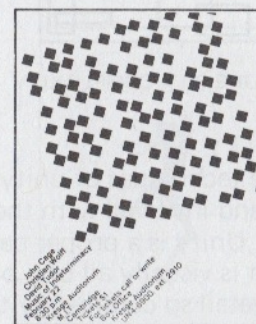
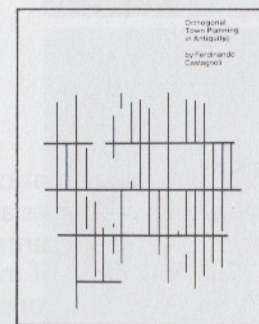
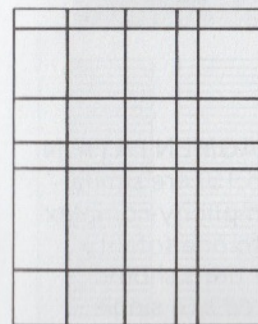


FIGURE 6.9. IRREGULARITY

SIMPLICITY

Order contributes a great deal to the visual synthesis of simplicity

COMPLEXITY

(6.10), a visual technique of directness and singleness of elemental form, free from secondary complications or elaboration. Its opposite visual formulation, complexity (6.11), comprises a visual intricacy made up of many elemental units and forces and results in a difficult process of organizing the meaning in the pattern.



FIGURE 6.10. SIMPLICITY



FIGURE 6.11. COMPLEXITY

UNITY

The techniques of unity (6.12) and fragmentation (6.13) are similar to and involved with the same design strategies as simplicity-complexity. Unity is a proper balance of diverse elements into one totality that is visually all of a piece. The collection of many units should dovetail so completely that it is viewed and considered as a single thing. Fragmentation is the breaking up of the elements and units of a design into separate pieces that relate but retain their own individual character.

FRAGMENTATION

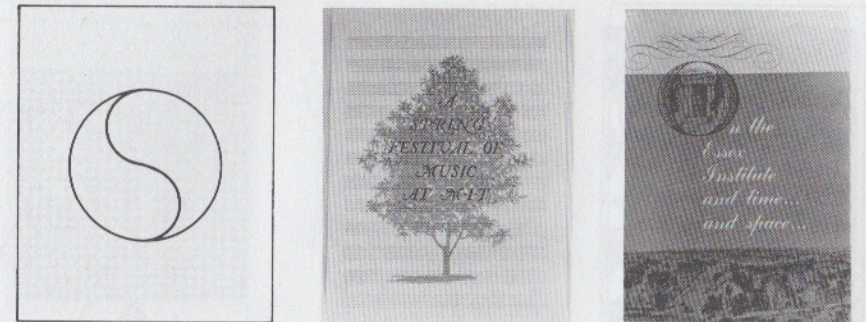


FIGURE 6.12. UNITY



FIGURE 6.13. FRAGMENTATION

ECONOMY

The presence of minimum units of visual means is typical of the tech-

INTRICACY

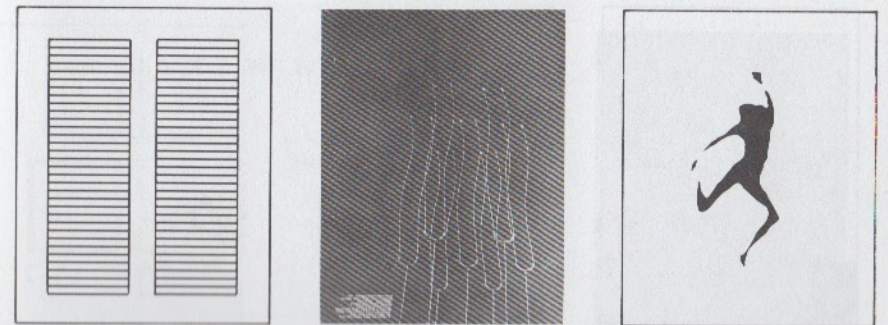


FIGURE 6.14. ECONOMY

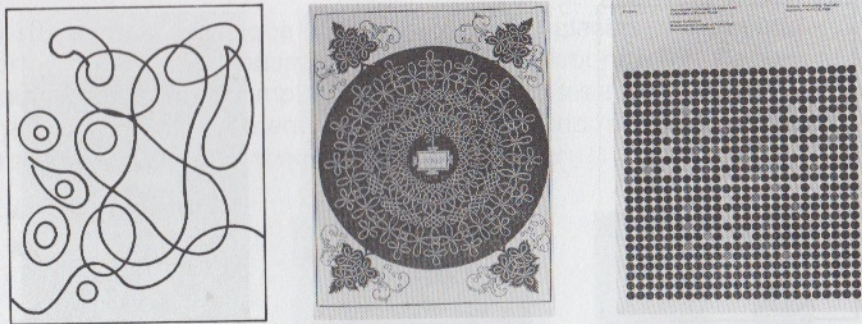


FIGURE 6.15. INTRICACY

nique of economy (6.14) which contrasts with its polar technique of intricacy (6.15) in many ways. Economy is a visual arrangement that is frugal and judicious in the utilization of elements. Intricacy is heavily weighted toward a technique of endlessly detailed discursive additions to a basic design that, ideally, soften and make more beautiful through ornamentation. Intricacy is an enriching technique visually, and associated with power and wealth, while economy is visually fundamental, emphasizing the conservative and understatement of the poor and the pure.

UNDERSTATEMENT

Understatement (6.16) and exaggeration (6.17) are the intellectual counterparts of economy-intricacy, serving similar ends but in a different context. Understatement is an approach of great restraint that seeks maximum response from the viewer from minimum ele-

EXAGGERATION

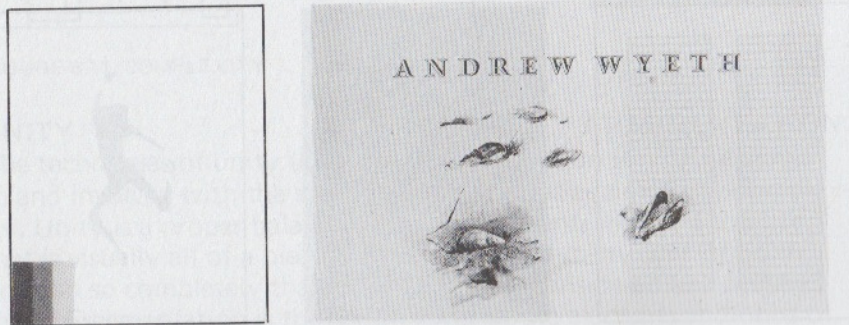


FIGURE 6.16. UNDERSTATEMENT



FIGURE 6.17. EXAGGERATION

ments. In fact, understatement in its studied attempt to engender great effect is the exact mirror image of its visual polarity, exaggeration. Both, in their own way, take great liberties with the manipulation of visual detail. Exaggeration, to be visually effective, must overstate extravagantly, enlarging its expression far beyond the truth to heighten and amplify.

PREDICTABILITY

Predictability (6.18), as a visual technique suggests some order or plan that is highly conventional. Whether through experience or observation or reason, one should be able to foretell in advance what the entire visual message will be, based on the minimum of information. Spontaneity (6.19), on the other hand, is characterized by an apparent lack of plan. It is an emotion-fraught technique, impulsive and unconstrained.

SPONTANEITY

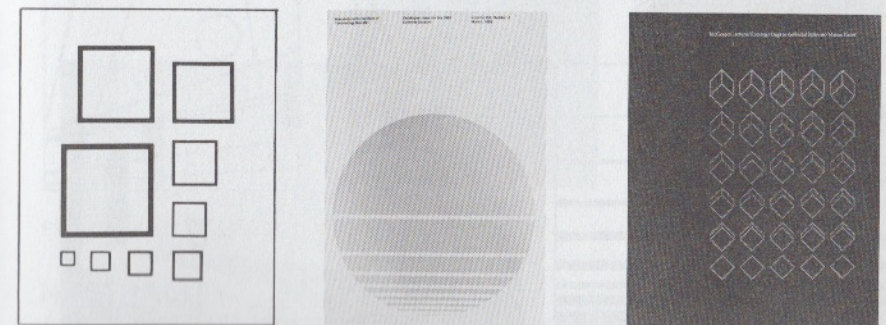


FIGURE 6.18. PREDICTABILITY

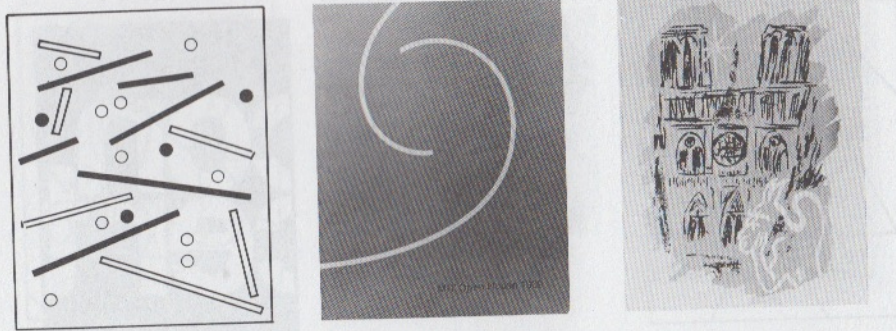


FIGURE 6.19. SPONTANEITY

ACTIVENESS

Activity (6.20), as a visual technique, must be reflective of motion through representation or suggestion. The energetic and lively posture of an active visual technique is highly modified in the motionless

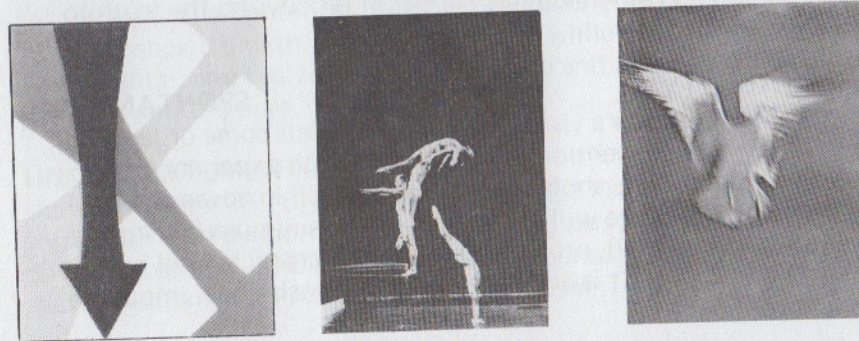


FIGURE 6.20. ACTIVENESS

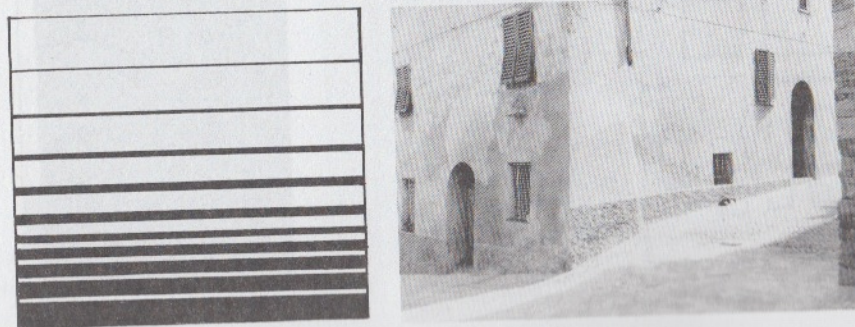


FIGURE 6.21. STASIS

STASIS

force of the technique of static representation (6.21), which, through absolute equilibrium, presents an effect of quiescence and repose.

SUBTLETY

In a visual message, subtlety is the technique you would choose to make a fine distinction, shunning any obviousness and energy of purpose. While subtlety (6.22) suggests a delicate and highly refined visual approach, it must be keenly devised and ingenious in solution. Boldness (6.23) is, by its very nature, an obvious visual technique. It should be turned to by the designer with daring and used with assurance and confidence, since its purpose is to seek optimum visibility.

BOLDNESS

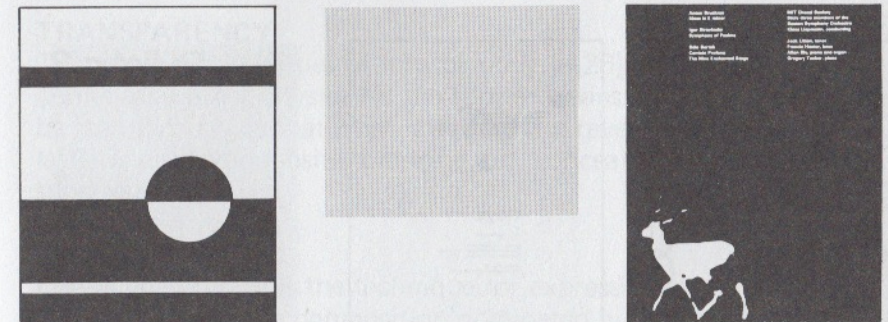


FIGURE 6.22. SUBTLETY



FIGURE 6.23. BOLDNESS

NEUTRALITY

A neutral (6.24) look to a design is almost a contradiction in terms, and yet there are occasions when the least provoking setting for a visual statement can be the most effective in cutting through viewer resistance or even belligerency. Little of the atmosphere of neutrality

ACCENT



FIGURE 6.24. NEUTRALITY

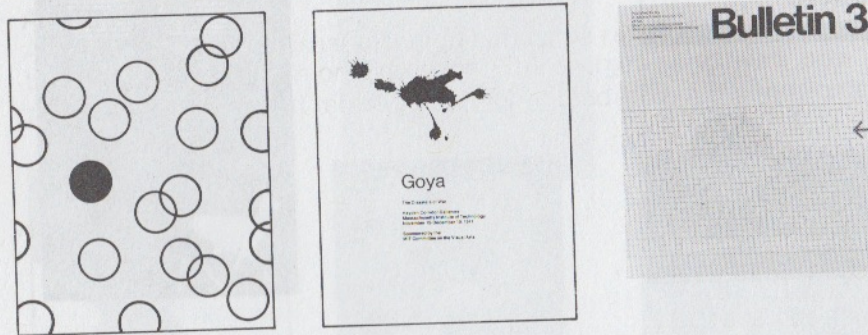


FIGURE 6.25. ACCENT

is disturbed by the technique of accent (6.25), in which just one thing is highlighted against a sameness of background.

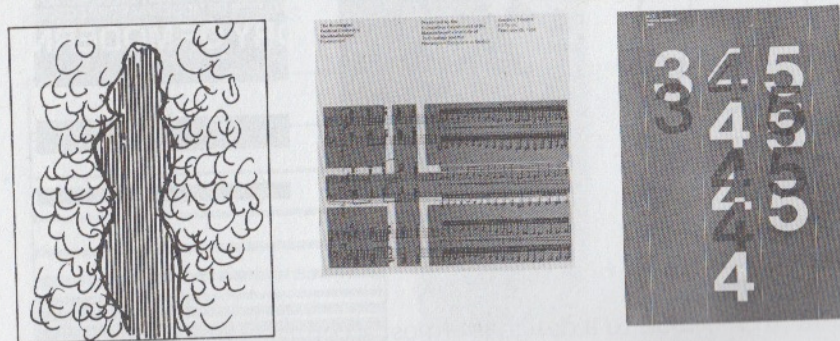


FIGURE 6.26. TRANSPARENCY



FIGURE 6.27. OPACITY

TRANSPARENCY

The technique polarities of transparency (6.26) and opacity (6.27) define each other physically: the former means visual detail that can be seen through so that what is behind it is revealed to the eye; the latter is just the opposite, blocking out, concealing what it visually supersedes.

CONSISTENCY

Consistency (6.28) is the technique for expressing visual compatibility, for developing a composition dominated by one thematic approach, uniform and consonant. If message strategy calls for changes and elaborations, the technique of variation (6.29) offers diversity and assortment. But variation, in visual composition, reflects the use of variation in musical composition in that the mutations are controlled by one dominant theme.

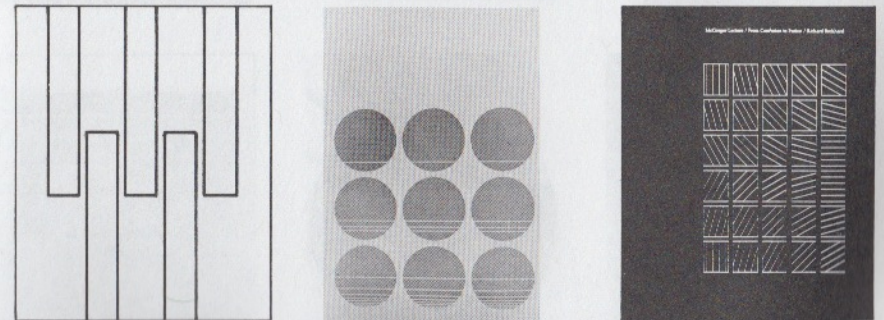


FIGURE 6.28. CONSISTENCY

OPACITY

VARIATION

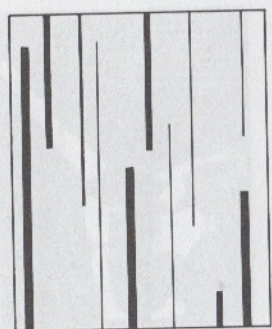


FIGURE 6.29. VARIATION

**ACCURACY**

Accuracy (6.30) is the natural technique of the camera, the option of the artist. Our natural visual experience of things is the model of realism in the visual arts and its utilization can involve many tricks and conventions calculated to replicate the same visual cues as the eye

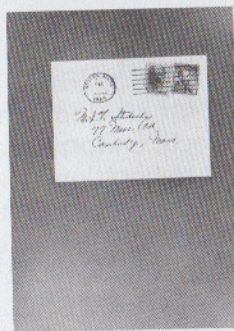
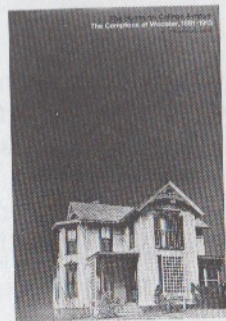
DISTORTION

FIGURE 6.30. ACCURACY

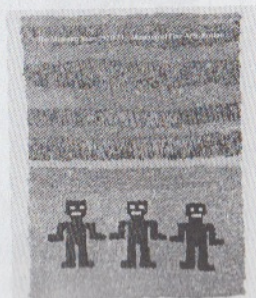


FIGURE 6.31. DISTORTION

conveys to the brain. The camera is patterned on the eye and, consequently, delivers many of its effects. For the artist, the use of perspective reinforced with the technique of chiaroscuro can suggest what we see directly in experience. But they are tricks on the eye. The most studied accuracy in painting is called just that, a "trompe l'oeil." Distortion (6.31) tampers with realism, seeking control of effect through deviation from regular shape and, possibly, true form. This is a technique that responds to strong purpose in visual composition and, well-handled, produces intense response.

FLATNESS**DEPTH**

Both of these visual techniques are primarily ruled by the use or non-use of perspective and augmented by replication of the environmental information through imitation of the effects of light and shade through chiaroscuro (6.32, 6.33) to suggest or to erase the natural appearance of dimension.

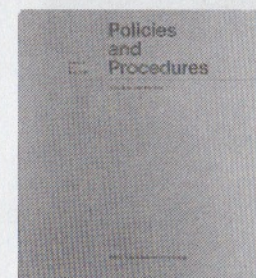
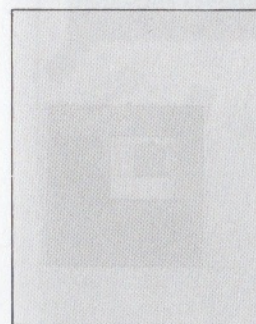


FIGURE 6.32. FLATNESS

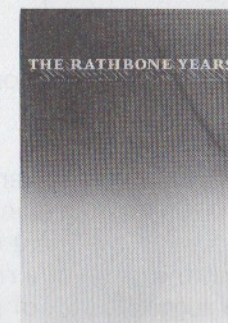
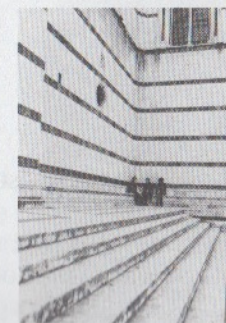


FIGURE 6.33. DEPTH

SINGULARITY

Singularity (6.34) is the focus of a composition on one separate and solitary theme, unsupported by any other particular or general visual stimuli. The strongest quality of this technique is the specific emphasis it conveys. Juxtaposition (6.35) expresses the interaction of visual stimuli, placing, as it does, at least two cues side by side, activating comparison of relationships.

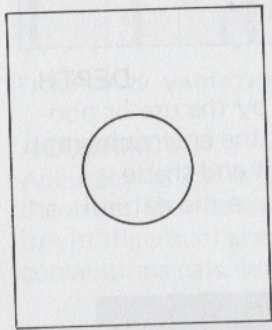


FIGURE 6.34. SINGULARITY

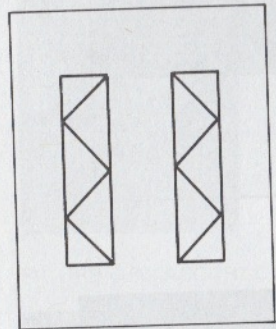


FIGURE 6.35. JUXTAPOSITION

SEQUENTIALITY

A sequential (6.36) arrangement in design is based on the compositional response to a plan of presentation that is arranged in a logical order. The arrangement can have any formula, but usually involves a series of things set in a rhythmic pattern. A random (6.37) technique should suggest a lack of plan, or a planned disorganization or accidental presentation of visual information.

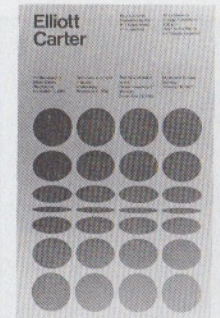
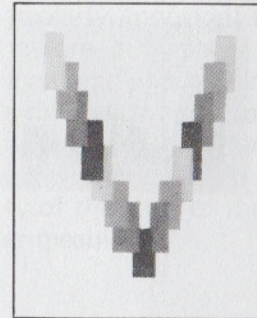
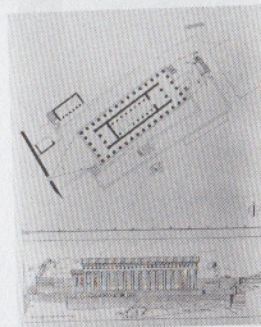
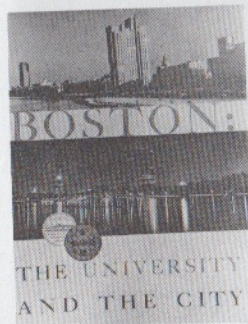
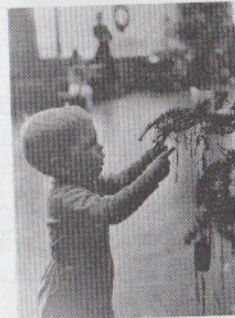
JUXTAPOSITION

FIGURE 6.36. SEQUENTIALITY

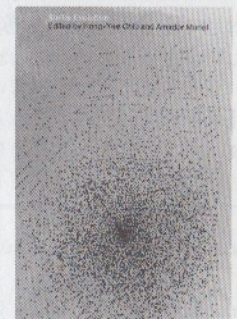


FIGURE 6.37. RANDOMNESS

SHARPNESS

Sharpness (6.38) as a visual technique is linked closely to clarity of physical state as well as clarity of expression. Through the use of precision and hard edges, the final effect is a distinct one and easy to in-

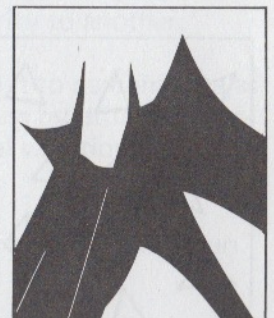
DIFFUSION

FIGURE 6.38. SHARPNESS

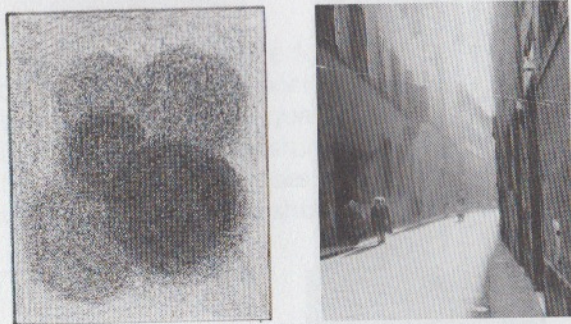


FIGURE 6.39. DIFFUSION

interpret. Diffusion (6.39) is soft, opting for less precision of character, but more atmosphere, more feeling and warmth.

REPETITION

Repetition (6.40) is the uninterrupted visual connections that are par-

EPISODICITY

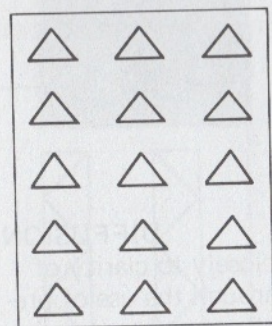


FIGURE 6.40. REPETITION

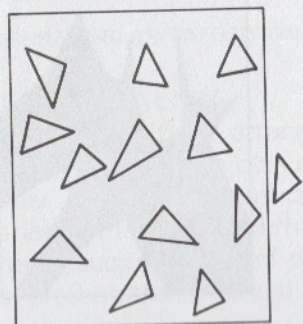


FIGURE 6.41. EPISODICITY



ticularly important to any unitized visual statement. In film, in architecture, in graphics, continuity is not only the uninterrupted steps from one point to another, but it is also the cohesive force that holds a diverse composition together. Episodic techniques (6.41) in visual expression indicate the expression of disconnection or, at least, loose connections. This is a technique which reinforces the individual quality of the parts of the whole without completely abandoning the larger meaning.

These techniques are only some of the many possible information modifiers available to the designer. Almost every visual formulator has a counterforce, and each of them is connected with the control of the visual elements that result in the shaping of content, the construction of message. Many more visual techniques can be explored, discovered, and utilized compositionally, and always in the action-counteraction polar state: brightness, dullness; colorfulness, monochromaticity; angularity, roundness; verticality, horizontality; sketchiness, mechanicalness; intersection, parallelism. Their opposite states of polarity offer the visual composer great opportunity to sharpen the meaning of the work in which they are applied through the use of contrast.

Visual techniques overlap and reinforce meaning in any compositional effort; all together they present artist and nonartist alike with the most effective means of making and understanding expressive visual communication in the search for a universal visual language.

EXERCISES

1. Pick out any polar techniques (accent-neutrality, exaggeration-understatement, depth-flatness, etc.) and find as many examples of each as you can. Arrange the examples from one polarity to another.
2. Choose any one visual subject and photograph it to demonstrate as many visual techniques as you possibly can express by different camera angles and positions, as well as other technical variations including light.
3. Choose one of the techniques listed and not shown and sketch an abstract design to illustrate it.
4. Take a number of advertisements, posters, or photographs and beside each list the techniques most evident in their composition.