Editor's Comments

Levels of Involvement

Recently returned from reviewing portfolios at Houston FotoFest, I was struck by how few photographers had given much thought to the audience they longed for. With each review, I began by asking what I thought was a simple question: *How can I help you today?* Answer: *I want to have my work seen by a larger audience.* Simple enough, or is it? As we got deeper into the conversation, I consistently found the photographers had no idea as to how to go about finding an audience for their work, what *kind* of audience, strategies that help an audience connect with the artwork, or what they might do to facilitate the process. This topic has been fresh on my mind as I've been working on our new workshop titled — not accidently — *Finding an Audience for Your Work*. What follows is a transcribed excerpt from that workshop and also the conversation I had with so many photographers at Fotofest.

One of the primary keys to finding an audience for your work I call "levels of involvement." The core is simply that different people in the audience are, indeed, *different*. They have different places they are in their life; they have different amounts of time; different amounts of money; different interest levels that imply different commitments to photographic art, etc. As much as we need to acknowledge this, a lot of photographers simply don't. They produce their original works of art — typically a print or a portfolio of prints — and announce to the world, "Here my prints. You can buy any print you want, $1000," or $500, or whatever their established price structure dictates. It's a take-it-or-leave-it strategy for an expensive commodity (I use that term on purpose) that is fundamentally flawed. It not only does not serve the range of audience members it could, but it can be downright insulting to those whose means don't rise to the minimum needed to get in the game.

By way of analogy, what if this were our choices in, say, transportation? Every one of us has need for transportation, but what if there was only one kind of car — and that car was a Rolls Royce? Said another way, what if the only choice of automobile that were presented to us was *expensive*? As a consumer, you would be incredibly frustrated because if there's

only one kind of car — and it's outside your budget — you're entirely locked out of transportation, at least from that car dealership. So, you either don't buy or you go looking elsewhere. This is exactly what happens when we offer for sale only items that the audience cannot afford. I cannot tell you the number of photographers I've talked to who collected artwork in the '60s and '70s when photography was affordable — before the prices escalated so much in the mid-to-late '70s. They haven't purchased a print since. Their passion and love for photography hasn't changed, but they've been pushed out of the art market. Using my analogy again, they're in need of transportation and the only car available is a Rolls Royce.

And, it's not that there is no place for a Rolls Royce because there certainly is. But for us artists, this isn't an all-or-nothing kind of scenario. There is an alternative that simply takes a little thought, a touch of empathy, and a willingness to cultivate all kinds and levels of audience.

The antidote to the elite-only art audience is encapsulated in a strategy I call *levels of involvement*. Once we recognize there are lots of different kinds of audiences, the implication for us is to simply create variations of our work that fit the various audiences we might encounter. That is to say, instead of producing and offering only one type of work — gallery prints — why

not have a variety of formats for the same project? For example: we could have a website presentation with a limited number of images from a project, a free downloadable PDF e-publication, a series of small individual prints, a folio of small prints, a large-scale gallery print, a portfolio with fancy clamshell box that contains multiple large-scale gallery prints — all at different prices requiring different levels of involvement on the part of the audience. And this list does not include printed materials like extended brochures, softcover books, hardbound books, special edition books, etc.

Zero-Cost Level

Let me expand on this with an example from my own work. I recently introduced a new body of work called *Uchiwa-e*, a series of photographs of Japan made using the shape of Japanese *uchiwa* fan prints. I strategically decided to provide various levels of involvement with this project. The first level of involvement is a simple web page. There is no cost to view it; it's visible instantly; people can look at a half-dozen of these images and decide if they want to see more. Lots of websites repeat this same formula.

But, here is where so many photographers fumble. In the typical web gallery, the only next step available to the audience is to buy an expensive gallery-type print. The leap is simply too great for the average

person to traverse and most photographers find their sale of original prints off their website is pretty paltry.

A Little of Your Time

Instead, as the next level of involvement in the *Uchiwa-e* project, I provide (for those who are interested) a free downloadable PDF that has all sixty images in the project. It's a deeper commitment on their part because they have to take the time to download the PDF file and open it in the Adobe Reader, rather than simply click the web link in their browser. Some people don't want to take that step; for them the website was enough. But, a lot of people did want to see more, and when they took that next step they were more involved — which from my perspective was perfectly acceptable to have them at that deeper level of participation. If they didn't go any further with this work than the PDF, at least they were involved in my artwork to that level. Maybe my next project might appeal to them even more; maybe they will be in a more receptive frame of mind on their next visit to my website; maybe the PDF planted a seed that will blossom sometime in the future.

A Small Purchase

For those who do want more right now, I provide a third level of involvement. In addition to the free downloadable PDF, I provided this project on disc, too. The disc includes not only the entire contents of the free downloadable PDF, but also includes audio and video — some stories of my experiences in Japan, some behind the scenes discussion of how I made the prints, and a *LensWork Creative Labs* tutorial on how to make non-quadrilateral prints. The people who were interested in more than just the free PDF could take the next step and purchase the disc for a $15 investment. Now we've entered a realm of commerce for the first time and predictably, there are fewer people at this level of involvement than at the previous ones. Of course the pyramid of folks involved is narrowing as we move up the scale of involvement, but that's as it will always be. In order to have height at the top of a pyramid, we need a very large base at the bottom. That's the nature of pyramids. We need to have faith that some of the audience will be interested in an even deeper level, but they can only pursue it if we make it available. So, the disc is not the final option because there is yet another level of involvement beyond this.

Folios

I also offer these *Uchiwa-e* prints as a series of folios. Each folio (there are six of them) include prints about a specific theme from my work in Japan. The six themes are: Temples, Shadows, Ancestral Home, Fall Leaves, Nature, and Bamboo. Each folio sells for $125, with a time-limited introductory price of $95.

You can see the "levels of involvement" strategy. Rather than making one thing — matted prints, ready for gallery exhibition — I can make a variety of *products* all having to do with this one *project.* I let the consumers sort out for themselves what their level of interest is, based on their voluntary commitment of time, money, and level of excitement they have about this work.

I've always thought that a "pay-a-lot-or-get-lost" attitude is a very arrogant one for artists to take. I'd rather respect the audience and their decisions no matter what level of involvement they feel comfortable with. I let them determine the level to which they want to participate, instead of forcing them to participate at the one and only level of involvement I dictate as the minimum entry level. I simply give them a choice — that's what I mean by levels of involvement.

Beyond this range of choices for our audience, this strategy also pertains to levels of involvement on our part as creative producers. With some projects, my level of involvement is only sufficient to create a web page. With others, I might produce different artwork across multiple media, prices, and depth. With a particularly important project in my photographic art life, I might want to appeal to as broad an audience possible. Knowing there are multiple audiences, I would provide a variety of different formats (or artifacts) for this body of work.

Up and Down the Economic Ladder

There is one other point I need to make about this idea. People's means are not static. People go up and down the economic ladder all the time. Maybe they get a promotion; maybe they get laid off; maybe they have a daughter or son in college for a few years, or one just out of college — *whew!* People's means vary, and if we strategically provide levels of involvement as a part of our plan to find an audience for our work, as their means change they might change how they respond to our work. I've had many cases where people have told me they downloaded one of my PDFs they loved, thought it was fabulous, but they just couldn't afford to purchase a folio at the time. Then their conditions changed and they came back and bought a folio. By providing levels of involvement, I had a connection with them, even when the only thing they could do was download a PDF.

Create pathways that include options appropriate for *their* lives yet still allow you to connect your work with people and they *will* connect with you.