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Brooks Jensen

WHAT SIZE IS THE EDITION?

by

Brooks Jensen

Every time I'm involved in a workshop, there is a predictable series of debates that crop up. Is it better to meter for Zone 2 or Zone 3? Can a decent print be made on RC paper? Is photography really art? and one of my favorites, Who was the greatest photographer of all time – Ansel Adams or Edward Weston? To workshop students who've never endured these debates, such topics, I'm sure, seem exciting and full of mystery, worthy of monopolizing the valuable time in a workshop. To anyone who has been around workshops for a while, these questions immediately inspire a yawn and the need to get away for a walk on the beach. There is, however, one question that I believe is worthy of discussion because it's a practical question that influences the photographer's entire career – How many prints should be made of a given negative, and, should they be limited and numbered?

Thorny issues, like roses, are often best handled with protective gloves. The problem with gloves, of course, is that they both protect and numb. I stand accused and guilty of being numb about the issue of edition sizes – at least numb to the point where I was unwilling to take a stand based on some underlying principle. In truth, I've struggled with the question of edition size for quite some time. I have politely avoided the issue because I was not certain of my own position. Having thought about it a great deal now for more than 25 years (!) my position on edition sizes has clarified. I am now prepared to take off my gloves (fully aware of the combative double-meaning in such a phrase) and take a stand. In short, I've decided I am against limiting an edition. Period. Let me be specific: I am against a predetermined limit imposed as a strategy to make the artwork scarce. I am now prepared to say that "1/250" is a bunch of bull.

Those of you who are long-time readers of *LensWork* will likely immediately recognize the egg I have just applied to my face. After all, most of the *LensWork Special Editions* are limited. Now I decide against it!? I'll address this issue at the end of this article.* To begin, however, I'd like to make a case for *not* limiting the size of an edition in the hopes that my thought process might be useful as you think through this issue for your own artwork.

There are, of course, two sides to consider in any debate such as this. There are those (I assume many of you reading this article) who will vehemently disagree with me. My challenge is to persuade you, and I will attempt to do so by considering, one by one, the arguments *for* limiting editions.

I should add parenthetically that this article fairly accurately portrays my internal vacillations about this issue. There have been times when I leaned toward limiting and other times when I have leaned away. It was only after considering each of the points that follow that I finally came to a firm stance. In some regards, I hope even this *process* adds value to your consideration of this issue.

Historical Context

Argument for limiting editions: The limited edition in photography is inherited from artistic tradition.

The entire idea of the "limited edition" is a concept borrowed from the world of fine art printmaking. The "original" was a plate or stone marked on or carved by hand by the artist. Marking on or into this printing surface (typically limestone, wood, or copper) the artist made a printing plate. The prints were then made from this oneof-a-kind plate, using the metal, stone or wood block as an ink delineator - not dissimilar to the way a modern-day rubber stamp is used to create an image. The process of applying the ink to the stone, wiping off the excess and/or applying the paper to the stone for printing - all done with repetition - eventually wore physical scratches in the image or degraded the carved edges. In short, the more prints that were squeezed and then pulled from the printing plate, the more the resulting image suffered from the effects of pressure, abrasion and friction. Editions were limited because the physical materials that created the image were themselves *limited*. Obviously, because this is a slow process of degradation that occurs incrementally with each successive print, the earliest copies in the sequence of prints were more likely to be "pure." Later copies would exhibit the degradations so much so that eventually the stone or wood block would have to be discarded as no longer useable. Since it was a one-of-a-kind original, this ended the edition with finality.

This is the historical context for two related ideas – the *limited edition* and the

vintage print. In fine art printmaking, the limited edition implied a scarcity that was medium-imposed and the vintage print was more valuable because it was the one least degraded. The world of fine art photography has misappropriated these terms and introduced the "limited edition photograph" in spite of the obvious misnomer and obfuscation. More recently we've seen the blossoming of the market for the "vintage photograph" – a supposed premium value if the photograph was printed near the same time that the negative was made.

Rebuttal

First, let's be honest about the mechanical logistics in photography. There is no mechanical reason why the number of photographs should be limited. The obvious exceptions might be Polaroid originals, emulsion transfer images, or hand-colored images, but I'm not addressing these media in this article. With these few exceptions, there is no limit to the number of copies that can be made from an original negative or transparency. When the light from an enlarger passes through the negative to make an exposure on photographic paper, there is no degradation to the negative. None. The mechanics of the process do not degrade the original, hence there is no medium-imposed limit to the edition nor is there a medium-defined vintage print.

Limited editions in photography are, quite honestly, a fiction. There is a limit to the number of copies of a photograph only because someone *decides* to impose an arbitrary limit for some purpose.

Vintage prints are, to put it bluntly, a strategy to sell inferior images for a higher price. This may be a bit harsh, but it is true. There is simply no relationship whatsoever between the quality of a photograph and its first appearance. First is not always better, but better is always better! Of course, scarcity (as in short supply) is a factor in the pricing of most vintage prints. But it is important here to distinguish between the use of the term vintage (Out OF DATE: old, historic, from a time long past) and vintage (Period: meaning produced near the time when it began) - which might be yesterday in the case of a contemporary photograph. The idea that print #1 is better or more valuable than print #100 is arbitrary and a valuation that is, in all likelihood, not based on image quality.

Argument for: But even negatives are subject to time. They can be scratched, lost, burnt, destroyed. Transparencies may exhibit color shifts. Certainly they are limited.

True, but this argument seems to me to miss the much larger point. Regardless of whether or not the *negative* is limited, certainly *the photographer* is. We are mortal and time is short. (You may quote me on this.) Certainly the number of prints a photographer can make from their negative is

finite – limited primarily by the amount of time they can spend doing photography or making repetitious copies of the same negative; limited ultimately because *they* are. Isn't this obvious? Why then make such a big deal out of the actual limited *number* of prints? All artwork is limited in the sense that the photographer will eventually be unable to create the art. The edition limiting that I am against is an *artificial limitation* that imposes a predetermined limit on the number of reproductions that will be made from a given negative.

Argument for: Limiting is a time-honored tradition even in photography. Lots of photographers limit the number of prints they will make from a given negative.

Why? If the image degraded with repetition, I could understand it. But, if the motivation to limit the number of copies is not mechanical, what is it?

The photographer might just become bored with an image and not want to make any more copies of it.

Then just stop and be done with it. Why announce a predetermined limit?

If there will be a limit anyway, why not announce it?

Again, why would a photographer choose to do this? What value is there to a photog-

rapher to announce to the world that there will be a limit to the number of copies of an image?

If there is going to be only a finite number of copies, it might be useful for the people who buy or collect an image to know there are a finite number of copies.

Of course there are a finite number of copies. There are a finite number of grains of sand on the earth. Of what *use* is it?

It's important and useful to know how limited the image is.

Useful in what sense? Let me be specific: For *whom* is it useful? How is this useful, say, for the *buyer*? Be honest, why announce the limit? In fact, isn't it really only useful to the *seller*? Buyers may, of course, eventually become sellers. But it's only *the seller* who benefits from the limit. Cut to the chase: imposed limits are artificially placed on photography for the benefit of the seller. Read "marketing."

There is only one reason to limit the number of photographs made from a negative and this is because we all know that artwork and photography are subject to the laws of economics – the most important of which is supply and demand. An edition is limited so as to limit the supply and push the price higher. There is no other reason to do it.

There is a myth believed by most artists that I must admit bothers me greatly. This myth is that artwork is not subject to the laws of economics. According to the train of thought, artwork is not supposed to be a commodity. It is supposedly somehow above the machinations of buying and selling that governs potatoes, T-shirts, oil or pork futures. It is holy, sacrosanct and – not to put too fine a point to it – different. Hogwash. Artwork is subject to the law of supply and demand just like any other commodity that is bought and sold.

Limiting the size of an edition is not an artistic question, it is a *marketing strategy*. Unless we can be honest with each other about this fundamental issue, we are simply fooling ourselves. And, there is nothing more sadly comical than a self-deluded artist. The argument usually is stated, "there is a limit, therefore the price must go up." In fact, the truth of the strategy is just the opposite – we want the price to go up, therefore we will impose a limit to facilitate *justifying* a higher price.

Fine, but what is wrong with this? It's a free country and an artist (or gallery) is free to determine any marketing strategy they want. Why shouldn't they try to sell work for as much as they can?

They should. But ultimately, I've seen this become unhealthy for photography and in particular for beginning and mid-career photographers. I say this for several reasons:

- The higher prices rise, the fewer buyers there will be.
- This ultimately limits the market for photography to those few who can afford it.
- This breeds an elitism which limits the market for new or mid-career photographers.
- Photography becomes judged by the signature on the work rather than the image itself.
- When sales galleries have to choose between dedicating an exhibition space to a newcomer (with, say, a \$400 price) and a master photographer (with a \$4,000 price) they choose the master for the obvious reasons.
- The more the established (and often deceased) photographers dominate the gallery scene, the more repetitious become the exhibitions and publications. The audience gets bored and moves on.

I am not blaming galleries for this trend. If I were in their business shoes, I would probably follow their same path. It just seems to me that when a paradigm is employed that ultimately creates a smaller and smaller market with higher and higher prices, very few people can be involved in collecting and this cannot be healthy for photography. Photography is the

quintessential democratic art form – both in making photographs and (theoretically) in collecting them. When a strategy (like limiting editions) interferes with this ideal it has to be questioned.

But some art buyers want to know that they own a piece of artwork exclusively, or almost exclusively. A limited edition is useful to them.

An ego in the world of the art connoisseur is not wholly unknown. But why not buy sculpture or painting? If they love photography, let them collect in other ways. Let them commission work from a photographer with the stipulation that only one print will be made. Let them buy prints of deceased masters (where the limit is not artificially imposed). Let them seek out beautiful but rare images. There are alternatives that can satisfy their ego. But why should mid-career or even late-career photographers place limits on their own work? If they want to collect contemporary photographers, let them buy only print #1 of an unlimited edition.

This is precisely the market known as vintage prints. Surely they should sell for a higher price.

Again, look at the historic model. In lithographs, the earlier in the print run, the cleaner and truer the printing plate. Vintage lithographs are more desirable because they are *better*, not because they are printed first. How does this relate to photography?

Ask any photographer. Simply put, the best print is always the most recent one – never the first one. With repetition, a photographer becomes better and better at printing a negative. They learn as they go. Later prints are always more subtle, refined, finessed. In short, later prints are always better. (There are only two exceptions to this and that is the occasional demise of a product, say a particular printing paper, or the aging of the photographer where eyesight, coordination or stamina begin to wane.) Again, I'll say that *later* prints in photography are always better. If better is the criteria for vintage prints in lithography, why shouldn't it be the same in photography? Why aren't photographs that are printed later valued more?

I admit I get tired of the game. *Vintage* prints in photography are supposedly worth more because they are rare and there are fewer of them. To whose advantage is this? The seller, of course. Again, it is a marketing ploy to prop-up prices to unsuspecting (though not always naïve) buyers.

Look at this another way, in lithography where the printing plate deteriorates, the later prints are the *rare* ones. Using the logic from photography, these later prints would be worth more because they are so rare. Fortunately, collectors of lithographs understand the higher principle that *quality* counts for something even more important than scarcity.

So why all this emphasis on the rare photograph? Ask the snake oil salesman why his elixir is not made from common ingredients and you'll find the answer to this question.

This "induced scarcity" associated with both limited editions and vintage prints is a concept that has been capitalized on and abused by a common human motivation – greed. For example, it was reputed that Salvador Dali signed hundreds of sheets of blank paper shortly before his death so his printers and estate could continue to flood the market with original prints. Where there is the will to defraud there is a way.

Thus, as always, the government steps in to save us from ourselves. The states of New York, California, Illinois, Arkansas, Hawaii, and Maryland have laws protecting the consumer from the abuse of fraudulent misrepresentation of edition sizes and authenticity. For prints sold in these states with a value of at least \$100 (less frame), the print must be accompanied by a certificate of authenticity that describes the name of the artist, the medium, when it was produced, the size of the edition, whether the print was signed, if it is estate signed (posthumous), a photo reproduction, if unsigned was it authorized by the artist or estate, etc. - in other words: a written guarantee.

So what to do?

The true meaning of "edition"

Dictionaries can sometimes be misleading because they define words as they are *supposed* to be used, not as they *are* used. I tend to discount arguments that rely on dictionary definitions to prove a point. This time, however, I think there is something to be gained from consideration of the dictionary definition of the term *edition*. This is from my favorite dictionary, the *Encarta World English Dictionary*:

- PRINTED VERSION, one version of a publication issued serially, periodically, or in multiple formats
- BROADCAST VERSION, a version or installment of a broadcast for a particular time or purpose
- PRINTED BATCH, a batch of identical copies of a publication all printed at the same time
- BATCH OF ITEMS, a batch or number of items all produced at the same time
- SIMILAR THING, a version or copy of something

From the Latin *edere* "to give out," from *dare*, "to give."

There are so many lessons to take from this dictionary definition.

Lesson #1 — First, notice that in the third definition referring to a printed batch the phrase "printed at the same time." I laugh. How many times have you seen a photograph marked 1/250 or 1/50? Do you actually believe the photographer made all those copies? Or do you instinctively *know* this is a *theoretical* limit only. I maintain that 99% of all photographs marked 1/50 never make it past print #5.

And don't you love the reference in the first definition to "multiple formats." Let's see now, if I do an 8x10 version and it should sell out completely, can I then do a 16x20 version with integrity? How about an 11x14 version? What about 10x13? Or 9x11? Is 8½x10¼ okay? Just where do I cross the line of integrity? Will this line of integrity be the same for the photographer, the gallery owner and the collector who owns the sold-out 8x10 version?

What if I change the toner from selenium to brown toner? Is this now a new version which I can reissue as a new edition with impunity? What it I change from Ilford to Forte printing paper? What if I change from gelatin silver to photogravure or digital inkjet? Are these different editions? What if I crop the image to a panorama or a square? Am I violating a trust by reissuing a soldout image with any of these changes?

And this is the core of the issue – *trust*. Nothing could devalue an artist's work faster than to violate the limit of an edition, except forgery. There is the recent controversy about Lewis Hines' work being printed posthumously by Walter Rosenbloom and offered as "vintage prints." (See *The Photo Review*, edited by Stephen Perloff.) Was this so controversial because they were fakes or because they, by sheer numbers, diluted the value of the original photographs? Or was it that these prints *violated the trust* between photographer and the collector, the gallery and the buyer?

The issue of limiting an edition of photographs is all about this trust. If there is anything sacred in the economic transaction it is this trust. You trust that the buyer will give you more money for your work and they trust that you won't ever produce it again. Once this bargain is forged, it must not be broken. But if you box yourself into this corner, as an artist you are committing yourself to never again deepen your creative vision with this image. Doesn't this violate a trust you have with your creative self, your personal pursuit of excellence? If you are prevented from making it better when you know you can - prevented because you are contractually obligated to leave it inferior – haven't you sold out just a bit to the lowest common denominator of economics? Doesn't this violate a trust inherent with the artistic process?

There is another part of this that is even more bothersome. Once the edition is soldout, who makes money on it then? If the artwork is viable in the art market, it is only the gallery, reseller or collector who can ever make money on the sale of that artwork once it can no longer be produced by the photographer. Does it make sense for the artist to limit their income this way, enabling others to profit while they are cut out of the economic equation? Limiting the size of the edition can only hurt the artist. If the artwork is not sellable, the size of the edition is non sequitur. If the image has market potential, a predetermined edition limit can only reduce the photographer's income. The only exception to this would be when the photographer can perfectly predict the market potential of an image. Enough said.

And, by the way, we all know that the price goes up dramatically once the edition is completely sold out or the photograph dies, right? There is an old (and somewhat sick) joke around photographic circles that says if you want to raise your prices, start a rumor that you've contracted a deadly and incurable disease. Geez.

Then there is the issue of time – particularly of changing tastes and fashions. Limiting an image today *limits it for all time*, assuming the prerequisite integrity on the part of the photographer. What if an image, style, subject or vision develops a larger audience

in a year or a decade from now? Fashions change. Demand does, too. How can it be successful to create a marketing and distribution scheme today that you must abide by twenty years from now? Thank God we don't do that with hair and clothing styles!

Lesson 2 — From the Latin *edere*, "to give." There are people – artists – who work only for themselves, caring nothing for the world at large or for an audience for their work. These are the sane artists, I think. The rest of us long to have our work seen. I have produced a lot of photographs in my art career and I hope to create many more. When I am gone from this earth, I hope I don't have a closet full of matted photographs, stored away in archival boxes with little tissues to keep them all pristine. They'd probably end up in a box on the front lawn in the garage sale for 25-cents each, where buyers would salivate over the chance to buy cheap mats for salvage. I would prefer to die artless – at least of my own work. I make photographs for others to enjoy and I work hard at it only so they can fly away to homes other than mine. Collecting my own art seems a bit redundant.

I have often proposed a question to workshop students as follows: If a year from now you had to look back on your photography career and assess the success of your artistic endeavors over the last twelve months, which would you prefer: that you had sold a few pieces of work for lots of money, or that you had lots of your images hanging in people's homes and offices which they enjoyed every day, even if you had no money to show for it? It's amazing how many photographers unhesitatingly would prefer *distribution* over *income*. Of course having both would be perfect, but if the choice must be made, distribution seems the clear preference for most folks.

Then why limit the edition? If virtue lies in sharing, why not strategize for maximum distribution rather than to maximize income? By the way, here is a hint: if you want to make a lot of money in life, being a photographic artist might not be your best first choice!

But, you say, I can't afford to give away all my artwork. Then don't. Give what you can. Sell it for what you must. Find another way. As an artist you are a creative individual – why not apply a portion of your creativity to developing an audience for your work that you can afford!

One of One?

Have you ever considered producing only one print from a negative, marking it 1/1 and taping the cut or scratched negative to the back of the mat board as proof? I have often been entertained discussing this idea with photographers and have been surprised how many of them have, at one

time or another, contemplated this idea. I like this idea, even if I've never been able to convince myself to try it. I've never known anyone to have the commitment to do it either.

Why? When pressed, I hear photographers respond that they are afraid that they might just limit their best-ever image to that one copy or that they hope that someday they might learn a technique to print the image better. Either of these points of view demonstrate my ideas in practice. *Marketing* prevents the singular print. *Knowledge* renders the vintage print impotent.

Have you ever made a print from a negative, sold it and then subsequently learned how to print it better? Did you contact the buyer of the earlier version and offer to exchange their inferior version for the new, better one? If not, why not? Could it be that – as Ansel Adams stated so well – the negative is the score and the print is the performance? Like a performance, a print is a statement *in time* of your abilities, sensitivities, skill and artistic savvy.

To do editions of one and only one might be fun and challenging, but unless the physical materials dictate such a severe approach, this seems disingenuous and somewhat phony. Again, it's all marketing and ultimately self-defeating.

No limits whatsoever?

The most popular alternative to limits is the no-limit approach. I know many photographers who don't limit their images or even number them. I used to be one of these photographers – until I saw first hand the effects of this strategy.

A number of years ago, I visited a number of people and galleries in the Carmel area doing research for LensWork. In the course of my travels I coincidentally happened to see six different prints of the same image - Horizontal Aspens by Ansel Adams. The prints were different sizes, different papers, different renditions. There was one version, however, that simply *glowed*. It wasn't simply better than the others – it toasted them. This clearly wasn't just another copy in a long edition run. It simply could not have been printed at the same time as the others. What was its history - to use the art world term - its provenance? Why was it different? Unknown – lost to history.

This experience set me to thinking about the context of history, personal development as an artist, the history of an image and the full development of the creative vision for an image. I realized that this is a *process*, not an event. And it is not just a process of the darkroom and of technical skill in printing. It is also a matter of artistic sensibilities and talent. As we grow as individuals, our artistic talent does too – hopefully! As time passes and our maturity

deepens, so does our creative vision and talent. This is a part of our personal history and the history of our art.

With this in mind, I have always disclosed full information on my fine art photographs. For me, this started with a simple question: what date should one use on the surface of the print near the signature? The date of the negative, the date of the print, or the copyright date? Just to avoid confusion, I list all information on a single sheet of paper that is affixed to the back of the mat board. (See our website for an example.) Where I make images without limits, this information at least creates a personal provenance and brief history of the print.

Alternatives

Having now taken full aim on the most popular paradigms and shot holes all over them, I suppose I now bear the responsibility to suggest a better solution. I can suggest one, but I hope my idea can be seen for what it is – *my* idea, not a definitive one for all times, all places or all people.

I have developed two ideas that seem to me to make sense – both from a mechanical/production point of view as well as an economic one. My criteria in creating these strategies is rooted in the most important of all the ideas I've discussed in this article – *trust*. Any discussion of edition size must be able to stand the test of trust – both to the collector and to the artist. Edition number-

ing must also be truthful to the medium and based on honesty about the mechanical process as well as the realities of the market. If it fails these criteria, it will be no better than the phony edition limits we see so often used in photography today – unfaithful to the medium, a perversion of the historical context, and merely a market game whose intention is to defraud rather than clarify.

Numbering only

The first idea is this: do not limit the number of copies of a photograph but do number them. This creates a sequential history for the image and allows collectors to know where, in the sequence, any particular version was created. This method is simple, easy to administer, and honest. It neither limits the image nor ignores the importance of time in the production of the photograph or in the maturing and creative vision of the photographic artist. Instead of "1/250," why not just "#1"? To collectors this delineates the vintage print without denying the photographer the opportunity to refine his or her vision or execution of that negative.

True editioning

The second idea is better, albeit somewhat more detailed. Follow the plan of the book publisher, using the ideas in the dictionary definitions above. Books are printed in a "First Edition, a "Second Edition," etc. Each edition is limited by the number of copies produced at that time. Also, a "First Edition" might undergo more than one printing – "First Edition, First Printing" followed by a "First Edition, Second Printing," etc. Each of these are dated and so enumerated.

I see no reason why this paradigm can't be adopted verbatim in photography. Begin with the creation of a "First Edition" with a defined and limited number of copies, printed all at once, dated and defined in time. Should this "edition" sell out it could be reprinted as a "second printing," and so designated. Instead of a second printing, a variation in the image could be created with improvements in the execution and be called a "Second Edition," again with a defined and limited number of copies, printed all at once, dated and defined in time. In fact, the first edition need not even sell out to create the second edition. Maybe the first rendition would be preferred by some collectors or buyers.

This strategy has the advantage of allowing the photographer an unlimited number of prints in their lifetime, allows for artistic growth in creative vision which would be realized by the various editions, and at the same time defines the work precisely for the collector/gallery who value such information. For example, in book printing a "First Edition" will often be more valuable than a later edition, even though the later one might be "better" – that is more durable, legible, etc. The collector looks for the

most valuable edition, the reader might look for the most functional, the decorator look for the most handsomely bound, etc.

Is this more cumbersome? Perhaps. But an even more important question is, *Is it more honest*? If the trust between buyer/collector and the artist is paramount, how could this be seen as anything but an improvement over the fuzzy "1/250" silliness that is now so prevalent in the photographic world? The key to implementing this strategy for your artwork lies not so much in the nomenclature as in the full disclosure of information and the force of your commitment to honesty and integrity.

Will the galleries like it? Probably not. Their economic interests are served too well by limited editions and the ease with which they can use the threat of a limit to motivate a hesitant buyer. Will the better galleries protest? I suspect not. They know that the more knowledge they can provide their buyer/collector the better their relationship with that client. Don't forget, their relationships are also built on trust and honesty. Besides the best galleries understand their responsibility to the artist's economic wellbeing is just as important as their own. Galleries who don't think this way must consider artists disposable and replaceable and I suspect these folks would make bad partners for your art career.

Conclusion

I am sure that painters, sculptors and other artists will laugh at this idea of editions and the convolutions of this debate. But we are photographers and our chosen medium allows us to define ourselves differently. It is this freedom to define that also places on us a responsibility to think clearly about these issues and mold our career and our artwork in the best possible way. To deny the reproducibility of photography is to deny its very nature. To ignore the implication of artificially limiting the size of an edition is to be numb to the realities of our production.

I began this article by stating this issue is a thorny one. As you can see, there are no hard and fast answers to this issue, but that does not mean there are no hard and fast answer for *individuals*. Next time you are in the darkroom producing an image, how many will you make?



* It is for the reasons discussed in this article that we are changing our *LensWork Special Editions** Collection, both in gelatin silver and in photogravure, from limited editions to numbered editions. Where we have already introduced a limited edition on an image, we will strictly abide by that limit. I may not now agree with these earlier decisions, but I will honor them; our integrity is too important. We will, however, no longer offer limited editions on new images.

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