



THE VISION COLLECTIVE: WEEK SEVEN

Choose Your Constraints

This week's lesson touches on what I consider one of the keys to the creative process. I've got another lesson specifically about creativity up my sleeve, but this week I want to focus on this very specific aspect, because I think when we speak about creativity it can get pretty artsy-fartsy pretty quickly, and while there's truly nothing wrong with that and I can get as hippy-dippy as the next guy (more so, you say?), I think those conversations aren't always immediately pragmatic and I'm doing my best to keep from having almost 8,000 people staring at their laptops and wondering if I'll ever get to the point.

Creativity matters deeply. It's HOW we do what we do. I know, you thought how we did photography had something to do with buttons and dials and stuff. That's how you *use a camera*. How you *make photographs* is a creative endeavour, not a technical one. If you want to become a better photographer, at some point you're going to have to make peace with the fact that creativity is your truest asset.

Writers and painters alike have talked about the terror of facing a blank canvas or blank pad of paper. Unless you leave your lens cap on there's a good chance you'll at least see something as a photographer when you put the camera to your eye. But the challenge remains: where do we begin and how do we make sense of all the incredible options available to us?

You choose your constraints. God knows we have enough limitations and frustrations as it is and sometimes those constraints choose you, I know. But even with those, most of us are all over the place with what we shoot. And most of us also have far too many technical choices; even if you have just two zoom lenses—a 24-70 and a 70-200—that's a huge range of focal lengths to choose from. And there's the choice of subjects which is nearly limitless, and on top of that there is every other choice that can be paralyzing when you show up to start photographing. And the secret is to give yourself fewer choices, not more.

In Week Three I talked about making *Images About* and not just *Images Of*. That's one constraint: your theme. Once you know or decide what your image or body of work is about, you're one step closer. Next, make some choices about how you will make the work: will you restrict yourself to colour or black and white, to a certain focal length or point of view, perhaps a certain aspect ratio or frame orientation? Pick one. And don't get all worked up about which one to pick. Go with your gut, your curiosity, or the flip of a coin. You just need a starting place; it doesn't have to be the *right* starting place. If you pick something at random and you run with it only to find out that it stinks and there are better constraints out there, you'll find out soon enough and then you can change to constraints that seem to be working better. But most of us work better with that clear starting place. That's the first reason to choose constraints.

The second is this: creativity is like a muscle. It needs something to push against in order to work. It needs a problem to solve or a challenge to overcome. So many of us are trying so hard to make our work better by learning new techniques and that's fine on the surface of things, but what will make our photographs stronger is usually not upping our technical game (though sometimes it is) but upping our creative one. My friend Paul Nicklen is a National Geographic photographer and he uses what he calls his 20/60/20 rule. The first 20% of his effort is just getting the image in focus and exposed and addressing technical issues. The next 60% is creatively finding ways to better express his story or convey the mood or emotion he's hoping for. The final 20% is a wild card. Once he's done the work he expected to do, he tries something new, something he's bound to fail at, but might produce surprising results. Longer shutter speeds, different strobe placements underwater, or anything else to mix it up. He learns a lot doing this. But notice that 80% of his effort is creative. That's where he puts his energies.



The kind of constraints you choose will be different from the ones another might choose from image to image and project to project. I give myself a new constraint each time I do a trip or assignment. Sometimes it's simply to use a lens I've not used in a while. Sometimes it's to focus on a particular kind of element in my images, like shadows or backlight. Sometimes it's to learn something new. When I went to Iceland I forced myself to shoot a series with a tilt-shift lens, having never used one before. That constraint pushed me to create new work (above) that I was really excited about at the time and still love. And every time it is those constraints that either drive my work and make it more interesting, or I fail quickly and find better constraints and then it's those that drive my work and make it more

interesting. Ultimately, they make me try new things and force me to think differently, and that is how we get to stronger photographs—by thinking. It is our thoughts that guide our decisions, even when we call it our heart, or our gut. It doesn't matter what you call it, it only matters that you give it the best chance at working in your favour.

Constraints have never failed me as a proven creative strategy for coming up with new ideas, learning new ways of working, gaining momentum on a project, or creating stronger work. In Further Study, I'll link you to a couple articles. When I was researching this, it was amazing where I found articles on the power of constraints in creative work, including *Harvard Business Review*, *Psychology Today*, *Inc.*, *Wired Magazine*, 99U, and others. This is not a secret.

Long term, I also have some constraints and those keep my work unified. I create images in a lot of places but the themes are always very similar, and the things I want my images to be about are consistent. That goes back to Week One and the discussion of vision. I know what I want my photographs to be like and I know what I want them to say, and those constraints have helped me create more consistent and authentic photographs.

Creative Exercise

Go out and shoot, but give yourself a constraint. One focal length, perhaps. Or just your iPhone and only black and white. Photograph only dogs or reflections or the colour yellow. Can't pick a good constraint? Make a photograph of something that intrigues you. Now find something in that single image to suggest your constraint. Was it the light? Go find more light like that. Was it a particular POV (point of view)? Only shoot from that angle. Just force yourself to start somewhere and see if you can create 6–12 photographs just to play with the idea of (and get comfortable with) using constraints. All of my work now incorporates constraints as early as I can possibly define them, and I think the work I've created that has been well constrained has been better for it.



Study the Masters

I won't always link things this tightly, but the first photographer who comes to mind in the context of this discussion about constraints is **Platon**. Born in 1968 and known simply as Platon, Platon Antoniou is probably too young to be considered a master in the sense that I want to use the word, but he's truly excellent at what he does and his portraiture is wonderful. Most of his work is created with wide-angle lenses that are used very close, and his subjects are lit very consistently, often in front of a white background. He has very tightly constrained himself (he has other work as well) and this gives him the freedom to concentrate on the relationship with his subject and the creative act of finding, making, and recognizing moments of revelation in his subject. His portraits are purely about personality, almost never with props or contrivances. But man are they alive! Spend some time **looking at his images** and consider how powerful they are despite (or, I suspect, *because of*), their simplicity.

Here's a **good article** on Platon if you want short and sweet.

And here's a **presentation** by Platon about his work, it's a great watch if you've got 30 minutes.

Further Study

Here are a few resources to follow up on as you have time.

- [Here's a great article in *Wired* about creativity and constraints.](#)
- [Here's an article on *Forbes.com*, also about constraints.](#)
- [And here's on in *Psychology Today* if you want to do a bit of a deeper dive.](#)

- Finally, you might consider reading my book, *A Beautiful Anarchy, When the Life Creative Becomes the Life Created*. It's about creativity and applying the principles of creativity to how we live and work. You can [get the print version here](#) and the [PDF version here](#).

As always, you can find me on [my blog](#), on [Facebook](#), and on [Instagram](#).

For the love of the photograph,

David duChemin