Peachpit Tips

Adobe After Effects 6.5
STUDIO TECHNIQUES

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The Nuts and Bolts of Visual Effects Magic

Adobe After Effects 6.5 has fantastic features that will revolutionize your compositing and visual effects work…if you know how to use them. In this excerpt from *Adobe After Effects 6.5 Studio Techniques*, **author Mark Christiansen takes you into the studio and shows you the fundamental bread-and-butter tips and techniques you need to master to successfully re-create reality in film, television, computer games, and more.**
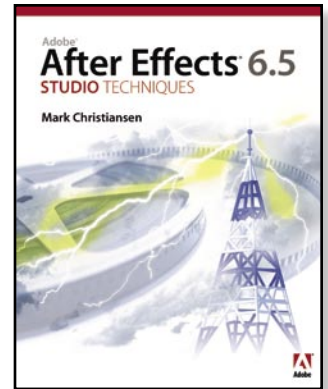
Customizing Your Workspace

If you haven't set up a workspace before and your desktop is becoming overwhelming cluttered, you have two options. First, you can simply resort to the Window>Workspace> One Comp view to reset the location of your windows and palettes, the One Comp View is a like a panic button for resetting your User Interface if things get too far out of control.
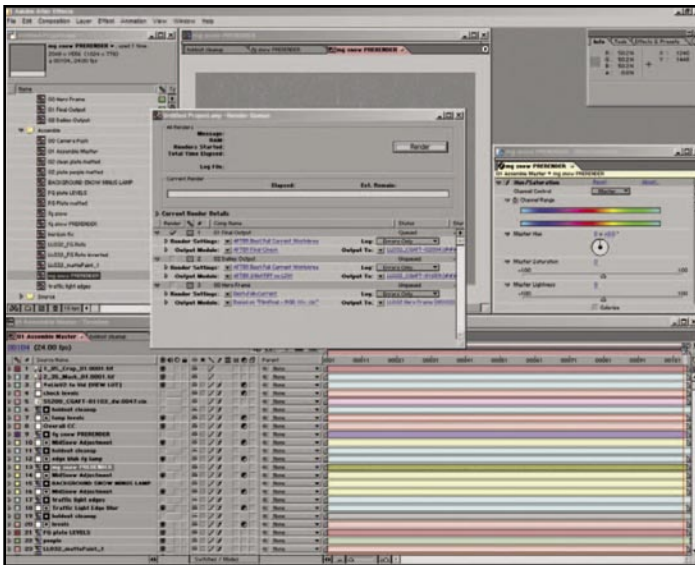
The best solution is to set up all of the windows and views the way you are likely to want them most of the time and save this layout as a custom workspace of your own. Here's how:

Step One: Consolidate palettes. In most cases you don't even need Audio, and Time Controls isn't essential once you have it set the way you want it and know the shortcut for creating a RAM preview (the 0 key on your numeric keypad). Pull the Info tab off of the palette with Audio, and drag Tools and Effects & Presets to that same palette. If you prefer, make Info the only palette in your workspace, and activate the other palettes as needed using shortcuts (Ctrl/Cmd+1 through Ctrl/Cmd+9, listed in order in the Window menu).

Step Two: Open, resize, and position your most frequently used windows. The Project window is always open but not always used; most of your work is done in the Timeline, Composition, Layer, and Effects Control windows, so open

all of these. With an empty project open, create a composition that is the size you normally work at. Add a solid to that composition and apply any effect to that solid— now you have the windows you need to position. Give prominence to the Composition window because that's where your focus is, note that your choice of magnification will be recorded as part of the workspace. Leave as much space as possible for the timeline. Position the Effects Control window and palettes adjacent to the Composition window.

Step Three: Save your new workspace. Choose Window > Workspace > Save Workspace, give your workspace a name, and then click OK. The name now appears in the Workspace menu, and you can return to that layout anytime your user interface needs tidying up.

Note: If some portion of your user interface is missing, it may have moved to an area of the display where you can no longer click and drag it out. In this instance, switching to a saved or default workspace is pretty much the only workable solution.

Timeline Essentials

The timeline is After Effects' killer application. It is the reason above all others that After Effects is equally effective for motion graphics or visual effects work. Node-based compositors make it easy to see render order, but they can make coordinating the timing of events more difficult.

Time Navigation

Here are a few handy navigation shortcuts:

One: The Home, End, Page Up, and Page Down keys correspond to moving to the first frame, the last frame, one frame backward, and one frame forward. Shift+Page Up and Shift+Page Down skip ten frames backward or forward, respectively. Press Shift+Home or Shift+End, and you are taken to the In and Out points of the work area.

Two: Click on the blue time status at the upper left of the timeline to open the Go To Time dialog (press Ctrl+G/Cmd+G). Here, you can enter a new time. There's no need to add punctuation, so 1000 is ten seconds in Seconds mode or frame 1000 in Frames mode.

Three: To navigate an arbitrary but precise number of frames or seconds (say, 48 frames after the current time), in the Go To Time dialog, replace the current time with your increment, in the format +48, click OK, and After Effects calculates the increment for you. But here's a gotcha: If you need to navigate backward in time 48 frames, you can't simply enter –48 in the Go To Time dialog. If you do, you're transported to negative 48 (frames or seconds, either of which probably moves the time needle right off the timeline). Instead, you must use the format +–48; you're adding a negative number, not subtracting.

The Überkey

This shortcut will make you a rapid-fire animator in the Timeline window.
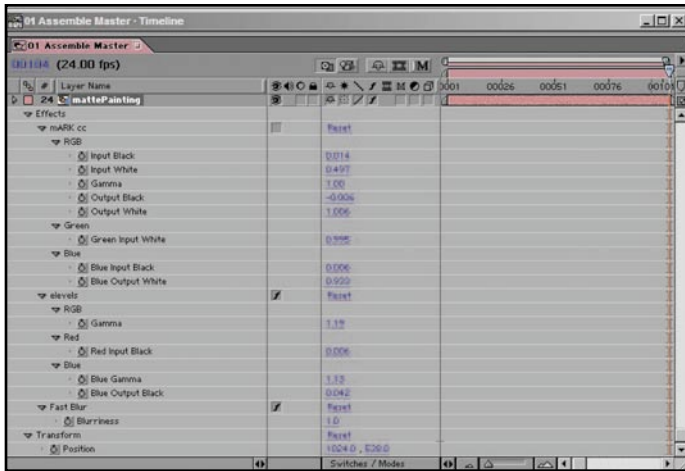
U: The U shortcut is a quick way to get at keyframes to edit them or to find an animation that you suspect is hiding somewhere. Highlight a layer that contains keyframe data but has no keyframes revealed, and press U on your keyboard. All of the properties with keyframes are revealed. Press U again, and they are all concealed.

UU: The UU shortcut is a full-on problem solving tool. It allows you to quickly investigate what has been edited on a given layer, helpful when troubleshooting your own layer settings, and priceless when investigating someone else's. To access it, highlight a layer with no keyframes whatsoever and press UU on your keyboard (two Us in quick succession). All of the properties that are set at any value other than their default, including those with keyframes, are revealed.

Note: To reveal only the applied effects on a layer, use the E key. Or, if the überkey reveals effects and transforms and you want the transforms only, use Shift+E to toggle the revealed effects.

Color Keying with Keylight

Keylight is an Academy award winning blue and green screen keyer plug-in. The core algorithm was developed by the Computer Film Company and has been further developed and is now included in After Effects 6.0 and 6.5 Professional.

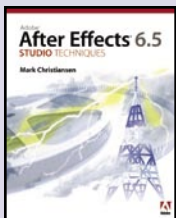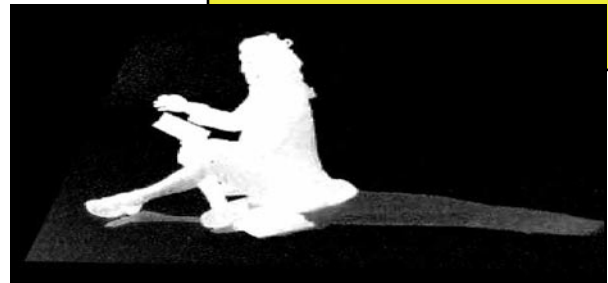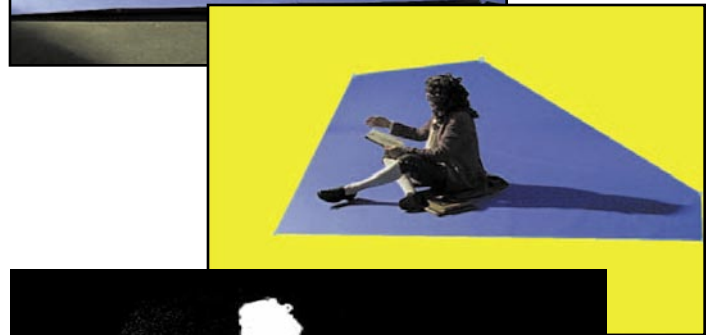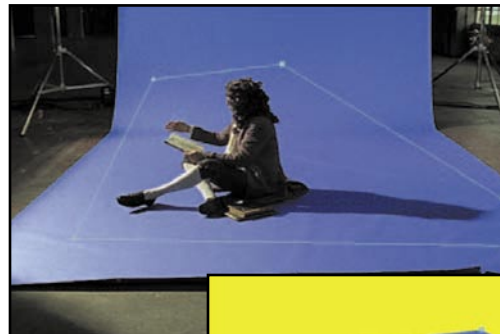The basic "blue screen" steps for Keylight are:

Step One: Garbage matte any areas of the background that can easily be masked out.

Step Two: Attempt a first pass key quickly, keeping this matte on the loose side, keeping as much edge detail as possible, with the idea that you'll be refining it later. Preview this at full resolution, in full motion, against a bright primary color.

Step Three: Examine the alpha channel. Switch to a view that clearly displays the alpha channel. Note any obvious holes in the foreground or areas of the background that have failed to key out, note any noise where the foreground or background areas should be solid.

Step Four: Use the eyedropper to sample a pixel in your background that you believe is roughly the median of the background. The view defaults to Final Result, so you can immediately examine the result of this one choice. (Remember to set your background to a bright color and solo the layer).

Step Five: If you think there is any chance of getting a better initial result, switch to the alpha channel (Alt+4/ Option+4), reset Keylight (do not undo) or switch the view to Source, and select again.