SCOTT ADAMS

## Photoshop Actions

One of the most powerful tools found in Adobe Photoshop 4.0 is not even an image-editing tool. The "Action" function is one of the most advanced features, yet it is one of the simplest to use. Unfortunately, very few new Photoshop users even know Actions exists, let alone put them to use.

New Photoshop users want to start editing right away, so they tend to only use the basic editing tools and struggle through the multitude of features found in the program. As they progress and gain confidence, they use more of the complex editing tools. With tips from the help file or maybe a couple of the tutorials, they become proficient at using the program, but mainly it is often by trial and error.

*This is a sample of the sites that you'll find when you do a web search in Yahoo or other search engine and type in "Photoshop Actions," "Metacreations," "Eye Candy," etc. All six of these web sites offered usable actions, which, of course, we downloaded.*

About this time many Photoshop users start adding plug-in filters for additional effects. There are dozens of these filters on the market and they range in price from several hundred dollars to free off the Internet. Some use special file compression, others accomplish special effects on just text objects, while others apply effects to an entire image. In most cases, these filters have a variety of controls that allow you to change the way the filter affects the image. Unless you are great at taking notes, or have a photographic memory, repeatability of an effect is almost impossible.

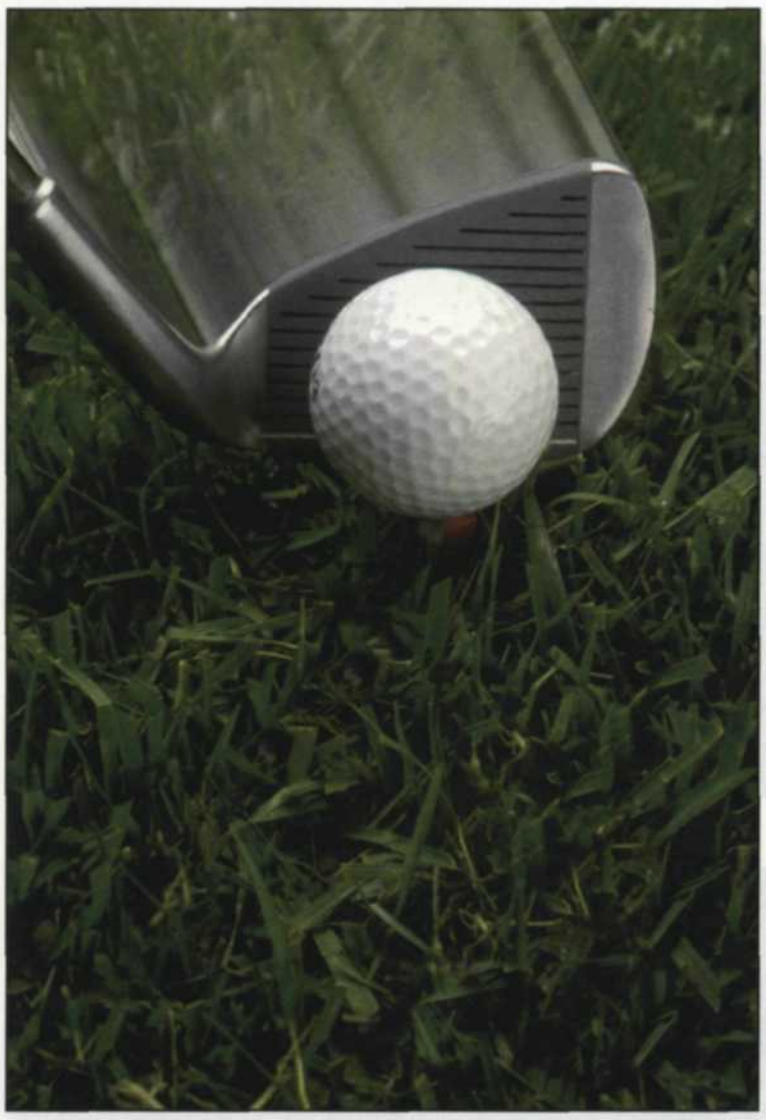
This is where Actions come into play. Under the "Window" pulldown window at the top of the Photoshop screen, you will find the Actions menu. The Actions program works much the same way a Macro or script function works in a word processor. Macros are a combination of functions recorded into one file and activated with a hot key (keyboard command). Actions work the same, except they combine Photoshop editing tools and plug-in filters into one file that is activated with a single press of the mouse button. Some of these Actions accomplish more than 50 functions, use a half dozen plug-in filters, and insert dozens of unique data values. Even if you could document this information, it would take forever to re-enter the data in the correct order each time. This is where Actions saves the day.

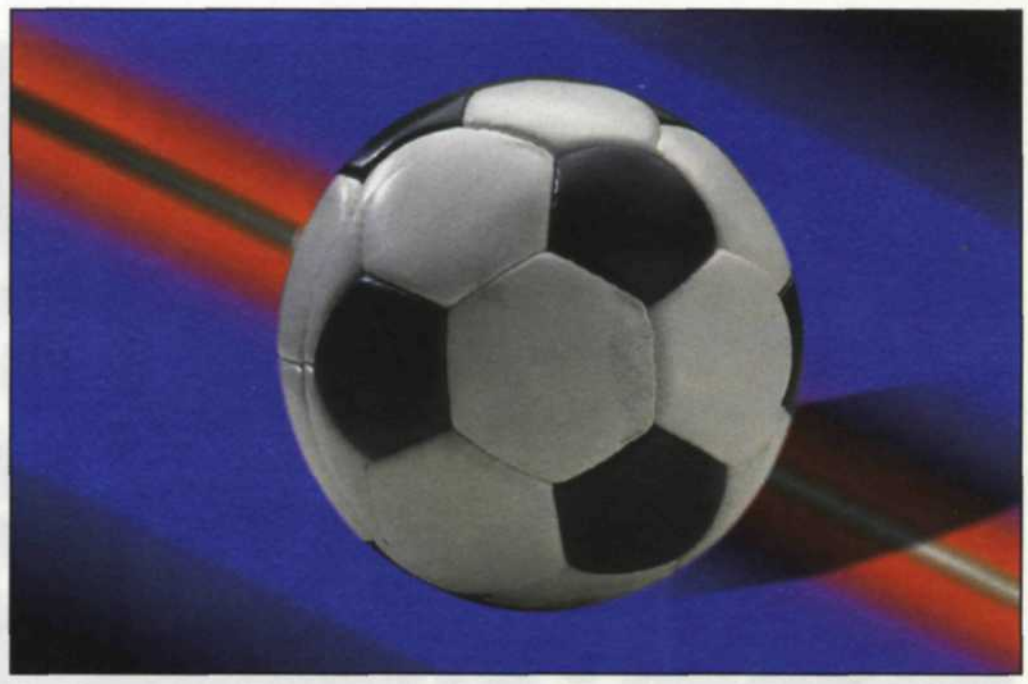
Actions are primarily used to repeat tasks that you do over and over to a variety of images or to create very complex special effects. To create a new Action, go to the Action pull-down menu and select "New Action." This lets you name the action and designate a hot key or special color for the new Action. Once you say "OK," a red "record" button indicates that every function is being recorded as you proceed. When you have applied all the editing functions and/or plug-in filters, simply stop the recording. Each new Action is added to your list of supplied Actions in the Actions menu. The next time you want to apply that combination of effects to an image, you touch that specific Action, and all the effects are applied to your image in sequence. Photoshop also gives you the option of adjusting each phase of an Action individually. Simply click on the dialog-box toggle in the Actions menu and a dialog box will come up for each item in the Action that is adjustable [Note: certain items like "save" and "close" commands don't automatically bring up a dialog box. Further, by deselcting the tick mark next to an item within an Action, you can force the Action script to bypass that function of the Action.]

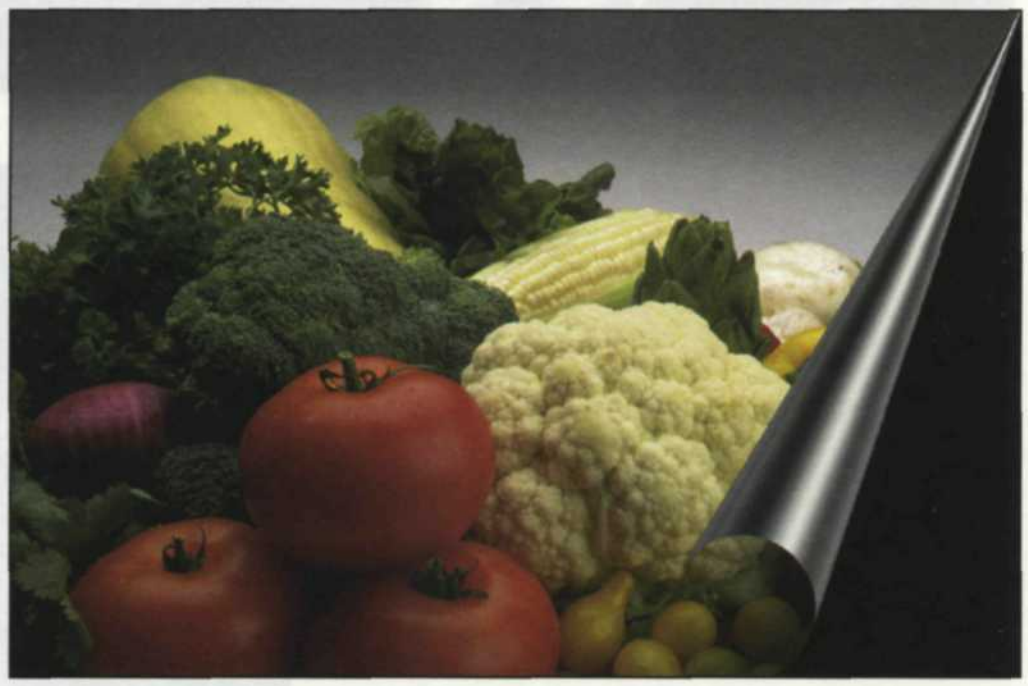
The best way to understand how Actions work is look at a few that I normally use when I edit my photos. Most of these Actions were derived from trial and error on test images and then saved as a new Action. I will start with the repeat tasks Actions and then progress to the more complex Actions.

### Grain Reduction

When I have a high speed film image with a lot of grain, I use my "Grain Reduction Action." This Action uses the despeckle filter followed by the sharpen filter. The despeckler reduces the grain a lot, but it also softens the image, so the sharpen filter brings the image back to







*Above—Golfball and club. Corel stock image with Metacreations plug-ins and actions.*

*Top right—Soccer ball. Corel stock image with Metacreations and Eye Candy plug-ins and actions.*

*Below right—Food. Corel stock image with Metacreations plug-ins and actions.*

the same spot it was before, but with less grain. [Editor's note: Photoshop 4.0 is supplied with an Action called "Reduce Graininess" that uses Gaussian blur with an 0.5 pixel radius and the "Sharpen Edges" filter.]

### File Conversion

Another Action I use is what I call the "MacTiff Action". I use a PC for my image editing and *Rangefinder* magazine uses Macs to work on my articles when I send them in. When I finish all the images for an article, I use the batch function in the Actions menu and apply it to a group of images. I sit back and watch the Action load in a file, convert it to a Tiff file, set it up for Mac, save it out, and close the file. Who says PCs and Macs can't live in harmony?

When I sell a group of images to a company that makes educational CDs, I use a special Action named for that specific client. This Action usually takes a group of images and reduces the image size to 25%, sharpens, and converts to Mac Tiff files. For one project, this Action processed over 650MB of large files down to a brand new set of CD images while I worked on other projects.

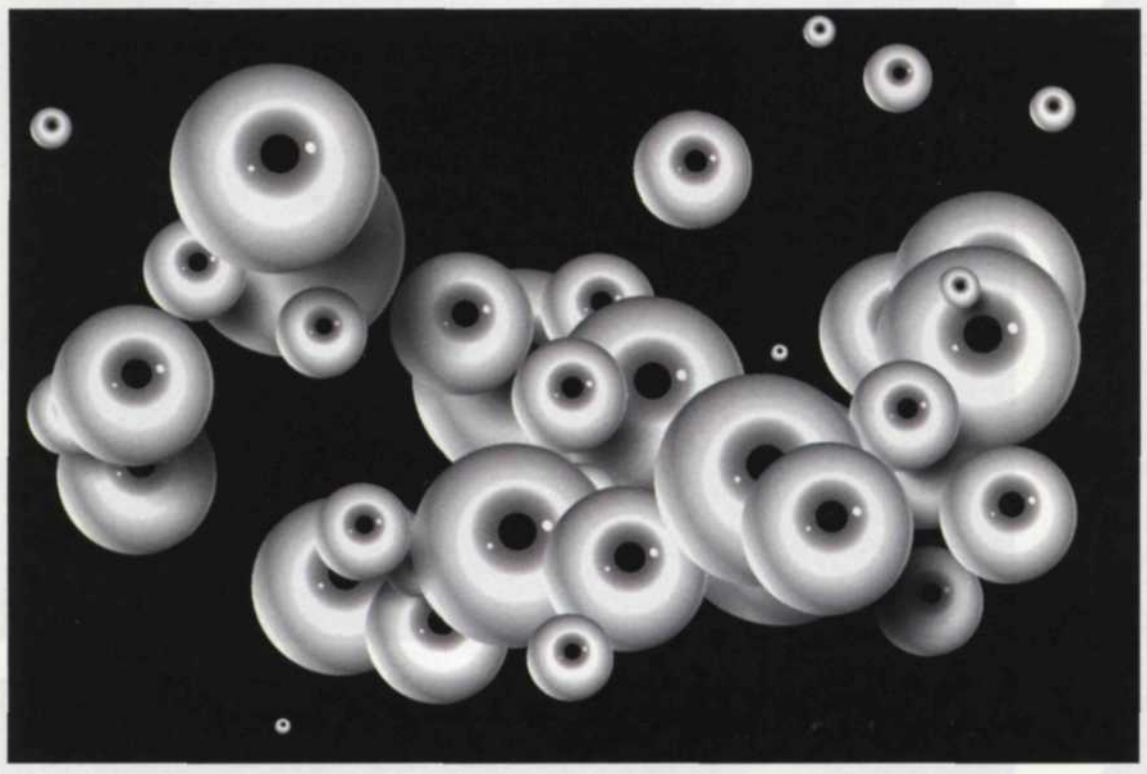
When I archive images, I have several versions of JPEG, Wavelet, and Fractal compression setup in the Actions menu. When I am done with a specific set of images, I open the batch Action and start the conversion process. I never have to use an outside file-conversion program to convert my files, and I know they will always work in Photoshop. (Some file converters are not fully compatible with Photoshop, especially for TIFF files).

### Color-Gamma Correction

There are times when you will have a group of images that all have the same color shift, or gamma errors. This is usually caused by poor scanning, or poor film processing. Since these groups of images are unique, you can create a special Action to correct them all at one time. Load in your first image and start recording the corrections you make to that image. When you have the final correction, turn off the record and it is saved to your Action menu. You then select the batch Action and apply it to all the images. In no time all the images are color-corrected just like the first one. If you get similar images at a later date, you don't have to remember how to fix them. Just pull up that special Action and apply it to the new images.

### Thumbnail Preview

Images brought in from other programs may not have a thumbnail preview. You have to guess what the image looks like or use a "Thumbnail Action." This Action loads the files and saves



*Metacreations plug-ins and actions.*

*Assortment of text effects made with various actions downloaded from different sources on the web.*

them in a duplicate directory. When all have been converted and you can see the thumbnails in the load menu, then you can delete the first directory. Some of the vertical images are sideways, so you can use a second Action to load these files, rotate, and resave them as new files.

### Special Effects

Combinations of plug-in filters can give you neon text, perspective shadows, exploding objects, fancy backgrounds, and a multitude of effects that extend your creative potential. The best way to learn how to create these effects is to log onto the Internet and perform a search for "Photoshop Actions." There are dozens of home pages dedicated to Photoshop plug-ins, filters and Actions. Many are free or others offer a short trial period. The best part is that these files are very small and you can download dozens in less than an hour. When you load one of these new Actions, use the little down arrows to open the Action and see what it does. It will list each step that it takes in plain English. If you like most of the Action but want to change one part, you can click on that line of instruction and change the values, or even delete that step. Customizing and editing Actions is really simple.

### Setting up Groups of Actions

After you have mastered Actions, you may find yourself overloaded with too many. This will be especially true if you start downloading Actions from the Internet. Fortunately, the Actions menu lets you form sub-groups that can be loaded and updated on a daily basis. You can have one group for file conversions, another for text effects, and one for image editing, and so on.

The best part of all is that you can custom design Photoshop to your specific editing applications. Complex tasks can be repeated over and over exactly the same way each time. Large batch processing of unique commands can be done unattended. You can create your own special effects that have your special technique embedded into the Action. I guarantee you that the time invested to learn to use the Actions will be well spent the first time you have to repeat a complex task. Take action and

**$UPER $ALES $TRATEGIES**
**40 Photographers Share Success Secrets**
**Helen T. Boursier**

Some of photography's biggest names—including Don Blair, Marc Hauser, Bill McIntosh and David Peters—share how their sales strategies evolved through the years, and which methods have proved most successful. Also included: packaging/selling seniors and weddings, family group sales, and more! **$64 (168)**

**WEDDING PHOTOGRAPHY: THE BUSINESS**
**Paul F. Frew**

Offers photographers a step-by-step procedure for a successful wedding photography business, starting with advertising and sales promotion right through increasing orders at proof presentation.

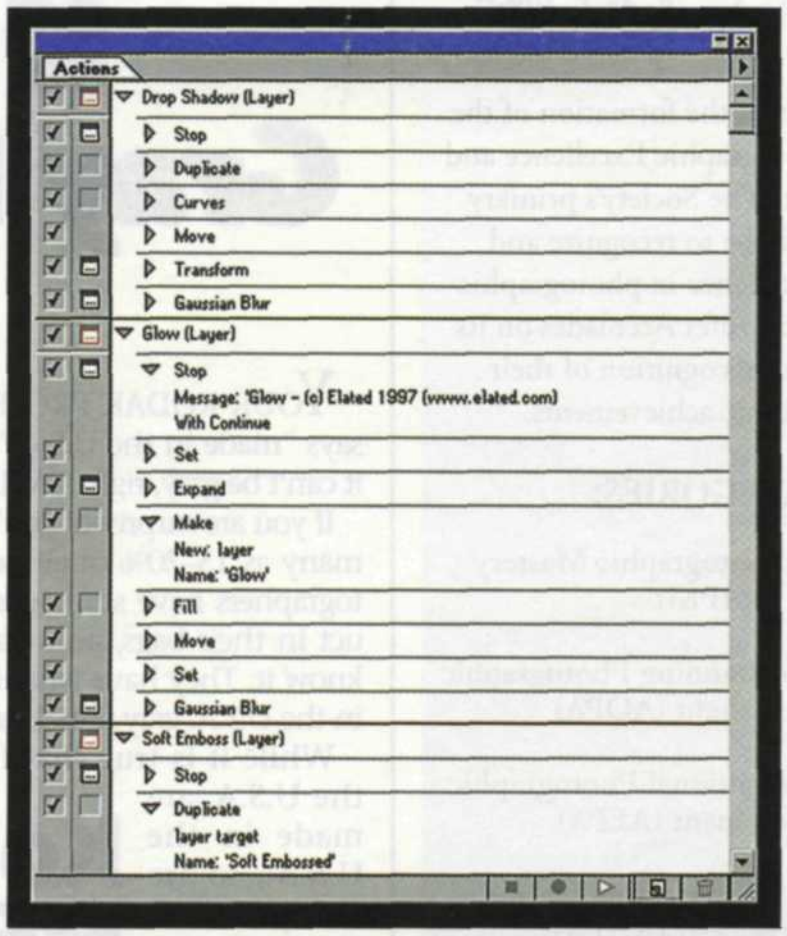
This well organized and detailed book offers many examples to illustrate important points. Sample forms, charts, lighting diagrams with photo illustrations for easy reference are included. **$39.95 (184)**

*Back by Popular Demand!*
**BEHIND THE CAMERA and BEYOND THE CAMERA**
**Jack Curtis**

The classics are back! Curtis' two definitive wedding photography guides are now available for one low price. "Behind" covers all basic and advanced shooting techniques, while "Beyond" helps to establish or improve your business with promotion/sales insights. **$49.95 (170)**

**Steve Sint's TIPS, TRICKS AND HINTS: 101 Secrets of a Professional Photographer**

This is a collection of suggestions from *Popular Photography*'s master of advice. Practical, streetwise, entertaining, these ideas will make life easier for anyone venturing out with a camera. From packing your bag and shooting the moon, to making and using barn doors, and putting an emergency kit together, and on and on…With a Sunsoft Cokin filter this is a $39.95 value. Order today for $25. **$25.00 (173)**




*The actions menu shows various actions set up like folders. The √ mark can be deselected to omit that portion or portions of the Action. The dialog box, next to the √ means that the item is adjustable and a dialog box will appear for you to enter data when that part of the Action is processing. The arrow, circle and square and the bottom of the menu are: Action running, record and stop recording, respectively.*

learn the Photoshop Actions.

### Finding Actions on the Web

The following is a selection of sites found by going to Yahoo and Alta Vista and typing in Photoshop Actions. There are literally hundreds more, but these are some of the more popular Actions sites.

**Action Addict:** www.bayweb.com.au/actionaddict/
**Action Exchange:** www.actionx-change.com/
**Custom Actions for Adobe Photoshop:** www.algonet.se/~tobias-e/actions.htm
**daFX–Adobe Photoshop 4.0 Actions:** www.dafx.com/actions.html
**Industrial Strength Photoshop Actions:** www.personal.psu.edu/users/a/t/atb107/ISPactions.htm
**New Illustrated Coloring Tutorial & Photoshop Actions:** www.lab-re-triever.com/coloristsunite/www-board/mess...
**Nils' Actions For Photoshop:** www.avaloncity.com/mactoday/JanFeb98/nils.html
**PIX—Photoshop Actions:** www.pdn-pix.com/tweaking.html
**Photoshop 4.0 Actions:** www.bway.net/~dorian/actions.htm
**Photoshop 4.0 Actions:** www.alex.net/html/photoshop/actions.html
**Photoshop 4.0—Actions and More!:** www.kensai.com/photoshop4/photo-shop4.htm
**Photoshop Actions:** www.pdn-pix.com/net.html
**Photoshop Actions!:** www.dcross.com/actions.html
**The Plugin Head Photoshop 4.0 Actions Page:** www.pluginhead.i-us.com/action.htm
**Sha's House of Actions:** http://home.sol.no/~sha99/
**Tang's Photoshop-related Actions Page:** www.postech.ac.kr/~iljimae/ac-tions.html
**Ultimate Photoshop Actions Archive:** www.csbn.net/engel/public/files/actions/actions.htm

*Scott Adams is a freelance journalist/photographer living in the Pacific Northwest.*