

EDITOR'S COMMENTS



If you build it ... The New 100 Prints Project

Elsewhere, I've written about a project I did in 1989 called *The 100 Prints Project* whose objectives were no more profound than the production of 100 finished, matted prints in six weeks — a printing and finishing sprint. It was a useful project; I learned a lot, produced a lot of work, and have found more than a few occasions to recommend such a project to other photographers. But that was 20 years ago. It was a good idea back then, so why not do it again?

With the success of that original project in mind, last October (2008), I decided to revisit this project concept. I had four specific reasons for considering a new version of this old idea:

1. To explore the production of images (and prints) that don't fit my other projects
2. The discipline of regular, consistent work
3. To experiment with Adobe Lightroom's web capabilities
4. A web traffic experiment

Rather than a sprint, this time it would be a marathon; rather than just prints, I'd include a website component. All this year, it's been an ongoing project on my website. I've heard from dozens of photographers who have picked up on the idea for their own "100 Prints Project" — or some variation thereof. In this article, I'll share my thoughts about this project as well as what I've learned now that it's concluded.

Let me begin by expanding on each of my four motivations just a bit.

Orphan Images

I tend to work in projects. My projects tend to be related bodies of work that are anywhere from five to ten prints for a small project to larger projects upwards of 100 prints. Nonetheless, there are occasional single images that don't seem to fit any project. I still want to be able to finish these orphans in some kind of meaningful way. What to do with them? Well, they could relate to one another as partners in a generic "100 prints" type of project. It's a wispy concept for a project, but would at

least give these images a permanent home in which they could reside.

Discipline

The 1989 version of *The 100 Prints Project* was proof of the motivation such a commitment engenders. Commitment, in combination with the structure of the project itself, fosters productivity. Well, with this new project, what commitment made sense? At first blush, I thought I'd try to do a new print every day. Giving it more serious thought, I realized this was a schedule that was likely to meet with failure. I'm simply too busy to stick with it at that pace. Life gets in the way; there were other demands on my time, both personal and business. In order to determine what would be practical, I spent a couple of weeks observing the ebb and flow of my other responsibilities and daily tasks. I concluded that I was comfortable with committing to a new print every three days. This structure seemed reasonable, doable, and a pace I knew I could maintain over the course of a year. There is no benefit in committing to a schedule that you know you cannot keep.

Lightroom and the Web

I've been using Adobe Lightroom since it was first introduced, but primarily for image database management and simple image adjustments. Its "Web Module" seemed interesting, but I hadn't taken the time to explore it. What better way

to learn the potential for this new software than to use it for this project! I did some initial experiments, a few tutorials, played around with a few design alternatives, and concluded that Lightroom might just be an ideal tool for this kind of project. The only way to know for sure was to jump in and give it a go.

So the structure of the project started to take form — a series of random prints whose only connection to one another was this project; a schedule to add a new print every third day; and the creation of a Lightroom website that would give this project tangible form. All I needed was an audience.

Web Traffic

A few years ago, I'd started a new website for my personal work, with the blind faith that people would visit it. I had no evidence that they wanted to; once launched, I had no evidence that they did. And then I remembered that great business management maxim, "What gets measured gets managed." A little poking around on the Internet and I discovered a wonderful resource that ranks web traffic in a hierarchy from number one (the most visited website in the world, usually Yahoo or Google) through, well, everyone else, in descending sequence. It's called Alexa and you can learn more about it at Alexa.com. Sure enough, brooksjensenarts.com was listed. Upon the launch

of my new website, it ranked at about 12 million, but steadily rose in the first few months to a peak of about 1,100,000. That is to say, my website was the 1,100,000th most popular website in the world. Not very impressive, but at least it was a measurement I could track.

Then, month by month, over the course of a couple of years, I watched my Alexa statistics steadily slip south. Last fall, brooks-jensenarts.com's rank has fallen to 4,286,656. I was not encouraged. Then again, on honest reflection, I had to admit this was understandable, even predictable. I was enthusiastic to build my website when I didn't have one, but after I'd launched it, I hadn't done anything to update it, expand it, build upon its launch foundation. I'd experienced this kind of thing as a visitor to other folks' websites: I'd find one I was excited about and would visit with some regularity only to find, visit after visit, the website never changed, never got updated, never provided any additional information for me to view. Predictably, human nature kicks in, and after visiting a static website with repeated disappointments, I'd simply stop visiting. Why go back? I knew I wasn't missing anything. Well, exactly the same thing had happened with my own website. I had considerable traffic upon launching it because it was new and there was lots to see. But, after months and months without any updates, people simply stopped visit-

ing the website and, understandably, my Alexa rating plummeted. It's a hard lesson to learn, but an easy one to know how to fix. Though, of course, *knowing* how to fix it is one thing, but doing so is a challenge in and of itself. New content with consistency is an elusive commodity.

Here's where *The New 100 Prints Project* could help. By adding a new print every third day, it would, by structural definition, provide the new content that just might keep people interested in returning to my website to see what was new. It was a worthy experiment. I'll share the results in just a minute, but before I do so, there was another component I decided to add to the project as I neared the first post.

Homage to Adams' Examples Book

In my youth, I made images. But over the years, I've become more interested in using images to tell stories, share experiences, share life. It's one thing to have a website populated with images — Flickr and the like come to mind — but I think it's a more powerful viewing experience if there is something more than just pretty pictures. By adding stories, experience, lessons learned, ideas, and other components beyond just pictures, a project can become more interesting, and (more importantly!) more interesting to a larger group of people. Since this was turning into a web experiment, I was highly motivated to create something that would



Painted Hull, Dakota Creek Industries, 2009

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the images alive and make them more than just beautiful pictures, or interesting photographs. I decided to include text with each image. But beyond that, because of my experiences with the LensWork Podcast, the idea of adding an audio component to *The New 100 Prints Project* was as natural as can be, too. With each new image, I include not only a short paragraph of text on the web page but also a separate, often unrelated, audio comment about the image or my creative process. Adding these two components would add to the images, expand the value of the project to the audience, and gave me a vehicle of homage to that wonderful book.

appeal to people on several levels — interesting images, sure, but I added comments about the stories contained in the images, comments about the images themselves, and comments about my creative process. I remember being so inspired by the Ansel Adams book, *Examples*, in which he discusses his images, mostly from a technical point of view, but which also includes anecdotes sprinkled throughout that bring

The Project Unfolds

The New 100 Prints Project officially started on October 13, 2008, when I posted the first image on my website. The final, 100th image was posted August 24, 2009. What an interesting year it's been! I had given myself a year to complete the 100 images because I assumed I'd miss the schedule from time to time.

In fact, I was so motivated and excited about adding new images that I missed only three posting dates, all due to travel away from home. As the hundredth print drew near, I found I was sad the project was coming to a close.

Choosing the 100 images was interesting, too. To include 100 images in the project I worked on a couple hundred images in total. Many images I really liked were left out because I simply had too many to use. I also discovered a couple of potential projects buried in my archives I didn't know were there! I also found images I'd long forgotten and was delighted to resurrect. In addition, I was able to finally let go of some persistent naggers that I eventually concluded weren't worth finishing. All in all, it was an inventory cholesterol cleaning experience.

Most of the images were, as planned, orphans that went way back to my earlier days in photography, but not all of them. Surprisingly, some brand new images also made it into the project because I couldn't resist sharing new images made during the year. (I guess this was cheating a bit, but even though these weren't "older images," they were "exploring new images," so I justified their inclusion.) Some of them will, no doubt, be included in projects I now foresee in my future as a result of using

this project as a sort of proving ground for new project ideas.

The 100 prints are, as predicted, an eclectic assortment, indeed. It was quite freeing to be able to wander through my archives with such abandon. Each third day, I added an image that spoke to me at the moment. It was a muse-connecting experience. I often found I'd look at an image week after week, passing it by for another that spoke to me more strongly. Then, unexpectedly, the oft-passed-by image would leap to the front of the line with ferocity and demand to be posted. I obeyed. A few final tweaks, a text comment that surfaced from my subconscious, the audio component that often appeared out of nowhere, and *voilà*, a new addition to the growing collection. I was often carried along for the ride, almost more a spectator than the pilot. I now know what writers mean when they say the characters in their novels take over and direct their own actions. The project seemed to have a life of its own.

The Results

And what are the results of this experiment?

First, I have 100 new images that I am excited about, most of which I know I would not have made during the last year had it not been for the structure of the project. The first lesson is, obviously,

commitment and follow-through are wonderful lubricants to productivity.

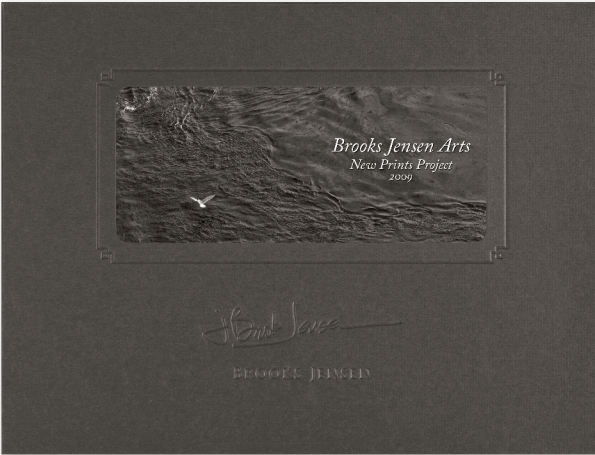
Second, I learned that Lightroom's web production capabilities are better than I'd thought, but clearly not as sophisticated as a dedicated website production application. I'm not sure I'd choose Lightroom to create a full-featured website, but that is not its stated purpose. It poses no threat to Dreamweaver, for example. But a little simple HTML coding allowed me to add the text and links for this project as, interestingly enough, part of the IPTC metadata within each of the images. Using that metadata in Lightroom's HTML templates, I was able to easily enough create an entirely updated website every third day. To put together a simple project like this, Lightroom is quite functional, and I'd use it again. Most importantly, it didn't get in the way. It would have been easy for me to create such a cumbersome production logistic so as to become discouraging. Overproduction can be a seduction that kills a project quickly. Lightroom's web module kept the process easy enough that I could do it. The routine became second nature, and Lightroom seemed to handle the growing volume of images and web pages without choking.

Third, because the structure was lightweight and flexible, because the schedule was reasonable and not overly burdensome, because the project never became

oppressive but remained fun the entire time, I *finished it*. How many times we've all had the experience of starting something with enthusiasm only to find that the burden of it drags us into lethargy and eventually abandonment! By being reasonable in my commitments and expectations, the project became doable — which may be the most valuable lesson of the entire project.

Fourth, the web traffic experiment was very interesting. The first week I launched the website there was an uptick in traffic, but not substantial. By the time I posted print number ten — roughly a month into the project — web traffic had grown substantially. People were interested. People were *returning*. The project itself began to gain momentum and as it did so I suspect it also created a certain word-of-mouth momentum. By the end of the second month, my Alexa rating had improved from roughly 4.2 million to about 980,000. Three months into the project, my Alexa rating hovered consistently between 450,000 to 550,000 and has stayed there through the duration of the project. It appears to be true that if you build it, they will, indeed, come.

Along the way, two most unexpected and rewarding things took place that were not a part of my original plans. People started asking if they could purchase individual prints. I had no intention of turning this



into a commercial venture, but if they were interested I was more than happy to accommodate them — wouldn't you? But, even more unexpected was an e-mail with a suggestion from one of the regular viewers ...

“I love the project! I don't love all the images. (Sorry.) But, I do love the idea of a folio of these images! Why not allow us to choose which 10 images we'd like in a folio and just build us a custom folio of those images?”

— Doug

I have to admit, I've never heard of anything like this. I had some mixed emotions about the concept: there is something slightly discomfoting about

The New 100 Prints Project in its entirety is included in *LensWork Extended #84* as a PDF publication along with all the audio commentaries and folio information. The original Lightroom website is still posted, too, at www.brooks-jensen.com.

losing control of one's art project. Nonetheless, the entire project is experimental by nature, so, throwing caution to the wind, I decided to give it a try and offer folios of five, ten, or 15 prints that viewers could select at their discretion from the 100 prints in the project. It's been a very interesting response. Clearly, I won't be retiring any time soon from the sale of these folios, but it is comforting to know that all five, ten, or 15 prints in these folios have

been selected by the purchasers because they are passionate about *all* of the images, not just a few of them.

Conclusions

Was it worthwhile? No question. Would I do it again? You bet. Did it introduce new work to lots of viewers? Without a doubt. Did it help accomplish my primary objective of getting my photography out there in the world? Clearly, yes. Do I recommend this kind of approach for other photographers? Without hesitation, because it appears to be true that if you build it...