

## **Beyond the Decisive Moment:**

# **Temporality and Montage in Paul Graham's *A Shimmer of Possibility***

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### ***Abstract***

The paper discusses questions of temporality and narration in Paul Graham's photobook *A Shimmer of Possibility*. Graham's use of photographic sequences decidedly contests the single photograph. He makes use of filmic methods such as temporality and montage that foster narration. The medium of the photobook supports the methods applied by creating a succession of pictures that can only be perceived one after another and therefore in time. Discussed are questions of stylistic methods, their relation to film, and the specific mediality of the photobook.

### ***Résumé***

Cet article revient sur les questions de temporalité et de narration dans le livre photo *A Shimmer of Possibility* de Paul Graham. L'utilisation de séries photographiques de Graham s'oppose résolument à la photographie unique. Il fait usage de techniques photofilmiques comme la temporalité ou le montage pour favoriser la narration. Le livre photographique comme médium permet la création de successions d'images qui ne peuvent être perçues qu'une après l'autre et donc dans une temporalité. Il sera enfin question de méthodes stylistiques envisagées dans leur rapport au film et à la spécificité du livre photo comme médium

### ***Keywords***

Graham (Paul), sequence, narration, temporality, montage, mediality

## The Single Image vs. the Image in Plural

The legacy of many photographers has derived from their ability to suggest that they were at the right place at the right time, to perceive life as it was unfolding, condensing it into the one photograph that seemed to tell an entire story or to manifestly produce the evidence and context of life itself. In producing the concept of the “decisive moment,” Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908–2004) committed himself to the formal perfection of the single shot. “[...] if the shutter was released at the decisive moment, you have instinctively fixed a geometric pattern without which the photograph would have been both formless and lifeless.” (Cartier-Bresson, 1952: n.p.) For Cartier-Bresson, formal aspects are essential to the concept of the decisive moment; everything must be perfectly in place. Many of his photographs, of course, instantiate this idea.

However, looking at contact sheets<sup>1</sup> of generations of photographers even before the invention of motor-driven or digital cameras, we now know that the idea of the single photograph is often a myth created by the second act of photography: in the process of selecting the image that best conveys the photographer’s ideas. Both photographing *and* selecting the single photograph imbue it with meaning and convey why the photographer who witnessed the moment did an excellent job in capturing it.

The historical opposite of this paradigm is chronophotography. (Cf. Frizot, 1998: 243ff.) In the experiments of Étienne-Jules Marey (1830–1904) and Eadward Muybridge (1830–1904), beginning in the 1870s, movement was captured by recording animated subjects—animals and humans—with multiple cameras that shot within a specific time pattern. Thus the course of motion was captured in multiple exposures, displaying the passing of time by freezing individual poses. Chronophotography can be seen as a precursor of cinema. For contemporary viewers it seemed necessary to animate the individual photographs as, for example, with some of the horses’ poses captured in “ugly and ungainly” positions. (Mowl Mathews, 2005: 44) With the invention of the zoopraxiscope, Muybridge solved this dilemma and displayed the individual photographs in motion, thus creating a realistic perception of movement.

The perception of an *ungainly* position in a single photograph of Muybridge’s horse sequence can be seen as the exact opposite of the decisive moment. The pose seems to be unnatural and preposterous, thus undermining the dignity and power of a galloping horse. However, using more than one photograph of the same subject can provide a more thorough view of the subject, adding context and depth to its presentation. When looking at chronophotography not only as a precursor of cinema but also as a sequential practice in photography, it seems necessary to note that it uses stilled cameras to observe motion and mostly follows a rigid pattern in the rhythm of exposure, whereas sequential photography may move the camera and vary the timing to create context.

Many photographers today use the opportunity to unfold their subject in more than one picture, illuminating it from different angles and thus gaining complexity. The combination of pictures brings forward the medium of the photobook. It can contain a whole series in a specific succession, enhancing the photographer’s ideas of context, cohesion, and narration. The “image in plural” (cf. Ganz/Thürlemann, 2010) forms a context in the form of a series, or sequences, or both. According to Allan Sekula (1951–2013), “Sequential organization, and the parallel construction of textual elements, allows a photographic work to function as a novel or film might, with a higher and more complex level of formal unity. However, the openness of the sequential ensemble constitutes a crucial difference with cinema: there is no unilinear dictatorship of the projector.” (Sekula, 1998: 5-6) Sekula relates the function of the photographic sequence to the specific mediality of film and literature, therefore introducing aspects of time and narration.

The single photograph produces visibility within its frame. The “off” stays off because it is impossible to reintroduce anything that has been left out of the frame back into the realm of visibility. (cf. Metz, 1990: 160f.) The minute moment of exposure freezes everything in place and produces stillness. Hence the metaphor of death has been introduced into reflections on photography. (cf. Barthes, 2010: 79) Contrasted with photography’s stillness, film is linked to movement and life. Both media share the time lapse between exposure and viewing. However, it seems that photography is always associated with history and memory, whereas the projection of film is said to produce presence.

I wish to contend that the use of filmic means in a sequential photographic practice produces a form of presence. The sequence allows us to experience persons, objects, or locations in more than one single photograph and therefore provides more information on the subject. The use of multiple pictures of a place, a person, or an event also rejects the idea that it is possible to reduce a situation to a single photograph. It denies the individual picture the notion of graphic and timely perfection. The photographic sequence implies the idea that there may be *ungainly* poses included, as this may help to form a context within the sequence. It is not necessarily the individual picture that has to be perfect; rather it is set within a context, which in combination with other images, conveys an idea or a visual experience. The single photograph within a sequence appears without symbolic meaning because the sequence as a whole creates visibility and/or meaning. The sequence allows an unfolding of visibility in a way that involves the viewer in a process of looking, thinking, and making up her mind as to what is being shown.

### *A Shimmer of Possibility*

Paul Graham photographed *A Shimmer of Possibility* from 2004 to 2006 in the United States. It was published in the form of a twelve-volume book. (Graham, 2007) Not deliberately seeking a particular topic, he seems to be interested in life itself, in its fleeting winks and its unforeseeable twists and turns within everyday moments. The sequences are about brief encounters, sometimes with and sometimes without the knowledge of those photographed. They are mostly about city- and landscapes and the people within. Atmosphere and lighting are important. Sometimes a sequence is photographed in one location, sometimes in different locations, interlacing and implementing more complex structures.

### **Louisiana 2005**

The sequence *Louisiana* was photographed in 2005. It consists of twelve photographs placed alone in one of the twelve volumes. The sequence begins on the right-hand page with a horizontal long shot showing a man and a red cat on a dirt track walking in the direction of the camera. An elevated road overpass and an industrial zone can be seen in the background. Untended greenery and blooming white flowers, additionally, shape the surrounding. The sun is shining.

In the following pictures, views of the man and the cat alternate from long-shot to close-up perspectives, always in the same setting underneath the elevated road overpass in the midst of the greenery. The photographs are various sizes and arranged on both pages. Only the last picture implements a minor change in location. We see the man from a distance in the back carrying the cat under his arm and walking towards the parking lot of a motel where another man stands facing him. At the bottom of the picture we view the end of the dirt track and understand our direct spatial connection to the other pictures: we are looking in the opposite direction.



*Fig. 1, Paul Graham: A Shimmer of Possibility, Louisiana sequence, Göttingen: Steidl, 2007. © Paul Graham.*

The twelve pictures are all photographed in the same location. The first picture serves as an establishing shot. It sets the tone and introduces the protagonists and the location. (Fig. 1) In the first two pictures—printed on the right-hand side, leaving the left page blank—the sequence suggests movement and the passing of time: not only because the man appears to walk towards us, becoming larger from one picture to the next, but also because the camera moves towards him, even though his position is frozen in the single frame. The pictures are positioned on the double page in a way that suggests that the movement is directed towards the book's gutter.

Movement abruptly halts with the third picture. (Fig. 2)



*Fig. 2, Paul Graham: A Shimmer of Possibility, Louisiana sequence, Göttingen: Steidl, 2007. © Paul Graham.*

The horizontal format supporting the movement is substituted by a vertical format, stalling the action and freezing the man in a pose. The arrangement of the picture on the left page adds to this impression of stopped time, and the right page is blank. After turning the page, the viewer's gaze typically shifts to the right page first. Thus its inkless-ness creates a break. Only after perceiving the blank page does the gaze move to the left page to view the image.

The perception of a sudden halt is heightened further by the next picture, which—on first view—seems to be identical with the one before. Same size, same position, same framing, same pose: even on closer inspection, it is difficult to identify the moved cars in the background in order to verify that this is *not* the same photograph. Time stands still. The moment seemingly stretches to an endless extent. However, this stillness is interrupted by the viewer of the book, who leafs back and forth in order to determine whether it is really the same photograph or not. The confusion produced in combination with the use of the book leads to movement—not in the pictures but by the viewer—in breaking up the stillness.

The next three pictures feature the cat and again suggest stillness. (Fig. 3)

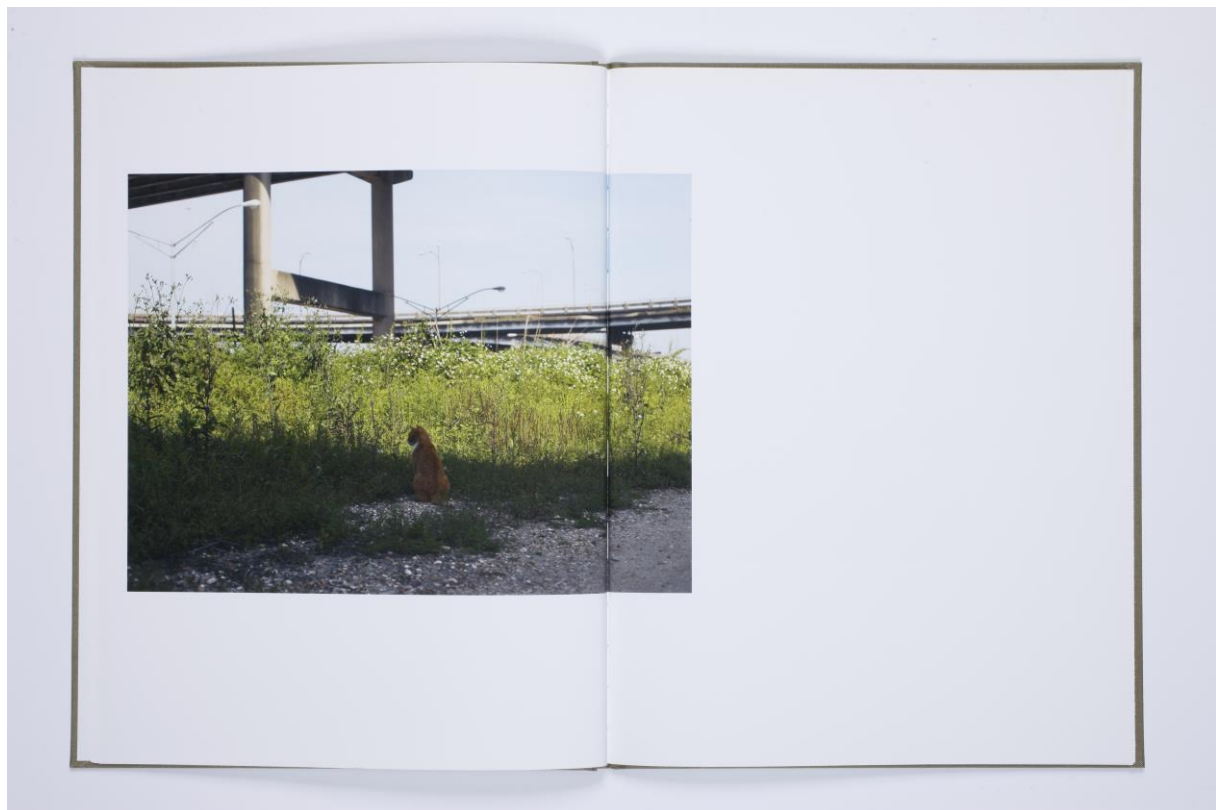


Fig. 3, Paul Graham: *A Shimmer of Possibility, Louisiana sequence*, Göttingen: Steidl, 2007. © Paul Graham.

The implementation of different angles and perspectives, enhanced by the varying sizes and positions of the photographs on the double page format, leads to the impression that time has cautiously begun to move again. However, the perception of time's passing is different than in the beginning of the sequence, as movement cannot be seen. The cat's laziness in the first picture is overtaken by its attentive observation of the greenery in the next photographs. The stillness of each pose contrasts with the invisible movement that has taken place in between the pictures. This suggests a passing of time, the length of which cannot be precisely specified. The act of moving is left out of the photographs. Two layers of time are apparently established: the man's time and the cat's time. Both are presented as autonomous time frames. The setting of the book, however, makes them pass one *after* another.

The pointing arm and hand form a special moment within the sequence, as now three pictures are juxtaposed on a double-page spread. (Fig. 4)



Fig. 4, Paul Graham: *A Shimmer of Possibility, Louisiana sequence*, Göttingen: Steidl, 2007. © Paul Graham.

The photographs form a sequence within the sequence. Three moments create one gesture, beginning with a slightly limp arm in the top left picture until a pose of pointing consolidates in the photograph on the right. The limp pose is *ungainly*, thus demonstrating the rejection of the perfect picture representing a decisive moment. The differences between the pictures are greater than in the two portraits of the man following each other because here both camera and body move. The photographs visualize a small gesture. The three pictures capture a fleeting moment that would most likely pass unnoticed in daily life. The moment is not halted; rather, through the array of the pictures on the double page, the moment becomes comprehensible as a movement connected to fleeting time. Although the gesture is stilled in the photographs, the movement continues in the cycle of the three pictures. Once I have viewed the last one, I begin anew with the top left picture because the finger points to it, and this moment potentially repeats forever in a circular act of perception.

Turning the page, we see again the cat peering into the green. It seems as if the cat has been waiting alertly while the man points to something unknown in the distance. The last picture once more suggests movement and the active passing of time. The change of perspective and resumed action propose that this earlier encounter, staged underneath the elevated road overpass, is over. The man disappears into the distance, with the cat returned to his supervision.

The sequence shows that there is no single decisive moment able to represent this encounter under the overpass. When only the man is present, we know that the cat is still there and vice versa. The “off” of the scene is not a complete off because we are constantly reminded of the other protagonist when turning to the next photograph. Moreover the setting is presented from different angles, thus producing a comprehensible, spatial

overview of the situation. The camera's reverse angle in the last photograph helps to better envision the entire setting. (Fig. 5)



Fig. 5, Paul Graham: *A Shimmer of Possibility*, Louisiana sequence, Göttingen: Steidl, 2007. © Paul Graham.

Time moves, stops, and passes: some moments are halted and stretched, others sped up. There is no continuous flow of time; rather stillness and varying speeds are implemented in order to introduce a fluctuating and elliptical rhythm. The subject of the photographs, how it is presented, and the array of the pictures emphasize the shifting handling of time. The sequence creates presence. In its varying temporalities, the scene and protagonists are very much present because we can experience them visually in different aspects within the surrounding. Such a shifting temporality is already implemented in the photographs and further enhanced in the selection process, and the photobook format adds to the perception of the sequence's temporality.

### **The Photobook**

When looking at photographs in a photobook, we never see all the pictures at once. In order to grasp the entire sequence, we remember pictures that came before while leafing through the pages, thus creating a more holistic structure in our memory. "Because of the persistence of memory and the retention of after-image, a previous page can be incorporated into the imagery of the following page, or even a succession of pages." (Smith, 1998: 42) Viewing, time, and memory are intertwined in the perception of a photobook. The pages and photographs are revealed in "the act of turning the page," as bookmaker Keith A. Smith describes. (Smith, 1998: 231) Turning the page is a form of movement. Thus time and movement go together in the experience of the book.

"Any format that exists in time has the potential for pacing. Specific patterns of pacing can be incorporated by turning pages. The viewer can recognize the slowing down and speeding up of turning pages intended by the bookmaker. But this is rarely the case." (142) Smith defines *pacing* as "1. The modulation of time in a book. 2. Cadence." (229) The pacing is something that the bookmaker implements within the book. The

viewer/reader may follow suit or, alternatively, use her own timing for a personal viewing experience. Yet there is a third aspect within the photobook: the timing of the photographs. Therefore time and movement in the photobook are threefold: there is the photographs' time, the pacing provided in the arrangement of the photographs, and the viewer's time.

According to Smith the pacing may be achieved through cinematographic characteristics. (132) The second term used for pacing is *cadence*, a term known from music. Music and cinema are media perceived in time. Additionally, British photography critic Gerry Badger thinks of music when talking about the arrangement of photographs in a book:

[...] it is useful to think of musical qualities like point and counterpoint, harmony and contrast, exposition and repeat. There should be an ebb and flow to a photobook narrative, it should get "softer" here, "louder" there, "quicken up" in visual terms, or slow down, and it should build naturally, if not to a climax, at least to a resolution. (Badger, 2013: 19)

The *Louisiana* sequence clearly demonstrates the three elements of temporality in the photobook. The photographs show movement or standstill. The arrangement makes the viewer turn the pages in a specific way, and each viewer will find her own timing in the perception of the book.

In the *Louisiana* sequence, the photographs seem to form a linear narration. However, even though there is a beginning and an end, the sequence does not tell a story in the most basic sense. If we think of the last picture as a form of arrival, then there may be a resolution in the aforementioned sense. Badger prefers to think of the narration in photobooks as "mood pieces, visual poems if you like, where any narrative line is contingent, fluid, and often highly elliptical. Indeed, elliptical narrative might almost be considered the quintessential characteristic of the photobook." (Badger, 2013: 18) Graham takes up this idea of *visual poems*, describing *A Shimmer of Possibility* as "filmic haikus." (Rosenberg, 2009) The essential elements of haiku, a Japanese form of poetry, are "concreteness and the reference to the present." [my translation] (Deutsche Haiku-Gesellschaft, n.d.) This analogy seems suitable for *A Shimmer of Possibility*. The presence created and the atmosphere displayed can be experienced in correlation to the passing, stretching, and cycling of time and its fluidity.

With the rejection of the single photograph, the photographer also seems to reject the notion of representation, or the charging of pictures with symbolic qualities. What is the sequence about? It does not present meaning in a way that can be easily grasped. The protagonist's appearance and the setting suggest that he is not rich. However, the sequence is no document about human poverty either. The man as a person is shown in dignity, but we learn nothing about him except from the fact that he walks around with a cat in the neighborhood of a motel that is situated on an elevated road overpass. The sequence asks questions that the photographs do not answer. Why is the man there, why is he taking a walk with a cat? This remains just as open as the nondescript setting, situated vaguely somewhere in Louisiana, as the title suggests.

### **California 2005-2006**

The eighteen photographs assembled in this volume were taken in different locations at different times. However, the sequencing in the book allows one to conclude that the author wishes them to be seen as interrelated. The book begins with a large,



horizontal close-up photograph of a man's chest, belly, and hands holding a styrofoam cup. (Fig. 6)

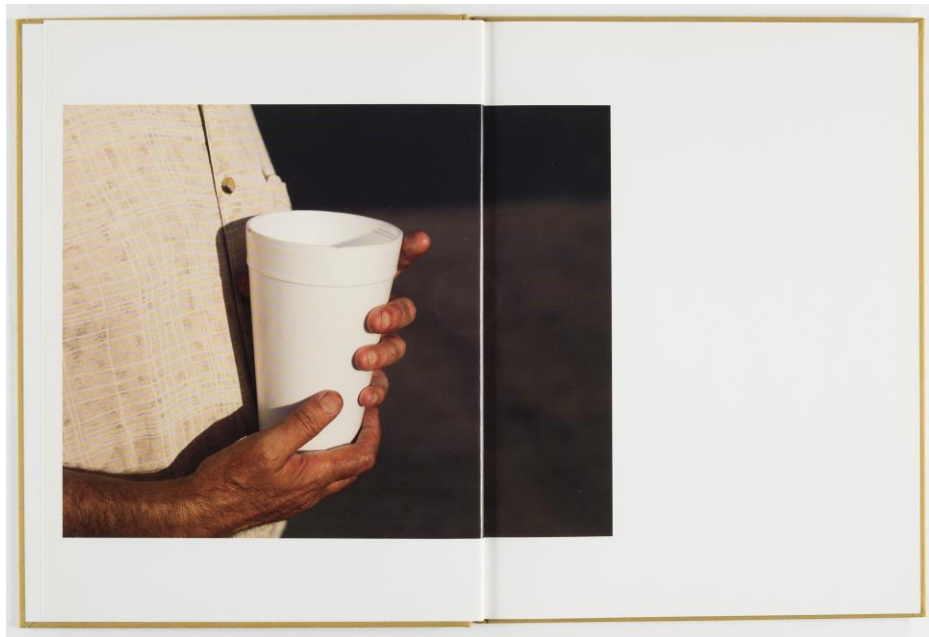


Fig. 6, Paul Graham: *A Shimmer of Possibility, California sequence*, Göttingen: Steidl, 2007. © Paul Graham.

It is impossible to see if the cup is filled. Therefore it remains unknown if the cup is used for coffee or for begged coins. The picture is placed on the left page stretching over the fold, showing the figure in semi-profile facing the gutter of the book. This first page spread is followed by an interleaf. Turning the page again, the viewer is confronted with a photograph showing the wall of a fast food restaurant, where a figure crouches in the shadow on the sidewalk.

On the following pages, the scene with the crouching man is juxtaposed with a second location, where a girl plays with toys on the sidewalk. The two scenes are shown in various arrays on the double page: they switch positions on the page itself but also from

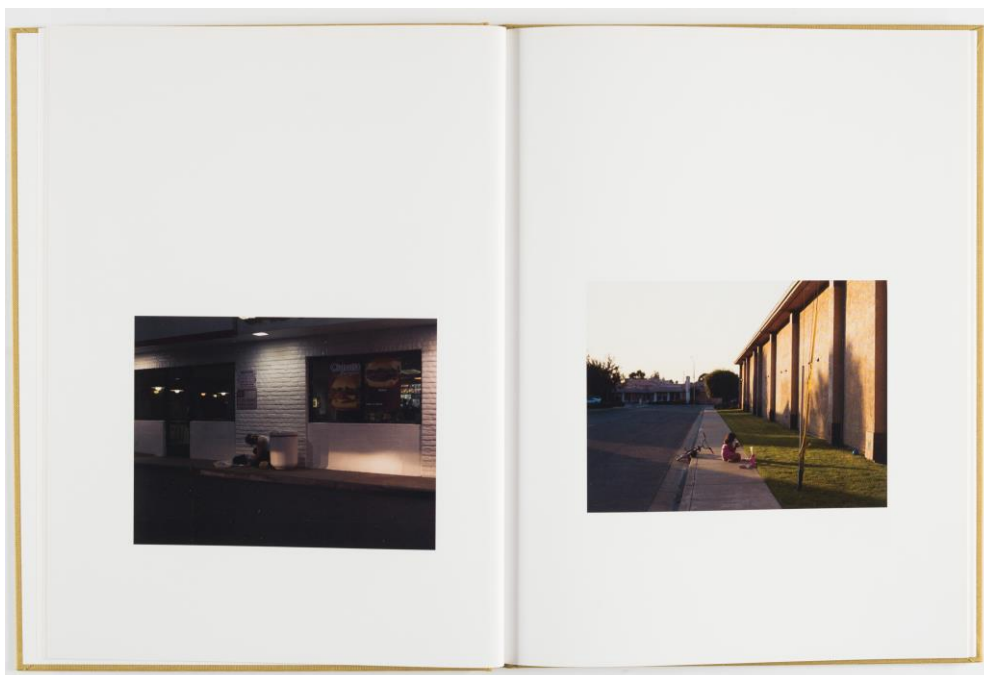


Fig. 7, Paul Graham: *A Shimmer of Possibility, California sequence*, Göttingen: Steidl, 2007. © Paul Graham.

left to right and vice versa. Thus on some pages the two protagonists seem to face each other, whereas in others they appear back-to-back. (Fig. 7) After a picture of the girl's toys, positioned on the left page, an interleaf follows. On the next double page we view a scene change; now we observe a little boy standing on a lawn. (Fig. 8)



*Fig. 8, Paul Graham: A Shimmer of Possibility, California sequence, Göttingen: Steidl, 2007. © Paul Graham.*

The next double pages show more of the setting: a concrete path used by skaters, a family having lunch close to a gas station, people sitting on the lawn. (Fig. 9)

The last picture from this setting shows a lonely, newly planted tree. The family pictures are of snapshot quality, cutting through people's heads and bodies and partly concealing other people present in the scene. After another interleaf, we are surprised with a reversed photograph of the man holding a styrofoam cup, positioned on the left page in



*Fig. 9, Paul Graham: A Shimmer of Possibility, California sequence, Göttingen: Steidl, 2007. © Paul Graham.*

the same size as the photograph in the beginning. (Fig. 10) Most of the man's body now lies in the shadow. The sun arrives from the right, slightly illuminating the man's shirt.

In this sequence we are confronted with varying scenes. It is not necessarily the timing that has the strongest impact on the viewer but rather the montage. The man with the styrofoam cup remains completely anonymous; the image does not even hint at a setting. But his photographs visually frame the entire sequence. The second part of the sequence, in turn, interlaces two quite different locations. Since both protagonists sit on sidewalks in front of walls in a twilight situation, there seems to be a formal connection between the scenes. While the photographer observes the crouching man from more or less the same position, he moves toward the girl with changing camera positions. The passing of time is made visible through the different positions that the protagonists assume in the photographs. They appear stilled in the single shots, their degree of motion remaining rather minimal. As the photographer approaches the girl, we can interpret a passage of time in order to bridge the distance. She has noticed his presence but does not care. The crouching man seems to be straightening up in slow motion, as the camera does not really move. He has not noticed the photographer. The interlacing of the two scenes introduces

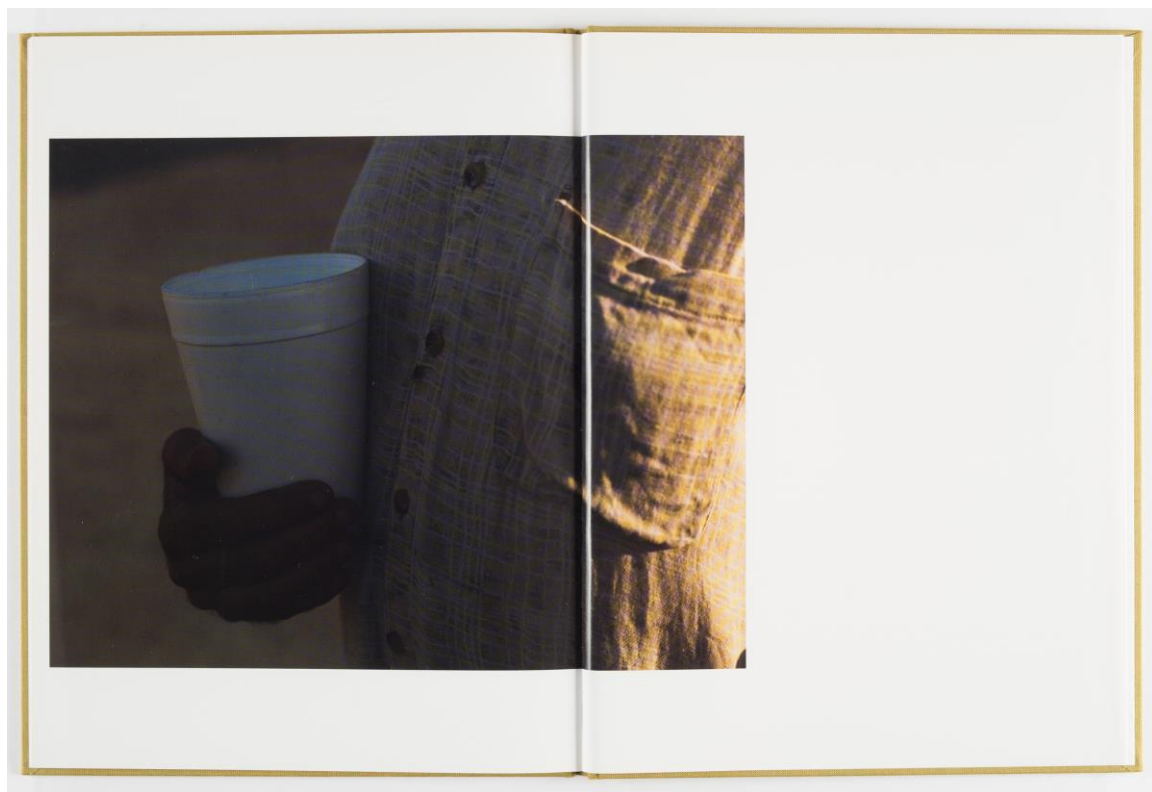


Fig. 10, Paul Graham: *A Shimmer of Possibility*, California sequence, Göttingen: Steidl, 2007. © Paul Graham.

varying time layers. The movement of the camera enhances the perception of time's passing, whereas the almost stilled camera slows down the passing of time.

The third part of the sequence completely differs from the others. It seems to show a middle-class, Sunday outing in a tourist spot. The protagonists can be clearly seen in the bright sunlight. Whereas Graham closely observes the settings before, here the photographs seem to visualize a fleeting glance: a family having fast food lunch, the skaters coming and going, people sitting on the grass. We do not even know if the family and the skaters are photographed in the same location. The grass and the surrounding landscape suggest a spatial identity, but this might result from the montage and the similarity of some aspects of the photographs. The perception of time's passing is enhanced by activity in the pictures: the children seem to be constantly moving, the skaters are active, and the gas station in the

background features two cars, both visible in the two pictures respectively, and sharing space in one of the photographs. Only the child (seemingly posing for the picture), the people sitting on the lawn in the distance, and the small tree in the center of the last photograph suggest stillness. The beginning and the end of this setting allow for a pause, whereas the other pictures display a high level of activity and motion, enhancing the perception of fleeting glances and time's quick passage.

In the end, temporality in the *California* sequence is not as graspable as in the *Louisiana* sequence. Here an aspect of montage becomes much more pronounced. The bracketing sets a frame around varying social and spatial scenes. While the scenes with the girl and the crouching man seem to be rather self-contained, the last scene opens the view onto a distance and allows for more freedom of activity and viewing.

Graham's practice of briefly turning his attention to someone present in a certain location or setting – or in other words, the juxtaposition of scenes that deviate from each other to a large degree – can be understood as a practice of *dérive*, coined by the Situationist International. The *dérive* is “[a] mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances.” (Situationist International, 1958) The *dérive* is about perception and experience, about the practical knowledge of ambiance and real life, including aspects of randomness. Its un-intentionality conflicts with the coherence of a story's narrative. Thus the *dérive* does not necessarily focus on creating meaning but rather concentrates on making ruptures and differences accessible.

David Chandler (b. 1933) describes Paul Graham's photographic practice like this: He continued driving, to and from places, visiting and not visiting; the locations, towns and cities becoming less and less relevant and more and more representative. He would drive, and stop, and walk, sometimes for a few minutes, at other times for hours, maintaining an unstructured and intuitive itinerary, and photographing all the while, keeping restraint in mind, never dwelling too long on any one subject or being drawn too far beyond that initial point of fascination. (Chandler, n.d.)

The seemingly random combination of different people, settings, and scenes in the *California* sequence leaves viewers with a vague impression rather than a clear understanding of events. The contrasts between twilight and sunlight, poor and affluent, ambiguity and clarity, all highlight different aspects of society in California. However, the complex visuality of the sequence expands beyond a simple verbal explanation.

## Conclusion

Paul Graham's use of photographic sequences in *A Shimmer of Possibility* bears a strong resemblance to film. Filmic techniques help to create presence, emphasizing timing and montage to convey a setting and to enable viewers to experience situations while looking at the photographs. The narrative structure, however, differs profoundly from a filmic one. In a documentary way, action is shown as unintentional and random. Thus Graham's narrative remains close to life itself: his photographs do not charge the scenes or activity observed with meaning, as a filmic or a literary narrative might do.

The overall presentation in the photobook puts forth the idea of a narrative without a storyline, without a particular beginning and ending, or a tangible plot. It is quite apt that Paul Graham associates his work with the short stories of Russian writer Anton Chekhov (1860–1904). Chandler writes about Chekhov's short stories that they “achieve the greatest atmosphere from ordinary situations, the most vivid sense of time, place and character, with the most minimal of means, and with plain words beautifully arranged often in long lilting sentences.” (Chandler, n.d.)

The rejection of a decisive moment leads to a complex presentation of an immersive atmosphere for the viewer. The combination of photographs, their succession and arrangement on the book's pages, as well as their timing and montage, all account for the remarkable quality of the work. Taking into account the photographs' temporality as well as their arrangement, and choosing her own pace of advancing or moving back-and-forth through the pages, the viewer becomes involved as a director.

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<sup>1</sup> William Klein (b.1928) initiated the idea of looking at photographers' contact sheets that eventually found its way into a TV documentation produced by Arte TV between 1988 and 2004 titled *Contacts*. Cf. [http://boutique.arte.tv/f8744contacts\\_coffret\\_3\\_dvd](http://boutique.arte.tv/f8744contacts_coffret_3_dvd), accessed September 5, 2014.

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