

WEEK 3

FOUR-PANEL STRIPS

Not unlike the marks that form letters and words, we can also think of the lines of our drawing as having a “sound”; they can be cacophonous, flow melodiously, or even evoke silence. Think of a thin, curved dotted line, a harshly jagged scrawl, or a thick droop of ink. Can you hear them in your head? Just as calligraphy can represent sound, so too can composition within a panel represent sound: a few horizontal and vertical lines can suggest the repose and stillness of a quiet room, while a jumble of diagonal lines can suggest an unruly, loud mob. Extrapolating from this, we see that a sequence of panels also has a sound, a rhythm, some might even say a “music.” This week we will begin to think of panels in relation to each other. First, let us loosen up with a little drawing exercise.

Exercise 3.1

You will need 12 index cards and the pen/pencil of your choice. Draw one panel per card, spending no more than 3–4 minutes per card. Do not use any words. Draw the following scenarios: (A) The beginning of the world; (B) The end of the world; (C) A self-portrait, including your entire body; (D) Something that happened at lunchtime (or breakfast, if it’s still morning); (E) An image from a dream you had recently; (F) Something that happened in the middle of the world’s existence, i.e., between drawings A and B; (G) What happened right after that?; (H) Something that happened early this morning; (I) Something that has yet to happen; (J) Pick any of the above panels and draw something that happened immediately afterward; (K) Draw a “riff” on panel J; for example, a different perspective, another character’s viewpoint, something that happened off-panel, or a close-up on some detail or aspect of the drawing; (L) Finally, draw something that

has absolutely nothing to do with anything else you have drawn in the other panels.

Spread the 12 panels out in front of you. Try to create a comic strip by choosing 4 of the panels in any order. Mix and match them however you wish. Observe how the emotional rhythm or “timing” changes when panels are rearranged. Choose a four-panel sequence that “reads” best to you. Think about why that might be. What kind of narrative do you prefer? Do the panels flow seamlessly? Are there visual elements that clearly connect one panel to the next? Do you see any abrupt breaks in the narrative? What about re-ordering the strip so that it reads in the opposite direction? Experiment with as many different narratives as you can muster. Pay attention to what happens to the story when the point of view changes or the scale shifts. Note how easy it is to completely change the intent or meaning of the strip by substituting or moving even one panel.

Paradoxically, the haiku-like rigidity of the four-panel structure allows us quite a flexible starting point.

Exercise 3.2

Gather up the 10 similarly themed objects from last week’s homework. Put the objects in some sort of order, or arrangement. Start putting objects next to each other, and let the overall structure slowly suggest itself. Perhaps you can arrange them by size, or color, or both size and color, or from simplicity to complexity. Do the objects tell a story of some kind? Or are they more conceptually arranged? Is there a discernible order or direction to them? Where is the starting point and where is the ending point? Or are we to experience the set as a singular totality? Perhaps both? Why did one particular object intuitively “fit” next to the other? Are there subsets within the larger set? As you play around with the arrangement, note that what you are doing is essentially making it “readable.”

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT 3

Let me first state that James Kochalka must be given credit for this brilliant idea. Using your sketchbook as a diary, draw one four-panel strip per day.



Figure 3. Sample drawings for today's exercise.

You should have 6 “daily strips” by the time of next week’s lesson. Identify or title each strip with the date. The strips can be drawn loosely, but make sure they are clear and legible. Aim for honesty first and foremost, but also take some care to consider graphic simplicity, clarity, and consistency. Try to make the little four-panel stories come alive on the page. Important: Use only 4 panels per day, with each panel being of equal size. Black and white. Yes, it is OK to use words.

Try to fit all your strips onto one 8½ x 11 inch page (after reducing your originals, of course). If that is not readable, then reproduce the strips onto two or three sheets of paper (meaning you will not have to reduce your work as small). Do not worry about being “funny.” Avoid it, even. You can take inspiration from everyday things in your life: observations, anecdotes, dreams, meandering thoughts, or whatever strikes your fancy. Limit yourself to only one “I couldn’t think of what to draw today” strip, if you must resort to it.

WEEK 4

A SIMPLE PAGE

Some of the more impatient students are probably itching to start drawing pages with fancy layouts, characters bursting out of the panels, word balloons shaped like icicles, diagonal borders, and the like. Yet, at this early stage, the serious student would best focus on capturing the nuances of rhythm, movement, character, and gesture before attempting to dazzle us with cleverness, pyrotechnics, or showboating. As in Ovid's famous dictum, "True Art is to Conceal Art."

In the following exercise, we will again be working without words. I understand these "silent" comics might be frustrating for you; allow me to explain. We are not working without words as some sort of stylistic or formal experiment. This sort of fetishistic thinking leads us nowhere and often results in what I call "variations without a theme." We are working without words so that we notice the "sound" inherent in line and composition, thus teaching us to eliminate all that is extraneous.

As kids, we may have seen those "how to cartoon" books wherein characters emote with grossly exaggerated gestures and facial tics. If we are to aim for subtlety and complexity, we must "turn down the volume" and discern how much can be communicated before we add the extra layer of words. It is no great trick to draw whispers or screams; a dotted word balloon or oversized letters will do the trick. It is the vast gray area of in-between volumes that is more difficult to convey. Even the way a character stands or walks can be overstated, seeming shrill and too theatrical. And a flashy page layout inappropriate to the actual content can be as annoyingly piercing as a siren.

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Exercise 4.1

In your sketchbook, draw a character built out of simple shapes: circles, triangles, rectangles. Minimal features and rudimentary limbs are OK, as is a basic pattern on his or her clothing. Roughly sketch the character in a few poses: side view, front view, moving, at rest, etc. Then sketch a location. Now draw an object, item, thing, or prop (whatever comes to mind). Finally, think of a verb, an action, for your subject.

Using 4 index cards of equal size, draw a four-panel strip, without words, of your character, in the location you chose, performing that action, making sure to somehow incorporate the object. Make this action, this sequence, clear. Hint: try not to shift the point of view or the scale, unless the narrative dictates that we need to see the action, say, close-up or at a different angle. Another hint: pay attention to the edges and corners of the index cards, and give your character adequate space to exist and act.

If I may make a suggestion: try orienting your index card horizontally instead of vertically. "Going wide" has two immediate benefits. First, it more closely approximates our eyes' field of view and (perhaps not coincidentally) correlates with the proscenium's compositional space, seen not only in stage plays but also on film and computer screens. Second, it damnably highlights those unconsidered compositions that focus on the figure to the detriment of any surrounding environment. We've all seen examples: a character is cut off at the ankles and surrounded at the top, left, and right by an undeliberate emptiness, a vast halo of nothing, a rickety non-space, or what I call The Arch of Uninterestingness.

You will probably notice that if your short strip necessitates the character making a decision, it becomes a challenge to convey that information wordlessly. Any story in which the reader needs to be inside the character's head to understand a choice or motivation is much more difficult to convey purely visually.

Draw 2 more panels to make the motivation behind the character's action clearer. Then, draw 2 more panels that show some consequence of the action depicted. You can insert these additional panels wherever needed, with the aim of finding the story's inherent structure, as opposed

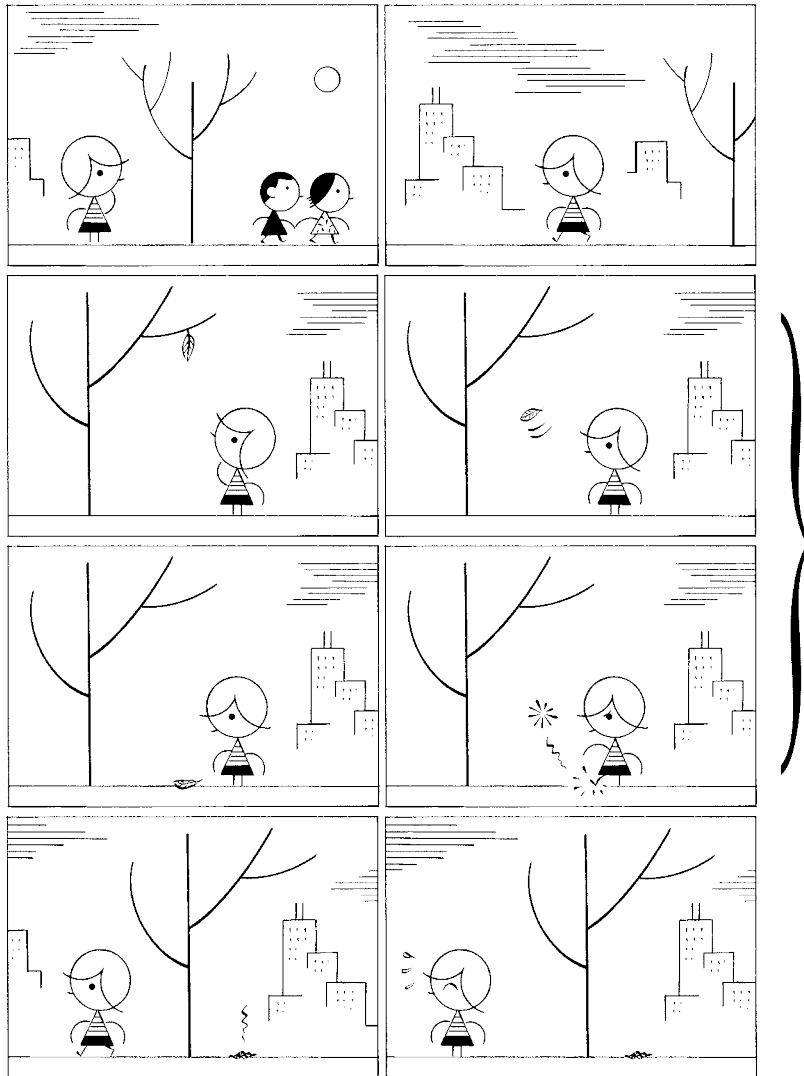


Figure 4. Working out a simple sequence. The four-panel sequence in the center was drawn first, and the top and bottom panels were added afterward.

to an arbitrary beginning, middle, and end. In the end, you should have a simple but comprehensible narrative. Stack up the 8 panels in 4 rows, and you have created a simple page layout.

Exercise 4.2

Compare the above process with last week's exercise arranging the 10 objects. Note that in both cases we were, at heart, designing. We considered not only the shape of each object, but also the relationship of each shape in the overall arrangement, or composition. Through constant practice and awareness of these principles, we develop visual sophistication.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT 4

Again using your sketchbook as a diary or journal, create a 6–9 panel strip that fits on one 8½ x 11 inch sheet of paper. The panels should all be the same size. Black and white. As always, you can draw your original at a larger size and simply use a photocopier to reduce the image to fit the sheet of paper.

The subject matter is up to you, but take care to observe the world around you, the way people speak as well as their body language; pay attention also to your "internal" world and the flux of your thoughts and emotions. You do not have to consciously try to sum up your entire day or week, or convince us of your pithiness. Recreate a brief moment of life, transcribe it, on the page.