

Do not touch

Written by Pedro Meyer



By now I have heard so many arguments about the intrinsic advantage of the "real" gallery space over the internet variant, that I find it deserves looking into in more detail. One recurrent theme that comes up is the idea related to touching photographs.

As there are many sides to this issue, I will arbitrarily start by looking at the sensorial nature that is being allegedly lost. I wonder when it was the last time that anyone reading this was allowed to "touch" any of the pictures in a traditional gallery or museum. To the best of my knowledge photographs are for the most part protected under glass or acrylic when exhibited in such spaces; or when one is invited to view a print that is not mounted, out come a pair of white

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cotton gloves to avoid coming into direct contact with the photograph. So obviously there are definite boundaries to this issue of touching which always seem to be forgotten.

Not all photographic images we get to look at are in the form of prints. There are also the transparencies or slides mounted on cardboard or plastic; or we have the negatives (color or black and white) mostly to be seen through a protective envelope. In a very strict sense, in none of these instances we get to actually touch the image. What we do touch, if at all, is the support or strata on which the image is deposited. The image is obviously not something that our fingers can wander across. The image as such only takes a physical reality within our brain cells.

This actually is a very interesting notion, because if we can never touch an image in it's present analogic iteration, what is all the fuss about when it becomes digital? The idea that because it is now digital it becomes an untouchable presentation is actually not the case. Not because it is "touchable", because it isn't, but because it was never the case before either. In other words, there has been no real change, we are just touching different things, different strata. That on which an image is deposited.

For instance, instead of a frame we now have a monitor. In both instances the image is below a protective surface, be that glass or plastic. We can print an image today much as we could yesterday. When the photograph is made with a digital camera, the electronic file is obviously not something that I can touch, but then neither is a negative. Or one would imagine that you never want to touch your negatives, even if you could just because the strata allows that to happen. Which leads us to wonder why all this nostalgia about touching, when to begin with, everything we are taught to do with pictures is about "not touching". Do not touch the negative, the slides, the prints. All for good measure of course, but in fact it is all about not touching. So now that we have the means to actually work with images without having to worry about our direct physical contact, the first thing that so many bring up is this longing for a sensorial contact which never existed in the first place.

Today the image is as much under "glass" (monitor) as when the thing hung framed on the wall. However there is one very important advantage to the digital image when seen on a screen: it is back lit. The actual tonal range that a photograph can offer when viewed on the computer screen is larger than when the same image is printed out on paper. The same thing happens when you view a transparency on a light box, and then compare it to the print made from that same photograph. The first always looks to have more depth to it.

However let me introduce a new concept into this equation. The longing to touch an image can actually be done in ways never ever thought possible before. Today, when I have a digital photograph up on the screen, I as a photographer can with the aid of my mouse, or stylus, touch and transform every single pixel of the image, in ways that have no correlation to any previous experience. I certainly never had the tools to touch every single grain within a traditional photograph.

The action of transferring the pressure from my finger on to any portion of the image has no parallel in chemical based photography. I can darken a single pixel if I want to, by just placing the right amount of pressure -with the chosen tool to do so- through the use of my fingers.

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Nothing is better than a good old-fashioned "Do not touch" sign. As the saying is, "Do not touch the sign." <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/aug/09/august-in-the>