'La Realidad' in the year 2000

Written by Pedro Meyer

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The Zapatista movement in Chiapas invented a place in the jungle that went by the name of "La Realidad" (Reality), located in the southern part of Mexico. It became a geographic rallying point from which to launch many of their political communiqués. The Internet helped to bring much of the world's attention to what transpired in those parts no one was paying attention to. Although the place hardly existed, the fact is that La Realidad became a reality through repetition and the clever use of all media.

Around that same time, faced by the onslaught of digital barbarians who were willing to engage

in what was considered a most despicable of practices -manipulating images of reality in their computers- photographers, editors and not few critics, started to rally around the notion that the "reality of the image" and thus photography had to be saved from any digital assault. The representation of "Reality" (with a capital R) had to be defended at all costs.

Documentary photographers were for the most part at the center core of those arguing against all forms of digital representation. It was considered in some quarters as the root of all evil, which eventually would erode the credibility of the photographic image.

Symposia and panel discussions were organized with photographers, editors and publishers of major publications, who would try to shame each other into acceptance as to what constituted an acceptable practice and what was not. (It is fascinating to observe how fast all the trappings of an inquisitorial practice can be erected.) It was determined for instance that images had to be labeled clearly to separate those that had suffered an alteration from those that were "pure" i.e. not modified (whatever that meant).
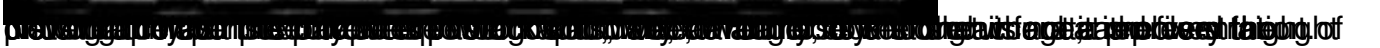
Since I produced one of the earliest bodies of digital work, and I did not particularly care to have any "Inquisition" pass judgment on my integrity, I devised a solution that offered two dates for all those images which had been altered by me in the computer. The day when the basic image was taken (on film at the time) and when the image had subsequently been altered in the computer. Thus, you had a guide if something had been altered in the computer by observing if I offered two dates or solely one. People would actually go around my exhibitions trying to guess if something had been done to the picture or not, and then looking at the dates.

In order to avoid any sort of manipulation with the photographic image, codes of "ethics" were drawn up using arguments based themselves on every sort of manipulation using words and ideas in very questionable ways.

The central distortion was that all the other media (written word, audio, video) were considered apparently less prone to the dangers of manipulation than those posed by photography. To extract a few minutes from an hour of audiotape or from a video interview was seen as a legitimate activity by such journalists. However if a photographer took an equivalent action, for instance that of deleting a pack of cigarettes or a telephone pole from a picture, he or she had incurred in a major sin. Never mind that by framing a picture differently at the time of making it, one could obviate the unfortunate telephone pole, without being taken to task for manipulating the representation of reality. After all a photograph had always been a proof of reality, was it not? Now it turns out The New York Times, in a very interesting article of January 13th, has just denounced CBS and their news program for inserting their own CBS logo on top of the NBC one that appears in real life in Times Sq. They did so during a live transmission at the time of the New Year celebrations in New York. The fact is that the genie of altering reality has been brought out of the bottle and nothing, I believe, will make it possible to be returned again to whence it came from, regardless if this applies to still or motion pictures.

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