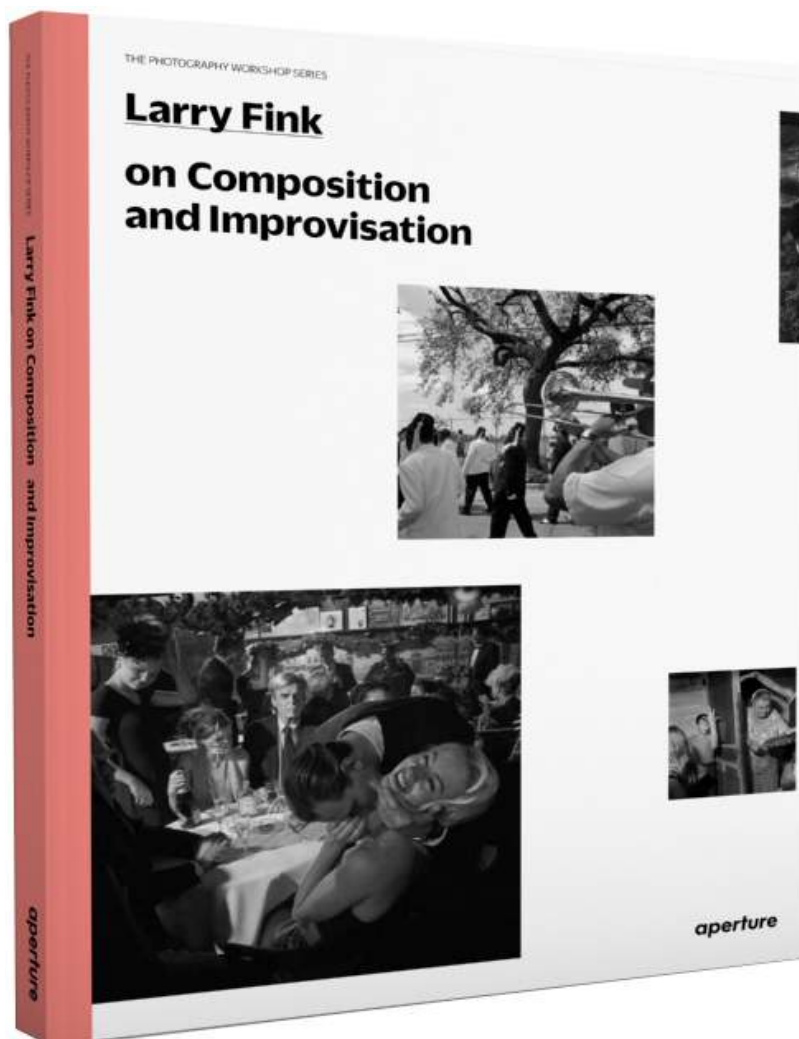


This resource is intended to inform educators about Aperture's Workshop series book

Larry Fink on Composition and Improvisation

and aid them in leading meaningful discussion surrounding its content.

ALL AGES



***“How do you align your shooting and seeing with intuition, with emotions, with what’s unfolding?”
—Larry Fink***

About Aperture's Workshop Series

The **Photography Workshop Series** is an accessible resource that can be used to begin class discussions on photography's history, the nature of photography, photographic techniques, the act of seeing, and the author of each book. The books are formatted in such a way that each chapter contains its own mini lesson or discussion, with bold headings or a bold quotation, and a brief elaboration or explanation below. The bolded headings can act as discussion topics, and can be easily rephrased as questions that you may pose to your class. The accompanying photographs act as the slideshow for the lesson. One of the first books in the series is *Larry Fink on Composition and Improvisation*.

About This Learning Guide

Aperture Education staff have organized this learning guide thematically, highlighting salient topics from Larry Fink's text. Within each theme, relevant chapters, passages, and vocabulary are noted, along with guiding questions to accompany specific images.

About Larry Fink

Larry Fink is well-known for his layered pictures in social settings. As a commercial photographer and photo-journalist during the 1960s, Fink viewed his work as an opportunity to saturate the media with a deeper humanism (*Social Graces*, p. 3). Empathy is a powerful theme running throughout all of Fink's images, no matter the context. He photographed high-society benefits in New York City, while simultaneously documenting the Sabatine family in rural Martin's Creek, Pennsylvania, all the while attempting to grasp the essence of human experience.

Fink has been widely recognized in the editorial and art worlds, and his work has been exhibited all over the United States. He has since taught photography at Yale University School of Art, Cooper Union, and Temple University and is now a tenured professor at Bard College.

Influenced by jazz music, Fink's photographs take on a nuanced quality that is simultaneously technical and emotional. In this book, Fink explores composing photographs and improvising within a scene to create images with both feeling and meaning. Through words and photographs, he reveals insight into his own practice and discusses a wide range of creative issues, from connecting with the subject in front of the lens to shaping a vision that is authentic. Fink's wisdom can be used to teach students how to create and analyze sophisticated photographic compositions, how to create pictures that take advantage of the tension within a scene, and how to make images that consciously convey their vision and feelings about the subject.

Juxtaposition and Incongruency



Pat Sabatine's Eighth Birthday Party, Martin's Creek, Pennsylvania, April 1977

Relevant Passage

"Through luck or happenstance or just by looking for it, you can find all kinds of juxtapositions, different contexts coming together in one place" (p. 16).

Relevant Chapter

"Incongruency and the Possibilities of Photography" (pp. 14–19)

Topics for Discussion

- What is a juxtaposition? How can juxtaposition be utilized in photography?
- What's going on in this picture?
- What is the subject of this photograph?
- What are the relationships between the various perspectives of each subject?
- Does the compositional structure of the photograph relate to the content?
- As Fink asks himself, "Is there a conflict" or "Is there a harmony"?

Vocabulary

perceptions
layering
incongruency
context

juxtaposition
atonalities
conflict
harmony

Composition and Framing



Pat Sabatine's *Twelfth Birthday Party*, Martin's Creek, Pennsylvania, May 1981

Relevant Passages

"It's a good idea to establish a working understanding of the 'rules,' or building blocks, of stories and juxtapositions: the principles of composition. Leading the viewer's eye is part of that" (p. 20).

"My pictures can be very formal, but in the end, the point is something else. I'm aware of how the frame breaks up into different kinds of shapes, but if I went out into the world and just thought in terms of triangles, I wouldn't be able to make a picture. Because why would I want to photograph triangles all day?" (p. 28).

Relevant Chapters

- "Building the Box" (pp. 20–27)
- "Breaking the Frame" (pp. 28–31)

Topics for Discussion

- What is framing?
- What is left in the frame, and what is left out? How do the elements at the edges of the photo change how you interpret the scene?
- What can lead the eye to one part of the frame?
- How does the frame shape change the way that we look at an image?
- How does the composition change the way that we interpret an image?
- How can one consciously break the rules of composition to create a compelling photograph?
- Compare *Pat Sabatine's Eighth Birthday Party* to *Pat Sabatine's Twelfth Birthday Party*. What similarities and differences can you find? How do the photographs tell different parts of the story?

Vocabulary

elements
edge
frame
tension

sculptural
static
stagnant
volumetric

Truth



Belly-Dancing School, March 1965

Relevant Passage

“That’s the thing about a photograph and the thing about truth: they’re all malleable” (p. 38).

Relevant Chapter

“Telling Lies” (pp. 36–40)

Topics for Discussion

- What is going on in this picture?
- What is the mood of this photograph? How does it make you feel? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Read Larry Fink’s story about the moment he took this photo (p. 38) and the caption of the photograph. Does learning the story change the way that you interpret the image?
- How do photographers have the capacity to manipulate truth?
- Can a camera ever capture a truthful image?

Vocabulary

referential
gesture
choreographic

Vantage Point



Lenox Lounge, Harlem, New York City, October 2001



George Plimpton and Devotees, Elaine's, New York City, January 1999

Relevant Chapter

"Between Here and There" (pp. 44–51)

Topics for Discussion

- What is vantage point?
- Where do you think Larry Fink was standing when he took these photographs?
- In *George Plimpton's Devotees*, what is the result of Larry Fink having his camera slightly below eye level?
- How would these images read differently if they were taken from a different perspective?
- How does the vantage point of the photographer have the capacity to alter the mood or energy of a photo?

Relevant Passage

"When you see a picture like this coming together, jump up on a chair" (p. 49).

Vocabulary

movement
vantage point
point of view

Empathy



Fashion Week, New York, April 1996

Relevant Passage

“Empathy cuts past judgment. When you judge, you are naturally competitive: ‘I am better than.’ When empathy pulls itself into the train station, the howl of the whistle disallows ‘I am better than,’ and says, ‘I am the same as.’ In this way, you’re always looking for yourself within your subjects’ (p. 58).

Relevant Chapter

“Looking for Yourself Within the Subject” (pp. 58–70)

Topics for Discussion

- What do you think this woman is thinking about? What do you see that makes you say that?
- What is empathy? How can one create empathy with one’s subjects?
- How is the self revealed through one’s photography?
- How do your values influence your work as a photographer?
- How is depth created by a connection between the photographer and subject?

Vocabulary

empathy
codify
perspective
organic

premonition
impulse
consciousness
contour

Emotional Composition



Mary, New York City, 1958

Relevant Passage

“While focus, depth of field, and shutter speed are technical terms, they are also at your disposal for emotional reasons. You’re often using them, working focus or depth of field back and forth, to see how many different ways you can interpret the sensory nature of the experience in front of you to find a fluidity of interpretation” (p. 75).

Relevant Chapter

“Emotional Composition” (pp. 75–83)

Topics for Discussion

- What do you think Fink’s relationship to the subject is? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Are there technical elements of this photograph that contribute to the emotion and atmosphere it conveys?
- How can one use technical tools, such as shutter speed and depth of field, for emotional terms?
- What types of abstract concepts are commonly photographed?
- When does intuition override technique?
- How does one maintain something’s essence in just one image?

Vocabulary

aesthetics
interpret
sensory
atmosphere

space
depth of field
shutter speed
emphasize

Photography and Music



Cleveland School of the Arts, Cleveland, Ohio, May 1998

Relevant Passages

Conflict or Harmony (p. 16)

"When I'm photographing, I'm watching and reacting to patterns and rhythms coming together. I'm scanning the situation and noticing atonalities, asking myself, 'Is there a conflict' or, 'Is there a harmony?'"

Improvisation (pp. 93–94)

"In photography and music, improvisation is the essence of this kind of uncertainty and potential failure... You begin to create a harmony with that instability and uncertainty. Improvising is the idea of being comfortable with the nature of discovery."

See also: Symphony (p. 98)

Relevant Chapters

"Incongruencies and the Possibilities of Photography" (pp. 14–19)

"Chance Is Everything" (pp. 89–93)

"When It All Comes Together" (pp. 98–101)

Topics for Discussion

- What are some connections between photography and music?
- How can musical concepts be utilized to make strong photographs?
- How can we use musical words as a way to interpret photographs?

Vocabulary

rhythm

harmony

tonalities/atonalities

improvisation

symphonic

Assignments

1. Empathy & Experience

“As humans, we have to accept that we, ourselves, can also repulse. We are all ugly; we are all beautiful. To recognize the ugliness and beauty in others, you must first accept those qualities in yourself.

As an exercise in empathy and photography, go out in the world and try to photograph a whole palette of human emotions and breadth of experience.” (p. 65)

2. Atmosphere & Space

“There’s a difference between atmosphere and space within a picture. Atmosphere is charged space; it fills the setting with feeling and could come from the way you feel about the place—something from within your mind—or from physical conditions. Either way, it is worth trying to emphasize factors in the reality that create atmosphere: dust or wind or rain overriding, overwhelming, oversaturating sun and heat.

Can you photograph heat in a way that conveys its hotness?

Can you photograph water and make the picture feel wet, rather than just look like a picture of water?” (p. 81)

Key Vocabulary

Atmosphere: the pervading tone or mood of a place, situation, or work of art, a “charged space” (p. 81)

Conflict: an incompatibility between two or more opinions, principles, or interests (p. 16)

Choreographic: something, such as a series of planned situations, likened to dance arrangements (pp. 34, 42, 51)

Context: the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood and assessed (p. 16)

Edge: the outside limit of an object, area, or surface (pp. 24, 120)

Element: a part or aspect of something abstract, especially one that is essential or characteristic (p. 24)

Empathy: the ability to understand and share the feelings of another (pp. 58–61)

Frame: a rigid structure that encloses something such as a door or window (p. 28)

Gesture: a movement of part of the body, especially a hand or the head, to express an idea or meaning (p. 41)

Harmony: agreement or concord (p. 16)

Incongruent: not corresponding in character or kind (p. 14)

Juxtaposition: the fact of two things being seen or placed close together with contrasting effect (p. 16)

Layering: using foreground, middle ground, and background to create a nuanced composition (p. 14)

Movement: showing action and directing the viewer’s eye throughout the picture plane (p. 44)

Perception: a way of regarding, understanding, or interpreting something; a mental impression (p. 14)

Perspective: a particular attitude toward or way of regarding something; a point of view (pp. 29, 30, 32)

Referential: containing or of the nature of references or allusions (p. 32)

Relational: concerning the way in which two or more things are connected (p. 13)

Rhythm: a strong, regular, repeated pattern of movement or sound (p. 90)

Sculptural: of, relating to, or resembling sculpture (p. 26)

Space: the dimensions of height, depth, and width within which all things exist and move (p. 81)

Stagnant: showing no activity; dull or sluggish (p. 30)

Static: lacking in movement, action, or change, especially in a way viewed as undesirable or uninteresting (p. 28)

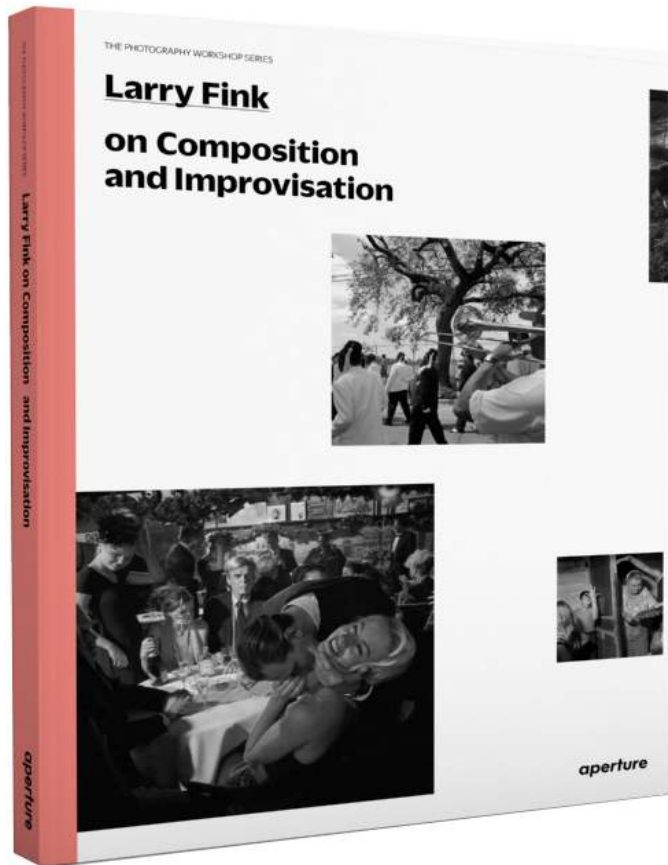
Surface: the outside part or uppermost layer of something (often used when describing its texture, form, or extent) (p. 84)

Tension: mental or emotional strain (pp. 24, 42)

Tonalities: the harmonic effect of being in a particular key (p. 90) / See also: Atonalities (p. 16)

Volumetric: of, or relating to, the measurement of volume (p. 26)

Source: Oxford Pocket Dictionary of Current English



Larry Fink on Composition and Improvisation

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Introduction by Lisa Kereszi

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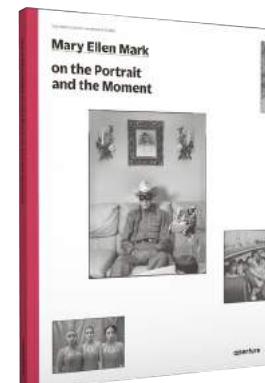
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