

ART63

from Donis A. Dondis

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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-

tremes 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

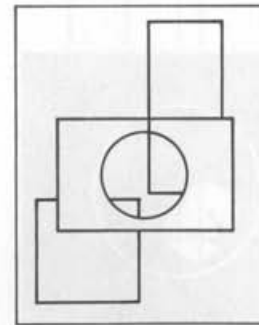


FIGURE 6.4. BALANCE

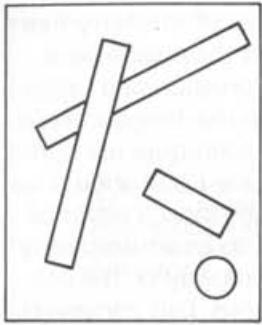


FIGURE 6.5. INSTABILITY

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

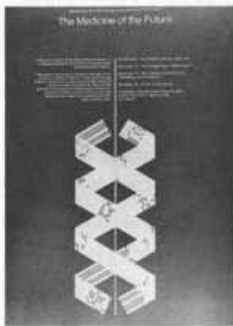
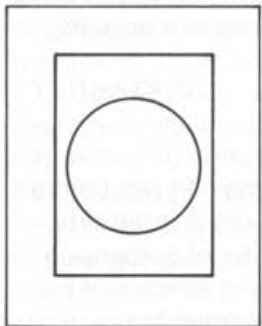


FIGURE 6.6. SYMMETRY

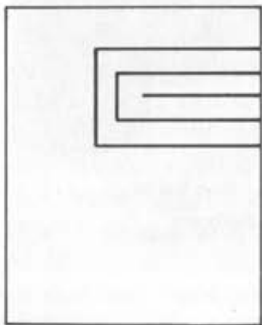


FIGURE 6.7. ASYMMETRY

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

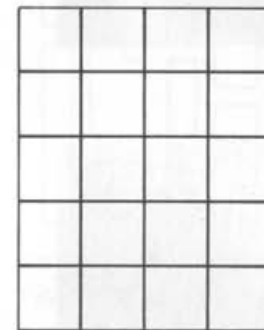


FIGURE 6.8. REGULARITY

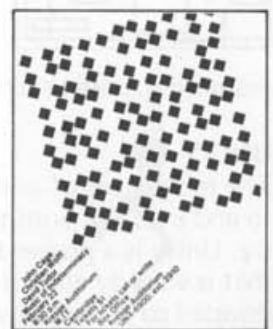
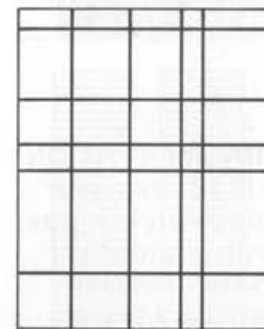


FIGURE 6.9. IRREGULARITY

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.

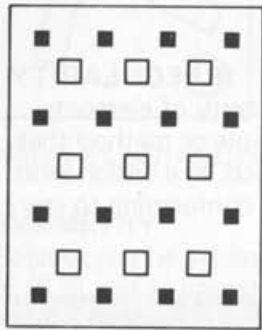


FIGURE 6.10. SIMPLICITY

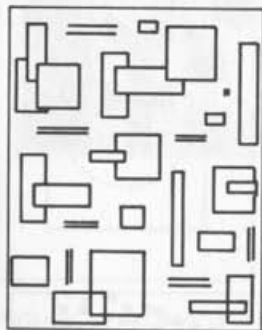
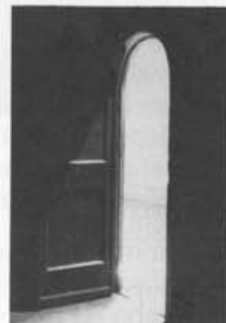


FIGURE 6.11. COMPLEXITY



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

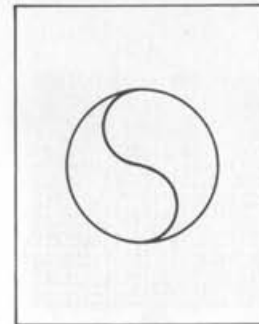


FIGURE 6.12. UNITY

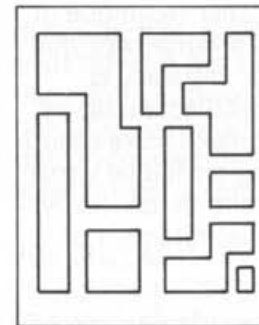


FIGURE 6.13. FRAGMENTATION



ECONOMY

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

INTRICACY

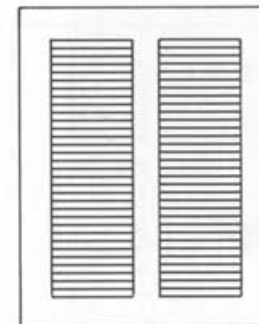


FIGURE 6.14. ECONOMY

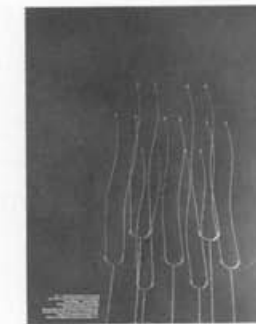




FIGURE 6.15. INTRICACY

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

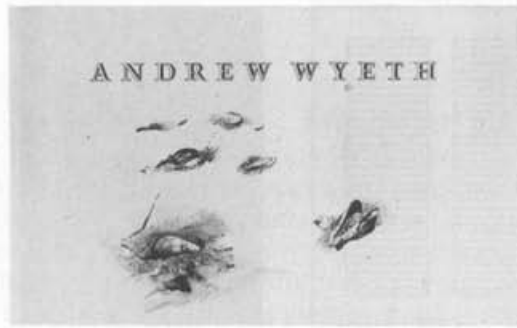


FIGURE 6.16. UNDERSTATEMENT

*INTRICACY vs. Economy
power vs. poor/MEEK*



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

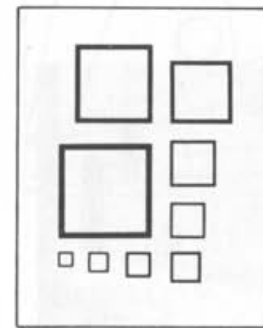


FIGURE 6.18. PREDICTABILITY



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

STASIS



FIGURE 6.20. ACTIVENESS

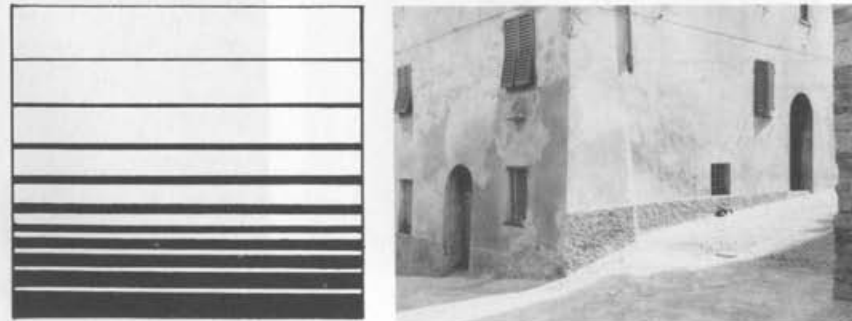


FIGURE 6.21. STASIS

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.

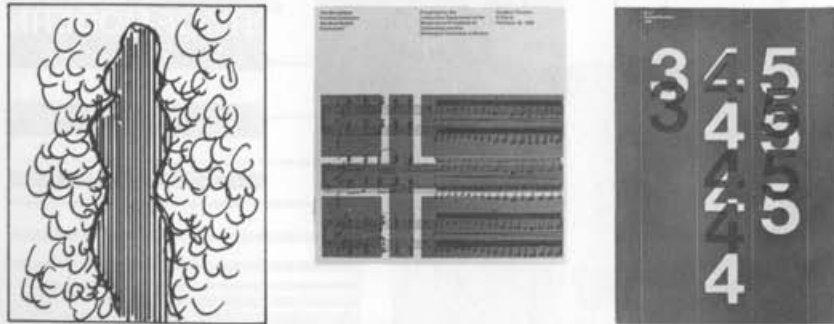


FIGURE 6.26. TRANSPARENCY



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.

OPACITY

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.

VARIATION

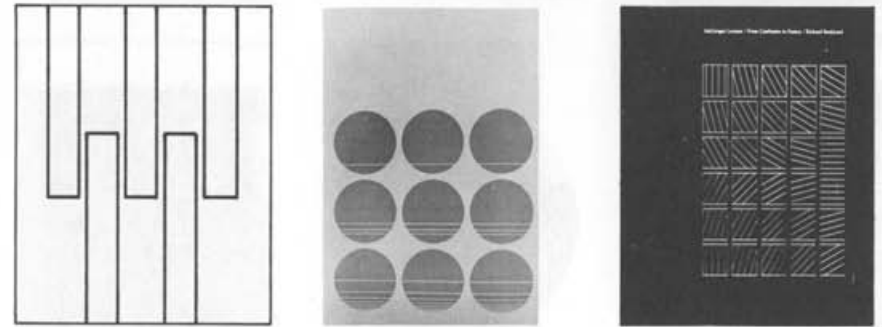


FIGURE 6.28. CONSISTENCY



FIGURE 6.29. VARIATION

ACCURACY

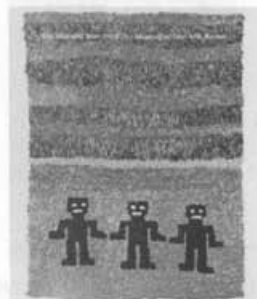
Accuracy (6.30) is the natural technique of the camera, the option of the artist. Our natural visual experience of things is the model of realism in the visual arts and its utilization can involve many tricks and conventions calculated to replicate the same visual cues as the eye



FIGURE 6.30. ACCURACY



FIGURE 6.31. DISTORTION



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.

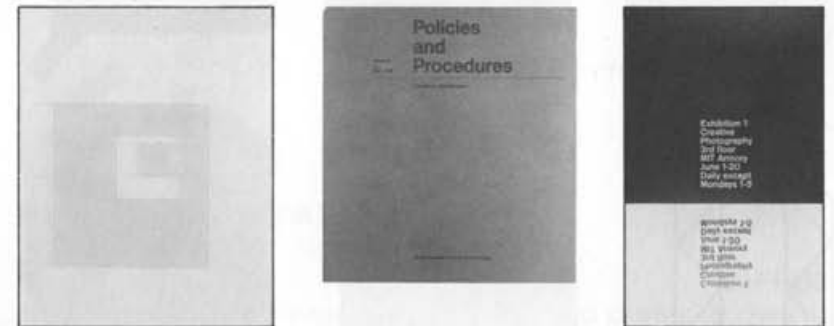


FIGURE 6.32. FLATNESS

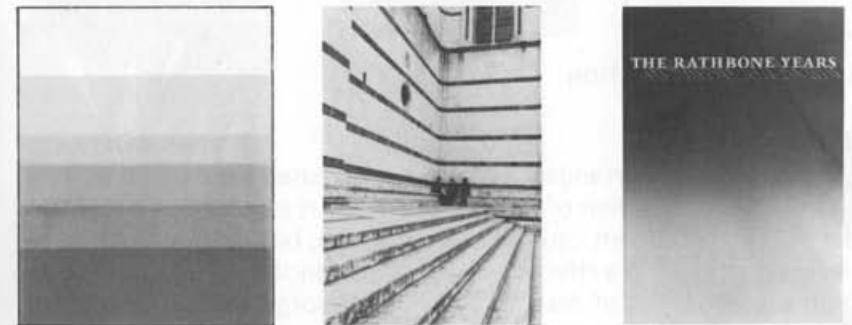


FIGURE 6.33. DEPTH

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.

JUXTAPOSITION

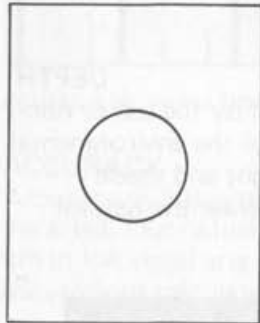


FIGURE 6.34. SINGULARITY

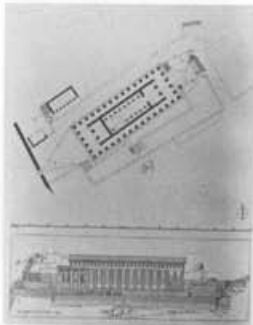
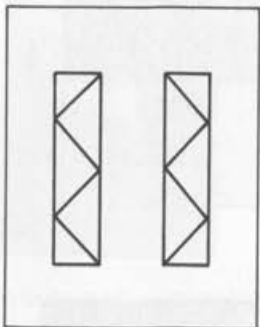


FIGURE 6.35. JUXTAPOSITION

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.

RANDOMNESS

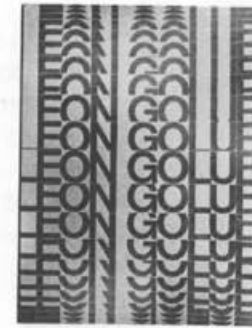
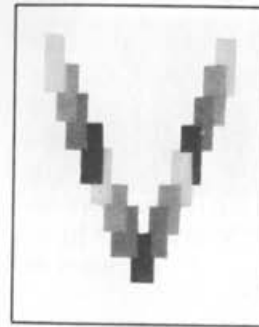


FIGURE 6.36. SEQUENTIALITY

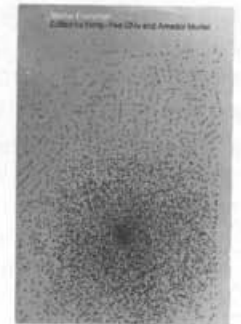
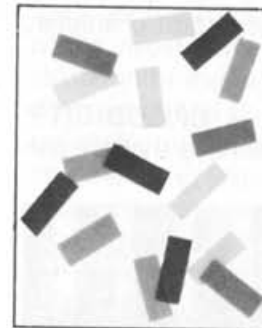


FIGURE 6.37. RANDOMNESS

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

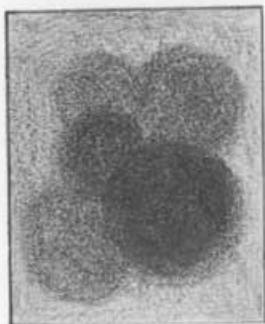


FIGURE 6.39. DIFFUSION



terpret. 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

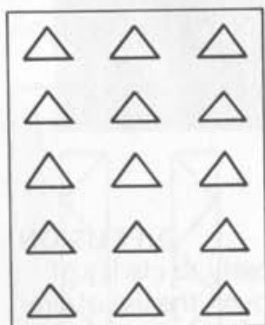


FIGURE 6.40. REPETITION

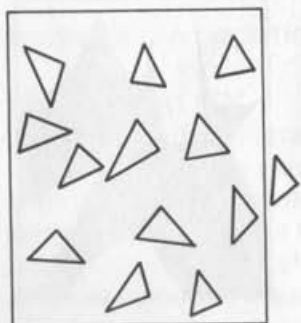


FIGURE 6.41. EPISODICITY



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.