



**Stuart Oring**

# Creativity Without Gimmicks

Photography is a paradox. Clichés require unusual handling and yet economy of means is important in art. To solve this problem, the photographer must achieve uniqueness not through technical means that make his photographs different but by saying the most important essentials simply and with feeling. Uniqueness alone is insufficient. An "idea feeling" must be evoked in the audience or the photograph will fail to communicate. That is why technique must serve as a tool toward creative photography, never as an end in itself. Creativity requires self-imposed limitations. The best use of the imagination is obtained by taking a well defined plan and treating it with as little inhibition in one's thinking as possible. It is important for the photographer to watch out for limitations which he might impose on the subject and himself.

## New Ways of Seeing

A wise teacher of photography once said: Pictures may symbolize a state of mind; stir up the audience; relate to surrealism; emphasize typical subject qualities such as texture, mood, or action; or reveal things in a new and different way. A photograph that fails to do any of these things is a very dull photograph. Look for new and different ways of doing and seeing things. Get away from the normal, the obvious wherever possible. To present the subject as a unique thing is

one way toward interesting photographs. One method of accomplishing this is to give new twists to old ideas. Many photographers ride the trend but inject original twists of their own within this framework. Many others don't realize the importance of borrowing ideas. Not to allow accidents can produce very dull pictures; sometimes it is valuable to use techniques that allow accidents to happen.

Our best photographers have always been the most courageous. Above all, be yourself! Denial and suppression of your real attitudes strangle creativity. Creativity flows in a mental state of aggressive self-confidence and grinds to a halt in moments of doubt. Have the nerve to be different and be willing to face laughter or ridicule. Accept the fact that when a person is being his most creative, he often feels as if he might be considered foolish or mad.

The photographer can approach the important aspects of the subject through: (1) symbolization, (2) similarities or overtones inherent in the subject, (3) what it is contained by, (4) its contents, (5) contrast with opposites, (6) where it resides, (7) where it comes from, (8) its age or period, (9) its shape, size, qualities, properties, material or state of material, (10) the emotional reactions it causes, (11) the state of mind that it causes, (12) sensual qualities, (13) its physical effect,



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(14) its behavior, (15) its sexual qualities, i.e. men are angular, women are soft, graceful and curved, (16) its purpose and (17) its connection with various things. With every subject, there are relationships that the photographer can make use of. What the objects will do can be more important than the objects themselves.

### Illogical Approaches to Creativity

The problem of developing your creative potential is a strange one and requires strange solutions, a few of which are offered here. Anyone who would develop his potential must develop a willingness to explore strange new paths where there are few written guidelines. If you want to think up ideas, do not let logic and common sense inhibit your creative thinking. They are useful only in examining ideas once they have been thought up. Some "illogical" approaches to creativity that really work include these suggestions: (1) make a long list of the most foolish ways you can think of to solve a problem; (2) try to think of ways which will lead to the effect opposite the one you desire; (3) jot down completely irrelevant ideas which come into your head and think about them until you can relate them to the problem at hand, however strained the relationship; (4) think up pictorial solutions that would aggravate people who looked at your photos; (5) if your problem is to think up something beautiful, try to think of the ugliest solutions possible; (6) if you want a photograph which will sell people on some notion, think up ways of completely alienating them instead; (7) if your self-assigned task is a fashion type photo, think of various ways in which an industrial photographer, a snapshotter, a botanical photographer or a documentarian would go about it.

One way to break through conditioned responses is to think backwards, or in as irrational a way as possible. For example, in trying to find a good use for an idea, start out by thinking of all the things it *isn't* good for. Push this to a point where your thinking seems completely preposterous. Be as silly about this as you can. This kind of behavior frees and excites the mind long enough so that it generates all kinds of ideas, both preposterous and entirely reasonable. Later, one can discard all the intentionally-projected garbage and develop the good, new ideas that have slipped

past the conditioning patterns in which the mind is usually imprisoned.

Photographs have one main idea and a lot of subordinate ones. The main ideas are often too abstract and philosophical, but the subordinate ones can grow into major ideas in your own work. But first you have to dissect the photograph thoroughly and note anything that happens to strike your eye, no matter how unimportant it may seem to you. Concentrate your attention on interesting details of lighting, expression, environment, pose and so on. From what is happening in these areas you can get very specific ideas of things to try in your own photographs. You can "mine" a photo for ideas by merely making a list of all the things you see in it. Then you can recombine them in new environments.

After you have dug an idea out, try to think of its opposite. It may provide even better material than the original idea. Frequently, you will find that thinking about an idea in terms of its supposed opposites enables you to understand it better. If this happens you could then deliberately forget the notion of opposites and work with the original idea itself. Those who wish to increase their creativity should understand that you do not have to carry out an idea just because you thought it up. In this case we've worked to think of opposites, then deliberately thrown them away.

The principle is that the more ideas you throw away, the more you'll get. But this can only happen if you don't permit yourself to feel guilty about discarding good concepts. On the other hand, if you think you should do something about every good idea you get, you'll soon dry yourself up.

Try translating the feelings and impressions that you get from seeing into words, then try to write them down. It does not matter if the words are meaningless to others.

Strange as it may seem, people sometimes unconsciously deny themselves permission to have ideas, lest they be embarrassed by them. The very best idea-people come up with great quantities of ideas, but many of them are literally terrible. They've learned through experience that although many of the ideas are corny or meaningless, if they leave the flow of ideas unchecked, something good will eventually come up. In other words, they've given their minds permission to work most effectively; that is, unbridled by logic and responsi-

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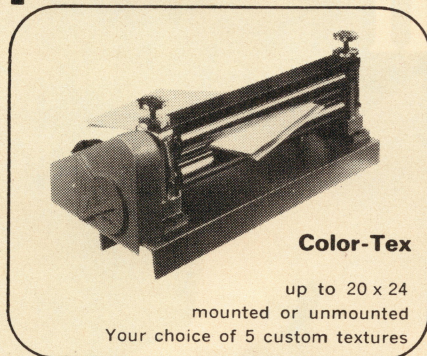
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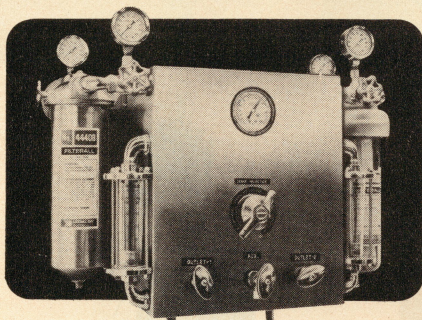
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bility. When the mind has permission to function freely, the unconscious part of the mind will start throwing out creative ideas by the carload.

One of the best ways for getting ideas is not to think them up but to discover and harvest those that are already lying around more or less unnoticed. They can be harvested or mined from paintings, books, conversations, museums, television, motion pictures, etc. One of the most fruitful areas to explore is other people's photographs. In existing pictures can be found ideas by the hundreds already cast in a form that is ideal for photography. Ideas from books or conversations may require considerable recasting. This does not have to be plagiarism if you borrow minor ideas and then adapt and develop them. From one photograph we take a secondary idea and turn it into a major one in photographs of our own; from another we take one that is merely latent, then develop it; from a third we take two ideas and combine them with three that we've already thought up; and from still another, we borrow ideas used in one context and adapt them to a completely different one. Through such procedures we make the borrowed ideas our own.

Assignments can be approached in such a manner as to encourage creative seeing to occur. These techniques include: (1) giving a familiar object new and exciting interest by putting it in an unlikely place; (2) exploiting the accidental — such as shooting a roll of film, re-rolling it, then shooting it again, thus getting double exposure on each frame, (the number of things you can combine is endless); (3) expressing your opinion by combining the object with other things or photographing it in such a manner as to illustrate how you feel about it; (4) learning to see all the possibilities of a given place by finding a place that interests you for some reason and then hanging around waiting for things to happen, going back day after day if necessary; (5) photographing things not only for what they are but for what *else* they are — by changes of lighting, camera angle, camera distance, focus, environmental surroundings, etc., a great many things can be transformed this way photographically (a twig becomes a tree, cracks in old paint suggest a face of person, etc.); (6) photographing in such a way as to reveal associations the subject causes us to make in our mind such as the jewel-like qualities of an egg;



and (7) visual type metaphors — derived from some visible aspect of similarity between the source object and the photographic interpretation. The important thing to remember about the use of metaphors is that the point of comparison between the thing from which the metaphor originated and the thing to which it applied should be similar enough that one can readily see that the comparison is reasonable.

Sometimes the best approach for the photographer is to allow the subject to be itself without interference. An idea, *per se*, has no value whatsoever; all that counts is that it means something or that it guides the photographer in his pursuit of meaning. A photographic effect for the sake of the effect only is a meaningless gimmick. The photographer's aim should be to evoke felt or experienced "idea feelings" in the photographic audience. While he must understand the technical tools at his disposal, these tools must always be used with purpose and understanding.

Part of the photographer's problem is to convey in his work such invisible things as ideas, moods and qualities. To evoke these responses in other people, the photographer must understand what "idea feelings" the subject evokes in himself and, equally important, he must understand how visual symbols evoke responses in man. Effect for effect sake is worthless here. To fulfill his purpose, the photographer must study the subject's features and must be truly perceptive about how it looks. Then he must look within and concern himself with what kind of subject matter it is and understand its true nature. Finally, the photographer uses his knowledge of the medium and the various techniques at his disposal to previsualize the final photograph and fix it on film. ●