

Thesis Statement for Composition is an Enigma

A mystery, a riddle, a paradox, a concept or a person that is difficult to understand - these fragments define enigma. What defines composition? Oh that's easy, it's an enigma. It's a synergy whereby the whole is rendered greater than the sum of the parts. With regard to education, it is the job of the teacher to supply all of the elements to the student so they can compose to their fullest potential. A composition is fueled by the environment of the maker. Now that the concept has been made perfectly clear, how does one teach composition? The student that only learns where a note is located on the instrument does not learn what that note sounds like. The student that learns where the subject should be placed within the frame does not learn how to react to the emotion of the moment. My goal is to share my influences, to do by showing.

Composition is an Enigma

Classic Greek design was based on proportional order. As Plato once said, "Gods and temples are not easily instituted, and to establish them rightly is the work of a mighty intellect" (Gardner 140). But what is this crazy little thing called composition? Is it taught? Is it absorbed through osmosis? Is it passed down through our DNA?

Composition can be defined as synergy: a putting together of parts or elements to form a whole. The arrangement creates an effect that is greater than the sum of these artistic parts. Composition is also defined by personal preference, culture and experience. So, let us gather up all of our artistic parts and unite them in order to form a more perfect union. What defines the impact of an image? Is it lighting? Is it posing? Perhaps it's color harmony. Maybe, it's the tonal value. If one takes all the ingredients and blends them into a giant bowl, the combination is called composition.

When speaking in terms of music, the audible piece is called the composition. It was created by a composer. The make up is drawn together by the use of harmonic tones that will evoke emotion from the listener. Wait, harmony and emotion? I have heard those same descriptions discussed when referring to an image. So, do music and photography share the same womb? They are built up from intricacies and nuances until their parts become a whole. Long ago, I remember hearing one of those "life defining moment" phrases that was so absurd it became a latent image in my memory. The phrase was something along the lines of, music already exists out there in the cosmos, we just have to listen for it and play it back. What if we (photographers) are just digging deeply into some primordial memory of composition from the outskirts of the

twilight zone? The notion extends beyond the photographic community. What if Picasso visited those same ethereal ideas? What if Michelangelo found inspiration there? By definition, composition is putting together parts or elements to form a whole (so we are gatherers).

How then, do we teach the act of blending that leads to the whole of this enigma we have come to know as composition? There are no visible guides to lead one to the perfect end. There is no finite order to completing the act of composition. It is more pliable. It is far more suitable for interpretation. Composition is more like that strange uncle in your family that no one likes and yet something about him amuses you. You understand him. You get his jokes. That is what composition is. There are some aspects regarding the properties of composition that will have an enormous impact on you, and yet not even make sense to the person sitting next to you. (Now, take a quick moment to actually look at the person sitting next to you and make that "tisk" sound with your mouth and shake your head at them because they have no idea of what good composition is).

Composer John Cage has an interesting take on formal music education, but I think it can be transcribed across the board to teaching any art form. A young child is positioned at the piano and forced to read the notes. The child's eyes become transfixed on the notes and what they mean with regards to the keyboard, but their ears do not hear the music. The focus is on playing the correct note within the correct time frame, not about enjoying the sound (Kostelanetz 239). That is the emotional connection needed with regards to education. It is very important to be familiar with the mechanical process, but imagine how much more can be learned once emotion is introduced to the battery. That note with a value of $\frac{1}{8}$ of a whole played at the tonal value of C on the major scale evokes a reaction. The student feels happiness from the sound, or perhaps the sound inspires a feeling of sadness. Whatever the emotion is does not matter, what does matter is

the student hears and feels the note. A portrait is created using all of the parameters, the mechanics, but has the photographer been influenced by an emotion? Did the photographer hear the sound of that note and more importantly, did the photographer enjoy the sound? That is the goal. The photographer feels something while the shutter clicks and that feeling is transferred to the viewer as they look at the composition. All of the mechanics have been executed to perfection and the emotion of that moment can be shared between the photographer and viewer.

In the early part of the Twentieth Century, the technology of photography accelerated as if it was trying to keep pace with the ideals growing from the human mind. Carl Jung explored the collective unconscious, the stream of intuition shared by humans. He believed in the unseen linkage of one soul to another and a connection to an intelligence of a higher order. Perhaps there is a great library in the sky that waits for the artist, musician, poet and photographer to pull down the elements needed and then pass them onto the next in line. Einstein would shatter the foundation of "seeing is believing" and call into question the perception of reality with regards to the five senses. Space and time were no longer under the rules and regulations of measurement. Perception was now in the hands of the observer. These revolutionaries impacted artists such as László Moholy-Nagy with his concept of *Vision in Motion*, a journey to a new dimension. Born in Hungary, Moholy-Nagy would join the faculty at Bauhaus in 1923 to spread his vision in the modern age. He experimented with light and color in painting, sculpture and photography. Through his eyes, we viewed a different perspective of ordinary objects. Our perception was altered in his photograph, *From the Radio Tower Berlin*. The composition reveals familiar geometric patterns but the reality changes when viewed from a perspective that is not eye level. During this time of growth, artists started to paint like photographers and photographers found new ways to create images that resembled paintings. The lines that once separated the two mediums became blurred. Georgia O'Keeffe and her husband, Alfred Stieglitz, composed with

shapes and textures, creating visual rhythms. Edward Weston changed the perception of simple vegetables into sensual imagery. He said, "To me, good composition is simply the strongest way to put over my emotional reaction. I do not consciously compose. I make my negative entirely under the effect of my emotion in response to a given subject" (Gardner 1006-07, 1010-11).

Arnold Newman resisted the notion of a pure, uncropped image. Cropping was just an extension of the framing that began in the camera. He reasons, "You work primarily from instinct. But what is instinct? It is a lifetime accumulation of influence: experience, knowledge, seeing and hearing. There is little time for reflection in taking a photograph. All your experiences come to a peak and you work on two levels: conscious and unconscious." Under the scrutiny of the darkroom, he could refine his composition once he had been removed from the moment of when the image was captured. He never embraced the title of "the father of environmental portraiture" because he felt that label was inaccurate and too restrictive. He would bring together elements of his subject to help compose and define who they were. Newman felt he was creating symbolic portraits. His portrait of Igor Stravinski was made in a borrowed room with a borrowed piano (Ewing 17). I remember a great story about Newman. Someone asked him if he used available light. He responded that yes indeed he did, tungsten, incandescent, studio flash and sunlight, whatever was available.

When I think of what a proper composition represents, I think of Yousuf Karsh. His powerful images that portray true icons each have a story to tell. Just look at a fraction of the list: Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Ernest Hemingway, Albert Einstein, and my favorite of all time, Winston Churchill. I love the story behind the image of Churchill. In 1941, Sir Winston was to address the Canadian Parliament. Karsh had set up his lights and camera in the Speaker's Chamber the night before. When Sir Winston brought down the

house with his rousing speech, he was led to the chambers. In celebration, he lit a cigar to bask in the glow of his oratorical prowess. When the gentle Karsh switched on his lights, Churchill growled, "What's this, what's this?", at which Karsh replied, "Sir, I hope I will be fortunate enough to make a portrait worthy of this historic occasion." Again the Lion growled, "Why was I not told?" As his entourage chuckled, more out of fear than anything else, yet Karsh stood his ground and Churchill bellowed, "You may take one." Karsh offered an ashtray to set aside the ever present cigar, yet it remained firmly clenched in his powerful jaws. Karsh checked all his gear to make sure the focus and exposure were perfect, then walked to his cantankerous subject and respectfully addressed him with, "Forgive me, sir," as he plucked the cigar from his lips. He returned to his camera to witness the now iconic glare. The room was in absolute silence but for the ear drum shattering click of the leaf shutter. As the moment of thick tension passed while the historic soul embedded itself into the emulsion of antiquity, Churchill responded with a tiny smile, "You may take another one . . . You can even make a roaring lion stand still to be photographed" (Karsh 7). It amuses me to pontificate the incorrectness of this image if it happened to come anonymously before a panel of IPC judges. One can almost hear the outcries against the image. It lacks space around the subject. Why would the maker turn such a large body square to the camera? Why would the maker broad light such an already rounded face? How could the maker record this image with such a doleful expression on the subject? Yet, despite all the rage, the composition works perfectly for this image. It is that bold stance, with shoulders facing square to the viewer and the hard, split, broad light on his face that create the illusion of power. This subject will fight to the death for what he believes in. He growls at opposition. He has no fear. Karsh was well aware of which rules he was breaking. The image of Churchill was not a pleasant surprise, it was conceived, it was composed, it was created before the shutter was released.

Timothy Greenfield-Sanders might just be the anti-hero with regards to the technological advances currently available to our art form. He works with what would be considered antiquated equipment, a 1905 Fulmer & Schwing and a 1940 Deardorff 11x14 cameras are his tools of the trade. He turns his back on megapixels and loads his camera with giant sheets of negative film. He relies on that absolute moment when his subject makes the connection with the photographer. By using his influences, his personal preferences and his relationship to the subject, the composition is born from the moment. His childhood was filled with amazing influences. His grandfather knew Hemingway, his uncle spent time with Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote. Art and culture were just daily staples in Greenfield-Sanders' young life. He would go on to study art history at Columbia University. This is where he met his wife, Karin Sanders, the daughter of painter Joop Sanders. His path continued to be paved with influences like Willem de Kooning and Robert Rauschenberg. "Undoubtedly one of Greenfield-Sanders' greatest attributes is how he eliminates the distance that separates the portrait from its viewer. This is most uncommon" (Paparoni and Mercurio 17-19, 31). I had the opportunity to view some of his work at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. the spring of 2012. *The Black List*, was hanging there at the time. I remember standing before a 58x44 inch image of Laurence Fishburne and thinking that I saw the second hand move on his watch. The show took my breath away. As I stood and stared into these massive images, the reality of it all overwhelmed me. Most of his images feature the actual edge of the negative, meaning he does not crop beyond what he sees in the ground glass back plate.

Arnold Schoenberg, arguably the eminent musical theorist, parallels the music teacher and the carpenter in his master work, *Theory of Harmony*. The music teacher and the carpenter plant the fundamental elements in their respective apprentices with the same end goal in mind. In both cases, the students will achieve a final result that will stand the test of time. While in music, there

is more of a scholarly theoretical approach to the craft than perhaps carpentry; both of these teachers can be considered masters. Both teachers "rest on observation, experience, reasoning and taste, on knowledge of natural laws and of the requirements of the material - is there then really any essential distinction?" Why then, do we not call a music theorist a master musician, or the master carpenter a theorist? It is because the carpenter needs practical skills, not just an understanding of theory? The same is true for the musician. To learn the theory of one trade is only part of the growth. The student also needs to know how to apply that theory in a practical sense to reach a full understanding of the trade. Whether it is joining pieces of wood together or joining chords together, the success depends on knowledge and practicality (Schoenberg 7-8).

Let's give the devil his due. It is possible to create music without having a complete understanding of music theory. Think of the great blues men playing from the heart. They may have never spent a day at a music conservatory in class learning chord progressions. Is their music any less valid? So music can come directly from the heart. It can also be said that a composition does not rely on the creator being well versed in the elements that make up that composition. As promising as that whole scenario sounds, it does not mean that the unschooled musician stumbled into the lime light blindly. Musicians find inspiration in others. Each one had an education of sorts, the school of hard knocks; they paid their dues; they practiced their art, not in the pedantic way of a music academy, but certainly in a way that resembles a master sharing with an apprentice. And in turn, the apprentice has become the master, sharing and inspiring others along the way. This should not be interpreted to mean that education is not necessary to attain success. Having the basics, having an understanding of the elements give the student the facility to create at a higher level. There is an argument to this point, with regards to pop music. Bad vocal technique can easily be fixed in the studio. Poor stage presence can be overcome with more dancers and dry ice with lots of shiny lights. The same can be said for all the

new photographers who rely on Photoshop actions and filters because they lack formal training. We can watch our art turn into recycled, blender made imagery, or we can continue to promote education as the way to stay above the sewage line.

The musician, the artist, the author and the photographer all compose their work. None of them were taught how to compose. They were given a set of guidelines during their respective growing years. If one teaches two students all the elements of composition, posing, lighting, exposure and placement of the subject within the frame, it is highly possible that two completely different compositions will be created, even if the subject is the same. The elements are set in motion due to interpretation. We need to keep this in mind when we teach. Our goal should be to give the students all the elements so that they can assemble them in a manner that they feel represents their vision. We can not teach them to compose, we can only guide them, facilitate it for them and hopefully inspire them. One has to learn the rules in order to break them.

Composition is not an action that can be performed again and again by clicking an icon on your computer screen. Composition is not a menial task that can be repeated over and over, it will not bow down to muscle memory, nor can it be written down on a piece of paper and folded and tucked neatly in the back pocket. Composition is order in proportion to our own private surroundings, our personal space, the influence of our environment. One can study how a certain work of art or piece of music has been composed. But the act of using the very same recipe will produce varied final results. Warren Zevon sings about love in "Searching for a Heart", but he could very well be describing composition with this line, "you can't start it like a car, you can't stop it with a gun" (Zevon). Composition is an enigma.

Works Cited

- Ewing, Willian A., *Masterclass: Arnold Newman*, London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2012. Print.
- Gardner, Helen, *Art Through the Ages*, Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1991
Ninth Edition. Print.
- Karsh, Yousuf and Estrellita, *Karsh: A Biography in Images*, Boston: MFA
Publications, 2009. Print.
- Kostelanetz, Richard, *Conversing With Cage*, New York: Limelight Editions, 1991. Print.
- Paparoni, Demetrio and Mercurio, Gianni, *Timothy Greenfield-Sanders: Face to Face,
Slected Portraits 1977 - 2005*, New York: International Publications, Inc. 2005. Print.
- Schoenberg, Arnold, *Theory of Harmony*, Berkley and Los Angeles: U of CA Press, 1978,
originally published in 1911 by Universal Edition, Vienna as *Harmonielehre*. Print.
- Zevon, Warren, "Searching for a Heart", *Mr. Bad Example*, Giant Records, 1991. CD