

# An introduction to photography & series

Welcome to Ten Lessons in Landscape Photography. The first lesson is a big one! It is so big that I have split it into two sections that can be taught together or separately. In these two sections we will discuss:

## **Part One**

- the photo as a subjective representation
- reading photographs
- the photo as decontextualized object
- role of landscape photography in how we view the American Landscape

## **Part two**

- the series and how it is helpful for design

You will notice that there is no specific introduction to the technical aspects of photography (such as aperture, shutter speed or film speed). This guide is meant to be an introduction to photography to all people with any type of camera. The focus of this guide will be on taking photos for design, not taking photos to be hung on gallery walls or printed in the darkroom. So I have kept the discussion of technical issues to a minimum. If there is a desire on your part to learn more about the technical aspects of your camera, please refer to the very comprehensive and accessible text *Photography* by Barbara London and John Upton.

## **Why photograph? The subjective nature of photography.**

All photographs are taken by someone, an individual with certain motivations and tastes. This individual, through the act of making a photograph, is designating a certain scene as important or memorable.

Photographs are a documentation of both a place or event and the photographer's preferences. Whether conscious or unconscious the photographer's biases always influence the image created. As a result all photographs are subjective in nature.

## **On Reading [the photograph]**

If we look closely at a photograph we can start addressing some of the assumptions we make about the objectivity of photographs. Most historical photographs are thought of as objective documentation of a certain time and place. Assumptions we tend to make about this scene are:

*Photographs bear witness to a human choice being exercised in a given situation. A photograph is a result of the photographer's decision that it is worth recording[,] that this particular event or this particular object has been seen.*

John Burger. "Understanding a Photograph."  
*The Look Of Things*. 1974.

E.R. Monroe or N. L. Ellis. Family Group.  
1897. The State Historical Society of  
Wisconsin.



*There is something paradoxical in the way that documentary photographs interact with our notions of reality. To function as documents at all they must first persuade us that they describe their subject accurately and objectively; in fact their initial task is to convince their audience that they are truly documents, that the photographer has fully exercised his powers of observation and description and has set aside his imaginings and prejudices. The ideal photographic document would appear to be without author or art. Yet of course photographs, despite their verisimilitude, are abstractions; their information is selective and incomplete.*  
Lewis Baltz, review of the *New West*, by Robert Adams, in *Art in America*, Vol. 63, n.2 1975. p41. Requoted in *The New Topographics* 1975.

- this is a family
- this is their house
- they are farmers

Actually we don't know for sure if any of these assumptions are true. The photo is sending the reader certain signals based on **collective cultural understandings** (see Shramm model in the Introduction) but can we really know if they are true? The only real assumption that can be made is: these people are posing for a photographer. It is the photographer who is creating this scene for the viewer. It is the photographer who makes subjective choices in making this photograph. For example the photographer probably:

- posed the people
- chose what side of the house to pose the people in front of
- chose how to frame the photograph
- chose what details or people to leave in or leave out
- chose the time of day to take this photograph

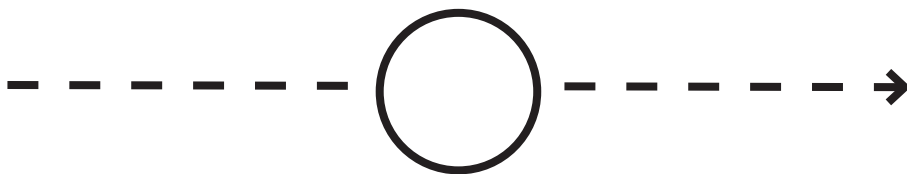
The photographer's choices determine how the viewer reads the photograph. Instead of *making assumptions* about what we are viewing it is more productive to *ask questions*:

- who are these people?
- where is this place?
- how are these people related to each other?
- what is the photographer trying to show?
- when was this taken?
- does the architecture or dress give us clues as to the time period?
- etc, etc, etc.

Getting in the habit of asking questions instead of making assumptions leads to **active viewing** versus **passive viewing** (see introduction). Active viewing helps the viewer delve more deeply into the information and details of a photograph. Active viewing trains our eye and mind to explore and wonder about what we are seeing instead of passively accepting base assumptions about a photograph. We become *critical* viewers through active viewing.

### The Slice: photographs as decontextualized objects

Another issue that needs addressing is the ways in which a the photograph isolates time and space. The photo essentially acts as a slice through time and space, capturing a single moment. This moment is immediately removed from its context and stands alone as a discrete object. The photo becomes a **decontextualized object** (see introduction, pp 13). How does this affect the way we view a photograph?



Because the photo is removed from its original context the viewer must rely on what is visually depicted in the image. We read the **internal context** and apply **external context** (Introduction, pp 13). Through this process the we will

*As for asking questions, one can simply get in the habit of doing so. What does it look like? How does it work? Who designed it? Why? When? What does it tell us about the way society works? . . .*

*One can . . . teach oneself how to see, and that is something most Americans haven't done and should do. . . The alternation of looking and reading and thinking and then looking and reading again, can yield remarkable results, if only to raise questions we had not asked before.*

Pierce F. Lewis. "Axioms for Reading the Landscape." *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*. 1979.

John Berger in *Another Way of Telling* (1982) diagrams how a photo slices through time (the dashed line) and creates an isolated image removed from its context (the circle) that functions according to what is depicted in the photograph and what information the viewer brings to the reading of the photograph.

make assumptions that we must learn to be critical of. Again, in order to be active viewers we must step back and question our assumptions. Really ask yourself “what am I seeing?” Sometimes it is extremely difficult to read an image.

Jerome Liebling. 1960-61.



What is going on in this photograph? Who is this person? Where is he? We quickly realize there is very little visual information (internal context) and we begin to make assumptions based on a few visual cues: the man is holding a knife; the man does not look happy; the man seems to be looking at something outside of the frame; there is a brick wall behind the man.

Many assumptions follow: the man is angry; the man is a murderer; the man is in an alley; someone is threatening the man outside of the frame, etc. These are all external contextual readings being applied to the image. We don't really know



what is going on because we are totally separated from the temporal and physical context in which the photograph was taken.

Some things can give us clues as to what is really going on. A title adds some concrete external context. The title of this photograph is "Slaughter House." Oh, well that tells us something totally different than what we were thinking! A rereading of the photograph begins:

The man is in a slaughter house. The man is on the production line waiting for the next animal. The man is in work clothes. The man has animal blood stains on his hands and clothes.

That is about as far as we can get before we start making assumptions again. Actually even these statements are assumptions based on what we have learned about slaughterhouses and butcher shops. This is the nature of photographs. We get some information but never enough to understand the reality of the situation. We are always stuck making assumptions. By simply understanding this issue the viewer can become conscious of how assumptions influence the way photographs are read.

This slicing, or decontextualizing, often means the photograph takes on a life of its own and becomes an object separate from the time and place in which it was taken.

## The Viewer, yes you!

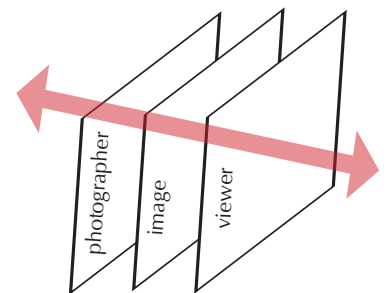
The viewer brings her own set of external contexts to the reading of photographs. How you read a photograph can reveal as much about you as the image you are interpreting. Each of us acts as a filter while reading photographs. Each of us will have a slightly different interpretation based on individual experiences, memories and histories. These are also considered external contexts applied to the reading of a photograph.

To actively and critically view a photograph we must become more aware of personal biases and how they influence our reading. In essence, three layers influence how one reads a photograph:

- the photographer's intentions and biases
- that which is visually depicted
- the viewers intentions and biases -- that's you.

*The self-conscious experience of place is inevitably a product and expression of the self whose experience it is, and therefore, unavoidably the nature of that experience is shaped at every turn by the personal and special biographies of those who sustain it.*

Keith H. Basso. *Wisdom Sits in Places*.  
University of New Mexico Press. 1996.





These three layers lead to THREE BIG QUESTIONS:

- What does the photograph tell about this place/event?
- What does this photograph tell about the photographer?
- What does this photograph tell about you in the way you interpret it?

Keeping these questions in mind helps us more actively use photographs as an integral part of the design process. These questions reveal deeper issues associated with the design of landscapes. Most importantly they address how personal biases influence the way a place is photographed and how that in turn influences how we design for that place. Each lesson will address specific examples associated with these questions.

### **Legacy of Landscape Photography and the Image of the Land**

Photographs play a huge role in how many Americans image and idealize the landscape. Photographs, through various forms such as travel magazines, act as surrogates to actual experience in the landscape, as Susan Sontag states in *On Photography*. As surrogates photographs abstract and idealize the real. This is perpetuated by particular genres of landscape photography which focus on the monumental and sublime and exclude any significant signs of human intervention or habitation.

Ansel Adams, through his monumental and powerful landscape photographs, portrays idealized images of the American West. His Yosemite photos depict a pristine landscape seemingly untouched by humans (yet anyone who has visited Yosemite in the last 60 years know it is anything but). Adams presents an edenic image that depicts landscape and nature as separate from human civilization. By portraying landscape in this manner Adams (and many other “nature photographers”) idealizes the landscape, making it an object of beauty rather than a living, breathing, place full of human interaction and intervention. The landscape photograph becomes a decontextualized object to be hung on the wall and observed as wonder of nature. This decontextualization prevents us from understanding that every action we make impacts these places and that many of these places.

Since Adams, many photographer’s have explored different ways of representing landscape. Edward Weston transformed landscape into pure studies of form. Joe Deal, a member of the New Topographics movement, represents landscape as complex scenes of human interaction with the land. Hamish Fulton

*Magazines like these often transport us to other lands, supplanting real experiences of landscape with idealized images.*

*National Geographic*

*Audobon*

*Conde Nast*

*Outside*

*Architectural Digest*



*The pictures of Ansel Adams are perhaps the last innocent landscape photographs. This problem was that, despite the attractiveness of his pictures, and those by other photographers presenting a natural world devoid of human presence -- artists such as Philip Hyde and Eliot Porter . . . -- everyone knew that the landscape didn't really look that way. The photographs were satisfying only at the most basic level of aesthetics; in terms of capturing a more complex reality, they definitely cropped out more than they included.*

William H, Fox. *View Finder*. p. 94.

Ansel Adams. Clearing after the Storm.

interweaves narrative text into photos of his hiking journeys. Patrick Nagatiani creates photo collages that pointedly question why humans damage the landscape for short term gain.

By looking more closely at how landscape is represented photographically, both by others and ourselves, we can become more aware of how photographs influence our design decisions. We will also become more aware of how photographs influence and idealize our perceptions of landscapes, such as “the West” or “the City.” If we learn how to unpack some of the loaded issues of idealization and decontextualization we can ask critical questions about how a photograph influences our sense of place.

# Series

The discussion thus far focused on viewing photographs, and how to become a more active and critical viewer, but how do you think about *taking* photographs? How do you apply the lessons of active viewing to taking photographs for site design?

Series is the first step towards answering this question. (The rest of the lessons also answer this question.) A series is a set of photographs that have a connection. For this guide I define series as *a set of photographs that show multiple aspects of a place*. For the purpose of these lessons a series is the set of photos taken at the site for each assignment. A series represents *many* aspects of a place. These can be spatial aspects, conceptual aspects or relational aspects. The key is to start thinking about a place as a whole multidimensional place and *representing it as such* through your photographs. Unknowingly we often treat a place as a set of discrete parts while photographing. Thinking about representing a place through a series helps us visually reveal the multiple interrelationships found in that place.

## Turning passive photography into active photography

How many times have you taken a set of photographs of a site and felt disappointed with the results? Sitting down with your stack of photos, or viewing them on your computer, you flip through and start wondering “What was I thinking when I took these?” There are too many photos of one place, no photos of another place, photos that don’t tell anything, and photos that seem like they should be important, but you can’t remember why. Only a few from 24, 36, 100 are truly helpful for your design process.

Nopporn Kichanan. Anne flipping out. 2004.





This scenario is the result of passive pointing and shooting. We trust the camera to document what we see, but forget to work within the limitations of the camera. We treat the camera as something remote from ourselves, an automaton separate from our own thought process. We take a passive role in the process of making photographs. We simply point and shoot. The results are disappointing.

Taking a series requires you as the photographer to fully explore the place you are documenting and engage more deeply in the process of making photographs. A good series documents the active exploration of a place. How do we do this? Asking questions of ourselves while taking photographs teaches us to be more active photographers.

Question asking connects how we see a place more directly to how we think about a place. Question asking also helps the photographer take the whole place into consideration instead of focusing on a few parts.

Some key things to think about while taking a series of photographs of a site:

- what is the character of the whole site?
- what is the character of what neighbors the site?
- why am I drawn to certain places and not others?
- what are the destination points, what makes them destination points?
- what leads me to these destination points?
- how do I navigate the site and by what means?
- who is here, what are they doing (human or animal)?
- what is happening here?
- how do I show what is happening?

### **Limits and complexity**

Limiting the number of photographs during this process also helps us more actively engage the photographic process. It forces us to really think and look at what we are taking and why we are taking it. We must think: "How do I best tell the story of this site through 24 photographs or 1 photograph?" instead of hoping: "If I take enough photographs some will turn out." Limiting the number of photographs gets us out of the passive habit of snapping away indiscriminately and hoping that enough "good ones" turn out. By having a limit, most people will step up to the challenge and immediately start engaging in a more thoughtful process of photographing.

A series of photographs gives the viewer a more complex understanding of a place than a single photograph can. Series making contextualizes. As stated earlier, photographs become decontextualized objects: the context outside of the frame is lost to the viewer. A series of photographs gives the viewer much more context and information about a place than a single photograph. The viewer can begin to compare and contrast the set of photographs. This process of examination reveals layers of complexity that cannot exist in a single photograph. An interplay exists between the internal context of each photograph and the external context created by the series of images. As a result a series also tells a richer narrative. The assumptions we make while reading single photographs are either reinforced or discounted as we explore the rest of the series.

In series-making there are two levels of discovery: the act of making the photographs and the act of looking at and comparing the photographs in the series. Likewise, two levels of interaction occur with the place: 1) the actual physical interaction with the place, through the camera, 2) the examination of the photographs, which can lead to different visual and psychological forms of discovery not experienced during the act of taking photographs.

If we saw just one of these images, would we understand the narrative of this interaction?



Duane Michals. *Chance Meeting*. 1969.

## **Primary:**

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## **Secondary:**

- Cronon, William. "The Trouble With Wilderness, or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. W. W. Norton & Company. New York. 1996. p. 69-90.
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## **Tertiary:**

- Sontag, Susan. "In Plato's Cave." *On Photography*. Picador USA. New York. 1977. p. 3-24.
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on photography*. Hill and Wang. New York. 1981.

# Assignment One Series

Taking a series of photographs and examining them can help us construct a more complex representation of a place. By taking a series of photographs and looking and reflecting on the series we can often understand unique relationships (physical and psychological) in the place.

For this assignment I am asking you to explore your site through the camera instead of simply using it as a tangential device for recording. Think about representing a total picture of the place instead of focusing on a set of objects or destination points.

There are many ways to approach this assignment: Recording a walk through the site, drift through the site, recording journeys as well as destination points or simply concentrating on recording all aspects of a site, not just the those that are appealing.

For this assignment and all following assignments, you are limited to one roll of film (or the equivalent), 24-36 images. People using digital cameras should NOT edit as they shoot. These limitations will help you be more deliberate in your documentation process.



# Journal One Series

What were you thinking and/or feeling as you were taking photos?

What method did you use explore the site with your camera?

Did thinking about taking a series change the way you take site photographs?

How?

How might this photographic process and its results apply to your design work?

What does Alan Ward mean by the “making of icons”? What do you think of

Ward’s comments?