Instruction for Gestalt (unity & variety) Photomontage with Lettering

Gestalt is a general description for the concepts that make unity and variety possible in design. It is a German word that roughly translates as "whole" or "form". Gestalt theory is involved with visual perception and the psychology of art among other things. It is concerned with the relationships between the parts and the whole of a composition.

What you will be studying about gestalt is concerned with how groups are formed and what affect they have on perception. The stronger the grouping, the stronger the gestalt. It is this grouping that contributes to the unity in a design.

The same concepts that form groups can be reverse to ungroup items - to make them look unique and stand alone. That is the basis for creating variety. Variety is what adds interest to an image.

The trick is to strike a balance between unity and variety. Too much unity and the design can look boring and repetitive; too much variety and it can look chaotic and disconnected. Understanding gestalt concepts can help a designer control unity and variety.

There are **five gestalt concepts**:

        Closure - the mind supplies the missing pieces in a composition.

        Continuance - the eye continues in the direction it is going.

        Similarity - what an item looks like and how that affects gestalt.

        Proximity - where items are in relationship to each other and how that affects gestalt.

        Alignment - lining up objects to organize and form groups.

The objectives of this assignment are to:

        Understand how **similarity** works to produce both unity and variety.

        Understand how **proximity** works to produce both unity and variety.

        Learn four proximity types and how to use them.

        Make an image where similarity is used to promote variety and proximity is used to create a unified composition.

Similarity

Subject matter will be eliminated for this discussion because gestalt is based in what items **look** like not what they **are** like. There is a limit to the amount of information that the mind can keep track of. When the amount of visual information becomes too great the mind tries to simplify by grouping. Groups are formed in logical ways based on what information looks like and where the various items are located. Similarity is concerned with what items or shapes look like.

Similarity is a powerful grouping concept and as such can contribute significantly towards achieving unity. The more alike the items are, the more likely they are to form groups. By the same token, if items are dissimilar, they will resist grouping and tend to show more variety. It is important to understand that all the gestalt concepts can be used both ways - to group and to ungroup.

There are **three major similarity types** - the way items can look alike or look different.

        Size - similar size is a more dominant similarity type. Similar size as in larger or smaller versus different shapes.

        Value / Color - color and/or value can make items easier to identify. Value can work as easily as color and in fact sometimes is a stronger design element. You have to be willing to try different combinations of things to see what works and what doesn't work.

        Shape - Simple shapes can be more attractive to the eye than complex shapes, even though complex shapes may stand out more, simple shapes can be more powerful because they appeal to our sense of order.

A simple example of using shapes to group is the use of *italic* or **bold** type to emphasis and separate parts of a sentence.

Similarity types are used extensively in design to create order and to organize information into specific groups in order to make the material presented more understandable.

You will be using magazines for the materials in this assignment. Notice how various concepts are used in magazines ads to control groups of information.

Proximity

Where items are placed in relation to each other is another important gestalt consideration. Proximity relationships will dominate over similarity relationships. The strongest control is available when two are used together. There are four specific types of proximity relationships that will be studied in this assignment.

> **Close edge** -The general concept for proximity states that the closer items are to one another, the more likely they are to be seen as a group. The amount of space involved is relative. Size is another grouping option. Shape is a distant third for forming groups. We read words from left to right, but also from top to bottom. Close edge relationships can form groups in any direction.
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> **Touch** - When items get close enough they touch. They still are two different items, but they seem to be attached together. This makes for a stronger gestalt than close edge. The background shape of the letter touches one another.
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> **Overlap** - The strongest gestalt between two items happens when they overlap. When the items are different colors the overlap produces the illusion of a shallow space. The overlapped items form a strong group regardless of color.
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> **Combine** - It is possible to group various items together by using an external element that acts to combine the items regardless of what other gestalt concepts are being used. The underline used in the previous sentence is such a combining device. Notice that it groups the phrase, just as **bold**, *italic* or "quotations" which do the same.

Other ways to combine items are putting brackets around them and/or putting items against a background, such as a color or a picture, which are the most common.

Alignment

Alignment is an extension of proximity. It has to do with placing items so that they line up. Alignment is a concept that produces both grouping and organizes information to create order.

> **Edge Alignment** - Any objects with flat edge(s) can be used for edge alignment. When more edges are aligned the gestalt is stronger with the surrounding shapes. Distance between shapes is a factor in how stronger the gestalt seems. The repetition of right angles adds a similarity gestalt to a composition, which increases the sense of unity.
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> **Center** Alignment - Any shaped items can be organized using center alignment. Simple shapes work best because it is easier to judge their centers so the alignment is easier to notice.
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> Center alignment will work to some extent in any axis, but it works best with a vertical axis because it relates to our sense of balance.   A horizontal alignment works well with lettering, which can help to provide balance. Letters can be slightly off from the center line, if balance is still achieved throughout the word.

Assignment for Gestalt

1. Find a phrase that you are interested in using that can be illustrated with an image you make. Suggest a song title, song lyrics, a bit of a poem, a quotation, a proverb or common phrase that you can relate to. There has to be at least four words with two or more letters. Do not go overboard. This is time consuming and can take up a lot of space.

2. The words will be made using all different sizes, colors, styles and shapes of letters cut from magazines. The letters are to be chosen for maximum variety and no duplicate styles are allowed unless there are more than twenty letters in a phrase.

3. Make sure you **use all four of the proximity concepts**, one each for an entire word. Touch and overlap work best on short words. The color/shape behind the letters can be the item that touches or overlaps. The combination concept works best for the most important part of the phrase. You can combine a single word for emphasis or a part of the phrase to set it off. All of the letters must be easy to see and the phrase must be easy to read.

4. Choose imagery to assist with the visual perception of your phrase and composition. Use magazine imagery only. You may use color paper as well. Format should be at least 6" x 8" in a portrait or landscape format or 7" x 7" in a square format.

5. Place your composition on a background color providing a 1/2" to 1" border.

Suggestions

Start collecting letters. Cut or tear whole pages or large portions of lettering. Aim for large, colorful, interesting letters. After you have twenty or more groups of letters collected start spelling out your phrase. One technique is to write the phrase out on paper with lots of space around each letter. Cut letters you may want to use and put them in piles by the corresponding letters in your phrase.

Remember that the color behind the letter will often show, so make the shape around each letter look like a shape you may want to see and to work with the letters next to it.

As you are looking for letters, look for images to use. Be open-minded and flexible. Sometimes a picture will suggest a phrase and you can start with the image.

Do not trim anything too close until you see where it is going and how it will affect the imagery around it.

When you have all the parts start laying out the composition. Try lots of different variations until you have what you want.   Place one or more significant words on top of the image. This will set those words off and relate them to the imagery. Be careful with the backgrounds of the letters and where they are placed on the image. The potential for visual confusion is great and extra care must be taken to make the word(s) readable.

Similarity can be used to spotlight certain words. Make a word like "fire" in all reds for instance. Use different sizes and shapes to control variety.

You may want to choose an especially large visible letter for the first letter in the phrase. A composition may look a bit confusing and a larger letter guides the viewer to find the place to start.