

The little red plane



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by Pedro Meyer

The engine roars as the hand made airplane built out of recycled CocaCola parts flies over the sky while the sun starts to settle over the horizon. Who said that such a plane could not fly? If we want to, as all children prove to us on a daily basis, any plane can do so, you only need a bit of imagination. My six year old said: "this plane will only fly as long as your brain is alive".

Yes, we want to make a little plane, made by hand, take off and move swiftly through the sky, much as our imagination does. All poor countries in the world recycle many materials because there is a need to do so, more than the romantic notion in the first world that recycling is done for enviromental reasons. None-the-less we can still feel inspired by the fantasy that must have gone into its making, the genius of the man who makes and sells them in the local market.

But then I also find huge talent among those people who designed the software that allowed me to place that little plane above the clouds? (I wonder if airlines create their advertising pictures like this as well?) or the computer or camera maker who provided me with the tools with which to put together all of these pieces in order for me to keep "my brain alive".

I am not a romantic who considers all hand made objects to be ideal where as machine made products would be the source of all evil. There is art and there is passion at both ends of this spectrum. When I write about cameras or printers or other such machine made products, I can also see the creative genius of a lot of people involved in their production, we need not feel sorry for ourselves because we are surrounded by a world of products and endless choices. It's all how we use these things that determines their usefulness and our possible relation to them.

Now some cameras of course can also be hand made (pin hole cameras), and they deliver without doubt some very wonderful images as we have shown here in ZoneZero, but for others, their creative needs require that we move beyond what such hand made devices can delive, they need other tools. This brings us to the present when we are confronted with many decision of using, or not, film-less cameras and if and when to enter the digital age through the front door.

So what are we to do?

Canon just announced its new G2 camera with 4 megapixels, Nikon came out with its D1x with six megapixels, and so one camera manufacturer after the other is increasing the power of their new offerings coming up with ever greater image definition as well as better colors. Aside from the numerous specifications that change from one model camera to the other, the megapixel race is on. It seems that every six months someone is adding about one million new pixels to what was offered before.

The question most often heard these days, is centered around when is the right time to buy a digital camera. No one wants to be stuck with an older model after having just purchased the latest, thinking it was the best option available (at that time), and certainly not paying today's prices for yesterday's technology.

As with so many things in these ever changing times, we also have to give some serious thought to how our traditional way of thinking might need to change with regard to how we decide to buy equipment.

Here are a few tips to consider:

1- Our film based cameras—for the most part—were instruments that had a useful life span upwards of twenty years. Digital cameras are going to be useful for no more than five or six years. Even if you take the greatest care of the camera, the technological advances are going to render them obsolete within a short time frame. Just look around at your computers and observe how long their life span has been. Digital cameras have a life span not that different to your computers.

2- Don't get greedy! What you save on film is going to pay for your digital camera within the time of its useful life or even earlier (depending on how much you photograph). So, if the camera is rendered obsolete and thus worth very little, or nothing, towards the end of its technical life, why give it a second thought when the camera has more than paid its way.

3- You don't need to change your camera with every new generation that comes out any more

than you need to buy a computer with every new edition that is brought to market. Upgrade only in relation to your needs, in other words, if you are going to make pictures mainly for the internet, you would hardly need a 4 million megapixel camera. If you are going to make high quality prints then you benefit enormously from having larger files. The bigger the better! It's quite obvious, the more information captured, the richer will be the detail in your image.

4- As with computers, the analogy extends to the buying cycle as well. With every new generation of cameras, there are price reductions for the previous models. Don't forget there are also friends who want to sell their previous camera models, from them you can buy a good used camera. Hey, some people even give them away at this point (remember they are paid for at this stage from the saving of not using film and needing to make prints to view them).

5- Some camera owners choose to donate their old equipment for a tax write off (in the USA). Your local school or institution can easily set up a donation center for such equipment, and thus bring such cameras to the hands of children who can then get some very good mileage out of them.

6- Remember, that the day you purchased the latest camera, it was already obsolete. Just think about it, the research labs and manufacturing process involved did not start the day before your latest camera was brought to the store you buy from. The time frame is about 18 months from inception of ideas to the moment that a camera is actually available to the consumer. So brace yourself with the notion that your wonderful new instrument, is being rendered obsolete today by yet another camera that is going through some stage of the production process for the next model that will be brought to market 18 months from now. The stronger the competition gets, the faster these production and innovation cycles become.

7- The very definition of what a still picture camera is, has eroded. Today you can have your Palm Pilot take pictures, or you can make photographs with your video camera,. You can make 1 minute

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videos and record sound using your still picture camera. We are already seeing image recording devices in formats that were never within the realm of what a photographer thought possible other than in James Bond or other such action movies. So after all, what is a digital camera? Japan's Sanyo Electric, has a camera that will record either a full two hours of video or up to 11,000 still images onto a single storage disk. It's called the IDC-1000Z iDshot digital disk camera.

8- Just keep in mind, the instrument (the camera) is for a purpose. You need to define for yourself what your purpose is for owning such a camera. If you do so, it will help you a great deal in mapping out which camera is best for you and your goals. or even if you need a new one to begin with.

Allow me to share with you an example of what happens with my own decision making process. I buy new cameras because I need to know what is going on, given the work that I do in this field. No guilt there to keep changing, is there? And with the money I save from not using film anymore the get amortized in no time.

With the appearance of each new camera generation, I have three groups of customers for my older models. My wife gets first choice and gets them for free if she wants one; relatives, friends and coworkers are the second group of possible candidates for my last year models, they always get real bargains. Some cameras I keep for the "in house museum" (which is a filing cabinet full of stuff) to observe how things have changed over the years, and then some of the more basic models, I just give away to my child's school, as they can use them without too much effort.

My old film based cameras M6 Leicas or Hasselblad, belong to another era, they have not much in common with the new digital cameras from an emotional and technical point of view. These new digital models, at least for the time being, are more or less like disposable units with a short life span. The Leicas I will be able to bequeath to my children, and provided there is still film around at the time, something that is not a given, they still will be able to make pic-

tures with them. What I am most certain of is that our present day digital cameras 20 years hence, will just be interesting devices of "how it was then" and nothing much to bequeath there. My first digital Canon still picture camera (ca.1984) already belongs to such a category, there is no easy way to even get the files off the camera, aside from the special batteries that no longer work.

In spite of all this, I would not like to turn the clock back by a minute, I thoroughly enjoy the digital cameras and how they work, and what they allow me to do creatively, that in the end I find should be the main inspiration in order to pursue any digital explorations.

If I discovered that I could not do a lot of better and more satisfactory work using digital technology, I would certainly not pursue it. The novelty factor is only good for the first few days, after which, if the creative juices are not flowing unconstrained, the effort is really not worth pursuing.

The river of family pictures has never flowed as intensely as in this digital age, pictures criss-cross the planet in every which way. Two constants always remain, children always look cute, and women rarely like their own images!

I have taken more pictures in the recent past than ever before, the good or great ones, are and will surely remain few and far between. But like with some one who draws, the more you draw, the more skillful you become. The more pictures I take the larger the pool of images I have with which to evaluate how my intentions have developed (no pun intended). In short, the old adage that "practice maketh perfect" can today be accomplished with greater ease than ever before, with the cost of producing images coming down to almost zero I believe we have a very good incentive to create a lot of new work.

With all this in mind, today is as good a time as any to decide on your new camera. Interestingly enough the same logic as described earlier with respect to cameras can be applied to printers as well.

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Héctor García, a very well respected photojournalist in Mexico, whose work we are presenting today here in ZoneZero, has for the first time taped interviews giving some background information on his better known pictures. These images have been widely published and exhibited, but only now do we have the tools with which to make such information available in a public space. Aside from the historical importance to have these audio tapes, we want to point out the significance of having access to such new ways of delivery at all.

I was asked to participate in a limited edition book that is being prepared as a homage to Héctor García's career, the artists participating are not all photographers, however we were all requested to take one of Héctor's pictures and manipulate it as we saw fit. Some will do paintings, others will prepare drawings and so on. I chose to do a new photograph.

I selected an image Héctor García made in 1960 of David Alfaro Siqueiros, [one of Mexico's three great muralists – Diego Rivera and Orozco being the other two], while he was behind bars as a political prisoner.

The new image I created replaced the background within the jail, with a political rally of students from the University in 1968 that I had taken at the time, that rally was to free yet other political prisoners who had been jailed then. In replacing the inside (the jail) with the image of the outside (the rally), Siqueiros can be seen as either behind the bars, or in front of them, with us viewers actually being the ones who end up being behind those very same bars.



David Alfaro Siqueiros, 1960

© Héctor García



Siqueiros no estaba en la carcel © Pedro Meyer 2001

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The picture published by Héctor García was actually cropped a bit, but I got access to the original file which is the one I used, it had the bars being slightly extended within the image

I have often asked myself how political prisoners managed to survive being jailed for prolonged periods of time. From what I have read, I found that it has always been their ability to transcend the moment thinking of themselves as actually being free outside of prison. This image then attempted to recreate a non-photographic idea, the sense of freedom for someone who was a political prisoner

To be able to do so, I find, will in the long run, be one of the important contributions accomplished through digital photography. The representation of ideas that are not derived from an immediate physical reference, is powerful stuff.

It is also worthy of note, how a strictly documentary image, could be altered to give new meanings by just tweaking the content a bit. The novelty lies not so much in the fact that it can be done, but in our ever increased awareness of such a creative potential, only made possible today because it can be achieved with relative ease.

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