

PHOTO BOOTH

A MARRIED COUPLE'S PICTURES OF LONGING AND REPRESSION

*Ken Graves and Eva Lipman's œuvre fixates upon the
American social rites that mediate touch, particularly
between men.*

By Becca Rothfeld
January 24, 2022

"Longing, we say, because desire is full / of endless distances," writes the poet Robert Hass. What he means, I think, is that intimacy is at least as much a matter of what we cannot touch as a matter of what we can. People reach for each other precisely because they are different—and therefore distant—from one another, yet their ineluctable dissimilarity is also what keeps them apart. The photo book "Restraint and Desire," published last fall, is a study of intimacy and its impediments: the tender images it contains portray longing (desire) when it is regulated by ritual (restraint). The book depicts perfectly ordinary exchanges in familiar, formalized settings: teen-agers dancing at prom, wrestlers writhing on the mat. Yet each of them represents an attempt to visualize the space that is both an obstacle to and a condition of love's consummation.



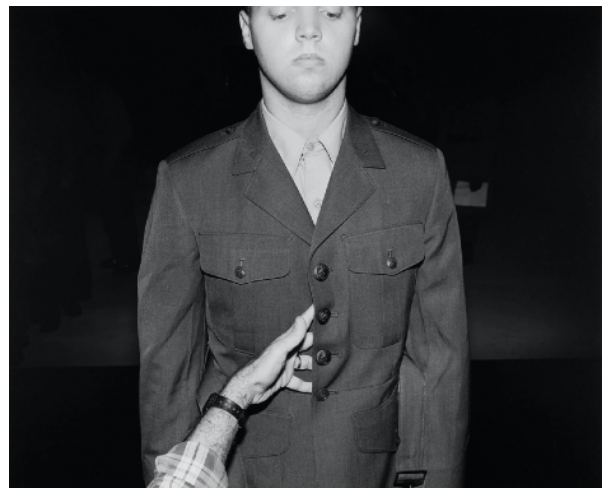


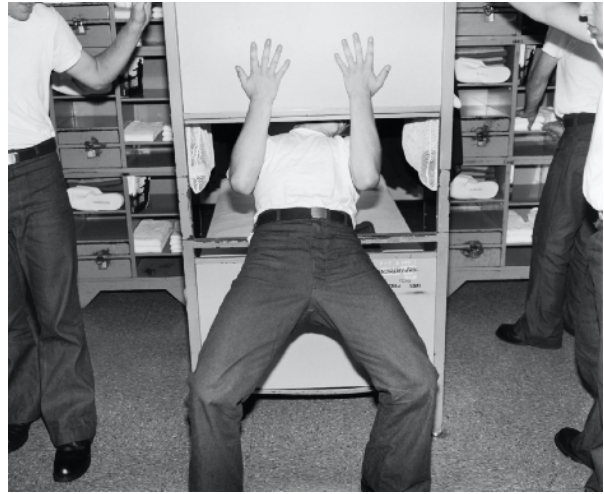
The volume is the work of Ken Graves and Eva Lipman, a pair of married photographers who met while shooting a ballroom-dance competition in Ohio, in 1986. Graves died, in 2016, at the age of seventy-four, and the book concludes with a rending note from Lipman: "These pictures were made in collaboration with my partner in life and work, Ken Graves. I will forever be grateful for his love and generosity, his unfailing optimism, and for sharing with me his strange and unique world view. *I miss him everyday.*"

Thankfully, their joint vision survives him in forty-two fond, funny, and surprising photographs that make up "Restraint and Desire." Touch is Graves and Lipman's great subject: they are fascinated by the way that its possibility animates even bodies in isolation. In one picture, boys in military uniforms, perhaps praying or performing a drill, stand at regular intervals from one another. The camera sits between two of them and across from a third, as if the viewer is part of the boys' severe formation—as if our bodies, too, are subject to the pressures of military geometry and the temptations of raw adolescent physicality.

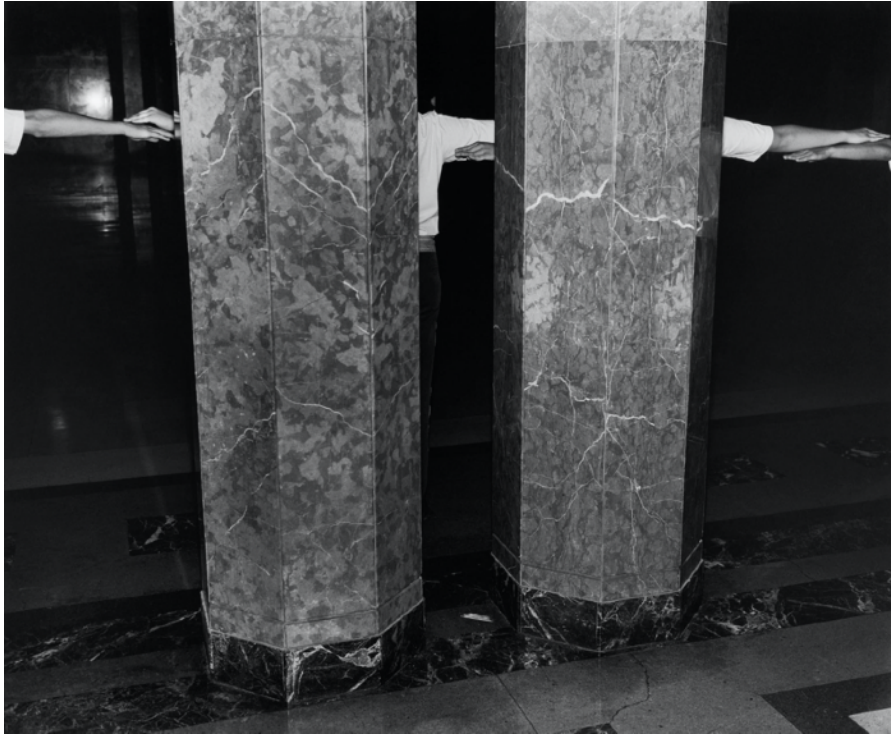
Military and athletic settings, and the fraught collisions they stage, are a recurrent fixation: restraint and desire are the central themes not only of Graves and Lipman's final book but also of an oeuvre that returns over and over to the American social rites that mediate touch, particularly between men. Many of the photos collected here originally appeared in the pair's poignantly awkward studies of proms and ballroom-dancing competitions, and many more were culled from their "The Making of Men" series, which documents military training sessions, demolition derbies, rodeos, and other customs that foment masculinity.

Yet Graves and Lipman have no interest in accepting ritual on its own terms; instead, they use it to reveal the poignant fragility of institutionalized intimacy. For this reason, they are intent on documenting the moments before a ceremony begins, or the moments when cracks appear on its surface. One photo, for instance, depicts two girls preparing for a dance. As they armor themselves in fancy clothing, they lapse into vulnerability: one girl assumes an anxious, even pained, expression as her friend fastens pearls around her neck.





Almost always, "Restraint and Desire" chips away at the authority of ritual by defying visual convention, venturing uncanny angles and jarring framings that endow prosaic acts with newfound strangeness. The majority of the figures that appear in the book are obscured in some way, either cut off by intrusive framings or eclipsed by objects or other bodies. Protruding appendages, attached to people we cannot discern, are a consistent motif. One photo shows a youth being bundled into a jacket by a barrage of disembodied hands; another depicts men standing behind columns, their arms spread out into "T"s. We see sleeves, arms, and the hint of fingers emerging from behind each pillar, but we cannot make out any torsos or heads.



All of these unexpected tableaux are presented without captions or context; this lends the pictures an acute ambiguity. Absent the apparatus of a match or a tournament, athletic maneuvers are difficult to decipher, and many of them become indistinguishable from embraces: were it not for the other photographs of wrestlers in the book, the picture of a man clutching an opponent's hand against his face might strike us as a portrait of entangled lovers.

Even when the settings of Graves and Lipman's pictures are familiar to us, we can never be sure of what is happening between the figures depicted therein. There is always a scintilla of mystery that ritual cannot publicize or sanitize: the unknown territories that intimacy carves out. Probably the most moving photograph in Graves and Lipman's extraordinary collection is the one reproduced on its cover. In a dance hall or a hotel ballroom, a man dressed in a suit turns away from us, toward a woman whom his body conceals. We can see only her pale arms, raised above her head, and her hip, which juts out from behind the man's back. Perhaps her posture represents an invitation to the man; perhaps she is only rearranging her hair. Maybe the man is leaning toward her to confide in her; maybe he intends to kiss her. The point is that we cannot know, cannot enter into the secret language that belongs to the couple alone—into what the novelist Norman Rush so aptly calls an "idioverse."



Graves and Lipman have the rare gift of rendering an idioverse visible without compromising its integrity. The dedication of the book—"In loving memory of Ken Graves"—appears below a photo that's more legible than the others—the kind of picture that might be posted on social media, or kept in a scrapbook. It depicts Graves and Lipman at a restaurant, smiling up into the camera and holding hands. And still there is an entire world between them.



These two books showcase the rituals that make us human

By Kenneth Dickerman - December 29, 2021

I think I've said it before, but one of the best parts of my job is that people will send me work that I'm not familiar with, and that will open up all kinds of vistas I didn't know were there to begin with. That's also one of the things I love about photography itself — how it can illuminate previously unknown things or introduce us to the myriad mysteries of life.

A couple of months ago, I received a package with two books by photographers I'm embarrassed to say I wasn't familiar with at all. The books are "Derby" and "Restraint and Desire" — both by Ken Graves and Eva Lipman and published this year by TBW Books. I was immediately struck with curiosity.



From "Derby," published by TBW Books. (Ken Graves and Eva Lipman)

Another interesting element is that the books carry joint authorship. After digging a bit, I found out that Lipman and Graves worked together for more than three decades, sharing artistic credit for their images until Graves died at age 74 in 2016.

Neither "Derby" nor "Restraint and Desire" contain much in the way of words. And that's just fine by me. As I've said here on multiple occasions, photography is a language in its own right. Often, I don't pay much attention to the writing in photo books anyway. But this time, because I wasn't familiar with Lipman and Graves's work, I wanted to know a little bit more. So I reached out to Lipman, who graciously sent me some much appreciated and illuminating words about their work.



From "Derby," published by TBW Books. (Ken Graves and Eva Lipman)

It turns out that Lipman and Graves began working together four years after they first met while seeing each other working individually. They were interested in many of the same things, so they often bumped into each other. Lipman says:

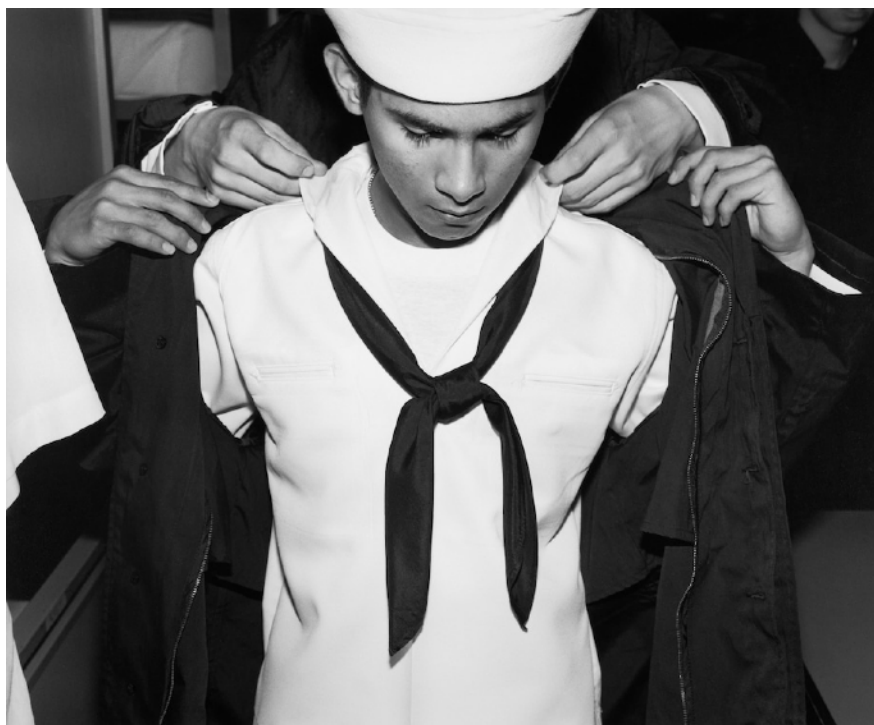
"In Art we were soul mates. We rejected the notion that photography had to be a solitary endeavor. Choosing to photograph as a single entity we shared artistic credit, blurring the lines of authorship. We were both teacher and student on a journey. Ken was the dreamer working from imagination, willing to sacrifice theme for a vision less subject driven. I remained faithful to the immediacy of events and people, searching for coherence and universals in the particular."

Both "Derby" and "Restraint and Desire" reflect the above personality traits as well as their seamless ability to work as joint authors.



From "Derby," published by TBW Books. (Ken Graves and Eva Lipman)

Of the two books, I was initially drawn to "Derby," probably because I'm from Midwestern stock, and it is a visual exploration of demolition derbies. On top of that, the photos are exquisite, as is the book's production. Over and above the depiction of somewhat familiar scenes, there is a focus on rituals of masculinity that are fascinating to take in. While on the surface "Derby" is a book about demolition derbies, it's so much more. It's about how those rituals serve to reinforce our identities.



From "Restaint and Desire," published by TBW Books. (Ken Graves and Eva Lipman)

When I first looked at "Restraint and Desire," I saw a book that was far more open-ended. Whereas "Derby" seemed to focus on one subject, "Restraint and Desire" floats through multiple subjects — high school dances, boxing matches, football games. But on second glance, it's a continuation of Graves and Lipman's interest in social rituals. Again, the subject is the vehicle to talk about something bigger. The more I look at "Restraint and Desire," the more I like it.

There's so much going on, all melded together through repeated gestures and rituals that say a lot about our humanness and impulses for the things we desire. Desire can be such a powerful thing, and yet sometimes we find ourselves holding it at bay.

No review can get to the bottom of what any work is about completely. And that's the case here. There's a richness of material in both "Derby" and "Restraint and Desire." They are fertile grounds for multiple readings. Like onions, you can peel each one back to reveal more and more layers. What unites both of them is their examination of the rituals that make us human — feelings and traits ranging from lust and desire to compassion and vulnerability. Time and again, in picture after picture, you can pick up on these things, whether it is the look in the eye of a man draped over his car or the intimacy of touch, the gestures of hands.



From "Restraint and Desire," published by TBW Books. (Ken Graves and Eva Lipman)

"Derby" and "Restraint and Desire" are beautifully evocative books that showcase Graves and Lipman's working relationship, not only with each other but to the resulting work. The following text comes from the publisher's website about "Restraint and Desire," but I think in a way it describes the photos in both books:

"With a profound visual sensitivity, Graves and Lipman collect human gestures that betray the complex interiority of their subjects. Hands often act here as the protagonist — grabbing, touching, reaching — entering and exiting the photographs like a visual metronome. Lust, fear,

boredom, exhaustion and a myriad of feelings beyond the realm of language are all on display through the discerning glare of their camera and its flash.”



From "Restaint and Desire," published by TBW Books. (Ken Graves and Eva Lipman)

An archive of touch: Ken Graves and Eva Lipman's *Restraint and Desire*

by Isaac Huxtable



The intimate book explores the unspoken bonds visible across US society

Touch is a complicated game. Codes, systems and rules govern touch between friends, lovers, strangers and family. And *Restraint and Desire*, the culmination of a lifelong creative partnership between the late Ken Graves and his wife Eva Lipman, compiles the pairs' joint investigation into the haptic complexities between people during social rituals across America: from high school proms to boxing matches, football games and military ceremonies.

The book moves between black-and-white photographs of bodies that can touch and bodies that do not and cannot. The interlocking arms of boxers shift into the loving embrace of a couple, while an image of two kissing teenagers leads into soldiers shaking hands. Each touch, or lack thereof, marks the tension between bodies: awkward, formal, sexual, intimate, loving. And the photographs of these physical communications exist as a sort of history of unspoken bonds and a reflection of Lipman and Grave's relationship itself. Indeed, the pair sensed sexual undertones, unspoken and unconscious, in many of the moments they captured. As Lipman reflects, "our work reflected back to us, like a mirror, the intensities and power dynamics of our shared life together."

The Little-Seen World of Demolition Derbies

by Lauren Moya Ford - October 12, 2021

Ken Graves and Eva Lipman expose the surprisingly tender and at times erotically charged moments that happen before and after impact, when human and machine bodies come into close contact.



Ken Graves and Eva Lipman, *Derby* (all images © Ken Graves and Eva Lipman, courtesy TBW Books)

In *Derby* (TBW Books, 2021), the late Ken Graves and his wife and photographic partner Eva Lipman reveal the little-seen world of competitive demolition derbies. Graves and Lipman's black and white photos depict the events' hardscrabble drivers and mangled cars, but avoid the dangerous crashes that derbies are known for. Instead, in lyrical compositions and rich tones, the series exposes the surprisingly tender and at times erotically charged moments that happen before and after impact, when human and machine bodies come into close contact.

The photos in *Derby* were taken in and around Pennsylvania in the mid-to-late 1990s while Graves taught at Penn State and Lipman worked as a mobile therapist and social worker in the rural areas nearby. "I witnessed first hand the brokenness of their domestic lives, their isolation, hardships, and even emasculation," Lipman said in a recent email to Hyperallergic. But the duo's photos are not a simplified portrait of misery or suffering. On weekends, the carnivalesque chaos of the derbies "created a space in which everyone was equal," Lipman reflected. "The boundaries between us and the drivers were erased. The drivers welcomed the attention, and felt safe opening themselves to the camera. They enjoyed being visible, performing their heroic feats, and were willing to expose their tensions and desires."



Ken Graves and Eva Lipman, *Derby*

Derby's tightly cropped, sharply focused pictures capture participants up close as they socialize around, rest in, and steadfastly fix up the cars that they send into battle. Women are largely absent from these pictures, though they did attend the events: one photo catches a little girl in a polka dotted dress with a bright flash, her paper cup falling to the ground as she stands beside a mud-splattered, dented derby car. In another, a man and woman embrace, both clinging to the same tire on a fence post. But most of these photos — as with Graves and

Lipman's previous projects on boxing, wrestling, the rodeo, and the military — are arenas for exploring the male body within a homosocial ritual.



Ken Graves and Eva Lipman, *Derby*

The shirtless, sweating men splayed across and against car hoods and dashboards in *Derby* convey a sense of bonded brotherhood and physical intimacy. "The familiarity of the place made for a space in which they experienced themselves as 'real,'" Lipman explained. "This extended to an environment in which men felt free to bond, show affection, touch." In one photo, a helmeted driver closes his eyes as if in prayer, while someone else's hand rests encouragingly on his open window. In another, two topless youths crowd together, skin on skin, as they repair a rear car seat. The pictures show the battered cars to be a poignant nexus between the people who drive and watch them.

Despite their unusual subject matter, Graves and Lipman didn't consider this an ethnographic or documentary project. "Ken and I never photographed thinking about documenting," Lipman said on a recent phone call with Hyperallergic. "We were not interested in making pictures that would be literal. We would go into a subject looking for images that had a bigger, more transcendent meaning." Together, Graves and Lipman's elegant images suggest that the derby is tied up in emotions that might seem unexpected for such a harsh and violent sport: among the dust and banged-up cars, their pictures emanate a sense of commitment, pride, and even love.



Ken Graves and Eva Lipman, *Derby*



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