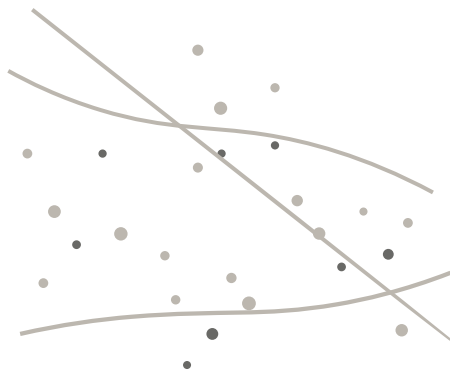


BEFORE THE CAPTURE

A Structural Essay on Pre-Capture Judgment in Photographic Practice

English Edition

Rewritten and translated from the Japanese original



Shintaro Yoshikawa / shintarrow
Practice-Based Structural Essay 01

2026

Abstract

This essay is an attempt to describe the “pre-capture judgment structure” that repeatedly appears in the author’s photographic practice.

Photography is often discussed in relation to the moment the shutter is released, or in relation to the image produced as a result of that moment. In the author’s practice, however, photography does not begin at the moment of release. Rather, photographic judgment is already taking shape when multiple conditions—subject, space, distance, light, movement, silence, and a sense of time—begin to shift.

This essay does not treat photography only as a matter of camera operation or compositional choice. Instead, it understands photography as a form of practice-based knowledge: how the photographer perceives changes in the field, at what stage they respond, and how they eventually arrive at the shutter.

The “judgment” discussed here is not simply the act of choosing whether or not to take a photograph. It refers to the process through which multiple factors—distance from the subject, field density, signs of movement, the photographer’s bodily sense, technical constraints, and ethical considerations—are integrated and recognized as a photographable state.

This is not an academic paper, but a practice-based structural essay. Its primary purpose is not statistical verification or experimental reproducibility. Rather, it describes the structure of pre-capture judgment based on the consistency of observations repeatedly appearing in the author’s own photographic practice.

Keywords

Photographic Practice, Practice-Based Knowledge, Judgment Structure, Pre-Capture, Perception of State, Field Density, Bodily Sense, Structural Essay

Position of this Paper

This essay does not aim to provide a comprehensive theory of photography. Nor does it claim empirical universality as an academic paper. It is not a technical manual or a step-by-step guide to photography. Rather, it is a structural essay that describes forms of judgment embedded in the author's photographic practice.

What this essay addresses are forms of judgment that repeatedly appear in the author's photographic practice. Judgment, in this context, does not mean simply stating a subjective feeling. Rather, it is an attempt to extract as structure the recurring responses, forms of attention, ways of taking distance, durations of waiting, and processes leading toward the shutter.

Therefore, this essay is not an explanation of photographic technique. It does not discuss methods of composition, exposure, or equipment settings. Its focus is on what occurs between the photographer and the field before such techniques are activated.

The validity of this essay is not based on statistical reproducibility. It is grounded in the consistency of observational structures repeatedly appearing in the author's photographic practice. In other words, this essay is not a definitive theory, but a hypothetical framework for describing embodied knowledge formed through photographic practice as structure.

Relation to Existing Discourses

In photographic discourse, photography has often been discussed in relation to seeing, recording, representation, and the fixing of a moment. This essay does not reject those discussions.

What this essay focuses on, however, is not the image after the photograph has come into being, but the layer of judgment formed between the photographer and the field before that image is made.

Therefore, this essay does not take the meaning of the photograph or the experience of viewing as its primary subject. Instead, it describes the practice-based knowledge before capture: what the photographer sees, what they wait for, what they respond to, and at what point they arrive at the shutter.

This essay does not fully adopt the form of an academic paper because its subject is closer to the description of sensations, judgments, and responses that repeatedly appear in practice than to statistical verification. Rather than comprehensively organizing existing theories, its purpose is to describe forms of judgment that repeatedly appear in the author's own photographic practice.

1. Introduction

Photography is often described as the act of capturing a moment. This understanding expresses one important aspect of photography. A photograph selects a particular point from the flow of time and fixes it as an image. For this reason, the moment the shutter is released has long occupied an important position in discussions of photography.

In the author's photographic practice, however, the shutter is not the beginning of judgment. Before the shutter is released, distance from the subject begins to shift. The density of the field changes. The direction of light changes. A person's awareness loosens, or closes. The weight of an animal's body shifts slightly. The silence of the field becomes thicker. A sense arises that waiting any longer will cause the state to collapse, or that it is still necessary to wait.

At this stage, photography has already begun.

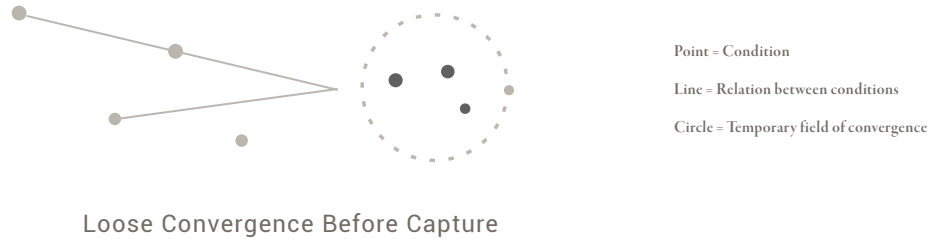
However, it has not yet become a photograph. It is the stage in which subject, space, time, bodily sense, and context begin to connect within the photographer, and photographic possibility begins to form.

The author calls this stage "pre-capture." What matters here is that pre-capture is not simply a period of preparation. Before holding the camera, before deciding the composition, and before releasing the shutter, judgment is already in progress. Rather, the quality of this judgment largely determines the quality of the final photograph.

This essay describes the structure of judgment that arises before capture. Its object is not the completed photograph. Rather, it concerns the layer of judgment before the image: why the photographer stands at that point, why they wait, why they approach, why they do not photograph, and why they finally release the shutter.

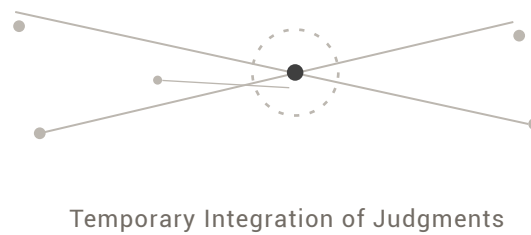
2. Definitions

2.1 Pre-Capture



In this essay, “pre-capture” does not simply refer to the time before the shutter is released. It refers to the entire process of judgment through which the photographer perceives changes in the subject or space and moves toward the act of photographing. This process includes not only visual recognition, but also a sense of distance, bodily position, the silence of the field, movement of the subject, changes in light, contextual understanding, technical constraints, and ethical judgment. Pre-capture is the field in which the conditions for a photograph are already forming, even though the photograph has not yet come into being.

2.2 Judgment Structure



“Judgment structure” refers to the process through which the photographer integrates multiple conditions and recognizes them as a photographable state. The judgment discussed here is not a simple choice. Whether to photograph or not, whether to approach or wait, whether to speak or remain silent, whether to compose the frame or accept its collapse, whether to enter the field or maintain distance—these judgments are simultaneously related. Judgment structure is not always consciously experienced as a clear procedure. Rather, it is embodied through repeated practice and appears as the photographer’s speed of response, way of taking distance, duration of waiting, and timing of the shutter.

2.3 Perception of State



Perceiving Tension Before Event

“Perception of State” refers to the ability to sense that a subject or space is moving toward a photographable state.

It is not simply a reaction to something that has become visible. A field may change before the subject moves. Distance may change before a person’s expression changes. The weight of an animal may shift before it turns. Light and shadow may temporarily converge before a landscape becomes complete. Perception of State is the act of receiving such changes as photographic possibility before they become clear events.

2.4 Practice-Based Knowledge

“Practice-based knowledge” refers to knowledge formed through repeated practice, rather than knowledge that exists first as theory or procedure. It often operates before it can be verbalized. A photographer may only be able to explain after the fact why they responded at a particular moment. Or they may continue to repeat similar judgments without being able to fully explain them. This essay does not treat such tacit judgment as mere intuition or coincidence. If it appears repeatedly in practice, then some form of structure can be understood to exist within it.

2.5 Field Density

“Field density” refers to a state in which subject, space, distance, light, movement, silence, and the photographer’s bodily sense overlap and begin to carry tension toward a photographable state. Density here does not mean physical crowding or quantitative concentration. Rather, it refers to a state in which multiple conditions begin to change simultaneously and cease to be unrelated. Field density increases when the movement of the subject, changes in light, changes in distance, silence, surrounding gazes, and the photographer’s own position begin to relate to one another. Field density is not judged after the fact by the quality of the resulting photograph. It appears before capture, as a state in which changes in distance, the tension of the subject, movement of light, the emergence of silence, surrounding gazes, and the photographer’s position simultaneously begin to demand judgments such as waiting, approaching, withdrawing, not photographing, or photographing. Therefore, field density is not merely another name for a photographable state. It is the relational tension among multiple conditions that gives rise to photographic judgment.

3. Propositions

This essay organizes the pre-capture judgment structure from three perspectives: perception, time, and action. These are not repetitions of the same claim. Rather, they describe the process through which photographic judgment is formed from different layers.

Proposition 1 — Structure of Perception

The photographer sees not the subject itself, but a field of conditions.

Photographic judgment is not formed by a single subject or by visual information alone. In the author's practice, photographic possibility arises not from the subject itself, but when multiple conditions surrounding the subject begin to shift.

These conditions include distance, light, movement, silence, the tension of the subject, field density, and the photographer's own bodily position. Even when the same subject remains in the same place, there are states in which it should be photographed and states in which it should not.

What is visible may be the same. Yet if the arrangement of conditions changes, photographic judgment changes as well. Therefore, what the photographer sees is not the subject alone, but a temporary relation among subject, space, time, bodily sense, and context.

Proposition 2 — Structure of Time

The shutter is not the starting point of judgment, but a point of convergence.

If pre-capture judgment exists, then the shutter cannot be the beginning of judgment. In photographic practice, most of the judgment has already been formed before that moment is reached.

The photographer finds the subject, measures distance, waits, approaches, withdraws, reads changes in light, senses the way wind enters the scene, and anticipates the direction of movement. They may judge that the photograph should not be taken, or that it is not yet time to take it. Only after these processes is the shutter released. Only after these processes does the shutter release.

In this sense, the shutter is not the starting point of judgment. It is the point at which multiple conditions and judgments temporarily converge. The photograph is the result fixed at that point of convergence.

Proposition 3 — Structure of Action

Photographic technique is the technique of responding to a state through distance.

Photographic technique is often explained as a matter of camera settings, composition, exposure, or lens choice. These elements are, of course, important. In the author's practice, however, what is more important is deciding the degree to which the photographer should become involved in the state of the field.

If the photographer comes too close, the subject closes. If the photographer remains too far, no relation emerges. If too many words are spoken, the expression becomes performed. If there is too much silence, the field becomes rigid. The photographer engages the subject and the field while seeking a distance that does not override them.

Therefore, photographic technique is not merely the ability to perceive a state. It is the technique of deciding at what distance, with what intensity, and at what timing one should respond to the perceived state.

4. Observations from Practice

In the author's photographic practice, whether photographing animals, people, landscapes, or spaces encountered while moving, the photograph is often made in response not to the moment when a clear event occurs, but to the state change that appears immediately before it.

This state change does not appear as a single piece of visual information. Rather, multiple conditions begin to shift at the same time. When those conditions reach a certain density, they are recognized as a photographable state.

4.1 Signs Before Animal Movement

When photographing animals, photographic judgment does not begin at the moment the subject makes a clear movement.

The direction of the ears, a shift in weight, the direction of the gaze, breathing, muscular tension, and reactions to the surroundings may appear before the movement becomes visible as an action.

The photographer does not necessarily analyze these elements one by one. Rather, they are received as a change in the overall state.

What matters at this stage is not what the subject has already done, but how strongly the possibility of something about to happen has increased.

The animal may look toward the photographer, move, flee, or approach. If the photographer only reacts after the event itself has occurred, it may already be too late. In practice, the state of the field has often already changed before the event takes place.

The shutter is released when that possibility reaches a certain density.

4.2 Distance in Portrait Photography

When photographing people, the photographer is not looking only at composition or facial expression.

Distance from the subject, the presence or absence of tension, the atmosphere of the field, surrounding gazes, whether to speak, whether to remain silent—these elements are judged simultaneously.

In particular, a photographable state may appear just before the subject becomes too conscious of being photographed, or at the moment when that awareness begins to loosen.

This state is not created unilaterally by the photographer. It emerges within the relationship with the subject, the condition of the field, and the flow of time.

Technique in portrait photography is not simply the technique of drawing out an expression. It is the judgment of a state in which the subject does not close off too much, while also not becoming overly exposed or defenseless.

If the photographer comes too close, the subject closes. If the photographer remains too far, no relation emerges. If too many words are spoken, the expression becomes performed. If there is too much silence, the field becomes rigid. Photographic judgment is formed among these multiple conditions.

4.3 Convergence in Spatial Photography

In landscape and spatial photography, photographic judgment is not established simply by selecting a static subject.

The angle of light, the position of shadows, the passage of people or animals, the movement of clouds, the margin within the frame, and the sense of time held by the place itself may temporarily converge at a certain moment. This convergence includes not only what is visible in the image, but also conditions such as wind, which alter the state of what becomes visible.

This convergence does not last long. It quickly collapses through slight changes. In the author's practice, when a space becomes photographable, there is often no clear event taking place. Rather, the photographer is responding to a state in which meaning has not yet been fixed, as if something is about to happen or has just passed. The photographer does not react after the convergence has been completed. They respond while it is still in the process of forming. Therefore, in spatial photography as well, photographic judgment is not the selection of a static subject, but a response to a changing state.

4.4 Maintaining State through Not Photographing

The pre-capture judgment structure does not always work in the direction of releasing the shutter.

In the author's practice, there are cases in which a photographable state has emerged, and yet the photographer deliberately decides not to take the photograph.

This may occur when the subject is excessively defenseless, when photographing would destroy the state of the field, or when the photographer's intervention would fix the relationship in an unnatural way.

At such moments, the photographer recognizes the possibility that the situation could become a photograph, and still does not release the shutter.

This judgment is not the absence of photographic action. Rather, it is a response that reads the state of the field and preserves that state by not photographing.

Therefore, the pre-capture judgment structure includes not only the judgment to photograph, but also the judgment not to photograph.

5. Discussion

Photographic technique cannot be reduced to the operation of a camera. The photographer is not simply making a judgment after seeing the subject. Rather, they are reading the process through which the subject, space, time, distance, light, wind, movement, and bodily sense gradually converge into a certain state.

In this sense, photographic judgment is not only visual judgment. It is also temporal, spatial, and bodily judgment.

The pre-capture judgment structure also changes through the photographer's experience. At an early stage of practice, the photographer may tend to react to the visible subject itself. Through repeated practice, however, the photographer begins to respond not only to the subject, but to changes in the conditions surrounding it.

In other words, improvement does not simply mean becoming faster at operating the camera. It means developing the ability to perceive the stage before a photographable state fully emerges.

From this perspective, photography education and the explanation of photographic technique require another point of view. Composition, exposure, equipment, and editing are important, but they are not sufficient. It is also necessary to consider what the photographer is seeing before capture, and what kinds of conditional changes they are responding to.

A photograph is the result of releasing the shutter, but it is also a trace of judgments formed before that release.

This perspective also affects the act of viewing photographs. When we look at a completed photograph, we tend first to ask what is depicted. However, if we consider what kind of judgment made the photograph possible, the criteria for viewing begin to change.

Within a photograph, there are not only subjects. There are also ways of taking distance, time spent waiting, decisions not to intervene, and choices that preserved the state of the field.

To read the pre-capture judgment structure is to understand photography not merely as a result, but as a trace of practice.

6. Limitations

The structure described in this essay is a hypothetical framework based on observations repeatedly appearing in the author's photographic practice. It is not presented as a definitive theory. Nor does this structure appear in the same form across all types of photography. In highly staged, record-oriented, or commercial photography, pre-capture judgment may appear not only as the perception of an emerging state, but also as the construction, maintenance, and adjustment of that state.

There are three issues for future consideration. First, it is necessary to describe not only the process through which judgment converges, but also the conditions under which judgment collapses. Second, it is necessary to consider how ethical judgments—such as the response of the subject, the degree of intervention caused by photographing, and whether or not something should be photographed—relate to the pre-capture structure. Third, it is necessary to examine how the photographer's own condition, including fatigue, tension, and emotional immersion, affects the judgment structure.

Therefore, the limitations of this essay are not only weaknesses in the discussion. They are also openings toward future essays. The pre-capture judgment structure should be considered not only through successful photographs, but also through photographs not taken, photographs that could not be taken, and moments in which judgment collapsed.

7. Conclusion

This essay has reconsidered photography not by reducing it to the moment of the shutter, but by understanding it as a judgment structure formed before that moment.

In the author's photographic practice, photography does not begin with recording what has become visible. Rather, subject, space, distance, light, movement, silence, and bodily sense begin to shift, and when they reach a certain density, a photographable state emerges.

The shutter is not the starting point. It is the point at which a judgment already in formation becomes temporarily fixed.

From this perspective, photographic technique is, before it is a technique of operating the camera, a technique of perceiving changes in state.

A photograph is the result of a released shutter, but it is also a trace of judgments formed before that moment.

Therefore, to view, make, or evaluate a photograph is not only to consider the completed image. It is also to consider what kind of judgment structure existed before that image came into being.

This essay has presented one framework for describing that prior stage.

Reference Points

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Series Statement

Practice-Based Structural Essay is an attempt to give structure to forms of practice-based knowledge that are difficult to formalize academically, rather than leaving such knowledge as mere intuition.