



Looking at Composition Is Like Painting the Golden Gate Bridge

86 aspects of composition

by Mike Vargas

I've accumulated the following ideas in the process of composing, improvising, collaborating, performing, and teaching during the last thirty years. This collection of 86 terms and questions grew out of a need to clarify for myself the way I look at music and dance—to explain what I had been doing instinctively and subconsciously for all these years while improvising and composing music. Since the mid-1990s, when I began developing this collection of concepts to guide students in the study of improvisation at Naropa University in Colorado, I have continued to add, subtract, and substitute terms and questions as I've gathered new insights. The list has been there all along; I'm just uncovering it.

This checklist is designed to help people through a similar process of their own as they practice organizing materials, perceptions, and decisions related to sound, movement, or any other artistic medium. It can be used to evaluate and analyze art, but it can also focus our attention on the composition of nature and the environment. Life and art are, after all, inseparable.

Though the 86 aspects represent a wide spectrum of concerns ranging from the conceptual to the physical, they reflect a relatively intellectual way of looking at art and life. This approach is easily counterbalanced by the ever-present factors of instinct, physical intelligence, habits, chance, and mistakes.

I think of these aspects as filters or lenses. The 86 aspects provide specific areas of focus both for observation and for action. They can narrow the frame if we want to look only at the parts, and they can broaden our field of view when we want to look at the whole.

I am told that there is no pause between coats of paint on the Golden Gate Bridge. By the time they have finished painting from one end to the other, the paint on the other end has been worn away by the ocean air. I am drawn to this image as a metaphor for the study—and the process—of composition because it represents an ongoing, living activity, rather than a static idea, and it's never really finished. The evolution of a piece of art is by no means as simple, as linear, or as neatly circular as the process of painting the Golden Gate Bridge. What I like about the analogy, however, is that it suggests a certain matter-of-factness in the necessity for ongoing maintenance and attention.

I believe we organize a composition by asking and answering questions pertaining to its nature—consciously and unconsciously, intellectually and intuitively, mentally and physically. One question leads to the next. Often when I'm at the beginning of a project, I'll scan down the list and particular aspects jump out at me. I allow myself to instinctively move from one relevant aspect to the next, according to the nature of what I'm working

photo: Mike Vargas

86 aspects of composition

abstraction—To what extent would two people from the same community agree about the meaning?

appropriation—How precisely and in what proportion to the whole have the ideas and constructs of others been incorporated into this creation?

balance—How do the qualities and relative importance of the constituent aspects counteract each other, both inside and outside the system?

breath—Where is the alternation between tension and release, inhalation and exhalation?

center—Which areas, events, or ideas does our attention revolve around or return to?

coherence—How well do the elements involved maintain their physical or conceptual connections to each other?

collaboration—If there is more than one person or element involved, how are they cooperating?

color—What shades, tones, or spectral qualities do these particular combinations of vibrations and their reflections create or evoke?

community—Who is involved with the making and perceiving of this work?

complexity—How many different streams of meaning, gestures, or materials are there, and do they interfere with each other?

context—What are the circumstances surrounding creation and perception, and what bearing do they have?

continuity—How does this move from idea to idea, from place to place, from beginning to end?

contrast—How different is one thing from another?

control—How tightly is the outcome predetermined?

conviction—To what extent is there an absence of doubt or hesitation, and how big a role does this play in the potential to inspire?

definition—What features distinguish this from everything else and are they expressed clearly?

density—How many elements are present simultaneously or in close proximity in a given area or at a given time?

with or observing. Working like this focuses my thinking and my actions; it also simplifies my decision-making process and clarifies my intentions.

The questions I have chosen to ask after each aspect indicate only a few points related to that aspect. In every case, they are only the tip of the iceberg. I have limited each question to a single sentence because I feel that the need for this reference to be succinct and suggestive outweighs the need for it to be comprehensive.

In naming the aspects and phrasing the questions, I have tried to use words that are not specific to a particular tradition or discipline in order to create a reference that is provocative across a broad spectrum of concerns and useful not only when working within a given artistic discipline but also when comparing or combining one art form with another, or looking at the world around us.

I offer this list as a tool to help focus our work—that is, our attention, our intentions, our observations, and our actions. I hope it helps to clarify the language we use when we discuss these things. Though originally born as a teaching tool, it quickly expanded to become not only a valuable topic of discussion with peers but also a welcome oracle in my own work and life.





photo: Mike Vargas

detail—How finely are the small qualities and features chiseled and how important are they to the functioning of the whole?

development—What changes as time and space extend and how does this affect coherence?

diversity—What degree of variety is present among the components and what effects does this variety produce?

duration—How much time goes by from the beginning to the end of each event? of each subdivision? of the whole?

emotion—Which human feelings can be found in this creation or perception and what importance are they given relative to the other ingredients?

emphasis—Which aspects are meant to draw our attention and how is this achieved?

exertion—How much physical and/or mental effort is involved and to what extent is it important for this to be visible?

expectation—Do assumptions held by the creator or perceiver influence continuity or predictability?

familiarity—How important is it to maintain or evolve recognizable situations, ideas, environments, or feelings?

frequency—How fast and how often do the events and the materials vibrate or occur?

function—What role does this play in the world, and what roles do each of the ingredients play relative to each other and to the whole?

generosity—What is being given freely?

geography—Where do things happen?

gesture—How is movement of the materials organized, and what shapes and qualities do the trajectories of this motion create?

hierarchy—How are importance and power organized?

humor—How do factors such as smiling, laughter, surprise, lightheartedness, or delight contribute to the nature of this work?

hybridization—Is there an intentional (or unconscious) blending of forms?

imitation—How much do internal elements seek or exhibit similarity among themselves, and how much do they or the whole seek or exhibit similarity with external models?

innovation—How great a role do new ideas play?

inspiration—How does this work give and receive motivating energy?

intention—What desired state or outcome is motivating the decisions that predetermine the nature of this process?

interpretation—How do history, personal opinions, emotions, and skills affect the transmission and reception of the original message or intention?

intuition—What percentage of creation/perception occurs spontaneously or without logical explanation, and how does this component in the composition interact with the intellectual component?

language—What conventions, rules, methods of organization, or vocabularies distinguish this communication from others, and who understands them?

leadership—Who makes the decisions?

limits—What kinds of restrictions help to focus the expression?

logic—What intellectual paradigms or conceptual maps are determining the basis for decision making?

memory—How does the ability to store, label, and then retrieve impressions from the near and distant past impact creation and perception?

mystery—How much reference is being made to not-knowing; how big a role does conscious (or unconscious) not-knowing play in conception and execution, and how necessary is knowing or not-knowing for appreciation?

mythology—What roles do heroism, archetypes, folklore, and oral history play?

organization—On what basis are the materials ordered, and what effect does this order have on the way they are perceived?

A number of years ago, looking down at the asphalt in the parking lot of a supermarket in Boulder, Colorado, I was delighted to discover a world of simple lines in space, of lovely black and white calligraphy and textures. Sometime later, I took these photos of road repairs in Canyonlands, Utah. I have spent a lot of time enjoying them while focusing on various of these 86 aspects, watching questions appear, watching my answers, and watching the answers lead to the next question. I enjoy the humor in the perspective that calls this art. I love these images! And I think they are beautiful. I am happy when my music inspires people the way these photos inspire me. [M.V.]



originality—What percentage of the content is unique, and how does that affect the value of the whole?

palette—What collection of physical and conceptual materials is being combined in this particular case?

perception—How do the attributes and mechanisms of the human senses and mind color this process?

perspective—From which physical or mental position was this created, and from which vantage points are the various elements and qualities best perceived?

planning—What role does advance thinking, organizing, and deciding play?

precision—Which ideas, gestures, or aspects must manifest in an exact way and which can be more general or approximate?

preference—What proportion of qualities or choices is guided or determined by personal affinities or taste?

process—What is the sequence and nature of the physical and intellectual events that determine the outcome?

proportion—What are the relative quantities, sizes, and importance of each aspect with respect to the others and to the whole?

proximity—What importance does the degree of nearness of players or elements have, internally and with respect to the perceiver?

pulse—How much of the organization involves the regular marking of time or space with a steady placement of weight or events?

punctuation—What devices help to delineate and separate units of meaning and activity?

purity—How much allegiance or adherence to particular styles, ideas, traditions, or methods is present or necessary?

reference—Toward which other elements, relationships, meanings, or memories is our focus directed when an element (or the whole) points outside of itself?

relationship—How do these materials, organizers of the materials, and observers interact with each other?

repetition—What happens again and again, how often, and with what intentions or results?

reproduction—To what extent and how precisely are these materials or characteristics meant to resemble something from the past?

resolution—How and when does this balance itself enough to start a new chapter or begin again?

resonance—How do the effects of sympathetic vibrations play a role in the transmission of energy and inspiration, internally and with the environment?

responsibility—How do social and environmental conscience influence the process of the creator, the perceiver, and other elements of the composition?

scale—How large is this, relative to its conceptual and physical context?

sensation—How does physical interaction with the medium, through the senses and systems of the body, affect the process and the nature of the experience?

sequence—What events or ideas or materials follow each other, and in what order?

shape—What are the qualities of the outline or contours created by the relative positions of materials in time and space?



photo: Mike Vargas

speed—How quickly do things happen?

spirituality—What importance is given, either in the creation or in the perceiving, to contemplation, kindness, and matters of the soul?

spontaneity—How much of the composition is determined by gestural, organizational, or conceptual decisions made in the moment?

stability—Is there a sense of underlying predictability or steadiness, and how is this achieved?

story—Is the series of events or the arrangement of elements such that it narrates or describes a human situation or perspective?

symmetry—What types of correspondences exist between opposing sides or halves, either of the whole or of the individual ingredients?

technique—What skills are necessary to clearly transmit and receive these energies or ideas, and how important is the mastery of these skills?



tension—Where is there a physical (or other kind of) pull or push between elements or ideas?

texture—What overall consistency or surface quality is created by the arrangement of materials?

timing—When do things happen and how important is precision in this regard?

tradition—What lineages of creators, styles, philosophies, politics, methods, contexts, or other factors have influenced this composition?

transition—What manner of bridges or connectors serve to span the gaps between ideas, chapters, or areas?

variation—What proportion of this process involves change, manipulation, or evolution of material or energy?

vibration—When and how does cyclical alternation (of position, qualities, states, materials, etc.) play a role, and how do the relative speeds of these oscillations interact?

There are many kinds of breathing, alternations that occur naturally: giving and taking, instinct and thought, improvisation and composition, nature and nurture, particle and wave. If we could say these so-called dualities are just two sides of the same coin, maybe we could go further and say that instead of just two sides, a system such as a piece of art, or a bridge, or a life, might have as many as, say, 86 sides!?

And thus the ongoing process of alternating among a wide spectrum of concerns in the evolution of a composition—both in our actions and in our observations—could be seen as a complex kind of breathing: inhaling as we check the state of various aspects, exhaling as we apply what we've learned to what we do next.

Composition is deciding what to put next to what and in what proportion, and it is also choosing when to do this. When I'm improvising music, this process proceeds at lightning speed, continuously, too fast for thought most of the time. Many many aspects are considered simultaneously. If, on the other hand, I'm just thinking about these things or discussing them with someone else, or experimenting with ways to refine my future improvisations, I can usually deal with only one or two aspects at a time. Yet in both situations, I am finding it extremely useful to practice finding the one or two specific things that must be attended to NOW, and NOW, and so forth.

While this conceptual framework is intended primarily as a means of support for open-ended creative research, I believe it can also be used to refine the mastery of specific styles or traditions in the arts, compositional or improvisational, regardless of medium. I hope this catalog will provoke further research and development, leading to greater specificity in our intentions and higher quality in our work, whatever that may be.



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