SEEING BETWEEN THE LINES:
THE INTERPRETATION OF PHOTOGRAPHS

Richard Pearce-Moses
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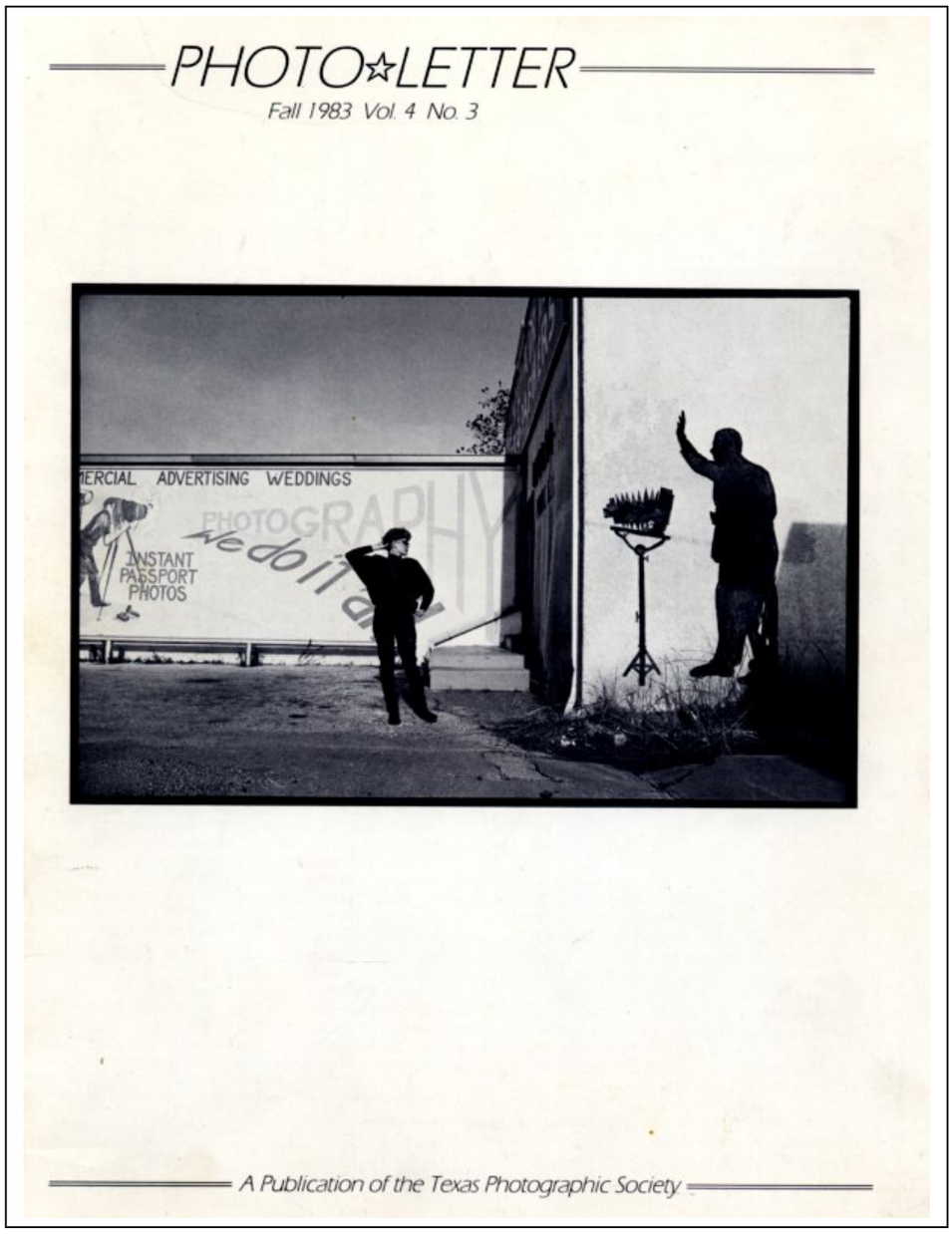

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Photography is a complex communication medium capable of expressing a variety of meanings. As such, a photographer is able to use personal, free-form symbols arising from his own creativity or commonly accepted, conventional signs to get across that which is he trying to "say" or show. These means of expression can be placed in a variety of genres of imagery such as documentary, artistic, or metaphoric styles to convey intended meaning. On the receiving end of this communication process, the viewer is faced with a picture and few rules to follow in attempting to grasp the expressive content of an image. The fact that the perceptual process is open to subjective bias and a picture is able to yield more than one interpretation adds to the confusion. By breaking down this complex sign system into component parts, it may be possible to understand better the reassembled whole. Some of the elements of the photographic sign system which will be investigated here are the nature of meaning, the modes of expression, and the varieties of perception.

PHOTOGRAPHY AS A COMMUNICATION MEDIUM

A photograph takes a moment of time and space and preserves it as a "slice" of the world in two dimensional form. It may be an instant, as the decisive moment of Cartier-Bresson. Or it may be a century, as in the works of the Rephotographic Survey Project (Newland, ed. p. 23). Yet, in the creator's mind, there lies behind this abstraction of the world, all the connotations of his personal reality from which the picture was made. Thus, the image is not just those items represented in the photograph, but all the unseen but implied emotions, experiences and spirit in both the photographer's and the viewer's minds. A picture holds meaning beyond the apparent content, speaking of people, events, and places that have passed by. Thus, the photograph can be understood as an expression of the maker's vision and experience of the world. Some of that meaning can potentially be grasped by a viewer.

A photograph made intentionally as an expression on the part of the photographer cannot be in a form no one else can understand. Another person must be able to take up such an image and grasp something of the photographer's design or no communication can take place. An artist cannot veer too far from convention without becoming incomprehensible. As Gadamer notes, "he who speaks a private language understood by no one else does not speak at all" (Linge, ed. p. 85). Sometimes, the meaning is obvious and frank, and can be stated simply: "This is my Aunt Martha." Meaning on this level tends to be identified with the thing itself, ignoring the distinction between the image and the reality it represents.

Other times, the image can be an eloquent and subtle, often elusive statement of great aesthetic impact. In such a case, the meaning of the image may not be clear. A novice viewer may become frustrated in his attempts to "get a handle" on the image-especially if the picture is not immediate accessible through its being personally aesthetically pleasing. In these cases he may simply walk away from the image, and not explore it any further.

There is a popular misconception that visual art should be simple to grasp. The "I know what I like" syndrome can be traced to people who are not aware that there may be something more to the visual arts than what is in front of their eyes-that there is an entire level of understanding possible beyond appearances. This can be contrasted to literature, where an educational system exists, teaching one to read for more than the story, but also for the deeper, ''hidden meaning."

The problem of going beyond the superficial with a visual work is analogous to a verbal analogy of picking up an advanced text on an unfamiliar topic for the first time. There may be no single element – a word – that cannot be understood with the aid of a dictionary. One may get a gist of the meaning, but the full meaning and implication may be lost without extended study. Looking at a photograph in terms of taste preference or for representational content may give one a general sense of what a photograph is about. But, the chances are that there are many less overt qualities about the image that will be missed.

As is generally the case for all communication, the 'grammatical' structure of an image is transparent to the content of the image (Lange, p. xxx). It 1s much like the window pane through which the world is seen. When the content is clear, the method of presentation does not call attention to itself. (As in an axiom from the cinema, 'Good editing is notable in its not being noticeable.') But, apparent or not, the structure is always there, even if it is an unfamiliar or awkward one. It is when a viewer is confronted by an image which is confusing or elusive that the interpretive process becomes apparent through its breakdown. The viewer must move from a familiar mode of understanding with little thought to what he is doing sub-consciously to the level of metacommunication. This process of deciphering an unfamiliar code can be started by asking the question, 'What is going on here?' In approaching an answer to that question, the viewer may gain a key to the unfamiliar form of expression before him and can come to some understanding of the image.

The study of the process of interpretation in pursuit of understanding in literature and verbal media is called hermeneutics. The techniques used in this process were developed early in the first millennium, and were used originally to determine the most authoritative sources of scriptural texts and to ascertain the best possible translation. In the last decades of the 19th century, the philosophical concepts underlying the techniques of interpretation were expanded by a group of philosophers (Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and Heidegger, through to the modern Gadamer and Ricouer) to include the whole question of the reader's coming to a comprehensive understanding of a text. This included the overt as well as the tacit meanings intended by the author. As well, it developed the idea of "excess of meaning," additional understanding which can be found in the work, but was not placed there consciously by the author. Many of the ideas of literary hermeneutics suggest themselves in the development of a system of visual interpretation. Gadamer has already broached the subject in a 1964 essay reproduced in *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (p. 95), where he discusses "the problem of aesthetics being transformed into the question of the experience of art." (p. 97)

At this time, there is no comprehensive methodology to assist a viewer in coming to a full understanding of images. Szarkowski has identified certain formal elements to assist stylistic analysis in *The Photographer's Eye*. Berger's *Ways of Seeing* and *Another way of Telling*, along with Hess' *How Pictures Mean* are examples of criticism more than they are of "technique." They are excellent models of criticism which show a developed, intuitive framework for evaluation and understanding images. These books, as well as the writings of others can give the novice interpreter of images a sense of how to approach visual imagery by osmosis. A close look at these authors' writings can suggest clues to the kinds of questions which must be asked in coming to terms with images, since they do not address the issues of interpretation directly. Donis A. Dondis' *A Primer of Visual Literacy* fails as a useful tool for the analysis of images in that it is more interested in proposing a system to be followed rather than analyzing existing systems. It is heavily biased toward the graphic arts and formal sign systems. Dondis' greatest contribution, though, is her providing a vocabulary and analysis for subjective, qualitative aspects of pictures.

THE NATURE OF MEANING IN PHOTOGRAPHY

A first step in this process of creating a visual hermeneutic is to expand the concept of "visual meaning," and with this, the ideas of understanding and interpreting images. These ideas have a linguistic background: meaning as definition; understanding as comprehension; interpretation as restatement of ideas in different words for better clarity. Understanding is largely linguistic, in the sense that it is a mental process which uses words. This verbal nature of the process does not interfere with the task of "mediating between the familiar and the alien" (Linge, ed. p. xxxi). In neither must understanding necessarily be verbal. Minor White encouraged people to respond to photographs through dance, music, or another medium by which

they could express their own response. Both Gadamer's and White's idea of understanding avoids concrete definitions which are limited. Images are too broad to have definitions; there can be no dictionary of pictures with commonly agreed upon (ad hoc) meanings beyond rudimentary symbols (such as traffic signs). The infinite number of images possible prevent a specific meaning to be associated with a specific picture. Each image must be approached as unique, and subjected to a process of divining its content. Ogden and Richards point out the first steps in *The Meaning of Meaning*: "Meaning. . . cannot be treated without a satisfactory theory of signs." One perceives meaning in a sign or symbol after it has reappeared several times in conjunction with a real world situation. According to Ogden and Richards, a sign's meaning is the repeated aspect of experience associated with the word, picture, or event that is evoked in one's mind on perceiving it on numerous occasions. "A sign is always a stimulus similar to some part of an original stimulus and sufficient to call up the engram formed by that stimulus" (Ogden and Richards, p. 53). For example, to hear the word "apple" in connection with a red skinned, white meated piece of fruit on several occasions makes one associate the phenomenon with the word "apple." On seeing this red skinned, white meated fruit represented in two-dimensional, monochromatic tonality one learns to connect the image with the item. A corollary of this is that a sign changes its meaning as new experiences of that sign are encountered.

In the same way that abstract ideas without physical counterparts can be symbolized in words, non-material ideas can also be expressed through visual symbols. Seeing the photograph of Aunt Martha is possible only if one knows Aunt Martha. Otherwise it is only a photograph of a woman. Seeing Weston's pepper is also seeing the organic and bulbous shapes that are reminiscent of erotic imagery. Knowing that Weston ate the pepper for dinner the night that he took the image may transform the meaning of the picture again, based on one's associated experiences of' food and eating. Understanding is grasping the visual elements in an image and relating them to the sum total of experiences that contribute to their meaning.

To express the understanding of an image that one has achieved, it is necessary to reform it in another mode of communication. This is most frequently a verbal act, in that understanding is largely verbal as noted above. To share this meaning with another person, requires one to find a different set of symbols which approximate one's experience. Some persons do this eloquently, and it is edifying to hear them comment on the image as it adds to the meaning.

> All experience . . . is either enjoyed or interpreted or both, and very little of it escapes some degree of interpretation. An account of the process of interpretation is thus the key to the understanding of the sign-situation, and therefore the beginning of wisdom. (Ogden and Richards, p. 50).

MODES OF MEANING

REPRESENTATIONAL MEANING

The most obvious mode of meaning for representational photographs is that of the objective world in the image – the photograph is of an apple or pepper. This ability to render the three-dimensional world on a planar surface on a one-to-one basis which can be expressed as an objective mathematical formula, and not formed through a subjective vision of human intervention is one of photography's most distinctive characteristics. The fact that the woman represented in the image is in fact Aunt Martha is not insignificant. This relationship between image and object portrayed is the basis of a whole genre of imagery: the document. This is a fundamental expression well used by many photographers.

Francis Frith, Maxime Ducamp, Girault de Prangey, as well as a host of other stereoscope photographers travelled the world to bring home images of the exotic. Through the objective image of the camera the stories of the traveler need not be taken on the teller's authority, but could be backed up with pictorial evidence of their strange sights and places. Lewis Hine, Jacob Riis, Walker Evans, Dorthea Lange and the FSA photographers saw the medium as a tool to bring to light the actual conditions in which the poor lived. This

characteristic of photography brought America the grim realities of the Vietnam war on the six o'clock news. This fundamental quality, the communication of the thing represented in the image, has made "straight" photography one of the most dominating forces in the medium.

Expressive Meaning

Visual meaning in this genre of the document can in no way be restricted to appearances. Documentary photography can convey feelings and attitudes beyond the material nature of the representational subject of the image. This expressive mode builds on the document, but adds a subjective value judgment to the representational level as commentary. Weston's "Pepper #30" is certainly more than a document of his meal that night. Many viewers do not recognize it as a bell pepper on first inspection, but rather see many other things in the image's abstract form. This is an example of the expressive mode, where commentary as meaning overrides the image's meaning as document. Once the material reality is perceived, these subjective statements about the object must be accounted for in this very successful record of "the thing itself. " There is something beyond the level of appearances, an intensified vision which transcends the mundane. For photographers such as Weston, Alfred Stieglitz and Minor White, the photograph, while based in. the appearances of the real world, portends something mystical. It is something that, like religious mysteries, can only be talked around, not talked about.

Metaphoric Meaning

There is an important shift in the expressive level of meaning from the contents of the image portraying meaning to the photograph itself becoming the symbol in its entirety. It is no longer that which is in the frame which takes on meaning and is commented on, but the image as a totality represents something the photographer is wishing to convey. This image as a whole can be a means of interpreting non-representational imagery as well. The elements of an abstract work do not in themselves carry meaning, as in the documentary level. Rather, it is their combination that has significance.

Thematic Meaning

Another mode of communicating meaning may be thought of as thematic or discursive, since it frequently "tells a story," or is constructed in such a fashion that the objects appearing before the camera do not represent themselves as in the documentary mode. Nor are they a subject represented with the photographer's bias as a significant part of the meaning. Like metaphor, the image as a whole is representing something. However, the objects that appear in the frame are not to be understood for themselves, but are the vehicles for symbolic meaning assigned to them. Representatives of this group could include H. P. Robinson, some of the work of Julia Margaret Cameron, F. Holland Day, Jerry Uelsmann and Duane Michals. This mode of meaning operates on relatively conventional symbols, often with no qualm to manipulating the image to a point where the objective reality before the camera has no bearing on the image itself. Thus, where Minor White will suggest the metaphysical, Rejlander will show you photographs of angels with wings. Using techniques that are frequently considered to be anathema to "straight" photographers, photographers who work in this style treat the photograph not as an objective truth of an external world, but a fiction that is capable of expressing a higher truth. While Christ was dead some 1900 years before the invention of photography, Day captured the crucifixion in his "Seven Last Words of Christ." Relying on traditional elements of composition, Day was able to create a series of images that Westerners recognize as "Christ." Those who know Day's appearance will recognize him as the subject, as well, changing the meaning from 'Christ' to 'Day acting the part of Christ.'

All the modes of meaning here are based in the manner in which the photographer manipulates photography's special relationship to the external world as source for subject material. The four modes covered here – representational, expressive, metaphoric, and thematic – are not by any means the only possible levels of meaning. Other modes not described may suggest better ways to understand how meaning is contained in

the image. This is especially the case for non-representational images. There are other criteria which affect meaning in imagery: style, time frame, serial versus singular imagery, and external evidence which can be learned about an image to name only a few. The concepts presented here are a first step, though, in coming to an understanding of a photograph – how does it contain its message. As in literature, the presentation of the subject as fiction, non-fiction, fictional history, biography, or some other form influences how the piece is understood.

THE VARIETIES OF PERCEPTION

Given this premise that the photograph is a communicative and expressive form, we are faced with the question of the nature of the viewer's experience. The nature of visual communication is very different from the verbal exchange of ideas and presents its own problems in talking about the process. Word systems use commonly accepted symbols (letter or sound formed) which have prescribed meanings that can be verified in an objective source, the dictionary. This sounds fairly simple, but common experience shows that tacit connotative meaning, tone of voice, and a host of other factors such as body language rapidly complicate the process of understanding. Hence, diplomats and lawyers can make a living helping peoples and persons come to precise statements with shared meaning agreed upon by all.

The verbal process is complicated enough while having the benefit of a dictionary. Viewers, having no objective reference to serve as authority, begin the process of interpretation without any such starting point. Even after coming to some sense of a picture's meaning, a viewer may have trouble articulating that perceived meaning to another person. One cannot merely rephrase the statement choosing different words until common understanding is reached. In talking about an image, not only must the viewer attempt to communicate his comprehension of the item, but he must translate it into a totally different mode of communication if he is to talk about it. This is no doubt the source of the photographer's complaint to critics and academics, "If I had wanted to say it in words, I wouldn't have made the picture!" One solution to this problem is to point to other images which together share some element with the specific image in question. With a simple image, there may not be much of a problem coming to a shared understanding of a picture's meaning: "This is my Aunt Martha." But, Weston's "Pepper #30" is certainly more than just an item for a salad, and translating the additional content into words is not always easy. This becomes even more difficult for non-representational images where there is no starting point of a easily agreed upon, recognizable object.

In speaking about how images convey meaning, one has moved to the level of metacommunication. Attention has shifted from the image itself to the nature of the communication between creator and viewer. The interaction between these two parties is important, as it will influence the choice of interpretation when there is a disagreement between the two. Given the two parties, the creator and the viewer, there are three possible means of relationship between them:

> The creator dominates the viewer.
>
> The viewer dominates the creator.
>
> The creator and viewer are co-equal.

In the first instance, nothing can be said about the image which is not intended by the creator. The meaning the photographer states he has embodied in the image is the correct one, and all others are false. Evidence for statements about the image must be able to be justified in terms of the creator's intention, whether private or publicly available information. Northrope Frye is of the opinion that once a work has left the hands of an artist, the creator has no special authority as a critic of the work, in that the skills of interpretation and creation are different. Frank Cioffi has shown the validity of the type of understanding one can gain by studying intention. It has also been discounted as the sole means of interpretation by Wimsatt and Beardsley. (Both articles are reproduced in Margolis.)

In the second case, the viewer takes complete liberty with the image, and can project his own meanings and significance onto it without regard to what the creator had in mind. In extreme cases, a viewer may perceive things that a number of people would not recognize, or see only after much explanation (a Rorschach 'original response'). This disregard of the intended meaning is equivalent to recreating the image. Often such an interpretation will have nothing to do with the original expressive act, and many other viewers would question the source of such an interpretation. Because a particular photograph will likely evoke in a particular viewer's mind certain engrams based in that viewer's private experience which call to mind various personal meanings, it would be incorrect to say that private meanings are "wrong" interpretations. Such meaning is valid for that individual. This approach is one of personal meaning, which is often so specific that it is inaccessible to others. It is important that this is in fact personal, and that there is a level of shared meaning which must not be subordinated.

The last possible form of relationship between creator and viewer is a moderate position between the two. Neither party dominates the understanding that can be gotten out of an image. The viewer is responsible for seeing what the creator has in mind when the image was made. In interpreting the picture, the viewer must base his understanding of the image on evidence that he can point to, not simply fancy. Yet, the creator cannot restrict the viewer from perceiving other meaning in excess of his original intention. (e.g., visual 'Freudian slips,' or significance picked up through the incidental inclusion of detail in the frame.) This approach is one of "shared" meaning. It is meaning that is accessible to all viewers, and achieves a greater level of "validity" through the community of viewers who agree in the interpretation. The meaning may be achieved through evidence internal to the picture frame, or from other sources. Recognizing the subject as a woman is certainly shared understanding. Reading the caption on the back of the print is "external evidence" that the woman is Aunt Martha. This sense of the excess of meaning becomes more important over time, for the statement takes on a historical perspective.

> The work of art says something to the historian: it says something to each person as if it were said especially to him, as something present and contemporaneous. Thus one's task is to understand the meaning of what it says and to make it clear to himself and to others. (Linge, ed. p 100.)

It is the job of the viewer to take the role of the observer, and enter into the interpretive process to elucidate to himself what the image means – what his understanding of the image is. Gadamer refers to this interplay of perspectives as a dialogue.

To understand a text is to come to understand oneself in a kind of dialogue . . . a text yields understanding only when what is said in the text begins to find expression in the interpreter's own language. (Linge, ed. p 57.)

This is the second stage of the hermeneutical process – to restate what has been perceived while being aware of one's perspective.

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These various levels of meaning represent modes in which the photographer has chosen to manipulate the image making nature of the medium. As such, they influence how one perceives meaning – should the photograph be taken for what is represented, for something more expressive, or to mean something other than what it in actuality is. This choice of mode is part of the photographer's intended meaning for the print. It is crucial to understand this level of meaning from the beginning. But, there may be more to understand. Photographers, like all humans, are not always aware of the full impact of their statements. There are hidden meanings that they do not perceive themselves, their subconscious giving them away. The passage of time may add significance to an image by altering the inherent value of an item represented in a photograph, or the relationship of two things represented in a photograph. The rebels of the Paris Commune were proud to have their photograph made with the fallen Vendrome column. Yet, after the revolution had been put down,

they were identified from these images as the culprits of the vandalism, and were punished. The photograph is changed from happy souvenir to tragic evidence.

In approaching an image, the viewer enters into a dialogue with it, first by proposing meanings based in similar sign situations perceived within the photograph. These sign-situations may originate in his own personal experience, or in shared experience. Next, the viewer tries to grasp meaning outside familiar sign situations placed in the photograph by the creator. In articulating this dialogue the image takes on meaning through a process of elimination of bad signs and a discovery of new signs not apparent at first. He makes his interpretation of the image through tentative statements of understanding. These would note the mode of meaning, a sense of the creator's intention, and other aspects of the image which contribute to additional meaning in the image. This hermeneutical method in approaching photographs suggests a process by which pictures can be understood. By taking an image through each step in the process, one can come to a less haphazard understanding. And contrariwise, by following the process after a commentary has been proposed for an image, misunderstandings based in faulty interpretation can be spotted and corrected.

REFERENCES

The ideas in this essay have come from a variety of sources that I have read for pleasure more than for research. As such, proper footnoting is difficult. The problem is compounded by the fact that I have discussed the topic with many friends, and the sources have become blurred. Professor J. B. Colson deserves special mention as a sounding board. I have listed below the prime sources for this article.

The Concept of Meaning / by Thomas E. Hill. New York: Humanities Press, 1971. 328 pp.

How Pictures Mean / by Hans Hess. New York: Pantheon Books, 1974. 160 pp.

The Meaning of Meaning / by C. K. Ogdenand I. A. Richards New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, first published 1923; eighth edition, 1946. xxv + 363 pp.

Philosophical Hermeneutics / by Hans-Georg Gadamer, ed. and translated by David E. Linge. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976. lvii + 243 pp.

Philosophy Looks at the Arts / ed. by Joseph Margolis. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978. ix + 481 pp.

Radical Rational, Space, Time / ed. by Joseph N. Newland. Seattle: University of Washington at Seattle, 1983. A catalogue with essays by Paul Berger, Leroy Searle, and Douglas Wadden published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same name at the Henry Art Gallery, the University of Washington at Seattle, March 11-May 15, 1983.

NOTE

Re-reading this after more than 25 years, I am happy that – I believe – I am a better writer. At the same time, I am not embarrassed by what may be the first article I ever had published. I think there's an interesting taxonomy of meanings. The ideas are not fully developed, but there's a seed that would be worth exploring.