

A MAVERICK MANIFESTO FOR THE 21ST CENTURY PHOTOGRAPHER.



THE FIGITAL REVOLUTION

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THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION

**a MAVERICK MANIFESTO FOR THE 21ST CENTURY
PHOTOGRAPHER**

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The Figital Revolution

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THE DIGITAL LIE, OR WHY YOU STILL SUCK

Okay folks, it's time once and for all to explode the myth. Digital is *easy*, right? It's photographic magic! Push a button and the technology does the rest! At least, that's what the industry wants everyone to believe, and they've done a pretty good job convincing us.

Problem is, even with the greatest, most cutting-edge technology available on the market today- and there's some pretty amazing stuff out there- digital is not only not magic, a lot of the time it isn't even easy.

Now I know what you're thinking. Sure, digital *has* transformed the industry, and no, we're not arguing that it hasn't vastly improved large-scale printing or made processing your own color work way, *way* easier, or a lot of other really cool things. But.

Does digital magically transform Jo Schmo into Ansel? Does it feed the homeless and cure the sick and eliminate flare?

No. You've been fed a lie and that's why most photographers still suck, regardless of that Super-Duper Gold-plated 85 Mega-Pixel monstrosity hanging around their neck for all to see.

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Fact is, we don't have a bone to pick with digital. We have a bone to pick with the *industry*. That's where the Figital Revolution comes in. Since when did we buy the line that we have to choose up sides? "Pick a team!!" The photo mags all cry, "Are you an old-school traditionalist? A progressive proponent of the 'light room'?" Ever since digital became available to the mainstream we've been assaulted with a barrage of misinformation that wrongly informs us we have to choose up sides- now.

At the risk of sounding like Mr. Rogers, we *can* all get along, and not only that we should. Why? Because we can have the best of both worlds. We *don't* have to decide. It makes life harder (read: more expensive) for the companies who produce our products, who'd like nothing better than to have, say, three papers available -max- and every camera be manditorily upgraded every fifteen minutes or so, but, you know, tough shit.

So read on, comrade! This is where things get interesting.



WHY IS FILM ON LIFE SUPPORT?

Once upon a time, and not so very long ago, digital was synonymous with The Dark Side for the photographic community. Remember? (“Luke- buy the upgrade Luke!”)

Boy, we’ve come a long way since then. Today of course, only a few short years later, we’ve done a flip-flop: digital is the rule and silver is the exception. Now, has technology evolved *so* quickly that film has been utterly eclipsed by the complete and total superiority of digital in every way, shape, and form? Absolutely not.

What *has* happened is a strategic move on the part of the photographic industry. Once camera-producing companies made the realization that digital could be endlessly upgraded year after year, they did the math and said “*Hey...* digital really is better!” Well, better for business, sure. After all, previously camera companies were a one-hit acquisition: a camera, a lens, and then, bye bye! Remember how the original Volkswagen Beetle was such a good car it basically put itself out of business? The car ran *too* well, as in: no repeat customers. Similarly, if a camera manufacturer made

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a *really* good system, the client might never come back... (Horrors- a satisfied customer!)

Well, that sad situation has certainly been rectified, hasn't it? Like the old joke about the weather- with the current digital climate, if you don't need new technology now then just wait a minute. Greed with a capital "G" has caused companies to hurtle forward into new frontiers of digital— more resolution! Easier to use! Still more resolution! Features you'll never need! Still, yet, now, even MORE resolution!— with staggering sums of money footing the bill for all the marketing needed to convince you that no, you cannot *possibly* get along without this, either.

Never mind that we're rapidly approaching differences in printer resolution so subtle as to be virtually undetectable ... never mind that software is released with known bugs (shh! Don't say anything!) just because we need something to sell at the next photo convention...Never mind that digital papers are all starting to look disturbingly similar...

So is digital better than film? No. Digital is *different* than film.

And when we say different, we don't mean the "Oh isn't that *different*?" one says in reaction to the mauve hand-knit sweater you got from Aunt

Petunia, we mean *good* different. That is to say, especially when we're talking about the options available to an artist in the creation of his or her work, choice is simply, and without question, an inherently positive thing.

But tell that to the industry, because they're sure as shit not hearing it. As we are all aware, film is on life support. It makes sense, perhaps, from a dollars-and-cents point of view, and from a digital-as-radioactive-reptile-taking-over-the-world point of view, but let's look at it another way. When working with a traditional crotchety old camera, how many film options do you have? At one time the answer to that question was over a hundred; and even today, with film sales in free-fall, that answer is still *dozens*. Sharp films, grainy films, films with every conceivable tonal range and color sensitivity.

On the other hand, when you buy your nifty new digital camera, how many "film" options do you have?

One.

Yup- as in: "sensor chosen for you by the manufacturer," which by the way isn't changeable- unless, of course you (all together now) UPGRADE!!

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Is this what we really want? Who is working for who around here anyway? You may just be surprised to find out.

A BILL OF GOODS: THE PHOTO-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

Okay, time for a Kumbayah moment. Let's think back to the time when the photographic world was a community. Remember that? Back then, things seemed a lot more, well, *balanced*. The photographers and the companies who made the technology and materials were all pieces of one great big, juicy, photographic pie.

Today, it feels more and more like the photographers are the pie, and the Photo-Industrial Complex is the Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum giant back for another enormous helping. And this speaks to the evil, greedy side of the amazing new technology- because folks, someday the pie is gong to run out. I mean, we give and we give...Dutifully, we attend the conventions, fork over the cash or commit ourselves to indentured servitude for all that great new technology. (As some former professors of ours liked to rightly point out- if you can't throw a hundred dollar bill out the window of your car, you should forget being a photographer. So, for digital? Maybe we should make it an even thousand.) And for all that, what do we get in return these days? Community? We're all in this together?

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Nope. We get stupid-easy. We get “even your dog can do it!” marketing. We get the incredible disappearing client, who buys the lie that there ain’t nothin’ to it, and promptly proceeds to fuck it completely up, all by themselves.

Talk to any lab owner, any wedding or portrait or product photographer, any studio. Ask them whether the advent of digital has helped or hurt their bottom line. (I bet you can guess!)

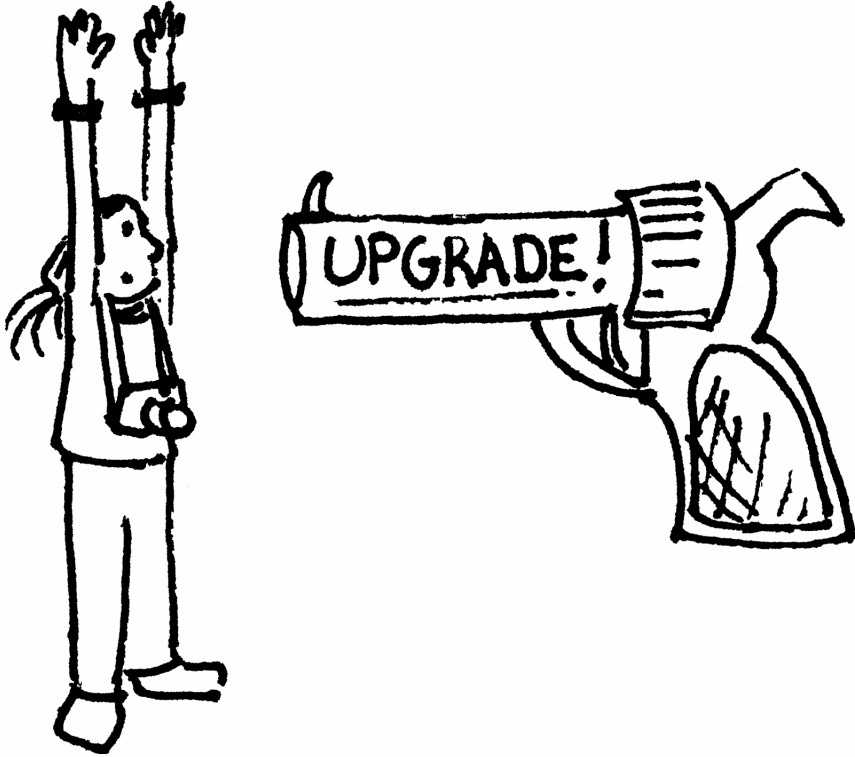
Now, nobody is arguing that people shouldn’t be able to print their own snaps at home, or that amateur photographers shouldn’t be encouraged to become artists or pros or prima ballerinas if they want to. And, contrary to our commie-pinko lingo, we’re not even arguing that the companies aren’t entitled to make a decent living, like everybody else. No, the problem is that the companies want to have their cake and eat it too. They’ve not *only* made the studios and pros slaves to the next big, new \$30-Thousand-Dollar-Whatever and subsequent infinite upgrades...as if that weren’t bad enough, coupled with the aggressive new Push-Here-Dummy marketing, they’re putting them out of work at the same time.

Incredible. Shortsighted. But true. By working with companies that have this attitude, we are effectively cutting our own throats in the long run. At the risk of sounding old fart-ish, it does seem that at one time the companies producing photo technology and supplies worked for us- today we work for them.

But wait, there's more.

Crappy Paper, Buggy Software, and MEANINGLESS Upgrades

The honeymoon is over.



In the beginning, digital made a lot of promises, brought us lots of candy and flowers, whispered sweet nothings in our ears. No longer would we be limited to printing on a relatively small handful of classic darkroom papers, along with someone else's idea of what a perfect tonal range was. With the advent of digital printing, a wonderful period of Wild West style

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experimentation in the realm of printing occurred: not just printing on coated papers or uncoated papers, but metal, fabric, and even ceramic...you name it. The sky was the limit.

Unfortunately, research and development is *expensive*. And, inevitably, there was a large demand for the familiar from many photographers. A good recent example is the search for a digital paper that would faithfully reproduce the look of a classic, f-surface, fiber-based, darkroom paper. First one company developed it, then another had it, and another. Now, if you don't have an f-surface, classic-looking, fiber-based darkroom resembling paper, you are, like, *so* last week. Does this remind anyone of high school?

And just like high school, homogenization is rewarded. Change is bad, different is avoided and choice is not an option. (And black is white, up is down and war is peace. Long Live Big Brother!)

It is in this sheep-like fashion that we find ourselves- hey!- back to a relatively small handful of classic darkroom-style papers! Déjà vu.

What, you may ask, is the single largest distinguishing factor among these different digital printing choices? In fact, it's the advertising. Which is

funny. It's like saying "Our toasted "O" cereal is better than your toasted "O" cereal!!" I mean, aside from which Olympic athlete or cartoon character they put in the commercial, how different can they *really* be? And, just like the generic brand you find at the supermarket, in many cases there is quite literally NO DIFFERENCE AT ALL.

That's right- it's called "rebranding," it's rampant today in the world of digital papers, and if you're unfamiliar with the phenomenon prepare to be pissed. It works like this: Company A wants to expand their product line and increase their share of the market, but R and D is expensive. So what do they do instead of actually developing a new paper? Company A buys some of Company B's paper, slaps a new name on it, and both companies agree not to tell anyone: *it's the exact same paper*.

Rebranding benefits both companies involved- Company A expands their product line in the interest of selling more paper and Company B... sells more paper. Who loses? You do. Instead of actual product development, you get deception. Instead of actual choice, you get simulated choice. The marketplace is saturated with paper but, we wonder- why does everything look the *same*? Now you know. The companies only want you to *think*

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you have a choice, rather than actually provide you with one. (All hail Big Brother!)

One area where companies *have* to foot the bill for research and development is software. But don't worry, they've found some ways around that too. One way is to make *you* pay for it before they actually do it.

Huh? Think of it this way: have you ever bought some software that didn't work the way it was supposed to? And when you called up to complain were told not to worry, there was a "patch" on the way that would make it work and should be available in, oh, say, three months? Now, pardon us for saying so, but this seems a little like buying a film and finding out it doesn't record any red. "Oh don't worry! The film will have a beautiful red in it once the upgrade is added in three months!"

Is there some reason the software gets released before it's ready? When it, in fact, has *known* bugs in it? Some reason they can take our money now for a product that won't work until one- or a series- of "fix-it" patches are added months down the line? Why not simply wait to release the product until it *works*, after all?

Money of course. Here's where we're footing the bill for the R & D.

They've got our money, but have we gotten what we've been promised?

Um, no, they're still working on it.

And connected with the money reason is the photo convention season.



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So many of us unquestioningly line up for the photo shows in Las Vegas and New York so we can be told, “Here’s what you need- NOW!!” But if the companies don’t have a new product, or software, or upgrade to promote, they can’t tell us what we need now. Thus, there has developed a tremendous incentive every fall for the promotion of things we, in fact, do NOT need: homogenous papers (with new names!), software (with known bugs!), and “upgrades” that are all but meaningless.

THE BS EXPERT- CONSIDER THE SOURCE

To pull all this together the companies have some tried and true techniques to get you and your wallet to *their* booth. (After all, isn't that what this is really all about?) Chicks are always good. Half-naked chicks are better. *Totally* naked chicks with beer and free stuff is probably best of all, but we're not sure what all this has to do with photography...

Another good one is "the expert."

Consider this: we've all seen those commercials for highly questionable weight loss pills with names like "Anorexatrim." Did you ever notice how they inevitably have a "doctor" (or, failing that, the gaffer in a white coat), attesting to the absolute safety and utter necessity of this snake oil?

Well, we all have our motives, and I suppose if I were an intern with a med school bill rivaling the national debt, I would probably be at least *tempted* by the chance to escape my indentured servitude in one fell swoop, too.

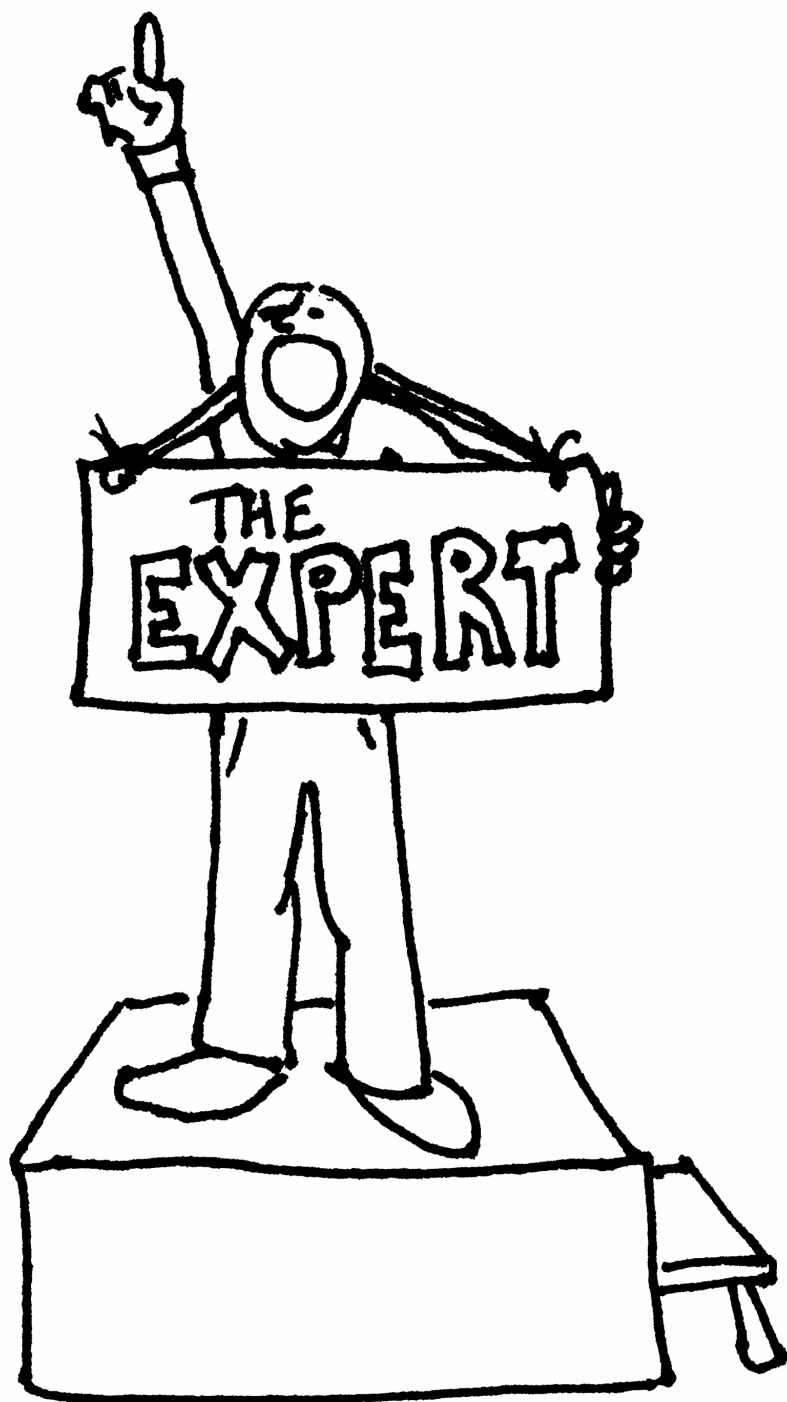
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The important point here is that, most intelligent people watching the commercial realize this. They don't *actually* think that a real, credible doctor is wholeheartedly endorsing this product. In fact, it's quite the opposite: the very fact that they *need* to show someone looking vaguely medical endorsing the product with such unreserved enthusiasm (which is, in itself, not an emotion I believe most doctors actually experience) tells you there's something fishy in Denmark, right?

Remember this the next time you run the gauntlet of "experts" at a photographic trade show.

But wait! you say, This is different! We're tampering with *tradition* here! True, since time immemorial photographers have benefited from a reciprocal relationship with the industry, receiving free product in exchange for innocent things like the rights to use a few images in advertising.

That's all well and good. And we're all for photographers getting things for free whenever possible- sure. The problem comes with the ever-expanding phenomenon of what we call the "BS Expert." You've seen this guy: he's THE EXPERT doing the portrait lighting demo at 2 o'clock at booth #47.



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Again, we'd like to think we're all fairly intelligent people here; we're not actually *surprised* when the "expert's" demonstration involves use of the product available for *sale* at Booth #47. What does surprise us is what Joe "Expert" is giving us, which is: a regurgitation of the sales pitch we heard from the company's rep. ten minutes ago.

Huh? Are there cue cards involved here? Are they holding a gun to his head? ("Tell zem about zee strobe... NOW!!!") No, it's just that Joe Expert has sold his soul for some free equipment, a free trip to the show, *and* the opportunity to be referred to as "Expert" before a jury of his peers, when in regular life he's known as Joe Average-Wedding-Photographer from Podunk, Nowhere. Spitting out the party line is easier, and safer, than giving a competent, real-world analysis of the product's strengths *and* flaws.

What we're really getting down to here is a Code of Ethics. Do we actually have to say this? Okay: Photographers? *You can't independently review a company that's sponsoring you.*

This goes for trade show demos, magazine reviews, web endorsements, and, yes, even the big, really famous photographers, who like free stuff as

much as the rest of us, and despite being a Johnny Big-Pants, aren't *necessarily* experts on whatever it is they're being compensated to talk about. Likewise, if a company uses your imagery in an advertisement, *it should have in some way involved the use of their product to make that image* (this is, unfortunately common practice too, as in: "Hey! Nice ad! I didn't know Edward Weston used digital!").

Folks, the photography community is incestuous enough as it is. We can't realistically expect the corporations not to try whatever works in the interest of higher sales, but as a community we need to be both more circumspect about who we accept as "the expert," as well as maintain our own integrity when it comes to talking about what products we use—whether we're being compensated in some way or not. We all know every product has its flaws, its drawbacks. We're only hurting ourselves if we pretend they don't exist. Talk about them. Be honest.

THE MYTHICAL DEFINITIVE PRINT

While we're on the subject of honesty, let's take a look at another favorite topic for trade shows, photo magazines, web sites and workshops: THE ANSWER.

It sounds good. It sells tickets, books and magazines. People will stand in line for THE ANSWER: whether "the answer" purports to solve the problems of your life or the problems of your digital workflow. We all have this need, deep down to believe "the answer" is simple, if only we could find someone who, if plied with enough money or Mohitos, would spill the beans and let us in on it.

We shouldn't be surprised. As humans, we often times want things to be as simple as an astrology reading, or a secret handshake or The Secret. We want it bad enough to fork over lots of perfectly good money and time in search of it. And photography as a medium has long capitalized on this desire, coupled with the misunderstanding of photography as *the easy* art form.

Thus, the repercussions of decades of aggressive "You push the button-we do the rest!!" advertising and our own wishful thinking have formed a

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lethal combination. Even though we all take for granted that everyone who owns a pencil isn't a writer, and that everyone who owns a knife isn't a chef, as a society we still can't seem to wrap our minds around the fact that *everyone who owns a camera isn't a photographer*.

Gasp! Yes, that's the *real* answer. We would venture to say that, as in any endeavor, creative or otherwise, exceptional photographers are not only born gifted, but have also spent many years in pursuit of their level of skill and accomplishment. It's not an old boy network, or a putting in your dues concept we're talking about here, but rather a fact that should be common sense: photography *isn't* easy; silver chemistry wasn't and neither is digital.

The idea that it *is*, is a lie perpetrated by the snake charmers and sword swallowers who would like to profit from your frustration. And with regard to digital workflow specifically, no formula exists for the perfect print.

Yes, I hate to rain on the money parade here, but in fact there is no magic formula, there is no button to press, no incantation to mutter while burning incense and waving severed chicken heads over your hard drive, no

ANSWER that will reliably deliver each and every image to a nirvana-like state of “definitive expressiveness.”

Are there elements we can all agree on? Basic ones, perhaps. Stuff like- before anything else reduce noise in your file. Or- optical resolution is better than interpolative resolution. But saying there is a definitive “perfect” workflow guaranteed to result in THE “Expressive Print” is sort of like saying there’s a “perfect” way to get to Times Square. There are so many variables inherent to the problem, that the question doesn’t really make any sense.

So it is with digital workflow. Every decision, every step along the way has a consequence. The path to the so-called “definitive print” is, in fact, going to be YOUR path, to YOUR definitive print- which may not be at all similar to Dick Avery’s path or Peter Parker’s path or Felix Unger’s path, to their respective definitive prints.

So the next time you see a workshop claiming: “Color Printing made E-Z!!” or a book teaching “Digital Printing for Complete Morons!” interpret it as the insult to your intelligence that it really is.

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Instead, step outside your comfort zone and take a workshop- read a book, visit a website- that encourages you to find *your own* vision for your workflow. Never forget, no matter how technical our medium may get, it is still, wonderfully, inevitably, a *creative process*. It may be frustrating, it may be painful, and you may end up with a few mysterious extra dents on the outside of your hard drive and/or forehead. But, what you come up with in the end won't be Mister E-Z's "definitive" print... it'll be all yours.

AT LEAST DIGITAL DOESN'T GIVE YOU CANCER

Digital Myth #47: Going digital solves everything. We can stop worrying, right guys? After all, if we give up the chemistry we can be kinder and gentler to our own bodies, (no more contact dermatitis/ nerve damage/ mysterious green neck fuzz) *plus* we can ditch the environmental guilt of all those chemicals going right down the drain day after day after day. Yay!

Come on.

The fact is- and this is common sense- there is NO magic bullet system that will leave no impact on your body and the environment. Instead of all the wonderful chemical side effects, photographers can now look forward to a whole host of other lovely-sounding disorders, from repetitive stress injury and carpal tunnel syndrome, to flicker-induced retinal damage. Sure, I suppose some folks would rather lose full use of their hands or eyes than get a brain tumor, but that's kind of like saying you're happy your house burned down, because that way it didn't get damaged in the earthquake. Either way, its sucksville. Either way, you're not making work anymore, and at the end of the day, that's all we care about.

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As for digital being “green,” sorry but we have to debunk this myth too. Mother Nature isn’t going to love us any more for the ever-accelerating, endless digital upgrades and the waste products generated by the production thereof, than she did for the endless disposal of film and silver paper chemistry. If anything, we’ve simply switched from one kind of disposability (film and paper) to another (camera and computer technology). Is it really preferable? Or are we talking earthquakes and house fires again?

The fact is, God has yet to reveal himself as a photographer, and therefore no process is going to be without its inherent downside, physically and environmentally. If we’re smart, however, we’ll maximize the things we do have: just as we know we should wear our good, nitrate-barrier gloves when using chemistry, we can use a really good chair and keyboard when working digitally so we aren’t turning ourselves into little hunchback trolls. Just as we know we should have reasonable, adequate darkroom ventilation to save our lungs, we need to get up from the monitor and walk around every thirty to forty minutes to save our eyes.

As for the environment? Recycle all your empty beer bottles and call it even.

WHY DO MOST PHOTO MAGAZINES SUCK?

Come on, admit it. You've wondered, haven't you? Why *do* most photo magazines suck? Once again we return to the root of all evil: advertising. No! No no no no...we mean money. Which is linked, of course, to advertising.

First off, consider the fact that you just about *never* see a slam review. You know, a real, slam-dunk, This-Product-Sucks-So-Bad-It-Should-Be-Renamed-Hoover type review. It's not that all the products out there these days are so inherently flawless and wonderful that they do our taxes and fold our socks when we're sleeping (see also: "Crappy Paper, Buggy Software and Meaningless Upgrades"). Nope. It's the advertising dollars, stupid! Every photo magazine we can think of is:

- a. desperate for money
- b. on the verge of bankruptcy most of the time
- c. not wanting to bite the hand that writes their checks
and therefore:
- d. in the right-hand pocket of the big corporations.

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Consequently, guess what the underlying, not-always-so subtle message is going to be? Buy, buy, buy!! Regardless of whether it's an actual product review, or an article on a photographer's work, rare indeed is the article that isn't motivated by the advertising dollars that can be procured to back it up. Given the choice between running an article about some really fascinating work someone is doing with, say, a camera he made from a Wheaties box, and the guy whose work reliably features misty rainbows and frolicking puppies, but who's working with the 45 Gigaplex Hassleslammer (coincidentally, the advertiser who is being approached to take the back cover), well, who do *you* think will win out?

This situation calls for the common sense rule we applied to photographers to be applied to our periodicals as well, which is, once again: *You can't independently review a company that's sponsoring you.* Got it?

Somehow, after all, the newspapers manage it, (well- some of them)- that invisible-but-real force field separating the journalism and editorial from the advertising. Is there some reason the magazines shouldn't give this a whirl? Oh yeah, money.

Perhaps this is one more sign that the expensive printed page of the photo mag is going the way of the dinosaur. It might be just as well, because freed from the burdens of heavy printing costs and overhead, this development could bring a fresh new infusion of honesty to the dialogue.

One can only hope that this development might also eradicate “suck-up syndrome.” You know, the endless parade of articles about The Big Guys that photo mags never seem to tire of, no matter how dusty their corpses get. Can you *really* get a lot out of *one more article* on Ansel Adams? The fact that, decades later, these magazines write as if Edward Weston was their fresh new discovery of the week would be funny, if it weren’t so sad.

Look, we all know these guys are/ were good. In many cases, they may be the reason we got into photography in the first place. And sure, occasionally we suppose the occasional Steichen or Avedon revelation might be just too pivotal not to let us all in on (Newsflash! Legendary Photographer #12 had sex with chickens! Maybe you should too!) but don’t we deserve more than the same old, same old, when we work in the world’s most widespread, popular, and dynamic medium? Come on. Stop catering to the happy-medium-amateur-asshole who wants to impress his friends with his coffee table reading selection (and we mean that with the

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highest degree of respect, mind you) when the rest of us are like plants dying for lack of water next to a swimming pool.

There's an awful lot more we could- and should- be talking about.

ON THE TRAIL OF THE ELUSIVE BLIND VAMPIRE PHOTOGRAPHER

In addition to the meaningless upgrades, and articles about long dead and dusty photographic icons, we can also add to the official list of distractions some actual technological developments that, in their best light represent good intentions run amuck, but at worst indicate yet another instance of greed-driven innovation. Photographers and companies alike can too easily find themselves mired in the realm of “Uh, do we *really* need this?”

Take auto-focus, for instance. Above the anguished howls of protest we can already hear emanating from the peanut gallery, we’d like to remind everyone what a recent phenomenon auto-focus actually is. Out of over 180 years of photographic history, auto-focus has been part of the picture for less than one-fifth that time. Don’t tell us nothing before 1977 was reliably sharp because we’d be forced to point out that your pants were on fire.

The funny thing is, like a lot of supposed technological “advances,” auto-focus does not represent a legitimate step forward for our medium, but rather- we would argue- a backward one. We know you too have

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cringed more than once to discover that your auto-focus picked the “wrong” element in your composition to render razor sharp- say, an unremarkable background Port-o-Potty- while blithely ignoring the three-horned moose in the foreground doing the Macarena that you were, in fact, trying to capture for posterity, and perhaps the National Enquirer.

Are we *really* all so hopeless, bumbling Jerry Lewis-style through the landscape, unable to turn a simple focus ring on a desired subject? Since when, we might ask, are photographers blind?

No doubt, there are good, legitimate uses for auto-focus. But unless you have a documented eye condition, or specialize in photographing hummingbirds playing floor hockey, we’re not buying the argument that you *need* this feature, and you shouldn’t either. Using the manual focus option is quieter, won’t zap up your batteries, and, very likely will give you more reliable, successful results. Try an experiment- turn off your auto-focus for a day. Instead of letting the digital camera determine what the exact point-of-focus of your image is, *you* decide. You may just decide that you’re not so blind after all.

And while we're on the subject of quasi-random bitching, we can't forget another well-intentioned phenomenon that has been overdone to the point of absurdity: the relentless pursuit of the archival. Perhaps because it is one more technologically-oriented element that we can divert ourselves obsessing about, photographers and the industry as a whole has a rather unhealthy obsession with living forever.

Once again, we can hear your howls of protest from here, so let's insert our disclaimer here: we are BIG proponents of archival. Huge. Do we do everything we can reasonably do to prolong the life of a given artwork? Yes. Truth be told, we've even been known to get a little obsessive about the matter ourselves... (acid-free Post-its anyone?) But- it is also important for us photographers, who tend to be a little more tightly wound, perhaps, than artists of other media (*what do they mean by that?? HMM?*) to also take a step back and realize that there is *no perfect solution*, and that the industry which has sprung up to provide us with the Fountain of Youth for our artworks is also fallible.

What? You heard us. Despite all those terrific numbers and charts and graphs discerning the perfect light level, most totally archival glue, matt board, storage boxes, hanging wire, and socks you should be wearing

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while handling the work, they don't necessarily tell you as much about the projected life of your artwork as it might seem. Test condition light levels are generally way lower than what we'd all likely agree is "normal" lighting... and do these tests take into account a multiplicity of actual real-world conditions? We're not talking about the morons who will decide to hang your work above the radiator in full sun next to the bathroom door- but more subtle variabilities that you as the artist can never fully predict or control: the occasional smoker, random air-borne pollutants, the inevitable cooking fumes and oils, those few stray sun rays, and even the most subtle humidity changes.

And lest we forget the money factor- frequently these official "tests" are underwritten by- yes!- the *corporations* whose products will eventually be touted by the "information" these tests provide, so once again we have a conflict of interest which calls into question the validity of the testimonial itself.

We don't know about you, but we're thinking the whole "live forever" thing is overrated. After all, vampires get to live forever, but in exchange they have to drink blood, never see daylight, and, perhaps worst of all,

stay way, WAY away from garlic. Indulging in, say, nachos at the water park is pretty much out of the question...

Every medium has it's own crew of museum cosmetologists and plastic surgeons at the ready to resolve the ongoing issues of art work evolution and decay: paintings periodically go through restretching, dirt-removal, pigment restoration, pitted marble sculptures are cleaned and repolished, and so on. From this we may cleverly discern that artworks all change- some faster than others- over time. Pollock included cigarette butts and other decaying detritus in his canvases that continue to haunt the nightmares of preservationists everywhere. So the fact is that *if your work is worth saving*, in a couple hundred years or so, the odds are good that there will be a crack team of art-doctors on the job. (Maybe we're just worried that our artworks won't be the ones deemed important enough for saving...)

A painter friend of ours who works extensively with resin once told us that he liked using such a decidedly un-archival material, precisely because it did change slowly over time. It's plastic after all: it yellows. It cracks. He admitted to never being sure exactly what it would do on a given piece, given enough time.

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“This way, the piece has a *life*,” he said. As do we all.

So, our advice is to accept the fact that someday the sun will go Supernova and all your works will disappear in a blinding flash along with the Mona Lisa, the Sistine Chapel Ceiling, every version of Dogs Playing Poker ever painted, and the rest of the planet. Accept that, while the experts can torture papers all they want in their synthetic microclimates, their projections are still going to be ideal scenario estimates- at best. We’re not relieving anyone of the burden of using good quality, stable materials, but we do think it is important to keep everything in perspective. Make the work you’re going to make and realize that, like everything, your work will have a *life*— a beginning, middle and an end. And like being able to have nachos at the water park, there’s something kind of nice about that.

NERD ALERT: WHY ARE ALL PHOTOGRAPHERS GEARHEADS?

You've noticed it, right? The almost complete and total surrender to geek-dom? The guy with three cameras around his neck... in the photo vest... taking pictures... *of the trade show?* Yikes.

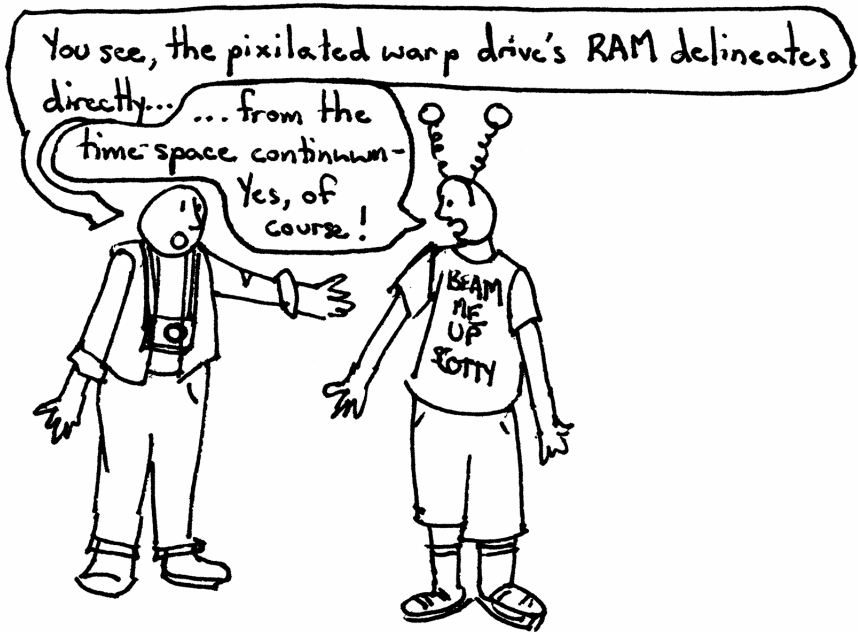


Photo Show... or Star Trek Convention
You decide.

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Get more than one photographer in a room and what do they talk about? Tech, tech, tech-tech-tech. On the other hand, eavesdrop on the conversation of a few painters, and are *they* talking about the *technology* of their art form? (“Dude! Check out the awesome new brush I just picked up! It’s optically tuned to produce a sharper stroke!”) Well, maybe. But they’re even *more* likely to be talking about something totally crazy, and utterly irrelevant like, idunno... content. I know! Nuts, right?

One reason is surely the fact that photography is more inextricably enmeshed with technology than any other major established art form. And, at least in the last two centuries, photography has also been the *most evolutionary* of those established art forms. I.e.: when was the last time painting or sculpture *evolved*- not thematically, not aesthetically, but technologically- in a meaningful way? We could, for example, point to the impact developments in pigment production had on the Impressionists, but how long ago was *that*?

By contrast of course, photographic technology has undergone a series of watershed changes within our lifetimes. By its very nature, and especially nowadays, photography is going to be channeling our inner geek, right? It’s inherent to our medium, and comes with the territory, yes?

Well... sort of.

Personally, we're big proponents of what we like to call the Artistic Trinity. Briefly stated, this is to say that all art is composed of three irreducible components: the *aesthetic*, the *technical* and the *conceptual*. Without fail- we'd assert- every great work of art is supported by a deft combination of these three elements working together toward the end product. Like an easel- or a tripod if you prefer- a work cannot stand on its own without meaningful support from each of the three elements.

Now, technology we photographers have down... aesthetics (or, to most folks, the study of "is it pretty?") isn't so terribly intimidating... but *concept*? "Holy crap- I made this thing and I have no fucking clue what it's about! What does that say about *me*!? Quick- let's talk about ink density!"

So, the sinister underbelly of all this glorious nerdiness is that it provides a convenient smokescreen behind which photographers can hide from that scary third component without which an aspiring artwork cannot stand: concept. The unspoken inverse law of photography is that the more expert

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you are at the technological, the more you are given tacit permission from your peers to ignore the conceptual.



The Artistic Trinity

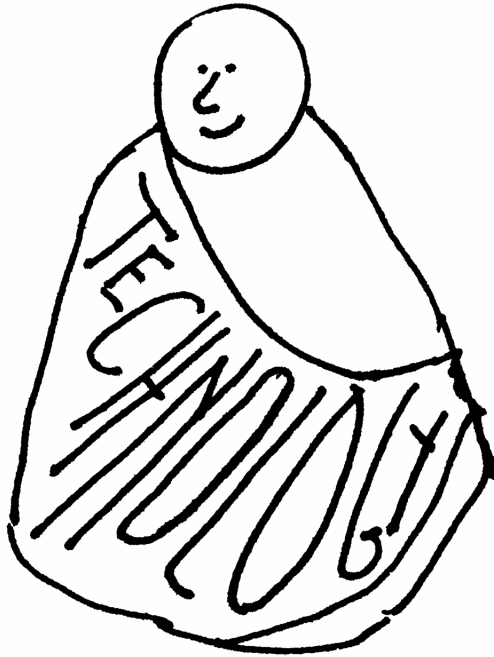
However, we'd argue that "Conceptual" isn't nearly as scary as it first appears. Just like the realms of technology and aesthetics, "conceptual" has its own lingo. Think of it like learning a foreign language- sure, you're going to feel stupid sometimes, but that comes with the process of stretching yourself and learning something new. You didn't let the learning curve stop you from setting up your first bathroom darkroom, or buying your first digital camera, did you? This is just like that.

So, far be it from us to try to rob photography of its long-standing tradition of geek-dom. Have a field day, if you want to. You certainly deserve to after mortgaging your house to pick up that insanely beautiful lens you've been coveting. Just remember, there is *so very much more* to photography. You can rub that lens with a cloth diaper and keep it in a satin box, but at the end of the day that Zeiss or Schneider is only as valuable as your ability to use it and create something that maybe no one has ever seen or thought about in quite that particular way before- and yes, we're talking concept. We're talking Art with a capital "A."

Photographic technology is mind-numbingly frustrating and purely amazing all at once. The fact that photographers are geeks is one of the salient reasons we're good at what we do. But the next time you find

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yourself ready to don the pocketed vest and talk about nothing but dot-gain at that three-hour cocktail party, just remember, Honey, denial ain't just a river in Egypt. The photo-security blanket may insulate you from some temporary, soul-searching discomfort, but eventually, if left unchecked, will behave like a slithering python and swallow your work up whole.



The Photo Security Blanket

WHAT YOU DON'T LEARN IN ART SCHOOL

So how do you learn to speak “Concept” anyway? Contrary to popular opinion, learning the lingo won’t turn you into an effete, chain-smoking art school student whose work is composed primarily of crushed Cheetos arranged in delicate circles and resolutely unmarketable. No, it takes a crack team of ivory-tower professors to do that.

For that matter, how does one learn *anything*? There are a wide variety of paths that one can follow, and one of the first to come to mind is art school.

Between us we have quite a bit of accumulated art school experience—from the impractically artsy, to the overly-practical techie, to the postmodern “But why are you photographing *at all*?” weirdness. One thing we can say unequivocally about them all: Mark Twain was right. School is great, just never let it interfere with your education.

And for once we’re being more sincere than snide, here. Art school is a big, bloated, bizarre phenomenon that makes the most sense to you when you’re buried up to your neck in it. Whether you’re taking a simple weekend workshop, or going for the full-blown B or MFA kahuna, the

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important thing to remember is this: what do I need to get out of this experience? And make sure you get it.

One thing that should be obvious, but isn't, is the fact that no one source is sufficient. Not only are workshops, art school programs, books, magazines or private study mentors not created equal, even the best of them aren't going to present you with the whole picture. Only you can collect the pieces and put them together.

Remember the BS expert? Remember the self-interested corporations? Ivory tower programs and Profs or workshop teachers aren't immune to the influences of the industry that can come between you and the untrammelled truth. They're human like the rest of us. They like naked chicks and free stuff and being the BS expert as much as any of us. Most of all, they like having a job, and a steady influx of students assures them of that. So whether they know the answer to your question or not, it's practically part of their job description to be sure *you* think they do.

So don't be surprised if you can't get your sum total education all in one place. Don't be surprised if art school can't teach you about really cutting edge tech, or how to run a studio, because it simply isn't their area of

expertise- teaching class is. But they can teach you concept lingo like it's going out of style.

Don't be surprised if that weekend warrior workshop you take has too many students crammed into it for you to really learn anything meaningful, or that the teacher unequivocally pushes the sponsor's perhaps inferior product, because it makes sense- who's their Daddy, after all? Not the crappy little students! On the other hand, this may be just the place to find that special, weird little topic you've been dying to learn more about, or gain access to that superstar who's guest teaching this month.

Don't be surprised if 90 percent of what you read in books, magazines, and on the Internet is unbelievable horseshit, because ...it is! Just like any idiot with a camera can take a photograph, any idiot with a computer can put finger to keyboard and crank out his version of the universe. At the risk of repeating ourselves, it doesn't make him the expert.

Don't be surprised... instead, expect it. You'll learn a lot more with your eyes wide open to the underlying motivations that inevitably pervade the

industry, than you will blindly following the advice of any one source in particular.

And when you are in pursuit of a learning experience, remember that the best learning experiences may be the ones that aren't as easy as paying your money to the appropriate workshop, BFA program or magazine subscription. In addition to more traditional learning resources, you'll do well- *really* well- to supplement with the non-traditional such as mentoring or apprenticing with someone you respect.

One of our favorite stories is of the guy who wanted to mentor with his hero, Arnold Newman, father of the environmental portrait. So this guy dropped out of art school and, risking rebuke and ridicule, showed up on Newman's doorstep. Arnold told him to go away- he didn't need anyone. But this guy was young and stubborn, so he stayed on Newman's doorstep for two or three days till Newman's wife finally said let the poor kid in! He's freezing/starving/blocking the doorway out there! So they let the guy in and gave him the nonexistent job. Fade out/fade in- after years apprenticing with Newman this fellow has his own studio and is a well-known and respected portrait photographer in his own right.

And while we're not advocating behavior that is normally associated with restraining orders, the point of this story is a good one- know what kind of education you are really looking for and do everything you can -legally!- to get it.

Most of all, always, *always* remember that your learning is *NEVER OVER*. Now more than ever, photography is a fast-paced world of change. Ditch dogma. Always live in pursuit of the better way. Always reinvent your obsession. Amen.



Brain of a traditional photographer



Brain of a digital photographer



Brain of a Figital Photographer

MOVEMENT DOES NOT EQUAL PROGRESS

We've alluded to this in earlier chapters, and perhaps you've noticed this phenomenon too: in the photographic industry, we're seeing an awful lot of *movement* these days- Slightly quicker auto-focus! Somewhat faster memory card! Ink dots just a wee bit smaller!- but very little of this bells-and-whistles activity is actual, bona fide *progress*.

As you may recall, once upon a time a decade or so ago, the advances in digital really *were* monumental, evolutionary steps. Remember when a 25MB file was big? Remember when 1 Gigabyte of RAM was *incredible*? In just a few short years astounding strides were made, bringing us screens with *way* better color accuracy, lenses specially optimized for digital sensors and computers that really *were* faster-better-stronger.

Gradually, however, the incentive for companies to invest in radical technology has been phased out, in favor of a pattern of upgrade after meaningless upgrade. This wouldn't be so bad if consumers actually had a choice in the matter- but there's a stick as well as a carrot involved here. Don't want to upgrade to the "new" software? That's fine, just be aware

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that we're no longer going to support the "old" software you purchased last week.

Pardon us for saying so, but this amounts to a hijacking of our art form. This isn't progress folks, it's just movement.

The next time you consider a brand-spanking new piece of technology, ask yourself the question: does this represent a definitive evolutionary improvement to the workings of our art form? Does it *really* make my work better/easier? Or, is this more akin to the installation of yet another tollbooth on the digital super-highway?

For example, no matter what any sales pitch may tell you, unless you're doubling your resolution, say from 6 to 12 Mega Pixels, that camera upgrade just isn't different enough from what you already have to be *worth* it.

But we're equal opportunity bitching here: we're not just talking about technology here- we're talking about the photographers too. We're talking about the stagnation of an art form. Remember all those sucky photo mags? In addition to soft-pedal reviews and advertising, they're filled to the brim with images that we've seen many, *many* (yawn) times before.

Folks, Edward Weston has been dead for fifty years- let the poor man rest. If we see one more nautilus shell-on-black-background, we might just have to impale ourselves on the nearest piece of full-tonal range driftwood. Let's place a moratorium on ersatz Westons and Adamses, Evanses and Avedons. Imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, but it sure *isn't* progress.

While we're at it, let's ban cheeseball T & A too. Not because we're prudish, mind you, but if we see one more tastefully positioned pube, one more delicate shadow touching the breast... we're going to run screaming from the wind-swept meadow. Sure, the nude can be a beautiful thing, but so can a sand dune, and a green pepper, and a moonrise over Hernandez. A beautiful image done to death ceases to be beautiful- and becomes instead the worst kind of cliché; a parody of itself. It's movement without progress.

If we're going to have *actual* progress in our art form as well as in our industry, we need to demand more, both from ourselves as artists, as well as from the companies who provide our technology, our supplies, our papers and our films.

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Don't just be along for the ride: let's give the matter some actual consideration. Where *do* we want photography to go from here?

THE CYNICAL OLD FUCK VERSUS THE NEOPHYTE SPONGE

Ah, the Cynical Old Fuck. Aka: the Diehard-with-a-capital-“D” photographic traditionalist, classic-silver fanatic, darkroom-devotee. He drinks fixer for breakfast and shits film canisters for lunch. Can be recognized instantly by his constant refrain: “Yes, but there’s just something about...”

- a. the *look* of a classic, traditional silver print
- b. the *feel* of large format film, sliding gently and effortlessly into the (%\$&^#@!!) film holder
- c. the *smell* of a poorly ventilated bathroom darkroom
- d. irreversible nerve damage/ brain tumors/ Parkinson’s.

His point? They just don’t make ‘em like they use-ta... these kids today with their fancy digital this and mega-whozit that...well they just plum don’t know their own history if you ask me! Why, everybody *knows* Weston made some of his best work with nothing more than a shoebox, some dirty cat fur and a Zippo lighter!



Okay, we're having too much fun here, but you get the point. You've probably met him. You may have read some of the publications or websites catering to, or maybe even studied with him. (Yes, him. We're being sexist, here. Sue us.) He's old (okay, add age-ism to the list), he's white (racism!), and his fingernails are a lovely shade of Amidol developer black. And he knows everything.

Well, everything except what's happening in the photo industry today.

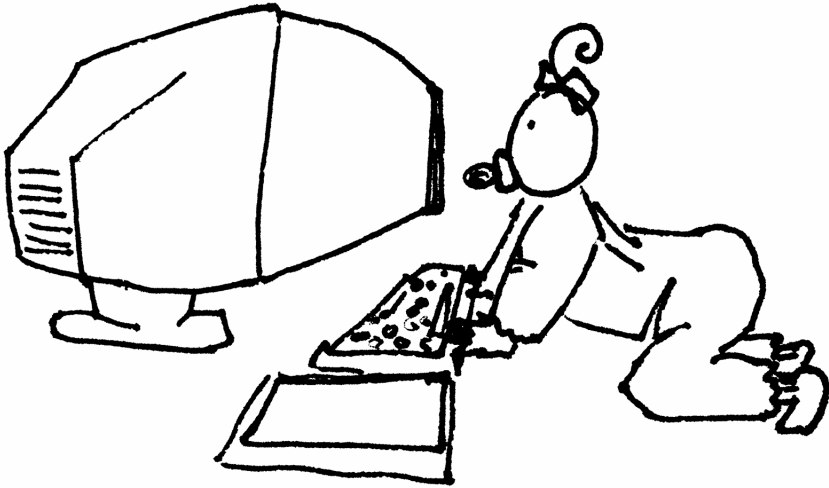
Our official diagnosis? An acute case of Head-in-the-sand-itis. Maybe, like the dinosaurs, these guys will eventually go the way of the Dodo bird and take their "Death Before Digital!!" mantra with them. Maybe we shouldn't blame them for being angry that the world as they knew and liked it took a left turn at the Millennium and ended up in pixel-land. Maybe.

On the other side of the spectrum, of course, we have the Neophyte Sponge. The complete opposite of the Cynical Old Fuck, this is the newbie who buys the party line hook, line and sinker. This dude (or dudette. Now that we've entered the 20th century we can equal-opportunity stereotype) thinks that "agitation" is what you feel when you

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run out of RAM, and that Photoshop dodging and burning icons are based on characters from Pokemon.

What? The Neophyte says, you mean, like, photography has a *history* prior to the advent of digital? Like, no *way*. (And, like, who *cares*?)



The Neophyte Sponge

Here's the thing. You can often recognize a true Neophyte by their prints: overly dramatic, forced, plastic-looking work that takes advantage of every trick in Photoshop. Subtlety is not their strong suit. There's a lot being lost here... nearly two centuries of accumulated photographic

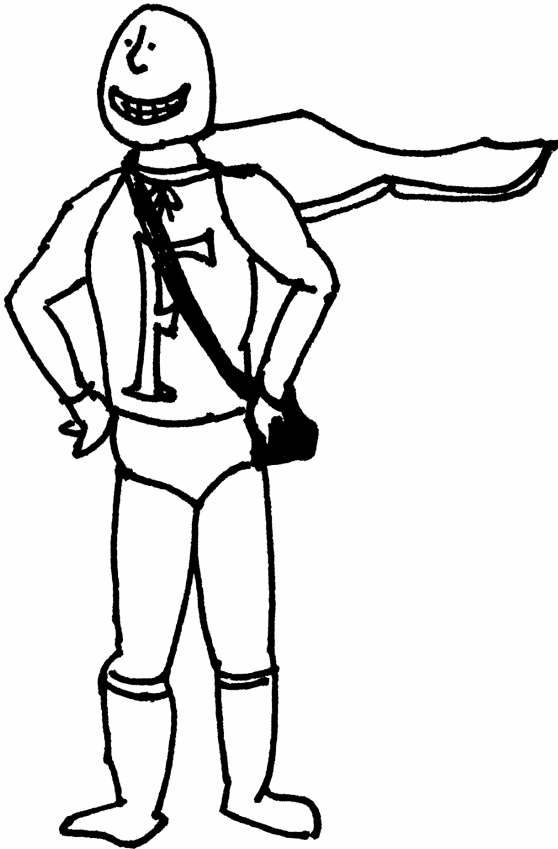
knowledge to be precise. Just because we don't want to be blind slaves to photographic tradition, doesn't mean we have to ditch a whole history spanning from Niepce and Newhall to Mann and Mapplethorpe... (and if you said: "*Who?*" Welcome to Neophyte-land, Newbie!)

No matter how lovingly the old guys cling to their 8x 10 enlargers, the fact remains: digital *is* the future of photography. (This isn't a surprise, but, apparently, it does need to be said.) In fact, the whole, so-called "Digital Debate" is a red herring, a misnomer, a joke. Don't buy it. While there may have been a debate at one time, way back when today's digital experts were still in short pants and trying not to publicly pee themselves, all those one-time digital issues- lack of stability, insufficient D-Max and color accuracy, poor-cousin resolution- have been resoundingly resolved. Today there simply *is* no digital debate. Nope.

That being the case, why couldn't we decide- Cynic and Neophyte alike- to engage with it- ALL of it? Don't know much about the darkroom? Never been in the digital domain? Take a class at your local arts center or college. This is a fascinating, exciting time in the development of our medium, and in a very real way, the direction it takes could depend upon what we as a community choose to *do* with that opportunity.

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The only way meaningful progress is really going to happen is if we all get over it. The cynic and the neophyte alike... BEGONE! In their place I give you- (cue the Superman soundtrack) the **Figital Photographer!**



The FIGITAL Photographer

In our humble opinion, the best and most interesting photographers and printers working today are the ones who aren't easily classifiable into one camp or the other; they come from a solid foundation of the traditional but have embraced digital in some ways as well. This can mean that they work in what we like to call a "hybrid form" that combines elements of each: scanning traditional negatives and outputting digitally, for example, or venturing into the scary territory of printing on alternative media such as handmade papers, fabric or even metal or glass. (Saran-Wrap art, anyone?) It means that their work is informed by both the history of traditional and the continuing developments of digital- *at the same time*.

We may have to eat our words, but it seems to us that traditional film and scanners today are pretty stable; they're about as good as they need to be. By contrast, the digital realm continues to morph and change, while the rest of us are left holding the bag- and the bill. Why not, then take advantage of the technology which has already been perfected, and incorporate it into *your* version of a digital process?

If you've ever seen a high resolution scan from a 2 1/4 or 4 x 5 neg, you'll know what we're getting at: despite everything you've been told, digital capture has nothing on this kind of quality, at least not without selling

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your grandmother to get your hands on the technology, and even *then*? Not so much. So the next time you are called upon to upgrade your mega-pixel-monstrosity, consider this: a film camera can “upgrade” for the price of a new roll of film- and with a good-quality scan will *still* be available to work with and print digitally.

Why isn’t this “best of both worlds” practice more prevalent? Because we’ve handed the wheel over to the industry, the companies, allowing them to dictate where we’re going to go rather than telling *them*, as consumers, what makes the most sense for us. The companies are driving the car, making good money, and they have no intention of stopping to ask for directions.

Our advice? Get out at the next red light and start walking. (Hey, your money is the gas in this metaphor, so they won’t get too far without you anyway.) Buy a roll of film and see what “hybrid” might mean for you and your work. You never know, your destination might just be right around the next corner after all.

One of the best pieces of advice we've ever gotten came from the landscape photographer Bill Clift. He said that the career of photography is not for those who need instant career gratification; but rather to think of it as The Long Haul.

We think the same advice could be offered to the photography industry as a whole, with the breakneck pace of digital particularly in mind.

Consider this: your average film camera purchased in say, 1947, can, if not dropped in the Grand Canyon at sunset or otherwise abused, now still shoot a perfectly respectable image, and function today much as it did sixty years ago.

Sixty years from now, do you think you're still going to be able to use the *digital* camera you purchased today? Nowadays, this kind of technological longevity seems utterly inconceivable. Already there's widespread and justifiable concern that file formats such as TIFFs, JPEGs and RAW formats won't be supported indefinitely. What does this mean for the gazillion images we've all got stored on our hard drives? In attempts to address this, Adobe has developed a so-called "universal" RAW format-

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the equivalent of an archival digital negative. But doesn't this presume that Adobe will always be the predominant imaging software... that, in fact, Adobe will always be in business?

That reminds us of another company that seemed like it would always, always be the industry leader – big daddy Kodak. So you see why we're concerned.

Like the younger sibling who wants desperately to get in the driver's seat, digital photography has been in a panic to meet and surpass the pimply older brother of traditional photographic practice. As a result of all this desperate activity, has anyone stopped to pose the all-important, big-picture question: is this a smart direction? Are we driving to somewhere that we will actually want to ultimately go? You know, just because the car hasn't crashed yet, doesn't mean we're not lost.

We need to learn from the past. We need to have an honest discussion about the future. In our humble opinion, the industry should reflect the direction WE all want it to go. Sustainability is going to require a real, effective communication between all elements of our industry: from the

photographers and the corporations, to the manufacturers, the engineers, and even the advertisers.

So make your voice heard. Demand more of the Photo-Industrial Complex. Tell them: I don't want to be the guinea pig for your buggy software! I don't want to be sold meaningless upgrades! I don't want new cameras introduced every two months- this is *movement without progress*. Do we want disposable, paper-plate technology- or do we want meaningful technology? Instead of making us buy a whole new camera- why not, for example, make the sensor upgradeable? Sustainable photographic technology is not by definition an oxymoron. If we aren't all in this together, we're quickly going to devolve into a hopelessly polarized class system of one Joe Rich Photographer for every couple thousand Bill Empty-Pockets who's been effectively driven out of the business by the greed of the industry.

This is, at heart, the point of the Figital Revolution: the idea that photographers need to take back the steering wheel to their own medium, and begin looking down the road apiece. Which developments are positive, and which amount to just so much smoke and mirrors? Which technology do we really want to invest our time and money in, and which

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is short shelf-life crap designed primarily to part you from the contents of your wallet on a regular basis?

Don't be diverted by smoke and mirrors "debates" about whether digital is better than analog, black and white is better than color, or Canon is better than Nikon. These questions are the same as asking whether apples are better than oranges- there is no answer. Instead they only generate more questions: well, what are you *looking* for? What is it that you *need*? Maybe instead of an apple or orange, you'd really like an appange or an orange instead. But we'll never get what we want until we have the foresight and temerity to ask for it.

So, seventy or so pages later, are we finally going to tell you what "Figital" is? As you probably guessed, yeah, it's a catchy sounding combination of "film" and "digital," but as we intend it, it's so much more than that. Being Figital means rejecting meaningless debate in favor of the REAL questions. Being Figital means keeping your eyes wide open as to whose hands are in your camera bag and your wallet while they are imparting to you their sage "wisdom" and "advice." Being Figital means defending our right to be really, truly, so-far-outside-the-box-we-didn't-even-know-there-was-one creative, despite the inertial and corporate

forces that make this a sometimes very uncomfortable place to be. Being Figital means understanding that technology isn't what we do; it's the all-important backbone of what we do- which is create.

We might have to back this car up; we might have to turn it around and go back to that general store on the corner to ask directions; heck- we might just have to take this whole car *apart*, piece by piece, to find out what really makes it tick, then put it back together with the seats on the hood and the tailpipe sticking straight up like a smokestack... why not? It's *our* damn car, isn't it?

They will hear us as we come puffing and honking over the next rise in the road like some character from *Dr. Seuss Goes to Hell and Back*, hollering-till-hoarse our resounding battle cry: Don't be a sheep! Don't be asleep! Be Figital!

Okay, comrade. The moral of this story is that we've got miles to go before we sleep... let's get to work.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Stephen M. Schaub is an artist and master printer who realizes that opinions are like assholes: everyone has one. This book just happens to represent his own, which hopefully will have something productive to contribute to the ongoing photographic dialogue, or, failing that, manage not give anyone an unsightly rash.

Stephen has been at one time or another: a Gearhead, a BS Expert, a Cynical Old Fuck and a Neophyte Sponge, as well as a contributor to many of the less sucky photo magazines. He is widely recognized in the industry as an expert and innovator of digital printing techniques. In addition to founding and boldly leading the Figital Revolution, he is the founding director of lifeequalsart.com, a free online community dedicated to the promotion of and communication between active, living artists.

A graduate of the Rochester Institute of Technology, Stephen is the author of two published collections of his photographs, *A Sense of Place* (1999) and *Through a Glass Darkly* (2004), as well as numerous articles which he frequently writes in collusion with his wife, Eve. Together, they run Indian Hill Imageworks in Pawlet, Vermont.

Eve Ogden Schaub is a writer who specializes in issues related to the arts. In addition to the introductions to both of her husband Stephen's books, she has written for numerous publications including *Afterimage*, *Camera Arts* and *Photovision*, and served as editor on the book: *Four Dollars and a Jug of Rum: the History of Grafton Vermont*.

Eve holds degrees in both English and Photography from Cornell University, as well as a Masters in Photography from the Rochester Institute of Technology, and was the founding director of the Indian Hill Gallery of Fine Photography from 2002-2006.

Her essays have been featured on Albany National Public Radio affiliate WAMC, and her blog-essay *A Creative Life* appears regularly on www.lifeequalsart.com.

