

MUSÉE

VANGUARD OF PHOTOGRAPHY CULTURE

Matt Lipps: "Interview with Matt Lipps: Extracted and Reinscribed"

By Samuel Stone

October 7, 2020



No. 044, 2020 © Matt Lipps.

Courtesy of the artist and Yancey Richardson, New York

Samuel Stone: What is the concept that motivated your *Solve for X* exhibition at Yancey Richardson?

Matt Lipps: My motivation is simply spending time with pictures, new and familiar, and thinking about the ways in which they mirror and obscure our contemporary moment. In this series of photographs, I have returned to the moment I recall being seduced into the complex world of photography: my early obsession with supermodels in 1990s fashion magazines.

As a closeted queer teenager leafing through glossy ads in his bedroom, my desire would bob and weave to avoid the hegemonic punches of heteronormativity, gender conformity, racism, classism, and sexism, all in order to preserve itself. It was then that I understood the physical, emotional, and psychological powers the medium held over me as it correlated to my desire within a continuum of social struggle. Thus, I "entered into photography" through a slice in the page made by an X-Acto knife in order to reconfigure my image-world so that it might better reflect my values, and thereby

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proclaim my identity.

By ascribing value to those fashion pictures and allowing them to resonate alongside the history of photography, I aimed to peel apart (by taping together) the connective (t)issues found in all photographs. Similarly to the parenthetical clauses in the preceding sentence, the displaced body becomes a performative aperture linking disparate pictures to discover common grounds visually, anecdotally, intuitively, or critically.



No. 130, 2020 © Matt Lipps.

Courtesy of the artist and Yancey Richardson, New York

Sam: There are many commonalities between this and your earlier projects, but *Solve For X* nevertheless feels distinct amidst your body of work. How did you get from there to here?

Matt: When I started making paper dolls as a teenager, carefully cutting out portions of images that I revered by erecting tiny, flimsy cardboard monuments to decorate my bedroom, I felt it necessary to hold onto the remnant page as a sign of respect for the original photograph's integrity. As those remnant pages stacked up on my desk, they told a visual history of the pictures I had literally bore through.

In 2016 I did a body of work using those emptied, remnant pages as a theatrical device that partially blocked and revealed cutouts to make evasive pictures. For me, it was metaphorical for a void that opens up at the death of a loved one. This new series brought content to that structural device by announcing the surface image as an entrance; and, it's the first body of work where the majority of pictures don't rely on paper doll cutouts.

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Dance, 2019 © Matt Lipps.

Courtesy of the artist and Yancey Richardson, New York

Sam: All of your work has a three-dimensional feel to it, but at the end of the day, is subsumed back into the two-dimensional photograph. Can you talk a little bit about what this tension means to you and how you arrived at this multimedia approach?

Matt: I grew up surrounded by printed images in magazines. The materiality of the paper gave form and tactility such that I could manipulate those pictures by cutting and pasting them together in a way that remixed and retold stories that reflected my inner world. When I started to photograph my constructions, thus delivering them back into the world of photography, I quickly understood a few things that set my practice apart from traditional collage or sculpture.

The first was scale. I found there was something uncanny about confronting the printed paper doll at larger-than-life scale. They commanded attention in a way that could destabilize the viewer. Also, photographs resist the viewer's ability to deconstruct how the image was made by erasing "the artist's hand". The seamless veneer of the photograph aids in minimizing the friction of that kind of analysis.

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Blowup, 2019 © Matt Lipps.

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Sam: I'm also enamored with the way you've titled it. The cutout figures certainly do imply a variability similar to that of the algebraic x , yet in a true algebraic equation, the value of x is ultimately definite, even if it's temporarily mysterious. Do you mean to imply a similar theoretical definiteness for the mysterious figures in these images?

Matt: I'm an artist, not a mathematician by a longshot. So, for me, the emphasis here is on the variability rather than arriving at a finite value of x . Speaking very generally, pictures offer a guarantee of a packaged event that took place in the world that can be clustered into a Rolodex of images you already know and have feelings about. When we encounter a photograph that dodges resolvability, we are asked to reexamine those feelings. Quickly we find that the lexicon we rely on to prop up our understanding of photography has not kept pace with the rapid expansion of the ways in which we are living our lives through images.

Consider, for example, the photograph *Dance* in this exhibition: the Versace advertisement photographed by Richard Avedon images five postures of Kate Moss in various states of distress, terror, and grief. It is layered over a picture from 1945 of a wounded Marine being rescued by the Coast Guard in Iwo Jima—a very different image of distress, terror and grief. What do these two pictures, when considered together, tell us about how photographs mobilize feeling into action? In this regard, the exhibition poses a set of questions rather than a summation of answers— x is and remains fugitive.

Sam: The world these days sometimes feels like it's coming to an end. How have you been handling the pandemic? Has it affected your creativity?

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Matt: Covid-19 has had tremendous impact on my being, my psychology, my politics, my welfare, my community, and my creativity. The majority of the work for *Solve for X* was completed before the pandemic, and I wasn't in public again until my first Black Lives Matter protest in the names of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor at the end of May. I had already begun working on a new series based on MoMA's *The Family of Man* exhibition catalog from 1955—reexamining the juggernaut propaganda machine and its oversimplified, Humanist narratives. And I have always felt well-equipped to call out patriarchy, heteronormativity, capitalism, all kinds of covert or overt messages found in photographs—but racism wasn't one of them.

Looking back, I clearly wasn't informed enough to pose critical questions on the matter, but I also didn't think it was my place to; I hadn't yet recognized that "silence = violence". Nevertheless, by listening and educating myself, I began to recognize patterns in my past where I safeguarded my white fragility and evoked my white privilege—and, more painfully, how those two mechanisms made me complicit in the very bedrock of our nation's history: white supremacy. The resulting exhibition, *The Body Wants to Live*, is not an antidote to systemic injustice, but it's a beginning for me. And while there is so much work yet to do, I can see evidence of the work I've begun on myself and how I operate as a teacher, partner, friend, citizen, and—to answer your question—as an artist.

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