

# GESTALT

**Ge-stalt** (gə-shtält'), n. [*pl.* GESTALTEN (-ən)], [G., lit., shape, form, configuration < MHG. *gestalt*, pp. of *stellen*, to arrange, fix, form], in *Gestalt psychology*, any of the integrated structures or patterns that make up all experience and have specific properties which can neither be derived from the elements of the whole nor considered simply as the sum of these elements.  
**Gestalt psychology**, [see prec. entry], a school of psychology, developed in Germany, which affirms that all experience consists of Gestalten, and that the response of an organism to a situation is a complete and unanalyzable whole rather than a sum of the responses to specific elements in the situation.

GESTALT PERCEPTUAL FACTORS BUILD A VISUAL FRAME OF REFERENCE WHICH CAN PROVIDE THE DESIGNER WITH A RELIABLE PSYCHOLOGICAL BASIS FOR THE SPATIAL ORGANIZATION OF GRAPHIC INFORMATION. AROUND 1900, GERMAN AND AUSTRIAN PSYCHOLOGISTS BEGAN TO FORMULATE CONCEPTS BASED ON "PATTERN SEEKING" IN HUMAN BEHAVIOR. THEY DEVELOPED THEORY PARTICULARLY VALUABLE TO DESIGNERS AND PHOTOGRAPHERS. WE ARE DRAWN TO GESTALT PERCEPTUAL PSYCHOLOGY BECAUSE IT GIVES CONCRETE EVIDENCE OF HOW THE EYE ORGANIZES VISUAL EXPERIENCES.

## THE GESTALT THEORY

**1** THE PARTS OF A VISUAL IMAGE MAY BE CONSIDERED, ANALYZED, AND EVALUATED AS DISTINCT COMPONENTS.

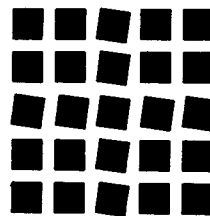
**2** THE WHOLE OF A VISUAL IMAGE IS DIFFERENT FROM AND GREATER THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS.

## EXAMPLES

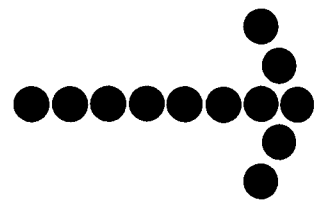
- WHEN YOU LOOK AT A PHOTOGRAPH OF A LANDSCAPE YOU MIGHT CONSIDER THE HILLS, SKY, SUNSET, LAKE, AND TREES AS ELEMENTS TO BE SEPARATELY ADMIRER. YET TAKEN TOGETHER THEY FORM A COHERENT WHOLE OF UNIFIED BEAUTY, EACH PART ADDING TO THE OTHER.
- A POSTER MAY BE ANALYZED AS A RECIPE OF ILLUSTRATION, HEADLINE TYPE AND TEXT TYPE. WHEN THESE COMMUNICATION ELEMENTS ARE PLACED TOGETHER THEY REINFORCE ONE ANOTHER BUILDING A PATTERN THAT "GLUES" THE WHOLE.
- THINK OF THIS MUSICAL ANALOGY: MUSICAL NOTES DEFINE A PATTERN OR MELODY. EACH NOTE MAY BE HEARD SEPARATELY AND CONSIDERED. IF THE NOTES ARE ARRANGED IN A PLEASING MELODY, THINK OF THE MELODY AS THE GESTALT WHICH IS GREATER THAN JUST THE SUM OF THE NOTES.

● A THOROUGH KNOWLEDGE OF VISUAL GESTALT PRINCIPLES GIVES THE GRAPHIC DESIGNER AN INVALUABLE TOOL BOX. WE KNOW THAT AUDIENCES WILL REACT TO OVERT OR OBVIOUS GESTALT PATTERNS. BY MATCHING A TARGET AUDIENCE WITH SELECTED HIGH IMPACT GESTALT IMAGES WE CAN SHORTEN THE DISTANCE TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS. WE CAN, AS DESIGNERS, VIRTUALLY GUARANTEE AN AUDIENCE RESPONSE, WHICH IS THE BOTTOM LINE OF DESIGN EFFICIENCY. GESTALT IMAGERY CAN BE PHOTOGRAPHIC, SYMBOLIC, TYPOGRAPHIC, ILLUSTRATIVE OR A COMBINATION OF THESE. OVERT GESTALTS ARE PARTICULARLY USEFUL FOR GRAPHIC PIECES WHICH RELY ON QUICK EXPOSURE - POSTERS, MAGAZINE AND BOOK COVERS, AND TELEVISION GRAPHICS. TO WORK WITH GESTALT PRINCIPLES IN VISUAL IMAGERY IS TO DEAL WITH BASIC HUMAN RESPONSE, A NATURAL VISUAL ACTIVITY OF THE HUMAN ORGANISM.

■ GESTALT VISUAL PRINCIPLES HAVE LONG BEEN USED TO ANALYZE IMAGES. MOST FINE ARTS HAVE BEEN CONSIDERED FROM OTHER VIEWPOINTS : WITH RATHER MYSTICAL "ESTHETIC" JUDGEMENTS. GESTALT PRINCIPLES GIVE US THE OPPORTUNITY TO EVALUATE THE END EFFECTIVENESS OF VISUAL IMAGERY. DESIGNERS SHOULD THOROUGHLY LEARN GESTALT PERCEPTUAL PSYCHOLOGY AND EXPERIMENT WITH ITS EXCITING FORMS.



■ IN THIS ILLUSTRATION YOU CAN TEST YOUR NATURAL TENDENCY TO ORGANIZE VISUAL PATTERNS. SEE HOW YOU GROUP THE TILTED SQUARES AND SEE A CROSS OR PLUS.



■ HERE TWELVE DOTS HAVE BEEN ARRANGED TO FORM A DIRECTIONAL SYMBOL. WE CAN "SEE" EACH DOT SEPARATELY BUT THE ARROW IS GREATER THAN THE SUM OF THE DOTS AND BECOMES THE COLLECTIVE GESTALT.

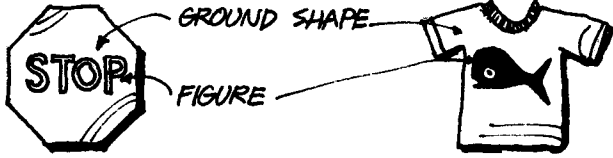
**1** **FIGURE/GROUND** • THE FUNDAMENTAL LAW OF PERCEPTION WHICH ALLOWS US TO "READ" IMAGERY. MADE POSSIBLE BY CONTRAST.

■ **FIGURES** • POSITIVE ELEMENTS DEFINED BY SPATIAL RELATIONSHIPS WHICH EXIST AMONG ALL THEIR PARTS. THEY OCCUR ON A FIELD OR GROUND.

■ **GROUND** • BACKGROUND, FIELD, WHITE SPACE, NEGATIVE SPACE, FORMAT WHICH CARRIES VISUAL IMAGE.

■ WE ARE ABLE TO READ A SPEEDOMETER, WATCH, OR SIGN.

■ POLAR BEARS HAVE A WHITE CAMOUFLAGE.



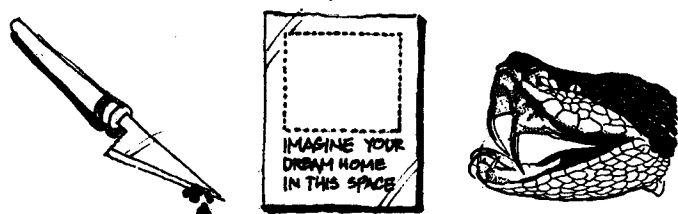
**2** **EQUILIBRIUM** • EVERY PSYCHOLOGICAL FIELD TENDS TOWARD ORDER, BALANCE, AND MAXIMUM EFFICIENCY. NATURAL PHENOMENA ACT ON MATERIALS, ORGANISMS. THE RESULTING SHAPES OF GRAVITY, HEAT, AND PRESSURE ARE USUALLY "CLOSED," COMPACT.

- WATER ON A WAXED SURFACE CLUSTERS.
- BUBBLES IN A SOFT DRINK ARE ROUNDED.
- A STRETCHED MEMBRANE CONTRACTS INTO A CIRCLE.
- MOLTEN METAL FORMS INTO A BALL SHAPE.
- FLOWERS OPEN AND CLOSE FROM A CENTRAL CORE.



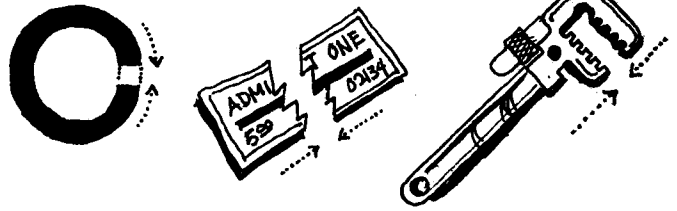
**3** **ISOMORPHIC CORRESPONDENCE** • DEALS WITH THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STRUCTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF VISUAL FORM AND SIMILAR CHARACTERISTICS OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR. EXPERIENCES OF PEOPLE, BOTH PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL, ARE RECALLED AND TRIGGERED BY SPECIFIC VISUAL IMAGES.

- AN ILLUSTRATION OF A BLOODY KNIFE RECALLS A CUT.
- A PHOTO OF A RATTLESNAKE TRIGGERS GREAT FEAR.
- A TELEVISION AD FOR A HAMBURGER STIMULATES HUNGER.
- AN ANTI-WAR POSTER INCITES A GROUP TO RIOT.
- AN INCOMPLETE AD INVITES VIEWERS TO IMAGINE A DREAM HOME ON THEIR PROPERTY.



**4** **CLOSURE** • CLOSED SHAPES ARE MORE VISUALLY STABLE THAN UNCLOSED SHAPES. WE HAVE A NATURAL TENDENCY TO CLOSE GAPS AND COMPLETE AN UNFINISHED FORM.

- WE IMAGINE HOW A PLIERS, WRENCH, OR TWEEZERS CLOSES.
- WE VISUALLY CLOSE A GATE IN AN OPEN CORRAL.



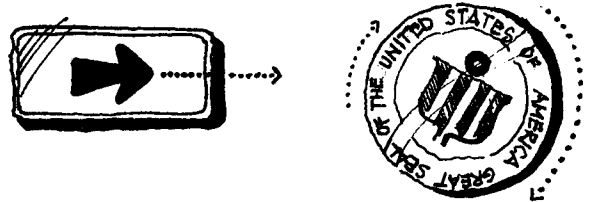
**5** **PROXIMITY** • PERCEPTUAL GROUPINGS ARE FAVORED ACCORDING TO THE NEARNESS OF PARTS. CLOSER PARTS FORM GROUPS BY VISUALLY UNITING.

- FOUR BLACK SWANS SWIMMING TOGETHER DRAW ATTENTION FROM A LARGE FLOCK OF BIRDS.
- YELLOW CABS CLUSTER NEAR A HOTEL ENTRANCE.
- IN A GARDEN, CLUSTERS OF FLOWERS DRAW THE EYE MORE READILY THAN SINGLE FLOWERS.



**6** **CONTINUATION** • ORGANIZATION IN PERCEPTION LEADS THE EYE TO CONTINUE ALONG AND BEYOND A STRAIGHT LINE OR CURVE.

- A DIRECTIONAL ARROW POINTS THE EYE IN THE INTENDED DIRECTION.
- WE ARE ABLE TO READ THE CIRCULAR TYPESETTING ON AN OFFICIAL SEAL.



**7** **SIMILARITY** • IDENTICAL VISUAL UNITS WILL BE SEEN TOGETHER IN GROUPS. SIMILAR OBJECTS ARE DEFINED BY SHAPE, SIZE, COLOR, AND DIRECTION.

- IN A HERD OF CATTLE WE PERCEIVE BLACK ANGUS AND RED HEREFORDS AS SEPARATE GROUPS.
- A CAR MOVING AGAINST TRAFFIC ON A ONE-WAY STREET BECOMES IMMEDIATELY APPARENT.

