

What Happens Between Images?

On Sequence, Coherence, and What Remains Outside

For some time, I thought I understood a photograph of a gate.

It shows the entrance to an industrial site. A fence crosses the frame. Signs regulate who may enter and under which conditions. Nothing especially dramatic is happening. The gate is closed, the surrounding architecture functional. When I first placed the photograph in a sequence, I read it mainly as a boundary: an arrangement that separates one side from another and makes passage conditional.

Later in the book, other photographs appear. Containers are moved. Trucks wait beside loading areas. Goods pass from one vehicle to another. A delivery worker carries something through the city.

When I return to the gate, it has not changed. But I no longer see only a barrier.

The same structure can now appear as an interface. It prevents some movements while allowing others to take place under particular conditions. What looked primarily like exclusion has also become part of circulation.

Nothing was added to the photograph itself. The fence, signs and entrance were visible from the beginning. The later images did not reveal some hidden part of the frame. They changed the context in which what was already visible could be understood.

This seems obvious once it has happened. It is also strange.

We often speak about a photograph as though its meaning were located somewhere inside it. We ask what an image says, what it is about, what it shows. These questions are useful because a photograph really does place limits around an encounter. Something stood in front of the camera. A distance existed. A body occupied one part of a space rather than another. A doorway opened there and not somewhere else.

But a photograph does not arrive alone every time we see it.

In a book, one image follows another. Something has already been seen before the next page is turned. Something else has not yet appeared. By the time a photograph arrives, the viewer has begun to acquire a history with the work.

During a first reading, every image arrives with some of the sequence already known and some of it still unknown. Context is not given all at once. It accumulates.

A photograph seen on page twenty cannot yet be affected by a photograph on page one hundred in the same way that it can after the book has been completed. The later image already exists physically. It is printed and waiting. But for the person moving through the book, it has not yet entered the encounter.

The page turn makes this especially clear.

I look at one photograph and turn the page. Another appears. The first image has not merely moved into the past of the sequence. In many books, it has literally disappeared from sight. If the two photographs are to remain in relation, something from the first has to be carried forward in memory.

A spread works differently. Two photographs may be available at once. Their similarities can be compared directly. Their scale, distance and rhythm can operate simultaneously. Across a page turn,

comparison is less stable. One image has to survive, however imperfectly, in the viewer before it can meet the next.

Sequence is therefore not only an order of photographs. It is also an order of availability: what can be seen together, what has to be remembered and what remains temporarily hidden.

That makes the beginning of a book less stable than it first appears.

On a second reading, the first photograph no longer arrives under its original conditions. What was still unknown the first time has become memory. A motif that initially seemed incidental may now be recognised immediately. A distance between a person and a building may already belong to a larger pattern. A barrier that once seemed singular may arrive with other barriers somewhere behind it.

By the time the last image has been seen, the first one belongs to a different context than it did when it first appeared.

A sequence can change its own beginning by being completed.

This is one reason repetition matters so much in photographic work. A repeated object does not only establish similarity. It begins to create expectation.

I have encountered this in my own photographs of stations, crossings, stairs and passages. A person waiting near a moving train can remain simply a person waiting. But after movement returns in different forms—escalators, tracks, bodies crossing, traffic passing—the pause begins to occupy another position within the sequence. Stillness has not changed. What surrounds it in memory has.

Repetition has not supplied an explanation. It has produced an expectation.

And expectation changes what absence can do.

If something has repeatedly been present and then fails to appear, its absence may become perceptible. A sequence filled with movement can give weight to stillness. Repeated control can make an unregulated opening noticeable. Human presence, once established, can make an empty space feel different from a space that simply happened to be photographed without people.

Absence, in this sense, is not nothing. It is a relation to what has become expected.

But not everything left out of a sequence becomes an absence within it.

Thousands of things disappear before a book is finished. Some were outside the frame when the photograph was made. Others were photographed but later rejected. Entire subjects may have been encountered and never selected. Other routes through the material were possible and abandoned.

Most of this cannot be felt as absence by a viewer because the work has given no reason to expect it.

If I show ten photographs of boundaries, the viewer may eventually recognise a recurring concern with boundaries. But those ten images do not reveal whether I also photographed twenty open spaces, fifty informal passages or a hundred situations in which access was not visually significant.

Those photographs may exist. They may never have existed. From inside the finished sequence, the difference may be impossible to know.

This is where selection becomes more than reduction.

When I photograph, I make one frame around the world. Later, when I decide which photographs remain together, I make another kind of frame. The first leaves things outside the photograph. The second leaves photographs outside the work.

Sequencing is not what happens after the photographs have been made. It is part of how the work is authored.

This does not make selection suspicious. Without selection there would be no work. A book containing every exposure I made would not become more complete simply because it contained more. It would still result from where I went, what caught my attention, when I stopped, where I stood and when I pressed the shutter.

Nor does a photographic work owe the viewer a representative sample of everything that could have been seen. I may decide to photograph gates for months. I may decide that a sequence needs twelve of them. The fact that I have excluded open passages does not invalidate what the gates can show.

The difficulty begins somewhere else.

It begins when the coherence produced by the sequence becomes so convincing that its origin in selection starts to disappear.

Ten gates may all have existed. I may genuinely have encountered every one of them. Their recurrence within the book is also real. But the fact that they form such a clear pattern there tells us first something about the work I have made. It does not yet tell us that the world from which they came possesses exactly the same coherence.

This distinction is easy to lose in photography because each image remains attached to an encounter with something that existed outside the work. A gate was there. A truck was there. Someone waited on that platform. A discarded cup remained on that pavement.

The sequence does not have to invent these things in order to construct a relation between them. That may be precisely what gives the relation its force.

Separate encounters begin to support one another. The more often a relation returns, the less accidental it may feel. A pattern acquires confidence.

And yet the work still has an outside.

There could have been other photographs, other encounters, other repetitions. Another sequence might have made something else difficult not to notice.

The strength of coherence is that it allows a work to become more than an accumulation of separate images. Its blind spot is that successful coherence can make its own exclusions harder to perceive.

I notice this especially clearly when the same photograph enters another context.

A photograph I made on Hamburg's Reeperbahn shows discarded plastic cups and melting ice close to the camera. Behind them, people occupy the pavement and the entrances along the street. The image later became important to me after I was confronted and threatened while photographing there, and for a time I even removed three people from the frame.

When I wrote about that experience, the photograph became connected to questions of distance, visibility and what I could or could not know about the people I had photographed. The location itself seemed to offer explanations before the image could justify them. A person standing near a doorway on the Reeperbahn is easily assigned a role that the photograph cannot actually establish.

Placed in another sequence, the photograph behaves differently.

Alongside bottles, stains, discarded packaging and other remains of urban use, the cups in the foreground move forward. The image begins to participate in a relation between consumption, presence and what remains after people move on.

Neither context makes the photograph infinitely flexible.

There are still cups on the ground. People still occupy the street behind them. Entrances still organise part of the space. The photograph continues to resist interpretations for which it gives no support.

But its function within a work can change.

The photographer can shape that function quite strongly. I can decide which images appear together, how soon something returns, whether two photographs share a spread or have to meet across several page turns. I can make some relations easier to notice than others.

I cannot finish the encounter for someone else.

Another person enters the sequence with experiences and knowledge I do not possess. Someone familiar with a particular city may notice what has been omitted. A worker may recognise a function in an industrial space that remains almost invisible to me. A person who knows a transport system may understand an entrance differently from someone encountering it for the first time.

Something that remains merely unrepresented for one viewer may become a conspicuous omission for another.

The work gives interpretation form without finishing it.

This is not the same as saying that every interpretation is equally possible. The image places limits. So does the sequence. But those limits do not make the viewer passive. The encounter is shaped from both sides: by the relations the work has arranged and by the experience through which another person meets them.

A sequence may become so effective at teaching us what to notice that we stop asking what else could have been noticed. That possibility does not make coherence a defect. It is part of the responsibility that comes with making it.

I think again of the gate.

It is still closed. The fence has not moved. The signs have not changed. Nothing in the later photographs has entered its frame.

I can still see exclusion there.

But I can no longer see only exclusion.

Other images have made circulation available to the photograph. Trucks, containers and deliveries have given the gate a relation to movements that are organised precisely because not every movement is possible in the same way.

The later photographs have not explained the gate. They have not told me why it was built, who decided its rules or what larger system finally accounts for its presence.

They have done something smaller.

They have changed the questions the photograph can carry.