

Creative Journey
By Kate Jordahl

Creative Journey:
How to Build a
Portfolio

*A step-by-step approach
with spirit in mind*

*By Kate Jordahl
in partial fulfillment of
Professional Development Leave
Project 2004-2005*

Those who cannot begin do not finish.
Art Spirit, Robert Henri

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Introduction

Two of my goals during my Professional Development Leave from Foothill College 2004-2005 was to develop a photographic portfolio of places of cultural, natural and spiritual importance with a focus on UNESCO World Heritage Sites and to document my process from conception of portfolio to presentation. I have in the course of my sabbatical worked on a number of interrelated portfolios. I have visited 10 World Heritages Sites and edited hundreds of contact sheets from past photographic trips. I have printed over 100 new photographs and integrated them with a number of my existing images. The development of the subsets of my work from both existing negative and digital files and the photographing of new sites has been an exciting challenge. This booklet is the result of my documentation of my process. I am a regular journal writer and during this time I documented my thoughts and my process as I built these various bodies of work.

The Portfolios I worked on are as follows:

Works from Europe and Japan

Organized for the exhibition *Suspension: The Photography of Geir and Kate Jordahl* at the Olive Hyde Art Gallery, Fremont, October 2004.

Japanese and Indonesian World Heritage Sites

Organized for the Modernbook Exhibition, May 2005,

French World Heritage Sites

Organized for Photo Faculty Campus Abroad Program Exhibit, Krause Center for Innovation Exhibition, May 2005

Norwegian World Heritage Sites

Organized for Norway Day, Fort Mason, May 2005

Walking with Kandinsky

A book published with Dreaming Mind Studio which includes images from both World Heritage and similar sites and explores creativity.

Afternoons with Ruth

A book published with Dreaming Mind Studio which includes images from both World Heritage and similar sites and celebrates my visits and conversations with Ruth Bernhard, an influential photographer and teacher.

Journey to World Heritage

An exhibition giving an overview of my work of World Heritage which also includes work by my husband and collaborator, Geir Jordahl. This exhibit features both silver gelatin and color digital images. January 2006, PhotoCentral Gallery

It is through the work on these portfolios and twenty years of teaching that I developed the ideas in this booklet. It is a work in progress.

Thank you to my collaborators and colleagues especially Don Drake and Wendy Gray. Thank you to Sharon Shoemaker for planting the seeds that grew in this booklet.

Special thanks to my partner and husband, Geir Jordahl who shares the journey and the process of creativity.

Why do I photograph? I photograph to see and share what I see.

It is said that to write is to live an experience twice. I believe to photograph is to live multiple times: seeing, photographing, editing, printing, presentation, and, finally, on the wall realized.

Kate Jordahl

What is a portfolio?

A portfolio is a place where images live. It can be a box, a show or a book. But it is in the simplest sense a home. Images realize their best selves in a portfolio just as in good homes we realized our best selves.

We need to nurture each picture while keeping the entire group in mind. Just like children, what we learn from one will translate to others in part to another yet each is unique. Your challenge is to get the photographs to work together yet be individually strong. They must be complete and also parts of the whole.

To make a group of work a portfolio you must start with heart and courage. So many things will conspire to turn you aside from your quest – to tell you it is hopeless or you are not up to the task – but it is the process of asking and of daring that allows you to achieve and sometimes succeed.

By deciding to make a portfolio you are taking your art and creativity to the next level. In the process, the tools do not matter and, yet, they are an imperative part of the process

You must use the tools that call you. You must use the tools that feed you. But it is not about the tools. Remember images are not about tools. They are about ideas.

What do you want to say?

This is the start. Now what technique will allow you to say it? What do you know or can you learn that will allow you to speak? You must speak clearly – efficiently – eloquently.

(Elementær geografi)
Eg kjenner ingen beinvegar.
Vegar er krokete, attgrodde
brått islagde, med svake kantar.
Dei fleste står ikkje på kartet.

Paal-Helge Haugen

(Elementary Geography)

*I know no shortcuts
The road is crooked, steep,
suddenly icy, with abrupt edges.
Most are not found on the map.*

A Xerox can convey an idea and a silver print can convey an idea and a digital print can convey an idea but they are different ideas or more accurately different aspects of the idea.

For photographers and other artists, a portfolio is a group of work that says more than its parts. It can be organized for professional reasons such as applying to school or for employment or it can be to realize a creative idea. Our primary interest here is in the artistic portfolio. This type of portfolio includes images that you exhibit or show as a group trying with the parts to say more than the individual photograph can say. It is often united by technique or concept. As I have worked on different groups of my photographs over the past few years, I realize more and more that each photograph will have different meanings in different groupings. I also realize that I can say more by the combination of images than by the individual images. I think of English composition as a metaphor: The images are the sentence and the portfolio is the paragraph or the images are the chapters, the portfolio is the novel. Perhaps the best metaphor is that the images are the lines and the portfolio is the poem.

A photographic portfolio must look both outward and inward. One must both capture the world and focus the self. Without both it is just pictures.

The longest journey is the journey
inwards. Of him who has chosen his
destiny, who has started upon his quest
for the source of his being.

Dag Hammarskjöld

Objective

1. To make a group of pictures that say more than any individual image while keeping the power and impact of each photograph high.
2. To push and work an idea or ideas to a full and rich level. To work beyond the obvious to exciting and new solutions.
3. To finish these images in a professional manner to archival standards.
4. To sign your name to each image with pride.

There is no right or wrong way to go about making a portfolio. A group of work generally begins with a question or a curiosity. Or an image that you notice “works” and you want to follow up on that theme. It might begin with an interest in a genre of photography, such as portraiture or still lifes or landscape.

Once this question or thought begins, the photographer will follow it up by photographing, thinking, and sometimes writing. In this developmental stage, a diligent photographer will look to the masters for inspiration and learn from their work.

As images or “work prints” begin to accumulate, the photographer will either shuffle through them regularly and/or pin the prints up in a place to be studied. Putting pictures where you can see them regularly is a good way to weed the lasting images from the less strong candidates.

Next, with a group of potential portfolio shots, the photographer will return to the darkroom or the computer to print these images to the best of his or her ability making every effort to realize the previsualized image and make each image sit seamlessly with the one before. There are no weak images in a strong portfolio. Only beautifully crafted and exquisitely printed images.

What we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But if that drop was not in the ocean, I think the ocean would be less because of that missing drop. I do not agree with the big way of doing things.

Mother Teresa

Step One: Collecting the work

There are many ways to approach developing a portfolio. First and foremost you must have many images worthy of your effort. As an example, for *Afternoons with Ruth*, I began by choosing and scanning 100 contact sheets that span 10 years of photography. I then chose 300 possible images. I edited those down to 100 images. I worked with three of my trusted colleagues to then edit these images down. This is for a book that has 11 images. My husband's book, *San Joaquin: River of Spirit*, was the result of 3 years of photographing, 200 work prints that was then edited down to 87 image in the exhibition/portfolio and 37 images in the book. Numbers do not tell it all, but you can not take one or two rolls of film or a few digital images and build a portfolio. You must work the ideas in the camera, work the ideas in the images and let them grow over time.

Henri Cartier Bresson says "What is made with time, time respects." Your first step in making a portfolio may well be committing yourself to the process and to the time involved.

Take photographs. Take more photographs. Make work prints. Once you have a number of images for consideration. Live with them, share them with people you trust, hang them on your wall. I have images from my current portfolio as a screen saver - when my computer goes to this mode, a slide show of my current images plays on the screen, giving me unexpected glimpses of my photographs. I make contact sheets, work print, I put them on walls, I carry them in my pockets. I want to come upon my work often and unexpectedly. I relish getting to know the images. And then I am ready to move on with the project.

Step Two: Work Prints & Prototypes

Here you will make prototypes and see what the images want to be! Listen. It is very easy to think your pictures rather than feel them. *Walking with Kandinsky* was made in 4 sizes before I felt certain on the proper size. Different materials were tried. In the end there were 7 prototypes! While this was an effect of both my collaboration with Dreaming Mind and the fact that *Kandinsky* was the first in what is to be a three book set, it does illustrate how important it is to really live with work, give it time and try different things.

Consider:

A. Size/Scale

B. Materials

C. Presentation

It is traditional that work in a portfolio can sit together with some constancy of presentation. This is not always required, but it is common and for the beginner, wise. Having different media (color, black and white, straight prints, collages) and sizes working together is very challenging for a cohesive portfolio not that it can not be done. One of the most inspiring books for me is Ralph Gibson's *Burgundy*. His seamless melding of color and black and white is a goal for me for a future portfolio.

Always go back to the question: "What do you want to say?" Make sure that everything and every decision supports your message: the materials, the number of images, the size, the presentation. Edit. Study other artists images. Keep pushing the ideas. Keep asking the questions.

Step Three: Making the work

Now, you must take the work you have from step one and the decisions you made from step two and make the portfolio. You want it to be excellent. You want it to sing in every aspect. Quality must be your watch word. Each piece in this step should get attention and be printed and presented as if it is the only piece in the group!

Step Four: Editing and Sequencing

Now you must take the pieces and group them in a manner that works as a whole. You must delete any that do not live up to the best of the work and more difficult at times, you must delete ones that may be good, may even be great, but don't support your original idea! Only images that are well seen, well realized and fully support the idea of the project can remain.

There are many ways to sequence a portfolio. It can be united by a theme. They can also be a response to a formal element where the visual elements of the pictures are the subject. Portfolios can also be organized in a sequential manner or to tell a story. We must once again return to what you want to say. Many portfolios will use all of these approaches to work. Let the pictures tell you what works.

Step Five: Sharing the work

Exhibition and books are two good ways to share this grouping of work you have developed. You have worked too hard to have them under your bed or in the back of your closet! Consider photo groups to share and discuss the work. In addition to traditional galleries, Cafes, libraries, schools and community centers have many places to show work. Invest in a few frames and circulate your images in them if they are appropriate to framing. (This can be another inspiration to standardizing sizes!) The joy of making become the joy of sharing!

On Being an Artist

Your only job as an artist is to keep on making things. There are many other tasks that you could and even should take on – but making things is number one. Without that, you are not an artist and, by the way, it is none of your business if they are good or worthy or important. That, like the other possible tasks (promotion, exhibitions, publication, documentation, preservation) comes later and has to do with your choice of what type of artist you wish to be now that you actually are an artist.

You might ask on this journey: “Why do pictures matter?” It can be hard in the face of hurricanes and earthquakes and terrorism and strife to believe pictures matter. It can be difficult to believe anything matters. But it does and pictures are my way and perhaps they are your way, of reaching to that place where we can still hope. Process is what keeps us sane despite the insanity, ritual reminds us when our sorrow and pain could blind us and artmaking is process and ritual. It is my meditation. Just as Julia Cameron points out in the *Artist’s Way* that we need the journal pages to make us still enough for meditation, we need the artwork to make us hopeful and to keep us putting one psychic foot before the other – when we would instead be compelled to put our head down and weep inconsolably. To look to art is perhaps only one source of solace – but it is mine and since you are listening, perhaps it is yours.

The first thing to know in the pursuit of the process of art is to know that there are different aspects of art in you and in our culture. Do not be distracted by these conflicting concepts held within one word. There is commerce and competition. There is progress and there is accomplishment. But these, while often present and distracting, have little to do with the artists.

It is none of your business what others think of your art.

Think of yourself as encased in an artistic gore-tex – the concept of gore-tex is that air gets in and water does not. For the artist, you need to let useful information in and screen out distractions and negativity. This is much more difficult than air and water! and perhaps more important!

When is ‘feedback’ useful and helpful even if it feels to your artist heart like a knife and when is it counter productive and destructive? This will take a personal alchemy and perhaps a bit of magic to wisely sort. Listen for authenticity in your audience - the same authenticity you bring to your work, and you will usually sort the helpful from the destructive.

There are time factors too – the time to make art, the time to be true, the time to hear what the audience is saying, a time to ignore them. All takes time and patience and heart. But you have the time. You have the patience and you certainly have the heart.

Good luck on your journey to make a portfolio. Your efforts will be worth the time and the effort.

The why
To communicate
to share to feel
to think

my picture hold
my hope and belief
in the power of
joy and spirit -
the power of the
spirit of humanity

to feel to see
it is not
different to me

I photograph because
I must
it is the language give to me

it is words and pictures
it is pictures and words

Kate Jordahl

Bibliography

This is a selective sampling of what has inspired me in the past few years of creativity. These books are both to help with the portfolio and your general creativity. Many artists have faced the same challenges we face and have made guide books. I believe that as we search, we will find the book we need! Visit books stores. I have had books literally fall on my head...just when I needed both that book and a good whack on the head! Happy adventures.

(Add to this list many books of images! You must look at pictures books. And go to museums and galleries. The more possibilities you see, the more options you have in your process. Look. Study. Learn!)

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