

Brief History of a Heretic

Written by Benjamin Mayer-Foulkes



Now I remember my first photo: a little black lamb that had been born from a white sheep. In 1947, I was walking in the valley in La Marquesa with my first camera, a Brownie. I set about watching a sheep that was in labor; and I could not believe my eyes as I saw how it delivered a little black creature. I got my camera ready and I shot that little black lamb that was stumbling before me.

With Heresies, Pedro Meyer ceases to be a photographer known for merely 400 images. Even though these few hundred photos have provided the solid foundation of his prestige, there has been a significant disparity between his production and his published work. He has even become accustomed not to ask his admirers how many of his images they remember. The entire corpus of his work today comprises over 300,000 photos. The discrepancy between 400 and 300,000 is not only immense, it is enigmatic. Pedro himself is pressed by the question: “So why did I take so many photographs, if I didn't even exhibit them?”

“I am a camera-man,” Pedro concludes. From an early age, photography has been a permanent presence in his life. As he says: “At certain moments of intense personal grief, capturing images was for me the only way to try to comprehend later what was happening.” Photography has been the most important organ in Pedro Meyer's imaginary body, his very skin: it has given structure to his persona, it has sheltered him, it has made his perceptions possible, it has encouraged his contact with others, and it has sustained his powers of articulation. In turn, this intimate epidermis has been shielded, regenerated, strengthened, extended and enhanced by a most potent prosthesis: digital imaging.

Meyer was the buyer of the first Apple computer sold in Mexico. When he switched it on, his life changed forever; he found the implications of information technology immediately obvious and desirable. We know of the many years Pedro has spent advocating digital photography and pitting himself against others who were against it; yet the virulence of the struggle only becomes clear when we take into account its religious undertow. For the digital mode is much more than a new technology: the transition from analog to digital is correlative to the radical rupture of a certain theistic order. The displacement of hierarchy by network, the substitution of unidirectional transmission with interactivity, and the shift from unity to multiplicity all presuppose leaving behind a certain theo-logic according to which a central force, in itself absolute, gives rise to a series of derivate terms ("copies", for instance), ever more unfaithful to their source.

In the development of his *Heresies* retrospective, the digital interface allowed Pedro to go beyond the traditional opposition between the private and the public, the feasible and the unfeasible, allowing for the display of that formidable skin fostered by his person for so many decades and mobilized by an inner impulse (whose ultimate capacity is decide) even more than by a simple desire to "communicate". Through *Heresies* the photographic apparatus, continuously present in his earlier family and personal life, mutated into a complex device capable of addressing an indeterminate number of persons with no common spatial or temporal coordinates.

That is why *Heresies* is no definitive ordering of a rich creative career. Its temporality does not correspond to a history (that would reveal a past truth), but rather to the promise of a realization always yet to come. To observe Meyer's images is to invoke the retroactivity of a future understanding of which we lack in the present. Thus, *Heresies* operates with the genre of the retrospective what has already happened in our critical age to the self-portrait and the autobiography, forms which can be seen to destroy precisely what they claim to represent. And just as the subject of the unconscious is really the residue left behind by the representation and writing of self, so too the substance of *Heresies* is the remainder of the traditional rhetoric of the retrospective—the prospective of a work and a life always to come...

Of all the tales I've heard from Pedro, none seems to condense so plainly and precisely the drive common to his life and work than the recollection of his first photo (the epigraph to the present text), a print that has gone missing and therefore has not been filed in the Heresies data base. This first portrait by Pedro, in whose later work so many portraits and self-portraits can be found, can also be considered as his first self-portrait.

For Pedro says that he has always felt like an outsider. When he attended a Marist Catholic school, he was only one of five Jewish children among seven hundred pupils; required to attend catechism, he took along his own readings: the first book he chose, *The Three Musketeers*, was prohibited. Later, he was sent to a military academy in the United States, where he refused to march carrying a rifle, for it seemed "utterly stupid" to him; when all of his fellow cadets graduated as officials, he graduated as a private. And when he was thirteen or fourteen years old, Gerhard Herzog, a dear friend of his father's, gave Pedro a camera with which he produced his first contact strips; later, when at thirty-eight he announced that he had decided to dedicate himself professionally to photography, his father objected and suffered a severe attack of vertigo; he wished for his son to make his living doing something more "serious" that would guarantee a proper standard of living for his family—yet it was precisely Gerhard who persuaded his old friend that prospects were not so gloomy after all...

Yet Pedro does not simply remain at odds: at once he identifies with the black sheep and realizes the photogram... As in each of those hundreds of thousands of later occasions, on this first opportunity his glance behind the lens (situated on the exterior perimeter of the scene of that bucolic maternity) is set at the very location at which his father was always to be found—now an exile, now a traveller. Rhizome of that luminous dermal film that from then on would outfit the persona of Pedro (in the presence and absence of his father, as well as beyond), whose personal and professional breadth would become ever greater, to the point of reaching the remarkable scale of endeavors such as *ZoneZero* and *Heresies*, and capable of corroding the very foundations of the photographic status quo of his time.

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Diaphanous skin that Pedro will have always insisted on sharing with others through his support of photography, photographers, and photographing, not merely as a technical, artistic, social, economic or political activity, but rather as an existential gamble. Thanks to lens and screen, that old black sheep has transmuted into the wizard of Coyoacán that today presides that open horizon which is www.pedromeyer.com.



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NOTE: The present text condenses some of the ideas contained in my text “*Black. Sheep. Wizard*”, the introductory essay of the Heresies volume (Lunweg, Barcelona, 2008), which forms part of the wider Heresies project.

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