

## Notes on Minor White's 1964-65 Portland Oregon workshops.

Larry Bullis, 2008

I was fortunate to attend two series of workshops with Minor White in Portland, Oregon, with his "home" group. Minor had gone to Portland in the 1930's, been employed there by the Works Progress Administration to photograph the historic steel fronted buildings on Portland's waterfront, and had been involved in the camera club there. Subsequently, after his stint in the army in WWII, he went to San Francisco to work with Ansel Adams at the California School of Fine Arts and then to Rochester to teach at RIT.

Many of the original members of his original group were still active. Every summer, Minor would come back to Portland and give workshops, which members of the old group attended. During the year between summers, the group or as much of it as could or wished to, would meet at Dr. Rustin's for the "Interim Workshop". This group is still going in a different location and with a different group of people, and unfortunately, without Minor. Participants would show their prints. Tapes were made of the proceedings. Minor would receive the tapes with the photographs that were discussed. The next month, the photographs were returned with his reply. During these interim meetings, the protocols were followed as they were with him present, but, of course, without his voice, except on tape in the comments concerning last month's presentations.

Here, in response to a thread on APUG (Analog Photography Users Group: <http://www.apug.org/forums/home.php>) about developing one's ability to see, I will describe the methods he used in his workshops as best I can. I believe the descriptions to be about as accurate as any could be. I thought it best to post it as an article, because of its length and its potential interest for other viewers.

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Photographs were viewed in a state of meditation. Every exercise was preceded by an induction to help the students attain the appropriate state. The student was prepared for the session through a guided progressive relaxation discipline. This induction would take approximately, I believe, about five minutes. The instructions were given slowly and deliberately, allowing time at each instruction for the student to accomplish the release of that body part or region before proceeding to the next. The intent of this was to bring the student's attention home to the body, rather than the usual flitting around between now and next weekend, love life, and tomorrow's dinner menu. Present in the body (this is quite an unusual state for most people, I think; we tend to live in our heads a lot) permits an unusual kind of simple awareness which does not include interpretation of any kind.

After the induction, the student would be asked to open his/her eyes, and would find a music stand positioned directly in front with a matted photograph on it. Note; music STAND. There is no music in the environment. Each student had a stand with a print on it. The photograph would be one that MW had brought with him; not one of his, but one he had for the purpose. It would be superb, but not a "masterpiece" and I think that was deliberate. I think it would be a mistake to use a photograph that is too powerful until the

process is mastered.

Minor must have traveled with 20 or more of these prints. Imagine traveling through the most primitive, hot, and dusty parts of the US, like the Henry Mountains in Utah, with 20 or more immaculate prints, to say nothing of lots of 4x5 film, view cameras, music stands, etc. in his red 1960's VW bus. He traveled with an assistant, and the bus would be made dark at night for loading and unloading holders by being covered with a large tarp (it was carried too) by the person not enclosed in the bus. Somebody needed to be there to install and remove the tarp. Film was carried in a cooler, with ice. Well, I guess he had it easier than Carleton Watkins did.

It is impossible to write in Minor's voice, but here goes. Also, I've experienced similar inductions in other contexts, so while the spirit of the process is accurate, it is not verbatim Minor. I'm sure he would, however, approve.

The induction:

Sit in a chair, your feet flat on the floor. Lap is a good place for the hands. Close your eyes.

Become aware of the sole of your left foot, where it contacts the floor. Place all of your attention there. (pause)

Retaining the awareness of the sole of the left foot, also become aware of the sole of the right foot. (pause) Allow that awareness to include all of both feet. (pause) And the ankles. (pause).

Allow the awareness to expand into your calves. (pause) Then your knees. (pause) And your thighs.

Allow the awareness to include your genitals, your hips and pelvic area. (pause).

Allow the awareness to expand into your stomach region and into your chest. (pause). Take three deep breaths and release, allowing the tensions in your body to expel in the exhalations.

Continue the expansion of awareness into your shoulders. Release the shoulders. Into the neck, and head. (pause)

Become aware of the muscles in your face. Allow them to relax. (pause)

When you are ready, open your eyes.

In theory, totally relaxed, perfectly present in the body, aware and open without anything in the mind (yeah, really!) the student would then look at the print for about 15 or 20 minutes. The room would be totally silent during this time. The long time may seem

excessive, but it isn't. If one knows that there is that much time involved, very soon one "gives up" and allows one's self to really get into the photograph and drop any worries about being able to see it all. With experience, the student will simply look at the photograph, allowing the eyes to pass over every millimeter, every line, every bit of glorious silver, every texture and every beautiful gray. (Would it work with an ugly photograph? I think so. It can work with anything. I assign my students to look at burnt toast. The important thing is to avoid judgment. Hey, burnt toast can be beautiful. Try it.).

At the end of the viewing time, the signal to gradually allow one's concentration to return to the room would be given, and after a few minutes (when MW could see that everyone was back) discussion would begin. These discussions could take any number of directions, some of which were not just talk, but could include body movements, postures and gestures. Each person would recount the experience with the work which often included difficulties, such as 1) judgment - good or bad, 2) technical criticisms, 3) distractions, 4) discomforts, 5) associational chains, 6) design criticisms, 7) likes and dislikes, and 8) anything else. I only number these to be sure that they separate one from the other in the reader's mind. I want the reader to note that these things are difficulties, despite what often is regarded as how you look at a photograph; i.e. to determine if it is good or bad. Value judgments like that, or any other valuation or analysis of any kind are considered intrusions on the experience; distractions. Flights of imagination, such as "it reminded me of...", "it looks like a...", "it made me think of..." etc. were NOT encouraged, but would be grudgingly tolerated if they didn't take very long. Intellectual analysis was considered a difficulty. Everything Gets in the Way. Opinions are definitely not honored. "I like it" is entirely irrelevant.

Not only difficulties would be discussed. The discussion could turn to appreciation, emotion (there were incidents of tears, etc.) and intangibles. It is not easy to discuss feelings, because there are no words that come from that part of the human makeup. An attitude of respect for the work and for the individuals present was always maintained.

One must be open, relaxed, and loose to concentrate this way, but incredibly vigilant and very aware of oneself, at the same time as being aware of the image and the self in the process of observation. Got that? This means to be present to oneself as one observes the work. It is a conscious dialog with the work. If this is hard to grasp, that is not surprising. It's not at all easy to explain. It is a sort of dual consciousness; it is not just "I look at print" but, almost from a position that is superior to my ordinary self, I am aware of myself observing the print. I am, ideally, fully present and aware of my presence as my eyes scan and send the data to the brain; my awareness includes that process going on as well. I am observing myself observing the image; it is all there.

What do you do about the fact that these difficulties, these distractions, are inevitable? Remember, MW was a meditator. He knew how to let thoughts happen, let them go, and come back. Always come back.

The tenor of the atmosphere? Somewhat painfully self conscious. Here again, it might help to know that Minor was a Gurdjieff student. G's method requires constant self

observation which is frequently uncomfortable and just might make one seem a bit weird to other people because of the intense self-focus - and knowing that it might make one seem weird could make one more self-conscious. He brought that into his teaching. His workshops could be fun, sometimes, but more often were rewarding in other ways, and not necessarily very comfortable to be in. He had a great sense of humor which he used very sparingly. A great premium was placed upon a rather serious self awareness.

The problem with using Minor White as a source of models for exercises is that you would almost need to be Minor White to use them. Minor was very charismatic, very commanding in workshop situations, and adept at creating what some would call an environment for learning, but others might call hypnotism. I think it would be very hard for an individual to apply his methods solo without training, but not impossible. I am able to do it, but it does take a peculiar effort, and I've had the training. Also, there are times that I simply can't do it. That effort isn't like "work", exactly; it is an effort to remember to do it. You know, remember to remember.

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A workshop might last several days, and after the first introductory one where the zone system and viewing protocols would be explained and demonstrated, would be held at some remote site such as Cape Kiwanda or Cape Arago on the Oregon Coast. The day would start early in the morning; can't remember how early, but it was early. The importation of Eastern spiritual materials had not yet quite begun in 1964-65, although it was starting, so there was no "yoga" as we have today. Minor had us doing calisthenics; you know, jumping jacks, pushups, sit-ups, etc. to start the day. Early! Then coffee. Then talk. Then breakfast, then more talk, then shoot at some location that had been determined, then if there was a darkroom arrangement, process, then meet with prints, view and discuss, more talk, dinner, more talk, maybe see one of Minor's INCREDIBLE dual projector slide shows (he was a master of fade and dissolve, which he did with hand dimmers, and used the superimposition of images to create spectacular dynamic interactions). Then socialize with liberal drink. The night would end late and the next day would start Early - really early. I think about 5 o'clock. With jumping jacks, pushups....

Out "shooting" (which term I can't recall in use, but there is a famous story about MW saying to students going out with their cameras: "Happy Snapping!") the model was similar. Ideally, I would not "look for pictures" but would stay in a meditative state, remain open, not be critical and allow the image to find me. I never felt it worked for me then, but it does now quite often. My wife tells me that Freeman Patterson called this "relaxed attentiveness" or something close to that. Another of my most honored and revered mentors, Lloyd J. Reynolds at Reed College, called it "serene open awareness". I submit it to you with my recommendation.

The pace was rather severe and within a few days, several students would be gone, never to be seen again. I asked him what the reason for the severity was. He told me that fatigue would break down the students' resistance and he could just "pour it in". Minor believed that getting more than four or five hours of sleep was to indulge in sheer luxury. He

would nap in the afternoon, perhaps curled up in the back of somebody's station wagon, for ten minutes, no more. He would count to ten, and be asleep. That was all he seemed to need. He was very strong; us young folks could keep up with him as he flapped his way up the streambed at Oneonta Gorge in his rubber thongs, his tripod with the Sinar over his shoulder, but older students fell back, not even trying to keep up.

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Minor's methods were and remain controversial. His models were more traditional Eastern methods where the student surrenders control to the teacher and does as s/he's told, but these methods were adapted more or less successfully to the more permissive American environment. He was not a tyrant. There were, and maybe still are, some who think that he may have done more harm to students than good. Critics point out his mystification, the tendency of his students to become second rate clones, etc.

I myself elected to pursue a different road, but I honor my teachers, of whom Minor White is one. My intent here is to present as best I can an accurate picture of specific workshops, not to laud or criticize. I have used daily what I learned with him for the past 44 years. In that regard, he is not alone, but a member of a select and honored group. He was and remains very important to me, as a teacher and as a person, but - not as a "god". Like all of us, he had his strengths and weaknesses. Those who seem larger than life also have passions that are larger than life. The whole person is magnified.