

Windowsill Daydreaming © Minor White Archive

Chapter V

The Creative Response

*Be still with yourself until the object of your attention
affirms your presence.*

Minor White

Minor White was a seminal figure in the critical thought and practice of the photographic medium during the mid-Twentieth Century. He investigated the art of seeing, in his work and teaching, with great passion and urgency — and expressed his findings with a near-missionary fervor and zeal. Often misunderstood during his lifetime, White employed a wide range of experimental methods and practices to assist those interested in the lost art of seeing. His body of research on seeing and visual perception remains unrivaled in the annals of photographic history and deserves renewed consideration in the present day. Due to his controversial status, many individuals are not aware of the significance of his thought and teaching.

From 1970 until his death in 1976, I had the privilege of working with Minor White as a student, assistant, and friend. I participated in many workshops and classes, gave assistance during his photographic journeys, and helped edit *THE VISUALIZATION MANUAL*, an unpublished manuscript detailing his teaching methods derived from over forty years of exploring creativity and visual perception.

Walking in the front door of his tall and stately Victorian house in Arlington Massachusetts, one entered a special place, almost immediately shedding the skin of the turbulent world outside. The spare simplicity of the space touched on the sacred, a true refuge of spirit and highly creative energy. An active stillness, like entering a Zen garden, charged the atmosphere. Minor's presence filled the space with the silence of the reverberations of a temple bell, the vibrations continuing on long after the sound was struck — the sound of one hand clapping, which is the title of one of Minor's well known sequences of photographs.

It was a profoundly nourishing space, filled with a quality of energy that served to awaken an inner longing and bring one into a deeper relationship with oneself.

Yet it was not comfortable. It was a challenging environment that encouraged wakefulness. All who entered accepted one implicit condition: making the “vow to grow,” to reach beyond oneself and one's limitations,

real or imagined. All were challenged to look beyond the ego, beyond one's habitual, familiar, and confining way of being. There was a sense of sacrifice present, of putting oneself at risk, as if something larger was at stake. The demands and requirements of the ego, and the upholding of one's brittle self-image were simply not acknowledged in this environment; by Minor, who set the example, nor by the others in the community of seekers who gathered in his home. We were asked to be connected to a sense of becoming, to embrace “not-knowing,” and to simply allow the fear and discomfort which inevitably arose to be a consistent part of one's inner landscape. We were continually reminded that growth of being, real creativity, and an authentic relationship with oneself might only arise through a sacrifice of the known and familiar. And this was undertaken for the sake of learning —for discovering the unknown and finding something more essential within ourselves, the emerging face of our true potential.

The favorite characters in our inner gallery of self-images were gently poked-at, prodded, and asked to recede into the background to give space for the appearance of our fragile and more real sense of self. Thrown into relief was our awkwardness, our inability to really do anything, to even tie our own shoes when it comes to real seeing and genuine creativity. We began to recognize that the creative process called forth a new relationship with ourselves, and that we were impotent when strictly on our own, without a connection to

the deeper sources of understanding, and inspiration within us. We began to see with increasing clarity that the images we held of ourselves were mostly a sham, a false persona, behind which lurked our young authentic selves. It was a humbling experience.

It was our barely emerging real selves that found a home in Minor's world. From these conditions of support and challenge, we were inspired to make the necessary efforts toward growth and awareness. We were encouraged upon making a real effort, and seen through when attempting to function from the ego — or with the arrogant confidence, hubris, or even false humility, arising from our personas. The conditions were set to help us penetrate the masks which hide us from ourselves.

All Minor needed to do was to look at us with deep awareness and understanding — and an expansive sense of acceptance — to remind us that we were not at home in ourselves most of the time. Or there were gentle reminders given when we were responding only in fragments: from the mind, or reacting from the emotional nature. There were many such “whacks to the side of the head” parried with empathetic understanding.

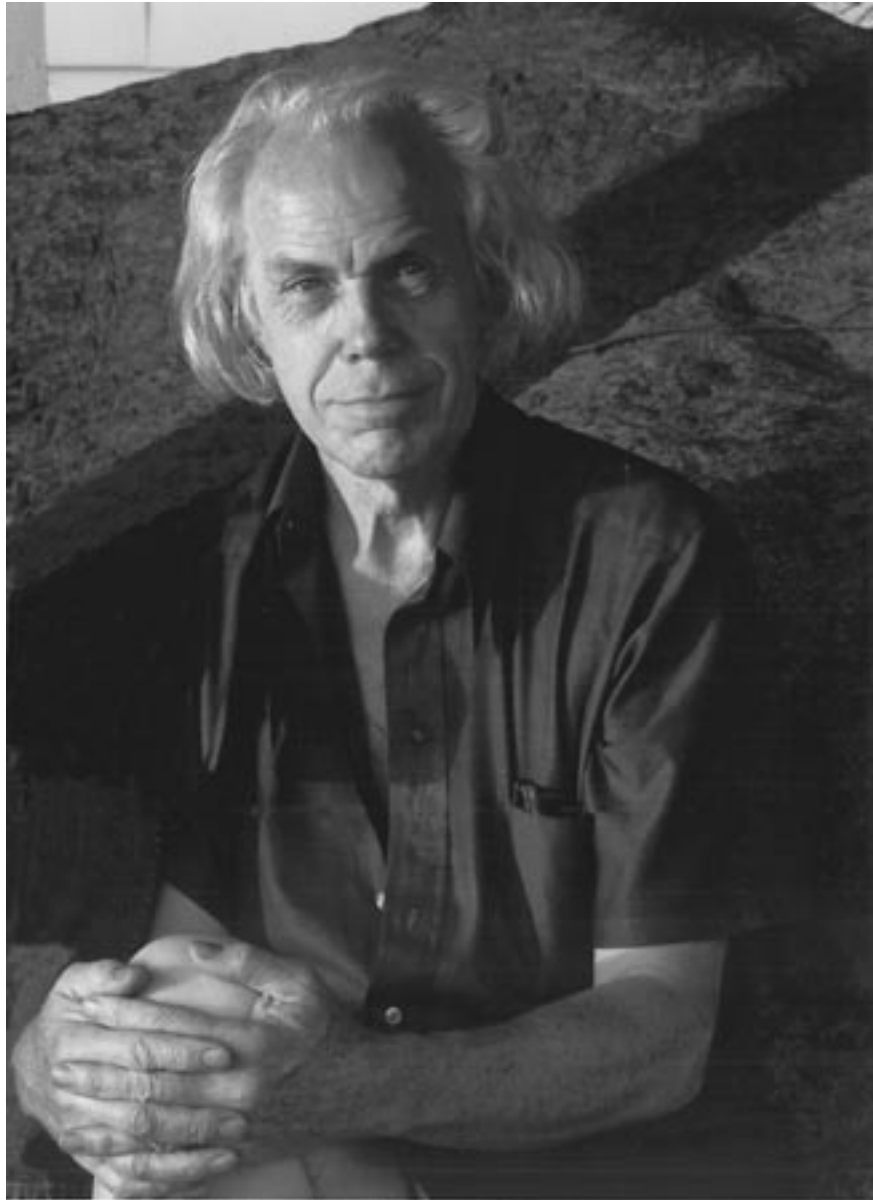
As a result of these “blows,” we used humor as a means of upholding our sagging self-images and “getting back” at Minor, making fun of his quirks and idiosyncrasies, such as the infamous green drink he had every morning for breakfast, consisting of the remains of the former night's dinner salad thrown

together in the blender and liquefied. Or, we would poke fun at the intensity of his passion for ice cream, which he often ate ceremoniously with wooden chopsticks.

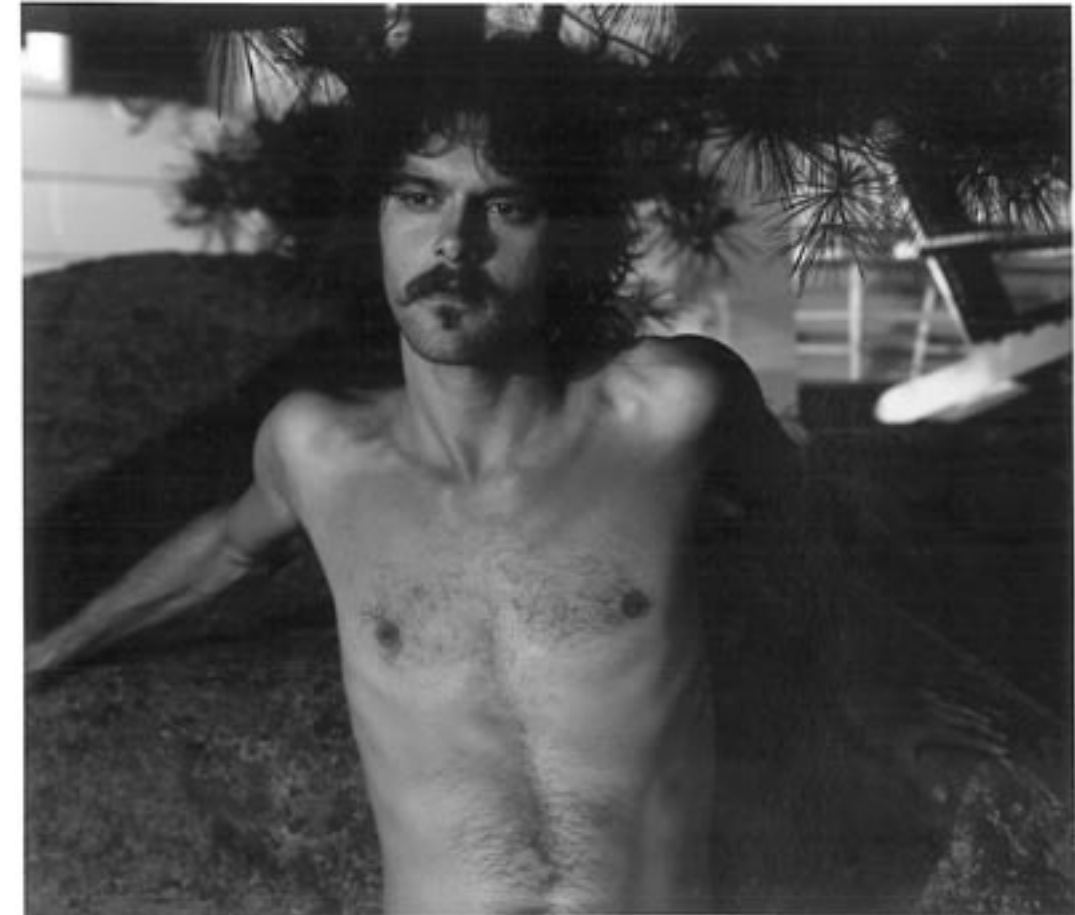
Yet we all felt acknowledged in Minor's presence, each in our own way. Most of us felt that something true and authentic in us was being supported and nurtured— really for the first time in our lives.

Minor White was a magnet for an extraordinary and sustained creative community — which I had the good fortune to enter only toward the end of its resonant existence. In a 1970 New York Times Book Review on Minor White's chef d'oeuvre — his retrospective autobiography of images and words, *MIRRORS, MESSAGES, MANIFESTATIONS* — John Szarkowski, former Director of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art, commented on White's omnipresence in the photographic world: *Of those photographers who reached their creative maturity after the Second War, none has been more influential than Minor White. . . . White's influence has depended not only on his own work as a photographer, but on his service as teacher, critic, publisher, theoretician, proselytizer and housemother for a large portion of the community of serious photographers.*

Before addressing the ideas which form the foundation of his teaching on vision and perception — the purpose of this chapter — I will provide some background information on White's life and work. Many of today's generation



Minor White, 1975 © David Ulrich



Portrait of the Author, 1975 © Minor White Archive

of artists have not had a first-hand experience of his work, his teachings, or his writings —nor know much about the details of his life or of his historic importance to the photographic medium. Peter Bunnell, Curator of The Art Museum, Princeton University, and the recipient of White's archive, claims that all photographers working in the mode of autobiographical inquiry owe a large debt to Minor White.

I was first given the opportunity to begin a written dialogue with White's work and ideas when Dorothea Dooling, founding editor of *Parabola Magazine*, asked me to review his first, large-scale posthumous retrospective, *THE EYE THAT SHAPES*, opening at the Museum of Modern Art in 1989. *THE EYE THAT SHAPES* was curated by Peter Bunnell, and was the result of sifting through and organizing White's archives at Princeton University, creating this exhibition some thirteen years after his death, Being the principal historian of White's work, and as a friend and former student, Bunnell was uniquely qualified for this undertaking. In fact, according to the critic A.D. Coleman, the exhibit and corresponding monograph "resolves a lifetime of interaction between White and Bunnell." Some material in this essay has been re-adapted from the exhibit review in *Parabola* published in 1989 with the title, *REVELATION THROUGH THE CAMERA LENS*.

Minor White's accomplishments as an artist, founding editor of *APERTURE* magazine, and teacher have undeniably earned his place as one of the

most influential figures in post-war photography; yet he remains an enigmatic presence and it has been difficult to attain a full perspective on the impact of his career. A modernist, deeply influenced by contact with Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Weston, White generated a body of work — photographs, writings, and a teaching legacy — which has yet to be fully seen, digested, and understood. Because of the highly esoteric nature of his work and teaching, he was easily misunderstood and often criticized. Many questions remain about the context in which to view his work. Is the work entirely aesthetic and meant to be viewed in the light of contemporary artistic practice, or does the work represent archetypal, symbolic imagery in the realm of universal tradition? Or, more likely, can we see his work through dual lenses and two eyes?

A.D. Coleman sheds light on White's intent and way of working:

White's generation of photographers, unlike ours, was not concerned with social theories of representation. Instead, they were concerned with vision — with learning to use their eyes in ways that would bypass mundane, habitual seeing. It was their belief that, if the impulses to literalize and to name could be suspended, then vision itself could function in a revelatory way. Washing the 'windows of the soul' was the first step toward letting in the light.

An ongoing inner search for the sacred was at the heart of his photographic work and teaching. The pedagogical heir to the charismatic ideas of Stieglitz, White furthered the concept of equivalence, where the image



Equivalent 1926 © Estate of Alfred Stieglitz

White's photographs are testaments to his own search for wholeness and point toward personal, revelatory truth as experienced by the individual. He used the Zone System (a method of expressive gray scale enhancement) as a highly manipulative tool capable of subtle, but significant transformations from the world of outer appearances to the world of photographic metaphor, or the inner landscape, a term often used to describe White's work.



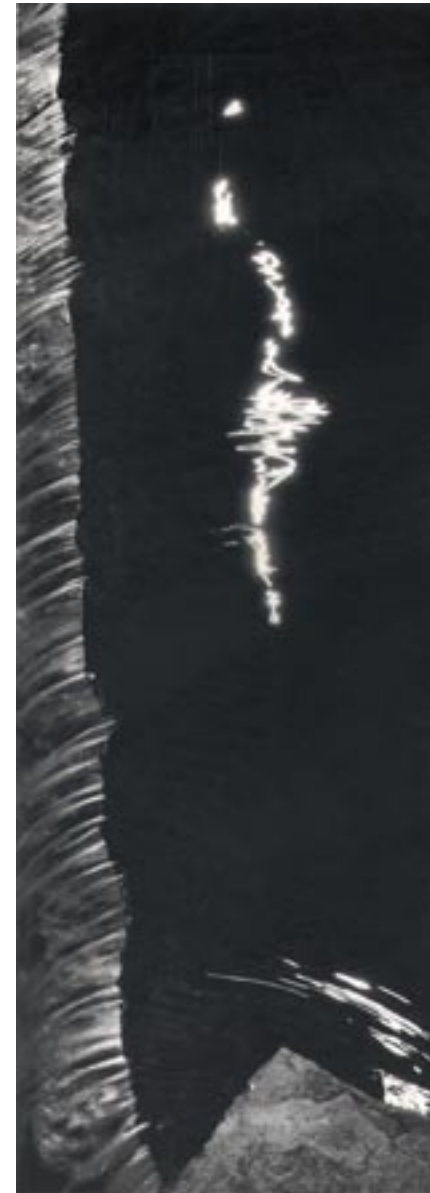
Twisted Tree, Point Lobos, CA 1951 © Minor White Archive

— in fact all art —-was seen as an equivalent of the artist's most significant and profound experiences. Stieglitz demanded that his art be an expression of an archetypal order that arose from, yet transcended the experience of a single individual. Like Stieglitz, White sought the individual moment as a gateway to larger truths. However, for White, it was the direct and highly personal experience which fueled his image-making. In many respects, the historical significance of his imagery is found in its parallel development to the growth of Abstract Expressionism at mid-century. His strongest images reveal a nearly alchemical process, where familiar, everyday objects were transformed through the camera lens into metaphoric abstraction. For the viewer conversant with the language of myth and symbol, White's photographs were often clear depictions of the process of opening to the inner world.

In his photography and his teaching, White championed the revelatory potential of the act of seeing. He describes this form of perception as a moment, *when either by grace or plan, camera unites me with the creative principle. The desirable working state: heightened awareness of my Self.* White's work serves to remind us of the necessity of finding a balance between the inner and outer worlds, and of the possibility of a transforming search for meaning and direction. Not surprisingly, many of his photographs do evoke, in the sensitive viewer, a state of inner quiet, which is not at all passive but an active turning toward the still resonances of the interior world.

Though he received much criticism during his lifetime for mixing photography with various traditions and teachings (Zen, Gestalt therapy, Christianity, and others before coming to the Gurdjieff ideas as his central source), it was just this sustained search for relationship to a guiding principle which underscores his importance. Indeed, in viewing his photographs, one questions what is more real: the outer, concrete world of appearances or the mysterious inner world of the energies of the psyche, with its attendant conflicts and illuminations, joys, and strivings. Certainly, Whites images make a compelling case for the latter, where every branch, every rock, seems imbued with a resonant, personal significance.

Most contemporary practitioners and students don't know quite what to do with his work and his teaching. Many feel that it no longer fits the tenor of the times. As Andy Grundberg points out: *White was more than just a photographer; he was a moral and critical guru who insisted on a connection between photography and the world's most powerful, universal forces. . . . In today's milieu . . . there is no longer a moral figure of unimpeachable authority who stands ready to lead us into the light — nor, indeed, does there seem a need for one. There is no apostle for the creed of photography as spiritual inquiry, no wise man to sing the epiphanies of photographic seeing. . .*



*Easter Sunday, Stony Brook State Park,
1963 © Minor White Archive*

Consciousness in photography comes out of an awakening to the interlocking interconnectedness of everything . . .

"Mysticism" in photographs is a delightful idea, full of danger of over-reading the visible elements, but perhaps intensely rewarding. I know its danger and pursue it anyway . . .

I believe that, like Alice Through the Looking Glass, with the camera one comes so close to the real that one goes beyond it and into the reality of the dream.

— Minor White



Root and Frost, 1958 © Minor White Archive



Nude, 1947 © Minor White Archive

However, I must admit, there were significant fault lines found in his work and teaching; some of his own making and some due to the climate of the times. Long before —in fact forty years before — Robert Mapplethorpe mainstreamed homo-erotic imagery, Minor White was exploring his love of men on both a metaphoric and literal level. Unlike Mapplethorpe, White was a tortured homosexual, growing up in a cultural milieu which shunned and persecuted those that were different than the norm.

At its best, White's metaphoric imagery is startlingly insightful and a remarkably precise representation, if read symbolically, of the universal dynamics of opening to the inner world. In other instances, an elusiveness is sensed in his work, a submerged expression of the agonies and conflicts surrounding his homosexuality. As a devout Christian for much of his life, his own deeply felt sexual impulses were in direct contradiction to widely accepted traditional religious beliefs. The complex contradictions between his spirituality and his sexuality caused much despair and questioning — and can be seen in his photographs as well as in selections from his journals. Unfortunately, this served to obscure his work as well as his teaching, since one often sensed, without knowing why, that something was hidden and being held back from view.

The primary controversy surrounding White's work and teaching

arose from the guru-like status many had conferred upon him. He used teaching techniques derived from an eclectic variety of wisdom traditions to help photographers achieve a state of heightened awareness, or a more open and receptive state of being —both behind the camera and while looking at photographs. He was remarkably able to relate the mechanics of photography to the traditional work of craft, where a deepening of attention could occur through one's work with the materials of the medium, when the photographer, camera, and mysterious processes in the darkroom could be fused into mutually reciprocating elements. His teaching clearly focused on work with oneself toward greater wholeness of being, likening photography to a spiritual discipline.

This was perhaps his greatest gift as a teacher — and his greatest limitation. Not everyone is searching for an opening to their inner life through photography workshops, nor should they be. Many were simply not ready, due to youth, inexperience, or more pointedly due to unresolved issues and latent, volcanic emotions yet unseen and unacknowledged. And there were eruptions of pain brought forth in individuals not yet ready to open or address their hidden complexes.

In his later years, White became something of a spiritual guide to a

younger generation of photographers, viewed in an elevated larger-than-life role by some and ridiculed by others. His didactic approach to photography generated much controversy, with people reacting strongly either for or against his underlying spiritual message.

In my own experience, White's teaching was experimental and often did serve to heighten awareness and deepen attention. However, it was overly complex, and at times tended to obscure rather than illuminate. Borrowing methods from many systems of knowing, some techniques were extremely useful, while others, in my estimation, were idiosyncratic. In his later years, as these methods were distilled through his own experience and understanding, he became a true guide in teaching the art of seeing. In reality, his "method" was himself — or the genuine growth of understanding he had achieved during his lifetime — and not the various systems he tried to integrate with photography. If only he could have understood this at the time. When White was "there" and in the moment, he was unusually attentive and perceptive — his presence lit the room and he inspired our efforts through his very example. Minor himself embodied the teaching.

Despite these limitations, the core elements of White's teaching, those that grew directly from his own experience, are unparalleled in the traditions of photographic education and represent an extremely valuable tool for re-

gaining the capacity for lucid sight. His work serves to bring us back to the authenticity of genuine personal experience and a connection to an essential part of ourselves that resides beneath our cultural conditioning and false personas.



Toward the end of his life, Minor White distilled his teaching methods into two primary experiential tools; derived and blended from several traditions, but effectively re-worked for use in the classroom by artists and creative individuals. These methods formed the core of his mature teaching and were the result of a forty-year exploration of camerawork and seeing. They became known as: *creative audience* and *heightened awareness*.

In *creative audience*, White asserted that seeing was a participatory act, whether on the part of the photographer or viewer. The same quality of intentional sight that an artist may bring to the world itself, can and should, for the sake of self knowledge and assisting others, be extended to the perception of works of art. The viewing audience could be equally creative in their interaction with a work of art, though in a different way, as the artist who



Rings and Roses, Ponce, Puerto Rico, 1973 © Minor White Archive

shaped it. Creative audience provides tools for seeing, for opening the gates of perception, and cultivating a fundamental re-education of vision. I personally favor the phrase, creative response, since White intended these tools to be used while looking at images and behind the camera, as well as in the midst of our daily lives and interactions.

Although I will summarize the exercises White used to encourage creative audience, merely knowing the methods is not enough. They are designed as experiential tools — as a genuine discipline, a practice for our lives. Through persistent experimentation, testing, and verifying continually, we may safely remove our fingers from the dike and unleash the floodgates of perception. The following is an outline of several of the guiding principles and teaching methods employed by White, and represent flexible tools, adaptable to one's own specific circumstances and needs. *Italicized sections of the text are White's own words, drawn from his unpublished manuscript and workshop notes.*

- A photograph — indeed any work of art, visual, or aural impression — *evokes* something in the viewer, as much as it *communicates* something to the viewer. Impressions enter our field of awareness and strike a chord — simultaneously in our bodies, feeling nature, minds, and souls — on both conscious and unconscious levels. What is evoked? Looking comprehensively

within and without at the same time is the key to an expansive awareness and heightened experience of the impression. Many of White's specific exercises were designed to encourage mindfulness and self-remembering, skillfully captivating an unbroken experience between ourselves and the object of our attention. We consciously enter an energetic feedback loop that invites a creative response, calling us to sing or dance, play or paint, activate the shutter — or just be and appreciate. White would often suggest focusing one's attention on the distance halfway between oneself and the object of our attention, while maintaining a keen awareness of both. For example, when maintaining eye contact, focus your gaze in the space between oneself and the other — both receptively receiving and actively projecting.

- An image — or incoming impression of any type — strikes each element in our inner triad: mind, body, and feelings — and each has its own particular response. Depending upon our type and conditioning, one or another of these centers may predominate within us. And we are naturally more aware of the responses of this part of our nature. An emotional person may primarily be touched by the feeling content, an intellectual may favor the conceptual implications, and a highly physical person may savor the sense impressions. In our culture, the head is often seen as the pre-eminant instrument and we

tend to intellectualize and rationalize our perceptions. A comprehensive understanding of anything can only arise through an awareness of all three layers of response simultaneously: physical, emotional, and mental. A whole response derives from our entire nature, including the intuition, unconscious, and collective mind. When we are centered in the body, responsive through the feelings, rigorously directed with the mind, and witnessing through the force of attention, an integrative, wholistic response may shine forth with lucid clarity.

Because people persist in using “like” and “not-like” to describe their reactions, a more precise and useful set of words was suggested. In saying something about one's response to an image one:

- a.) *KNEW* *When there was an intellectual response.*
- b.) *FELT* *an emotional response.*
- c.) *SENSED* *a tactile (physical, visceral) response.*
- d.) *ASSOCIATED* *the image with other images, remembrances, and conditions.*

and finally one:

- e.) *UNDERSTOOD* *after examining and clarifying all four of these reactions.*

• White used a flexible variety of means to help individuals earn the gift of awareness. His workshop exercises were stunning, multi-dimensional, and engaged the whole person, often like a Zen master's whack shaking loose the thick crust of ego and conditioning. Participants were challenged — often to the point of humility and embarrassment. All were asked to stretch, to try, to respond in ways that pushed against one's ingrained attitudes, habitual postures, and tired ways of seeing. White used to say: in a workshop environment, the impossible is possible, within one's reach.



He explored multiple dimensions of seeing through a broad spectrum of exercises, including, but not limited to:

- Movement, dance, or body postures assumed in response to an image.
- Breathing (speaking) fragments of poetry and words, remembered, or spontaneously generated.
- Narrative, verbal descriptions of one's response, identifying the locale in the body where the impressions strike, relating the nature of the feelings evoked, and describing the thoughts and associations that arise.
- Responding to images through showing or making another, or playing music if one is so disposed, or reading passages of literature.



Minor White workshop © Thomas Schuler

- Using techniques of empathy, sensing the image through one's body, or projection, seeing one's own image reflected in the object.
- Sketching or drawing one's response.
- Exploring mental associations and their relationship to the image.
- Capturing and tasting first impressions, before the associative and labeling nature of the mind takes over; witnessing and sharing one's conditioned filters that arise; examining remembered images and last impressions.
- Discovering negative space, mapping the core shapes and forms, and sensing the dominant movements and rhythms. Feeling the vibrational effects of color and form.
- Identifying the personal and collective meaning of symbols and signs found in an image. Freely reading metaphoric and archetypal content. Writing poetry and stories in response.
- Producing spontaneous theatre and dramatic action in response to image. Using skills in other art forms as a method of response.

Recently, I witnessed George Winston, the composer and pianist, play a harmonica in response to an exhibit of underwater photographs by a close friend of mine, Wayne Levin. It was entirely in the moment, an unexpected act

reminiscent of Minor White's workshops. Winston proceeded from picture to picture, closely observing each one, while continually interacting with the images through an unbroken stream of music, notes rising and falling as the impressions entered his being, with corresponding subtle body movements. It was unbelievable, magical, and exquisitely beautiful — and I do not use words like this lightly.

- Two modes of seeing were thoroughly explored: *empathy* and *projection*. In an empathetic response, we stay within our own bodies and sense the features of the object: its weight, lines, rhythms, shapes, textures, its overall feeling, and its intrinsic nature. We attentively enter the object, using our senses and feelings to know its essence, its characteristics and life force. We feel its presence from the inside-out. The mind takes note of the entire experience and adds its knowledge to the mixture. Through projection, we see what the object means to us, projecting our energies and personality on to the object. We note what is mirrored, what parts of ourselves are reflected back to us. This includes though extends well beyond the mere psychological projection of our shadow selves and dis-owned complexes. We engage our entire being and see the object as a symbol or metaphor for parts of ourselves. This becomes a

valuable tool for self-knowledge; the object teaches us of our essence through mutual mirroring. We discover the shapes and sounds of our true nature, predilections, unique conditioning, and the residue of past experience. White would often say that we might even glimpse a shared “splinter of divinity.”

- White believed that all visual impressions are food, capable of nourishment or depletion, depending on the object and the viewer. In his autobiography of words and images, *MIRRORS, MESSAGES, MANIFESTATIONS*, he writes: *Let's look at photographs as food. Does an exhibition leave you hungry or fill you with the visual equivalent of a snack or feast.*

Do your photographs offer substance and sustenance? Or a starvation diet? Do your photographs feed another man's body, his emotions, his love, his intellect, his cupidity, his lower appetites, his transcendental hungers? Or leave him drained, depleted of energy? As we know, images which poison one man, vivify another . . .

White perceptively taught that the impressions we receive become part of us. We are what we eat. His metaphoric sequences of photographs in *MIRRORS, MESSAGES, MANIFESTATIONS* reveal the entire range of White's agonies and ecstasies. Some images reveal the transcendent wonder of existence and

awaken a longing for consciousness. While others deeply disturb, mirroring our common suffering and shared struggles. Often, we are deeply and inexplicably attracted to objects, music, images, or people which reflect core parts of our nature. Some are enlivening, some frightful. Our angels and demons are mirrored, whether we desire it or not. In a moment of blinding fear and constricting anxiety on my part, White offered not consolation, but the empathetic words of advice: “we often fear or resist the very things that we need the most.” Very often, the impressions which may nourish the deeper parts of our being are the ones that quake our foundations, are the least understood by our conscious minds, and are staunchly resisted at first glance.

Those images which ‘haunt’ for days and weeks . . . what is being nourished? Maybe something in you that is starved by your inhibitions and perversions has had a tiny bit of food and is crying out for more. Feed that place, or stirring, as often as you can, for it’s probably your soul. Open up, take a chance that it is.

He taught a deep sense of responsibility. What are we feeding another: a nourishing feast for the soul, a vigorous challenge to our shared, entrenched attitudes, or spoiled meat that stimulates the seven deadly sins? White would often ask us to “taste” our images before serving and to observe the quality of our emanations, the vibrations that deeply enter others — and the planet

itself — that derive from our very being. “Check your hat before going out the door,” he once said.

- Sustained concentration forms the primary tool for seeing and entering the “energetic feedback loop” with life’s manifestations. Without concentration, we are mere machines, drawn here and taken there as the outer world captures our attention. The developed ability to have and to give attention was viewed by White as integral to lucid seeing and a full engagement with the creative process.

Concentration is a tool. Any tool must be used to keep its edge and to be of value. There are two basic types of concentration you will encounter: voluntary and involuntary. You are probably familiar with the latter, which occurs when something captures your interest and holds you taught. The former is better, because you can retain awareness of yourself and the subject of your interest. In any case, the aim is to increase your ability to see.

Most of the techniques employed in creative audience were designed to help develop one’s attention, toward a marriage of sense and soul, subject and object. White’s teaching and example lead toward a bridged, relational perception, seeing how one thing influences another, and how thinking,

feeling, and sensing are different branches of the same stream — the broad current of awareness. His exercises helped us to see from within, deep inside the body, to awaken feeling and open thought, with hints of erotic connectedness to the invisible tentacles of luminous fibers that interweave all living things.

Just become conscious of the solar plexus . . . give your attention there and hold it there. Do this when you are going to look at a photograph, make images, listen to music . . . try to put this into practice frequently during the day. When you are going to start anything, take a few moments to prepare from a state of stillness. . . . This contact gives you strength which you can extend to whatever you are going to be doing.

- Three “canons” of photography, adapted from the Six Canons of Chinese Painting, were formulated by White and used frequently in workshops. Like Zen koans, their meaning can emerge only to the degree that we might experience them.

Be still with yourself until the object of your attention affirms your presence.

Let the subject generate its own composition.

When the image mirrors the man, and the man mirrors the subject, something might take over.



Wall, Santa Fe, 1966 © Minor White Archive



The implication of White’s teaching was that seeing took place through the whole of oneself — already, without our intervention. The one thing needful to unravel the mysteries of perception was simply to become aware, to bring attention to the multiple layers of seeing that proceed naturally in all human beings.

Over the years, through my own creative work and teaching, I have tried to further this work in myself and offer what I can to others. Times have changed, though the substance of White’s gifts remain vital and active. The community of seekers that gathered around White have long since gone their separate ways, but I still feel compelled to use the word we in referring to his influence, viewing his contribution as a collective gift. The following ideas reflect a summarized mixture of White’s influence along with my own predilections, interests, and insights.

In his autobiography, Carl Jung writes of the primordial darkness of Africa, its vast solitude and maternal mysteries, and the resurgence of light at dawn. He felt a sadness overtake the continent when “the great night comes” and every soul takes on a “deep dejection. . . a pent-up feeling that can be detected in the eyes of the primitives, and also in the eyes of

animals.” All mystical traditions speak of the dark night of the soul, a time when we turn inward and deeply suffer our lack of inner unity and attention. Our “great night” comes when we genuinely taste our vast solitude, our fragmented disassociation, and our profound lack of resonant connection with life’s energies and manifestations. According to Jung, the sun’s birth in the morning is felt as the re-awakening of life. “The moment in which light comes is God. That moment brings redemption, release.” The final words of the section struck a deep chord in me: “the longing for light is the longing for consciousness.”

This, I believe, was White’s greatest legacy. Having scratched the surface of the mysteries of seeing, we were left with an unforgettable residue vibrating in the depths of our being. We hungered for the sight of the soul, having altogether too brief flashes of unitive awareness. We longed for vision, for light. Embedded in the primordial depths of our civilized brain is a pent-up sadness, a longing for the clear dawn of consciousness. While the seasons of the year allow for a natural ebb and flow of light, an organic turning inward and then outward again, our society has forsaken a relationship with the light of the world. Robert Adam writes of Denver buildings, facing the mountains of the great divide, that allow few windows in their design. In lieu of natural light — and a stirring view of real mountains — workers endure dull fluorescence



Sun Over Pacific, Devils Slide, CA 1948, from the Sequence Song Without Words © Minor White Archive

and mass-produced reproductions of paintings from distant lands. In the same mode of perverse thinking, throughout the American West, motels and restaurants face their picture windows toward the synthesized, neon wonderland of commerce, looking at ever-present roads and businesses with mammoth, paved parking lots — while a meager pane of glass located in the rear bathroom reveals distant mountainous landscapes, the light of the sun, and wild, un-asphalted, but uncaringly littered nature just yards away. The paradigms expressed in these buildings belong to us — we cannot deny it — and represent our constructed reality. They serve as sad symbols of our societal attitude toward light and beauty and truth.

Light bathes our world with energy. It is the reality and metaphor of consciousness. Radiance is everpresent. Only we are not... here, present. We have no sensitized emulsion to receive it, much less allow it to interpenetrate our bodies and souls, forming images and liquid, alchemical mirrors. My earliest childhood memories, of the wonder of light itself, were prophetic of my future longing. I loved light and the magic of silver halide capturing this radiant essence. I did not care as much about the subject of my pictures, I merely wanted to interact with the luminous, life-giving force of light, to feel and taste it, to let it deeply enter my being, and to recognize, come to know through direct experience, the light that exists within me.

Through our work with the exercises initiated by White, we were gifted with moments of pure awareness and clear sight. Once experienced, as White would say, we were poisoned and there was no turning back. We now knew the existence of the riddle, the mystery, though we had yet to unravel it. We hungered to penetrate the multiple dimensions of seeing. It was a palpable longing, a famished state bereft of numinous nourishment — save brief and shining moments. Beauty, reflecting a divine order, exists. That is enough, and it is not enough. Don't we want to be present to experience it? Pure seeing — without judgment and opinion — is within our grasp, so close yet so far, separated by many layers of conditioning and egoistic attitudes. White taught us to ask the questions: what do we want? What do we really know about ourselves? What constitutes our unique perceptual gifts — some that we share with all and others that we alone can wield? And the last question, the one that has resonated in me over thirty years now: what gets in the way? Real seeing is a form of magic, and we deeply trusted the direct energy exchange that it offers. But we quickly learned to distrust the churning mind and the endlessly dramatic emotional states that weigh us down and fragment our attention. I feel sorry, now, for those who, by misguided intent, choose to respond to the world solely through the mind, seeing only endless facts, or those who

perceive life filtered through mere sentiment, ignoring the radical truth and radiant sadness of what is. Ken Wilber calls these types, *flatlanders*, a word that corresponds to my experience of some people and also reflects large, disparate pieces of myself. It really is up to us. Had Van Gogh believed in a flatlined world, lacking in divine dimension, he could not have give us the unrivaled vision of Starry Night. And what if Walt Whitman did not savor a leaf of grass? How do we see? What do we have to offer, ourselves and others, that grows directly from our essence, that we have earned through virtue of our identity and being?

Owing to Whitman's awakening from observing leaves of grass, the bard sings: "Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul. Lack one, lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen..." To see even the most ordinary moment as a manifestation of the primary source, the ultimate cause, takes only a minor shift. The clear stream of awareness is at hand, flowing softly behind our mundane concerns and petty pre-occupations. White's work helped crack us open. He taught us to shift our assemblage point, connecting the mind and body, releasing our attention from the machinations of the wild mind and self-enclosed emotions — and letting go into what is. He opened us to a world of deep synchronicity where magic was not only possible,

but likely. When we are in tune, the world will let us know. Our images and experiences, what we need, will find us. And a deep mystery and unknown causality surrounds all things. White's final, private words to me were: "seek resonance, in both your life and work, your perception and actions — you won't be let down."

The senses are deeply related, a unified resonance brought forth through the field of attention. Gifted with hints of synaesthesia, we listened to the emanating sound of what we saw and closing our eyes, we imaged the vibrations that entered our ears, picturing their journey into our inner regions. We saw the metaphors of life reflected in touch and smelled the clear taste of awareness. Having a little experience with body-work and massage, and no longer blessed with full visual capacity, I was given moments of resonating insight. Touching another's body, I would sometimes see well-defined symbolic images emerge into conscious view, a sharp visual rendition of each chakra's unique state of energy and vibration as I laid my hands on each in turn. Depending wholly on the thread of attention, this was real and not imaginary, though highly elusive. As soon as my mind began its usual commentary, I would lose the sight of my mind's eye, returning me to the ordinary world of half-seeing and selective listening.

White's teaching helped us be more sensitive to place, experiencing a resounding affirmation or denial while in the presence of particular locations. Shopping malls and plastic furnishings have a flattening, deadening effect, while nature, the inspired achievements of mankind, and certain locales, are places of power and energy, deserving of our deepest attention. Witnessing the energies of place, the spirit of place, as DH Lawrence called it, became the focus of my photographic work for over twenty years. Genius loci — a beautifully descriptive phrase: the guardian deity, the distinctive atmosphere of a locality — engaged my passionate interest, as I observed the measurable vibrations of certain places on my inner world. Rejecting some and embracing others, I felt a primordial, instinctive response to the spirit of a location — a phenomenon which became a treasure-trove for creative work. I cannot say this took place through seeing; rather it was the simultaneous interaction of all the senses, fueled by efforts of attention. I began to regard seeing as that which generates insight, is governed by receptive intent, and is derived from all of our senses, becoming a string on which the world can play its variant melodies.

In workshops, we experimented with finding our own spot, where according to don Juan, our bodies could be happy and at-ease, safe from any discordant energies — and where we were helped by a unique confluence of



Cobblestone House, Avon NY, 1958 © Minor White Archive

energies that allied with our being. We would photograph these places, be in them, and, when possible, live in them. Through sensing and intuiting genius loci, and witnessing its affect on me, I moved to the islands of Hawai‘i, a place which never fails to inspire my deepest insights — and greatest challenges. It is said of Hawai‘i: one will confront oneself here, ready or not, willingly or otherwise. Some it rejects, almost immediately. Others it nurtures with a maternal mystery. But none are allowed to escape themselves.

Creative audience helped develop the skillful means of seeing. We gave careful regard to the surfaces and textures of things, the contrasts that define an object’s boundaries, and the edges that define a thing’s separate, discrete existence. Straining to sense the relationship, the dynamic energy passing between and through objects as they interacted with each other’s field of vibration, we viewed negative space as the substance and volume of relatedness. The space between is a vibrating region of vital tension — the interaction of life forces.

A photographic technique, previsualization, where one imagines the expressive tonal and compositional elements of the finished print while looking at the subject, became the key toward seeing with the mind’s eye. Through a re-direction of focused intent, one could inwardly sense the

transformation of the world into image, the seamless changing of reality to metaphor through manipulating the visual cues of contrast, color, form, and movement. Reminiscent of the Dreamtime of Australian Aborigines, we learned to recognize the richly metaphoric content of nature, art, and life itself. Often, a vision deriving from the unconscious would superimpose on a visible scene, revealing insights and realizations not available through the eyes alone. At the best of times, we endeavored to perceive energy itself. Alfred Stieglitz coined a term for this way of seeing — *equivalence*. And Minor White furthered our understanding of this form of perception. Works of art may be an equivalent of the artist’s most profound experience of life. And the forces of the world itself may be an equivalent of human experience. Falling out of favor in today’s photographic thought and critical theory, this is viewed as a mystical conundrum and inexplicable to the ordinary mind, therefore lacking validity. Through this form of seeing — the witnessing of energy — one can verify, without a doubt, that certain energies, emanating from differing objects, are indeed, equal to each other, vibrating at the same frequency and containing similar essences.

At times, especially during workshops and special conditions blending the combined forces of many individuals sharing a common aim, our images

prefigured the future. When two or more are gathered together and working intensely, to modify White's statement, the impossible becomes downright likely — for at least a momentary gift. In the midst of a project, I would often make a singular image that stood apart from the rest, that was beyond my understanding, where I perceived sub-content and specific metaphors that were not immediately understood. Over time, it became astonishingly clear that these images directly and precisely prefigured an event that was to take place in my future. To this day, when looking at student photographs, definitive insights may emerge from sources and energies that underlie their pictures, revealing in-depth glimpses of who they are or where they're going. Recently, a young woman brought to class a series of images that, to my mind's eye, were deeply reflectant of debilitating illness. They called forth sadness and grave concern in me. They felt cancer-like. I was greatly relieved, when three months later, she was diagnosed with mercury poisoning, serious enough to be sure, but not life-threatening.

What became increasingly clear from the long-term exploration of creative audience is that White's ideas are in keeping with the growing body of research in transpersonal psychology; that many forms of seeing are available to us, that a direct perception of energy is within our grasp, and that

the dynamic relatedness of life is open to our perception. As taught by many wisdom traditions, each in their own language, our deepening awareness depends on a shift of our assemblage point and a re-education of vision, turning away from the flatlined modality of self-importance and the attention deficiency promulgated by modern life, and turning inward toward the still resonances of our being.

The primary key toward unlocking the mysteries of seeing is some form of inner quiet, an active stillness. This was emphasized again and again in White's teaching. Entering the body, quieting the mind, and opening to the witness within are universal methods of developing awareness. All would agree that attention is fundamental to the art of seeing.

My objective is to show that a basis for photographing is some form of silence — exterior and interior silence — a silence which can be used as a starting point for an experience with an image or object which will have greater depth than usual. This experience is an attempt to actually make contact with the image or object . . . so that there is a union or total awareness of it and yourself simultaneously.

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