

# Stage

Paul Mpagi Sepuya

April 16 – May 29, 2021

What does it take to make a photograph? In Paul Mpagi Sepuya's world, it takes a village. A very small one at that, but a village nonetheless. This village consists of not only (mostly naked, male-presenting, and queer) bodies, but also tripods, mirrors, drop curtains, and dollies in equal measure. These are objects that have been associated with the making of all kinds of photographs for almost two centuries, but they have mostly kept a low profile. In the act of facilitating the photographic act, they often stage the disappearance of the artifice of what willed them—into existence, into the studio, into contact with the bodies and machinery of quasi-fantastical subject-formation. They are, indeed, self-effacing familiars.

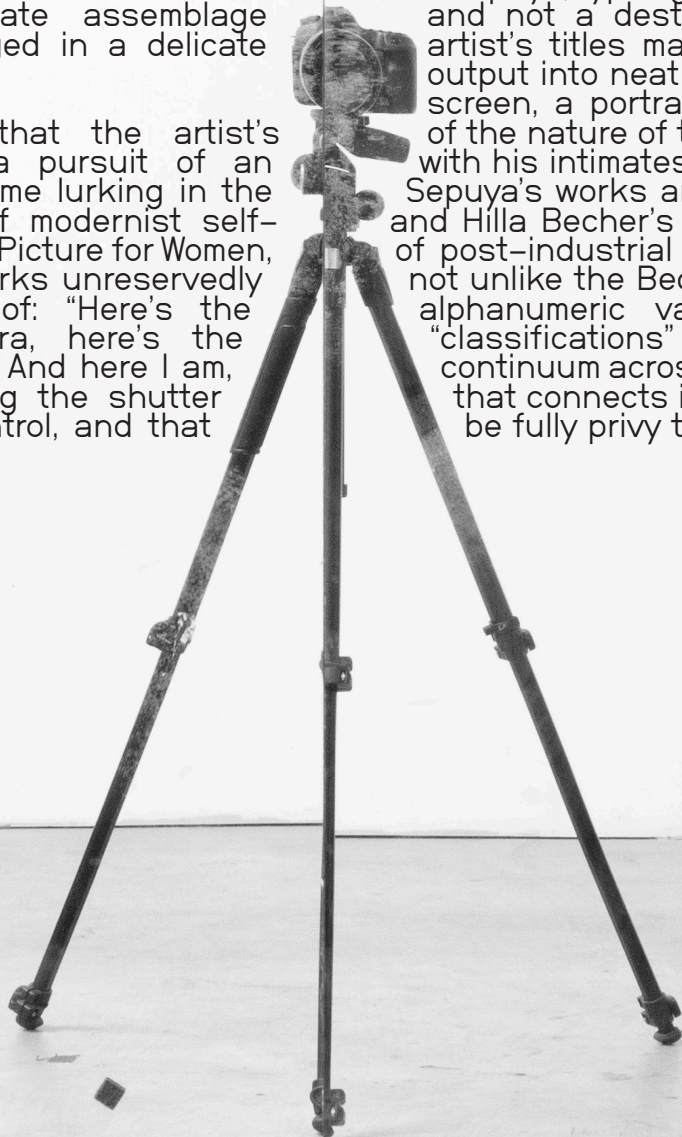
Let's ask it one more time: what does it take to make a photograph beyond a functioning camera and a finger to press the shutter release? The hearty response of Sepuya's work to this question seems to be: support structures. Take tripods, for instance. A tripod does not see—it stands. It shoulders, supports, and stabilizes in real time, so that mechanical or digital vision can proceed unimpeded with the task of canceling the flux of time. But, sometimes, this is not enough on its own: a work such as *Screen* (OX5A2669), 2020, suggests the occasional need for additional provisions; as the artist's hand lightly rests on the lens implicating a momentary adjustment, another person presses the shutter button. In fact, in other, slightly earlier works by Sepuya, the tripod may altogether disappear and have its function transferred to an intimate assemblage of bodies that are engaged in a delicate balancing act.

Rest assured, though, that the artist's broader project is not a pursuit of an elusive photographic sublime lurking in the plastered-over fissures of modernist self-reflexivity. Unlike Jeff Wall's *Picture for Women*, 1979, none of Sepuya's works unreservedly proclaim the equivalent of: "Here's the model, here's the camera, here's the studio, here are the lights. And here I am, the photographer, pressing the shutter release on the remote control, and that

is all." At the very least, if there is no explicit shrouding of bodies (via screens and curtains) or obfuscation of space (through a strategic use of mirrors), fingerprints appear on mirrors. In connoting the passage of time, dust and other tell-tale signs of studio activity and life point to something beyond "the decisive moment." Sepuya's laying bare of the device always has its own complications. But to what end?

Art historian and critic George Baker notes the positioning of photography as a "profoundly un- or a-relational medium" in the wake of Susan Sontag's criticism and turns to Zoe Leonard's camera obscura works as an instance of "expanded photograph, an ur-photograph . . . a photograph that now [holds] its viewer within the apparatus, within the photographic experience, receiving viewer and world both . . . in some fused or indistinct way."<sup>1</sup> His experience of Leonard's *453 West 17th Street*, 2012, Baker argues, "was collective, not individuating . . . a social space of a kind." Sepuya's works, too, can be understood in similar terms—albeit, perhaps, as a more delimited "social space" where the artist's individual relationships play out without ever attaining full transparency, one of the hallmarks of the epistemic violence of documentary photography. If anything, they beg the following question: is it possible to imagine the photographic/document not as a hierarchy-reinforcing by-product of relationships, but as the matrix of friendships, love, and solidarity itself?

For Sepuya, typologies are only points of departure and not a destination. At a first glance, the artist's titles may appear to divide his artistic output into neat categories: studio, drop scene, screen, a portrait. However, the unintelligibility of the nature of the photographer's relationship with his intimates contained therein assure that Sepuya's works are far from, for instance, Bernd and Hilla Becher's quasi-fetishizing photography of post-industrial age ruins. On the other hand, not unlike the Bechers, the computer-generated alphanumeric values that follow his titular "classifications" attest to the presence of a continuum across categories—a larger narrative that connects it all, but one that we can never be fully privy to as viewers.



In this vein, repeating digits in the titles of temporally proximate works function like the dust-breeding, fingerprint-ridden mirrors we see in them: not only do they evidence the unspooling of time, but they also constitute a language of doubles. Not a postmodern proxy for multitudes that cancel one another, but a lexicon of plenitude that permits what was not possible before. In his essay "Photography 'en abyme,'" critic and activist Craig Owens reminds his readers "the analogical definition of the photograph as a mirror image" throughout the history of photography.<sup>2</sup> He then goes on to argue that, when the presence of a mirror in a photograph gives rise to a diminutive, redundant copy of the image in excess, it can be compared to the semiotic reduplication—the folding—onto—one's self—that characterizes infantile speech. Just as syllables redouble on themselves to produce words at this early stage ("mama," "papa," etc.), mirrors in photographs, Owens contends, may lead the way for the inception of "a genuine rhetoric of the image."<sup>3</sup>

One might wonder if Sepuya's photographs articulate a "genuine rhetoric of the image." But, in this day and age, I feel that this query would be outdated. Beyond the trappings of the zero-sum game of modernist medium-specificity, Gilles Deleuze maintains that, through "the exercise of repeating a word," child "mak[e]s it vibrate around itself."<sup>4</sup> And so,

"[t]here is no longer a destination of something by means of a figurative sense, nor an assignation of metaphors by means of a figurative state . . . but a sequence of intensive states, a ladder or a circuit for intensities."<sup>5</sup> Conventionally "meaningful" words with repeating syllables are, indeed, not the rule but the exception in early speech and they too can revert to being "nonsensical" intensities, if they are repeated in their entirety enough times. In another text co-authored with Félix Guattari, Deleuze associates such "placing-in-variation" in the service of creating intensities with "minor" languages. Different from conventional language "that does not operate between something seen (or felt) and something said . . . [and that] always goes from saying to saying," minor languages (e.g. secret languages, slangs, nursery rhymes, and merchants' cries) can have bodily affect as a "continuum or medium without beginning or end."<sup>6</sup> It is through what Deleuze and Guattari call the "stammering" or "wailing" of language that minor languages and literatures (such as Franz Kafka's extremely "sober" Prague German) put pressure on their major counterparts, make them change for good, or even push them to codify and institutionalize their territorial claims.

The proliferation of BIPOC and/or queer bodies suspended in the act of touching cameras and each other can then be regarded as the "becoming-minoritarian" of photography. From experiments in sharing seeing with others but not (entirely) with us (Drop Scene (OX5A6023), 2019, Drop Scene (OX5A2478), 2020, Screen (OX5A2669), 2020) to the peculiar cadence created by willful obfuscation of intimate gestures (Screen (OX5A4474), 2019, Screen (OX5A3705), 2020), and spatial organization (Studio (OX5A9572), 2020, Studio (OX5A9586), 2020), Sepuya replaces the primacy of "to-be-seeness" in photography with that of "to-be-feltness." "Use the minor language," exhort Deleuze and Guattari, "to send the major language racing."<sup>7</sup> After a year of unmitigated racial violence in the age of contactless deliveries, the urgency of Sepuya's practice persists with a heightened intensity or a-relational medium" in the wake of Susan Sontag's criticism and turns to Zoe Leonard's camera obscura works as an instance of "expanded photograph, an ur-photograph . . . a photograph that now [holds] its viewer within the apparatus, within the photographic experience, receiving viewer and world both . . . in some fused

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– Gökcan Demirkazik

<sup>1</sup>George Baker, "The Relational Field of Photography," Museum Winterthur, Still Searching... (blog), May 31, 2013, [https://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/explore/still-searching/articles/26955\\_the\\_relational\\_field\\_of\\_photography](https://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/explore/still-searching/articles/26955_the_relational_field_of_photography)

<sup>2</sup>Craig Owens, "Photography 'en abyme,'" October 5 (Summer, 1978): 74.

<sup>3</sup>Owens, 84.

<sup>4</sup>Gilles Deleuze, "Minor Literature," in *The Deleuze Reader*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York and Oxford: Columbia University Press, 1993), 157.

<sup>5</sup>Deleuze, "Minor Literature," 158.

<sup>6</sup>Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "November 20, 1923: Postulates of Linguistics," in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 76 and 94.

<sup>7</sup>Deleuze and Guattari, "November 20, 1923: Postulates of Linguistics," 105.