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# 'From dark room to light room': Some Aspects of Photography in Digital Times. Interview with Pedro Meyer

By Jörn Glasenapp

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## Abstract

Pedro Meyer (b. 1935) is one of the first photographers to successfully make the transition from analog to digital photography. He has won numerous awards for his work which is included in permanent collections of more than 20 of the world's finest museums, and has appeared in more than 125 exhibitions. As a founder of ZoneZero.com - perhaps the most important website dedicated to promoting digital photography from around the world - the Mexican artist has published, among other things, two interactive CD-ROM titles, the ground-breaking "I Photograph to Remember" (1991) and the much-acclaimed "Truths & Fictions" (1995) which is also available in a print version (published by Aperture).

Jörn Glasenapp talked to Pedro Meyer about the manipulative aspects of both analog and digital imaging, Paul Strand's alleged 'purity', the weakness of the medium to transport the artist's statement, the forthcoming death of analog photography and the internet as an important distribution platform.

**dd:** New technologies alter, rather than simply extend, the resources of art. Accordingly, many critics argue that the creative freedom provided by digital manipulation is bought at the cost of photography's distinctive power, which, rightly or wrongly, we tend to see in its documentary quality, that is in its close connection with the observable reality or its adherence to a referent. What do you think about this point?

**PM:** As you correctly state: namely the option that photography is being considered wrongly for its inherent documentary quality as a result of its close connection with observable reality. The critics are confused and shortsighted at best, they lack memory. If they did exercise such a skill, they would remember that photography was accused at the outset of its existence of all that today they accuse digital photography to be. Remember how photography was frowned upon for being the

by-product of a mechanical instrument which denied any possibility for individual expression? Yesterdays shame for using a camera is replaced today by a computer being the source for banal creativity as produced by such evil machines which take the "truth" out of photography.

Ask any one of those critics for a good example of a documentary picture, and, more often than not, they will refer you to a black and white image. As if reality resided any where in the world in black and white. They seem to forget that this abstraction is solely a convention and nothing more, which we have incorporated into our visual language without any further critical thought. Now if we speak of color pictures, the distance between fact and fiction is no better off, as it is anyone's guess what "true" colors really are. It is much too complex to enter into this theme in these few questions and answers.

**dd:** Could digital photography, simply because everybody knows how easy it is to manipulate a digital image, function as a means to undercut the common belief in the trustworthiness and authenticity of photographs in general? Seen that way, digital photography might fulfill a sensitizing or didactic function by calling attention to the fact that every image is manipulation, that photographs are not neutral containers of reality.

**PM:** Precisely, that is my point.

**dd:** In pre-digital times, Paul Strand, pleading for the purity of photography as a distinct art form, claimed that "manipulation is merely the expression of an impotent desire to paint." Indeed, one could describe, and many critics do so, digital editing as the photographer's means of gaining the painter's authorial control of meaning. What do you think about the fact that the digital image threatens to blur the customary distinctions between painting and photography?

**PM:** Let me first take issue here with the assumptions about "purity" as Paul Strand would describe photography, in order to be considered as such. I will quote my good friend Esther Parada:

"But Strand's work is fraught with such contradictions. My initial response to the portfolio was to see it as a quintessential example of the idealized, exoticized Third World "other" - all too familiar in the history of European/North American photography. For example, the distinctness of different regions of the country - Saltillo, Oaxaca, Michoacan, Tenancingo - is subsumed under the rubric of a timeless "Mexico," the stoic (stern? bitter? dignified?) faces and figures are frontal but anonymous, communicating neither with each other nor the viewer. The settings - cracked adobe walls and wooden doors - give "no trace of the modern era, even so much as a telephone wire, light bulb, or tin can."

So much for the so called authority on the "real"...or the pretense that there was a total absence of manipulation.

One only needed to be a photographer in order to manipulate. Not a painter. I sense therefore that the question you pose leads us into a trap. Needless to say that as photographers we have done bloody well manipulating reality without having to consider ourselves as painters. It is not that I have an issue with being considered a painter, but doing so removes the challenge on photography by allowing the issue to be explained away so conveniently as photographers don't manipulate, painters do.

Observe how manipulative you questions actually are. You see text can do that very easily also, you don't need to be considered a painter in order to do so. Do you?

**dd:** You once said that digital editing "enhances your position from being just a button-pusher to being a creator." This statement gives me the impression that you are a bit envious a) of the painter's freedom to create and control, and b) of his reputation as an artist.

**PM:** If pushing the boundries of ones' medium is synonymous with envy for other mediums as you pose the question, then I think we should re-examine what envy means. The dictionary tells us that envy is: resentful awareness of another's advantage.

Why should I be resentful when today we can only celebrate that as photographers we have a whole new world of opportunities in front of us. So who is supposed to have the advantages ?

And then about the issue of reputation, I can only say that I have a reputation that at times is larger than that of some painters I know, which makes the issue not one of medium but one of individualities.

No, I do not envy anyone, nor do I envy any other medium. This one will do for my lifetime. I can hardly keep up with all that it has to offer to even think in terms of being envious of other options.

**dd:** As you mentioned in "Truths & Fiction", digital editing gives you the possibility "to convey your message, your intentions, with much greater clarity." Isn't the prize of freeing yourself from the constraints of reality the stronger restriction of the viewer's scope of interpretation? I ask this question because digitality in literature, that is in hypertexts is supposed to undermine the author's control of the reader's interpretation.

**PM:** You introduced into the question some of what I suspect might be your own prejudices. You ask: "Isn't the prize of freeing yourself from the constraints of reality...." first of all I am freeing myself not from reality but from the limitations that the tools had in the past. BIG DIFFERENCE!

The larger issue is that photography never had any control of anything, being that it is a weak medium to begin with, it can not communicate any specific thoughts or ideas. To be specific it always required text or other forms of communicating in order to deliver a precise messages. Susan Sontag already dealt with this almost 20 years ago.

I as an author using photographs have control over the image in direct proportion to the tools that allow me to fine tune the image, yet at the end of the day, it is the viewer who will deliver to the image the specificity that she or he feels that the image conveys. At best I can come closer to making my statement with the tools at hand today, but the photograph by itself is a medium fraught with limitations. Some of these can even work to ones advantage at times, from a narrative point of view. But they are there never the less.

**dd:** Will digital imaging be the death of analog photography?

**PM:** If you mean that by that, the death of the chemical process, I would venture to say yes. But Photography aside of how it is produced is certainly not going anywhere but up. I would venture to say we have moved from the "dark room" to the "light room". That is certainly an optimistic view, wouldn't you say? I have not stepped into the dark room in more than a decade, and yet I have never produced more images than at present.

**dd:** What's your view of the internet concerning the development of digital photography as an art form?

**PM:** It will be an intrinsic part of the medium of photography. A platform for delivery with whole new opportunities for publishing and sharing images.

**dd:** Critics like Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin maintained that some of your works might be characterized as visual equivalents of the magic realism of Latin American authors like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and others. Do you consider this comparison an appropriate one?

**PM:** I am not sure that even Gabriel Garcia Marquez would fully see his work in that light. After all what is "magic realism" ? At the heart of this, as I see it, is cultural diversity, and how the translations work between one and the other culture. I might see as magic realism some of the things that go on in Europe, and to your eyes they are simply normal. See what I mean?

**dd:** In an interview you said that Robert Frank's "The Americans" was a reference that no one (including yourself) would let you forget when you took the pictures for "Truth & Fiction". Are there any other photographers the work of whom you would name as special points of orientation for your own work ("Eye Bar, Los Angeles", for example, reminds me of Susan Meiselas)?

**PM:** Hmm! never thought of that, she is a good friend of mine, but I have never ever seen an image of hers that would even remotely send me in that direction.

I have a huge library of books on photography, as a curator, editor, publisher, teacher, etc. you can well imagine that my brain has been populated by a lot of very exciting and good work over time. Have I received any influences from all these sources? I would hope so, otherwise I would have been a moron staring into the void.

Now does that translate into me picking a specific photographers' work as a role model? no I never did that. Since I never went to school to learn about photography, I had to sort these issues out on my own, and I probably never felt confident enough to settle on any one role model for fear of possibly going down the wrong path.

Aside from the fact that I was educated with the idea that to imitate or copy anyone was not done if you had any interest in developing you own character, it was also not very moral to do so. I also was brought up with the notion that you ate all that you had on your plate. Old fashioned? yes!

**dd:** Do you use digital altering as a means to evade their example, to cope with your anxiety of influence?

**PM:** It is interesting you ask this, as it resembles very much the question of envy you asked earlier. Sorry to disappoint you, in that I am less neurotic than you might suggest. I am not at all envious or anxious of others. As a matter of fact I am quite content with the opportunities that I have had in my life, and I have done as best as possible within what ever real limitations I surely have had. I am neither competing with others, or even looking out as to what they are doing. Which brings me in closing to tell you a little anecdote.

As I was working in the US, at the end of the eighties on all that I produced over those five years, 1988-1993, I made incredible innovations which only in time I would realize what they meant and what they were. I produced the first CD ROM with photographs and continuous images, ( I Photograph to Remember), I produced one of the first books that were ever done over the internet. I produced what was at the time, the very first photographic exhibition of images not only digitally created but also printed, and so on, and so on, but at the time, as I saw no one around me, doing anything, I thought of myself of being hopelessly behind everyone and imaging that surely it was only due to my ignorance that I did not know of all the accomplishments of others, but I did not have any time to find out if that was true or not, I just plowed along with my own things, exploring and enjoying every moment of it. When I finally came out of that period, I realized that indeed what had happened is that I wasn't behind everyone but instead quite ahead of the curve.

My motivations were never to be ahead or to prove anything, I simply wanted to be creative and enjoy it. I was, and have always been, self motivated. I do things

because I like the challenges they pose, not because I have to prove anything to anyone. Such freedom is very important within this digital world which can be very unsettling if you view the process from a competitive point of view.

**dd:** Thank you very much for the interview.