

Lesson Eight

Narrative

Text and photographs often accompany one another. Newspapers rely on photographs to illustrate news releases. Text books rely on a combination of descriptive text and diagrammatic photographs to help students understand a particular concept, system or set of relationships. Museums display title and descriptive text next to displayed art work. Photo essays, such as *Women* by Annie Leibowitz, lay out a set of photos that become unified by Susan Sontag's discussion of women in America.

Narrative implies the act of telling. What are we telling, what do we want to tell, to whom are we telling this? Narrative also implies telling a story. Photographs, especially a series of photographs, tell a story to be read by the viewer. As we have already discussed, multiple viewers often have multiple readings of the story a photograph tells. Sometimes it is important for the viewer to clearly understand the photographer's intended narrative for the photographs. Text accompanying photographs more clearly tells the intended narrative story.

There are many examples of how text is used as an integral part of the reading of photographs. The most familiar and common is the title. By simply naming the place or the situation the viewer's interpretation is guided (as we saw in lesson two with *Slaughter House* by Jerome Liebling). Mary Price, in *The Photograph: A Strange Confined Place*, discusses the use of a title and how it influences the viewer's reading. Through the act of naming (giving a title), interpretation begins and is guided. Context is revealed through this guided interpretation. "To describe and to name is to continue the process of seeing by interpretation. Naming is interpretation, even when the name is Untitled" (Price 1994).

Another familiar use of text is the essay. A book such as Peter Matthiessen's *Tigers in the Snow* combines an in-depth essay about the history and decline of Siberian Tigers in the Russian Far East with photographs of these tigers by Maurice Hornocker. The photographs alone show us the many moods and habits of these beautiful tigers, but the photographs do not tell the stories about threats to these

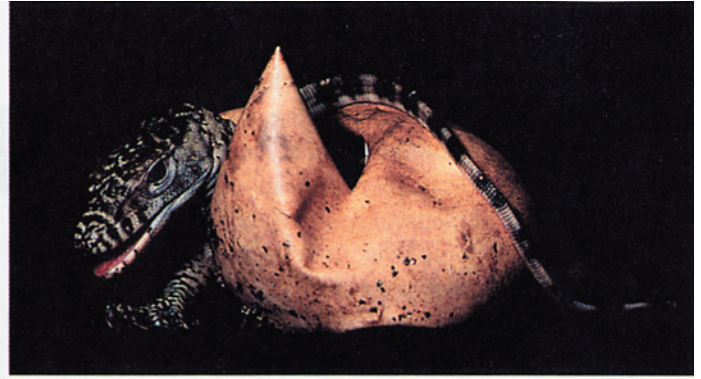
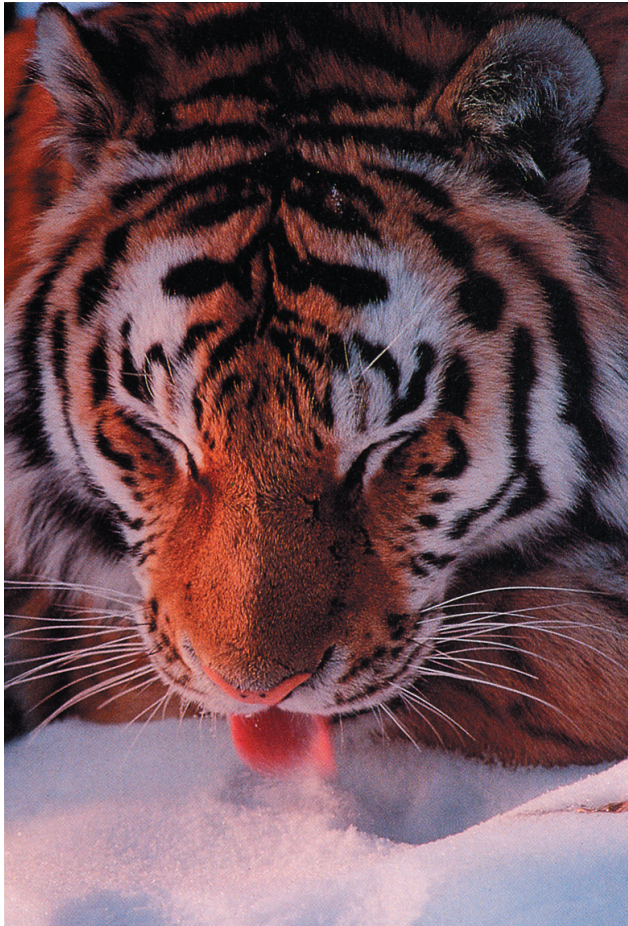


FIGURE 34.22 A hatching reptile. This Komodo dragon is breaking out of a parchmentlike shell, a common type of shell among reptiles. The shells of some reptiles are harder because of an abundance of calcium carbonate, as in bird eggs.

from *Biology*, 6th ed. Campbell and Reece. 2002.

The crucial question is not a technical one, not what constitutes a "good" photograph measured by focus or contrast. The crucial and important question is twofold: What does this photograph convey as information, and what does that information mean? To talk about either aspect, it is necessary to describe the photograph, that is, to name what is seen as fully as possible and then to relate that description to the context, effect, and significance of the piece.

Mary Price. "Untitled." *The Photograph: A Strange Confined Place* 1994. p.71-87.



Maurice Hornocker. 2000.

tigers' habitat, increased poaching, and cultural animosity and fear of these big cats. The photographs endear the reader to the plight of these animals as we read Matthiessen's urgent text. Hornocker presents the Siberian Tigers as beautiful, strong and beguiling creatures, creatures that we want to care about. He writes "If these photographs stir the conservation embers in readers' souls and help to save the great Siberian, then our efforts will have been well rewarded." (2000 p. xviii)

Tigers in the Snow exemplifies how photographs add to a text. *Colorado: Visions of an American Landscape*, by Kenneth Helphand and Ellen Manchester, exemplifies the equal joining of text and photographs. Over one-hundred photographs, gathered throughout Colorado, visually tell the story of this state's history and evolution of landscape photography. The photographs can be viewed alone as a visual description of Colorado. The photographs also illustrate how photography molded the identity of the state. The text complements the photo narrative in an equally in-depth and thoughtful manner. The project was conceived



Miller, T.C. (attr.) Hydraulic Mining at Alma, Ca. 1881.

as an equal collaboration of photography and text to discuss the changing landscape of Colorado. Manchester, the photo editor of *Colorado*, states “the photographs are to be seen for their distinct narrative quality, in their own right, not necessarily as illustrations of the text. In addition, the text does not always describe specific images. Both are designed to complement each other and to stimulate further thinking.” (p. xviii 1991)

A similar collaboration between text and photography is *Overland: The California Immigrant Trail* by Greg MacGregor. The existing remnants of the Immigrant Trail are photographically recorded by MacGregor and joined with shorter excerpts of text about the history of each of the places. Instead of a continuous narrative, the excerpts act as long titles to each of the photographs, helping the viewer understand the past use of the present scene photographed on the trail. Two sets of time are experienced by the viewer, that of the present physical state of the California Immigrant Trail and the past histories of its use and the people who traveled it. The two times, through two representations (photography and text), echo off one another.

Richard Misrach’s *Violent Legacies*, a set of photo essays in the Desert Cantos series, uses short text (a few paragraphs) to introduce particular sets of issues that created or influenced the landscapes photographed and shown. Misrach’s use of large format color film and his precise sense of light and form create beautiful photographs of, at times, the most horrific subjects. For example “The Pit”, one

Several Principles guided the selection of these photographs. First, landscape photographs were defined by images that represented the relationship of people to place. Second, each photograph tells more than one story, speaks to several levels of landscape thinking, and often represents similar issues in another period, i.e. a nineteenth century mining photograph might address contemporary environmental concerns. Third, the selection attempts to provide a sense of the history of photography, specifically as it relates to landscape and cultural issues. Various styles of photography from every decade since 1859 are represented by a diverse group of more than sixty photographers. To reflect an accurate history of the medium, a wide range of types of photographs was selected, ranging from the snapshot to government documents and fine art images.

Ellen Manchester “About the photographs.”
Colorado: Visions of an American Landscape.
 1991.

Initial investigation by the government experts indicated that radiation was the cause [of the animals' deaths]. However, when the Atomic Energy Commission recognized the potential economic and political liability, all reports and findings were immediately classified. The AEC did provide a public explanation: a dry year and malnutrition were blamed.

Today, county-designated dead-animal pits can be found throughout the West. They function much like trash dumps in which locals are encouraged to deposit livestock that die suddenly. The causes of the animal's deaths are often unknown.

Richard Misrach. "The Pit." *Violent Legacies: Three Cantos*. 1992.

Richard Misrach. Dead animals #79. 1992.



of Misrach's best-known works, depicts a farm animal dumping site in the desert, including close-ups of the rotting remains of horses and cattle. These images are beautiful and horrible at the same time and yet I cannot take my eyes off of them. The text reveals the government policies creating this landscape and Misrach's advocacy against such practices.

Because Misrach's images are so beautiful and formal the viewer might not understand Misrach's strong political motivations for taking these photographs. The text in *Violent Legacies* is essential for understanding the deeper implications of what the photographs depict. Without it, many of the photographs' deeper meanings could be lost in their sheer beauty. Beauty can anaesthetize critical thought. Misrach's text pushes us to think harder about what his photos show through his narrative. It is just a matter of the viewer reading the text.

As we have discussed, narrative text can be long or short, directly descriptive of the photograph, or descriptive of a larger context impacting what is shown by the photographer. All of the previous examples have text as separate from the photograph. There is another set of photographers who use narrative text as a formal part of the photograph. Hamish Fulton, Peter Goin and Wanda

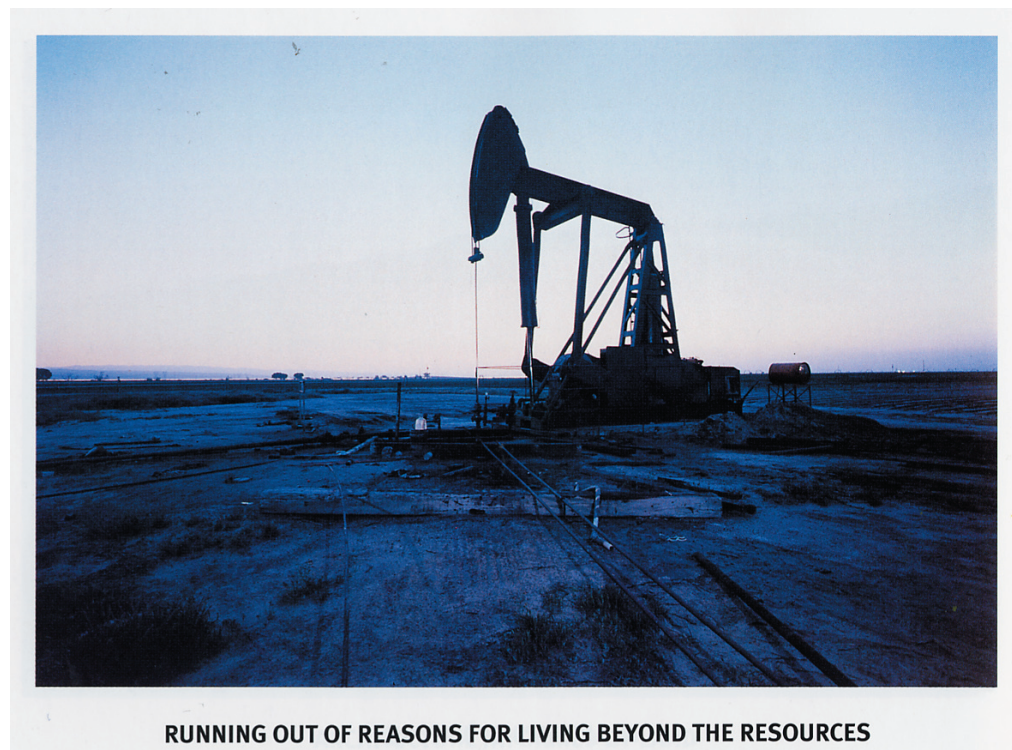
Hammerbeck's work are three examples from a whole genre that combines text and photographs.

Peter Goin and Wanda Hammerbeck use text as a way to directly critique what is depicted in their photographs. Because the text is printed with the photograph, the viewer can't ignore it. It cannot be overlooked or brushed aside, instead it is an integral part of the image, not a title printed on a white card next to the image. The pieces of narrative hit us because they are so critical. Imagine looking at either of these images with no text. What would you think about them? Would either of these narratives have occurred to you? Now that you have read them, what do you think? How will you remember these photographs?

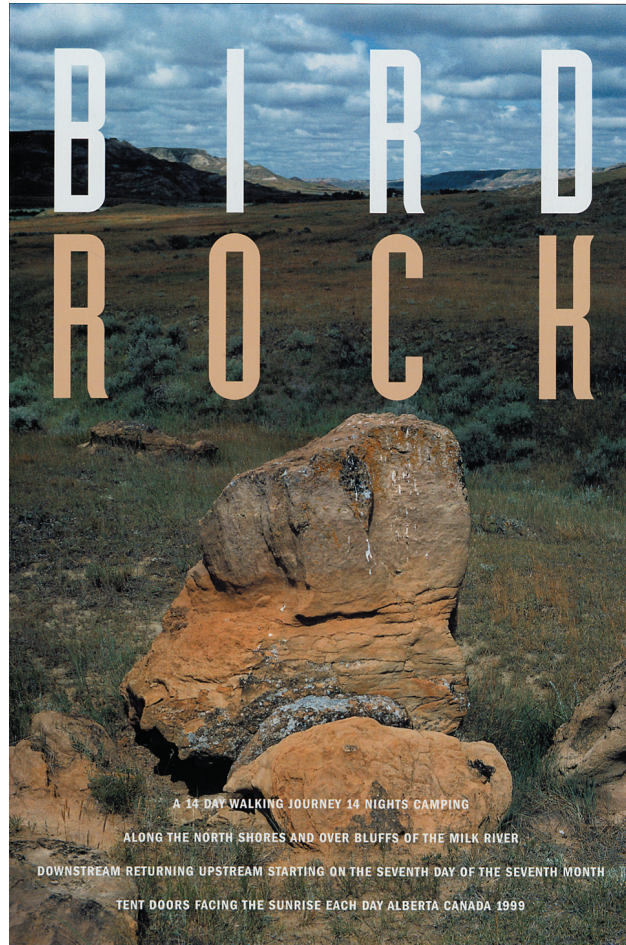
Hamish Fulton recounts a journey or an event of the day in his text-imbedded photographs. His work is similar to Goin's and



Peter Goin. How would a House Withstand Nuclear Wind? 1987.



Wanda Hammerbeck. Running Out of Reasons for Living Beyond the Resources. 1992.



Hamis Fulton. Bird Rock. 1999.

Hammerbeck's in that the narrative is not explicit in the photograph. Instead the narrative adds another layer of meaning. In this instance the narrative also invites the viewer to imagine places or events beyond the frame of the single photograph.

In Fulton's more recent work text also plays a significant role in the overall composition of the image. The text is made large or small, skinny or fat according to Fulton's sense of design and how that plays into the composition of the photograph. The text is colored to mimic certain tones and pigments in the photograph. Fulton creates an image that represents a whole journey. In "Bird Rock", Fulton tells us what we cannot see in the photograph: the length of time of the journey, the terrain traveled and his personal tent door ritual. The photograph combined with the text creates a representation of a span of time instead of a single moment. This two dimensional representation implies a three dimensional experience because of the inclusion of narrative as a compositional element.

Recontextualization (again)

Narrative is another way to recontextualize photographs (which you might have guessed). Short illustrative text illuminates multiple issues and contexts that often can never be read through a photograph. Duane Michals explores this issue in his work. One of Michals's best-know examples is this bar scene joined by a brief text:

My shirt was wet with perspiration. The beer tasted good but I was still thirsty. Some drunk was talking loudly to another drunk about Nixon. I watched a roach walk slowly along the edge of a bar stool. On the juke box Glen Campbell began to sing about "southern nights." I had to go to the men's room. A derelict began to walk towards me to ask for money. It was time to leave. (1977)



Duane Michals. There are things not seen in this photograph. 1977.

None of this interaction is shown in the photograph. It is simply a photograph of an empty bar. Michal's words enliven the scene and place the viewer in the physical experience of the bar. We all can imagine how it might have felt to be sitting at that bar while reading Michals text.

This is not to say that all photographs require a narrative or even a title. It is up to the photographer (and his collaborators) to decide how much he wants

to influence and guide the reading of the photograph. In many instances the photographer desires to leave the reading open ended and up to the viewer. But if a particular context is important to the photographer then he can reveal that to the viewer via a textual narrative can reveal that to the viewer.

Narrative and design

For our purposes narrative is another way for a student to more deeply engage the design process. Site photographs can be the starting point for a narrative exploration of history, use, personal feelings, political climate, or imagined change. Writing is yet another way to uncover meaningful context and apply it directly or indirectly to the design process. Narrative accompanying site photographs also helps others understand a place beyond its present physical state. Like MacGregor's work in *Overland*, a student could research and write past histories of places he photographed today. This juxtaposition can help viewers connect the past to the present in a more tangible way. Similarly, the inclusion of personal experiences or journeys of a place can help the viewer understand what it may feel like to be in that place. The narrative adds another layer of understanding and depth to the photographic representation of a place.

Taking Narrative a Step Farther

While narrative guides and informs the reading of a photograph, each viewer will still continue to interpret the photograph based on her own general experience in the world and specific associations with what the subject matter of the photograph signifies. The same holds true for landscapes. Creating narratives for landscapes, or creating narrative landscapes is a practice often associated with historical or ecological interpretation of a place. The intent is to guide the visitor's experience and inform her about the intent of the place. Marc Treib speaks to this in "Must Landscapes Mean?" He pointedly explores how and why landscapes mean and ponders the question "Is it really possible to build into landscape architecture a semantic dimension that communicates the maker's intention to the inhabitant?" Unlike photographs hung in a gallery or museum, there is no true equivalent to the white title card in even the most intentionally, metaphorically wrought, built landscape. Similarly a landscape cannot be perceived in one glance, one momentary look. Landscapes must be experienced individually over a span of time.

Ten Lessons on Writing the Landscape, the next guide, easily follows the same paths of discovery we have addressed in these lessons on photography. Through writing, as through photographing, we reveal multiple layers of a landscape's history. Writing both focuses our thoughts and encourages personal expression. Writing asks us to explore the meaning of a place through words and descriptions. This process necessarily forces us look more closely, ask more questions, and become an active participant in the landscape's history and life.

In looking at a photograph and either reading or applying a descriptive narrative we are always bound by the time and cultural viewpoint from which we come. In fifty years that same narrative applied to that same image may be read in a very different way simply because the time has changed, the cultural context of the reading has changed. Things change.

The same holds true for landscapes. The intended narrative of a garden fades and changes over time because the changing culture can no longer read the narrative signs imbedded in the landscape. But the landscape is still experienced by the visitor. Treib states "We have lost the ability to read the original intentions, but we can still decipher the original garden elements on our own contemporary terms." Landscape narrative becomes flexible, fluid simply because human nature is flexible and fluid. The same is true for photographic narrative.

What is different is the ability to change. Landscapes change over time - plants grow, and die, structures weather and fail, and the designer or owner's whims slowly reform a place. Photographs themselves do not change: they are frozen pieces of time. The context in which they are presented can change (and can radically change the way they are read) but the actual object and what it visually depicts does not change. Landscapes may have more open-ended narratives because of their ability to change, while a photograph's narrative may lose relevance over time. A landscape that is too dependent on a rigid narrative may also lose relevance over time.

Landscapes and photographs mean something to the viewer when they trigger an emotional response. Narrative may enhance this experience, but it may also limit it. Treib concludes in "Must Landscapes Mean?" "Could we not start with these physical senses rather with the uncultured mind? Could we not make the place pleasurable?"

Similarly, narrative can enhance meaning, but it can also lead in an artificial and unsustainable way. It is a matter of balance. What narratives enhances the visual qualities and meaning of the photograph? What narratives are too heavy-handed and leading? When is a narrative necessary and when can an image or scene evoke strong meaning without an narrative? How might this narrative stand the test of time? How might it evolve? By looking at photographs and applying narratives to them we can experiment with what that balance should be.

Narrative is an increasingly common intention in contemporary landscape design. However, landscape narratives are typically conceived in terms of literal storytelling, being highly scripted and controlled with explicit references to histories, biographies, local emblems or other codified or textual forms. While this does begin to communicate a local sense of place and extend the repertoire of landscape expression, it is a limited conception of the significance and potential of both narrative and landscape.

Matthew Potteiger and Jamie Purinton.

"Landscape Narratives." 1998.

Reading

Primary:

MacGregor, Greg. *Overland: The California Emigrant Trail of 1841-1870*. University of New Mexico Press. 1996.

Manchester, Ellen. "About the Photographs." *Colorado: Visions of an American Landscape*. Kenny Helphand. Roberts Rinehart Publishers. Niwot, Colorado. 1991. p. xv -xix.

Misrach, Robert. *Violent Legacies*. Aperture. New York. 1992.

Potteiger, Matthew and Purinton, Jaime. "Landscape Narratives." *Theory in Landscape Architecture*. Simon Swaffield. University of Pennsylvania Press. 2002. First published 1998. p. 136-144.

Secondary:

Treib, Marc. "Must landscapes Mean?" *Theory in Landscape Architecture*. Simon Swaffield. University of Pennsylvania Press. 2002. First published 1995. p. 89-101.

Tertiary:

Morley, Simon. *Writing on the Wall: Word and Image in Modern Art*. University of California Press. Berkeley. 2003.

Assignment Nine

Narrative

Narratives are articulated and constructed via the design process and the resulting final landscape plan. Potteiger and Purinton describe three forms of landscape narrative: the story realm, the contextual/intertextual realm, the discourse realm. Each of the realms relies on “outside” information (re)applied to the landscape. This outside information can be: history, personal experience, fictional narrative, folklore, ecology, collective community experiences, collective cultural beliefs, etc. etc. . . .

This outside information is usually embedded in the experience of the place, but often must be revealed through writing or other interpretive methods.

For this assignment I am asking you to create a photographic narrative. This narrative making will draw on all of the “tools” you have collected through the previous lessons. Your series of photographs should reveal or uncover a story about the place. This story can be actual or constructed, serious or humorous. It must tell a story about a landscape (remember the term landscape can be defined in multiple ways).

In creating this photographic narrative, I am asking you to either read an existing narrative and apply it your photographic experience, or write a narrative that adds to the understanding of the series. You must include a portion of the narrative with the photographs.

Journal Eight

Narrative

Where is your narrative?

What photographic methods did you use to create narrative? (framing, depth of field, etc.)

What major relationships convey the photographic narrative?

Please attach a portion of your written narrative (one to five paragraphs).