



Andy Mattern, *Average Subject/Medium Distance 7264 (Contrast)*, 2019, ink-jet print, 25 3/4 × 17 3/4".

Andy Mattern

ELIZABETH HOUSTON GALLERY

In 1977, Douglas Crimp observed that “while it once seemed that pictures had the function of interpreting reality it now seems that they have usurped it.” How understated that declaration appears today—with its hedging *seemingly*—in a world ruled and fueled by images. Crimp wrote the line for the catalogue essay accompanying a modest, generation-making group show he organized at Artists Space in New York, called simply “Pictures” (its title yet another understatement). Crimp’s thought was on my mind in early July a couple days after his death, when I visited the basement of the Elizabeth Houston Gallery to see Andy Mattern’s small exhibition of Conceptual photographs whose title, “Normal Pictures,” immediately made clear that no such things would be on view and that, indeed, “normal pictures” do not exist.

This was less “photography about photography” than a reminder of that phrase’s useless tautology. Mattern has taken midcentury Kodaguides—colorful paper dials that once assisted amateur photogs in calculating exposure settings for their Kodaks—and, with Photoshop, erased all their instructions, save for a word or two: POSE, FLOWERS, FIGURE, VALUE, DESIRE, IMPORTANT. These blackout poems float inside Mattern’s scaled-up diagrams, constructivist in their cool aesthetics (and gently reminiscent of El Lissitzky’s dynamic Prouns, 1919–27), but rinsed of all utopian connotation. It is a beautiful gimmick, one that, in our roiling visual culture, maintains that photography is and has always been an art of subtraction, an invitation to reduce the world to a single frame. But this clever exercise also suggested the medium’s more nefarious exclusions.

The word FIGURE, for instance, brought to mind the now-infamous Shirley cards—portraits of white women used by Kodak labs worldwide in the 1970s and ’80s to aid in the calibration of skin tones during printing. Behind its playful premise, “Normal Pictures” intimated, yet refrained from explicitly showing, that the insidious “neutrality” of outmoded analog equipment still permeates the contemporary mechanisms of seeing: Think of the racial blind spots ingrained in facial recognition technology, or the sinister purposes to which computer vision and machine learning can be put, from the political distortion of deepfakes to the profiling enabled by mass surveillance.

In *Average Subject / Medium Distance 7246 (Light)* (all works cited, 2019), two sets of parentheses—their linguistic freight redacted—flank a serified light, marooned in a disk of mustard yellow in which a green arrow points up and a red one points down. When I first saw the photograph, I began to think idly of twentieth-century snapshooters squinting at their Kodaguides (which today go for around five dollars each on eBay), carefully computing the ideal shutter speed at which to capture an overcast morning at the beach, or to commemorate a loved one’s birthday. With a second viewing, I saw that Mattern’s abstraction resembled an actual sun, its circumferential notches like the rays so diligently drawn by children. In *Average Subject / Medium Distance 5871 (Desire)*—the photographs are all titled in this oddly unevocative manner—a lowercase DESIRE orbits the dial’s eyelet, a lone satellite in galactic blackness: How accurate a metaphor for that experience, which often feels as though one were a moon, locked in trajectory around a loved one. Such subtle occasions for lyrical indulgence lent Mattern’s works a thoughtful texture.

“If, in drawing a picture, one imagines beholders, all is lost,” aphorized Diderot. Mattern’s work seems indifferent to pleasing an audience. It instead attends to the process of imagemaking and the joys of decelerated looking, as well as to the shifting intentions and choices granted to photographers of the digital age. Yet his prints are marvels to behold, humming with sumptuous color, unlike the architectural ready-mades of Bernd and Hilla Becher—whom Mattern has, in interviews, named as a main influence. Like the Bechers’ black-and-white crops of water towers and coal bunkers, Mattern’s typologies are unpeopled. But if viewers look closer, they may detect motes of dust or other signs of wear left on his pictures’ surfaces: hints of the imperfect human who is always behind the camera.

- Zack Hatfield