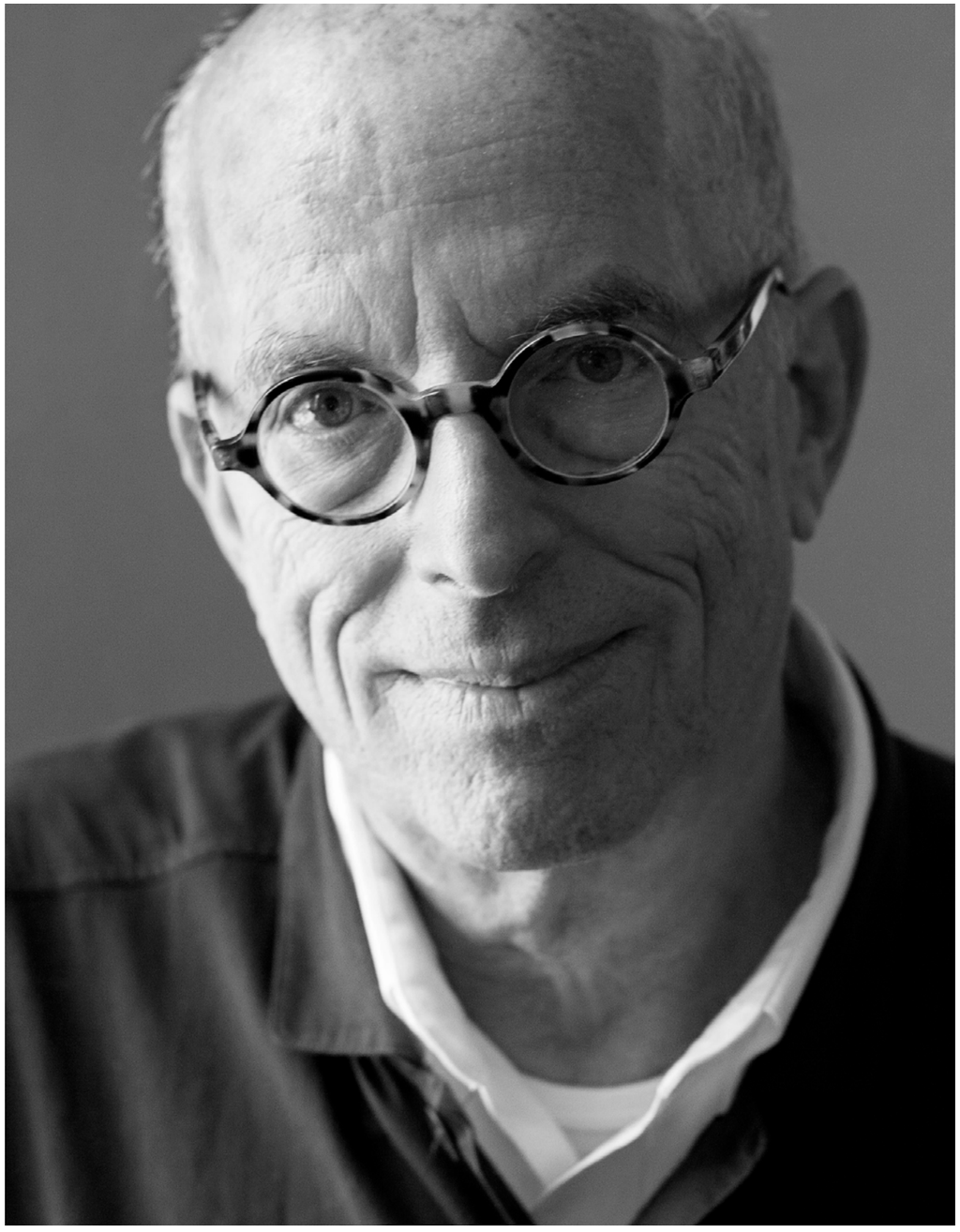
# MARVIN HEIFERMAN



Marvin Heiferman, 2017 © Sara Macel



**STEVE MILLER:** *Separately, Andrea Blanch and I were each taken with an image you posted on Instagram a while ago: a split face collage of your face and Maurice's, your husband. I was struck by how seamlessly you two blended into a single image, given that you both look so different. Thinking about that raises the question of how a relationship creates an identity that two people share when they face the world. What made you think about creating this visual marriage? What did the new image make you understand about your identity as a couple?* **MARVIN HEIFERMAN:** I guess I'll have to go back to its genesis to explain some things. I've been posting images on Instagram, one a day and for the past six years, of things that capture my attention for one reason or another. That stopped abruptly in March when my husband, Maurice Berger, came down with flu-like symptoms. Because we were both so nervous about what was happening with the spread of coronavirus, taking pictures, usually a highlight of my day, was the last thing that was on my mind. I stopped taking pictures on March 18th, the day Maurice first felt sick. He died four days later, on March 22nd. I was startled and devastated by his sudden death and literally didn't know what to do for or with myself. Three days later, walking on the road by our house, I saw something that looked as distressed as I felt: a fucked-up flag, twisted around a pole, dangling off a tree. Instinctively, I took a picture of that and understood that taking pictures might give meaning and a bit of structure to my days, I went back to posting a daily picture. The only thing that engaged and made sense to me, though, was representing my feelings, confusion, and grief. Maurice's death was devastating. Words failed me. I was unable to articulate my shock and the depth of my sadness. Yet, I sensed, somehow, that pictures might help me do that. And so, what's now turned into an extended project began, featuring photographs I'd made of Maurice, of me, objects around the house and of places we'd gone. Friends started sending me pictures they'd made of Maurice and of us in the past. Among my favorites is one taken in 2017 by Therese Lichtenstein, one of Maurice's best friends, when we had lunch with her at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. When I look at that image, the happiness Maurice and I shared in our life together seems palpable, vivid, and emblematic to me. We adored each other, and this picture, more than most, captured our comfort and delight in being a couple. I posted it on Instagram and look at a printout of it, next to my computer, multiple times a day, every day. And, at some point, a funny thing happened. I saw the two of us in one picture, both smiling, both with glasses on, both looking at Terry and wondered what would happen if I collapsed the space between us. I'm sure it also had something to do with a poem, "Epitaph", by Forrest Gander, that another friend had sent to me. In it, Gander mourns the death of his wife, the poet C.D. Wright, and the fact the person who knew him the best and reflected that best self back to him was gone. "You existed me," he wrote, *"…you see me as I would never again be revealed."* and I felt that way about Maurice, too. But, with him gone, I wondered what would happen if I merged the two of us together. And I was delighted and unnerved when I did. We looked like a single person, neither me nor him, but like us. It was uncanny. **STEVE:** *When you're in a long-term relationship with somebody, there's your public life and your private life. The lives you have together become an identity, even if you don't think about it as a shared identity. And I guess that's what this merging of the two faces revealed in a very graphic, simple way. In this one image, you*

*captured, from my perspective, the idea of what it is to present a unified face to the world.* **MARVIN:** We used to joke around and call ourselves M&M and, so, this kind of combination of the two Ms made sense to me. We had been together for twenty-six years, a lot of people knew us as a couple, and our life together was a partnership that became an entity. **STEVE:** *There's that one identity, but, in your Instagram feed in the aftermath of Maurice's death, you're obviously processing loss and grieving through images. You make your aloneness and new identity feel very natural and inevitable, like when you register the imprints of Maurice that remain: clothing, keys, diary, bed, nightstand, places that you shopped and visited. Can you speak about other pictures you've posted that deal with the loss of identity?* **MARVIN:** The most unsettling thing when your spouse dies is the most obvious: they're gone. Your life together is over; that's it. The weird thing, in terms of photography, is that every time I look at a picture of Maurice, it feels like he's still here, which is disorienting. All those two-dimensional pictures have enough data in them to read as three-dimensional to me. And, sometimes, that makes me feel better, and sometimes, it makes me feel worse. Maurice's death felt irreconcilable, but our life together seemed retrievable, in some way, through photography. **STEVE:** *What made you decide to share your feelings and pictures of loss on Instagram?* **MARVIN:** Maurice was dead. I was home alone in upstate New York at the beginning of a pandemic. There was little chance of anyone coming by. Putting pictures out on Instagram became something of a survival strategy, a way to express and acknowledge what I was feeling. Except for talking to a handful of people on the telephone, which I was doing an awful lot, I watched as my inbox filled up with hundreds of emails about Maurice's death, and a hundred thoughtful letters, notes, and condolence cards arrived in the mail and I while I wanted to acknowledge them all, I was exhausted, overwhelmed. So, I started putting out pictures on Instagram, not quite as documentary images but to represent what my grieving felt like. All I wanted was for someone to throw their arms around my shoulders and tell me I'd be OK. And that wasn't in the cards. But, as news of Maurice's death spread, growing numbers of people started looking at my Instagram account, and I soon found myself engaged in unexpected and often surprisingly intimate conversations with people. I realized that the fact that they were paying attention to what I was posting and expressing their love and concern was comforting to me in unexpected ways and much appreciated. Making and sharing pictures became a way for me to be myself and get outside of myself. And it was at that point that I started reading about grief, how it's expressed, and how other people, if you're lucky, help you along in your processing of it. Joan Didion's book, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, impressed me because of her accuracy in describing what it feels like to be derailed by a spouse's death. I was drawn, too, to the work of David Kessler, a grief expert, who talks about how grief needs to be witnessed, which I realized was what I needed to have happen. I needed acknowledgement of what happened to Maurice and to me. I needed to deal with my story and sorrow and have people be there for me, which would be a comfort and become part of the process. The unexpected thing is that a number of people who were looking at pictures about something horrible that happened to me started rising. The number of likes my pictures were getting on Instagram quadrupled. The photographs were resonating in ways I never would have imagined. **STEVE:** *You've had a long and very public career in photography, working as a gallerist, curator, publisher, producer, and writer. Your Smithsonian project and the subsequent book,* Photography Changes Everything*, examined the medi-*

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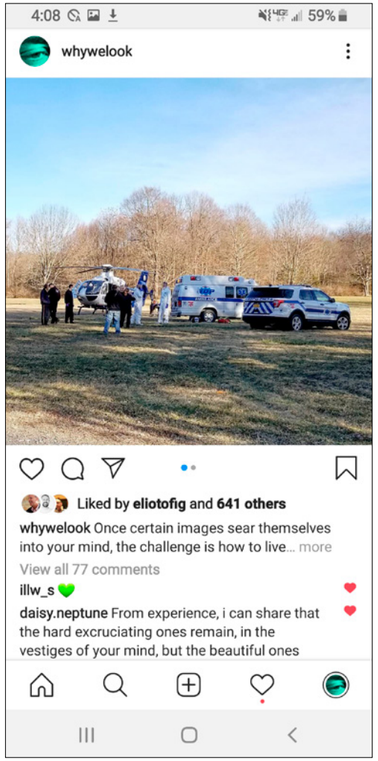
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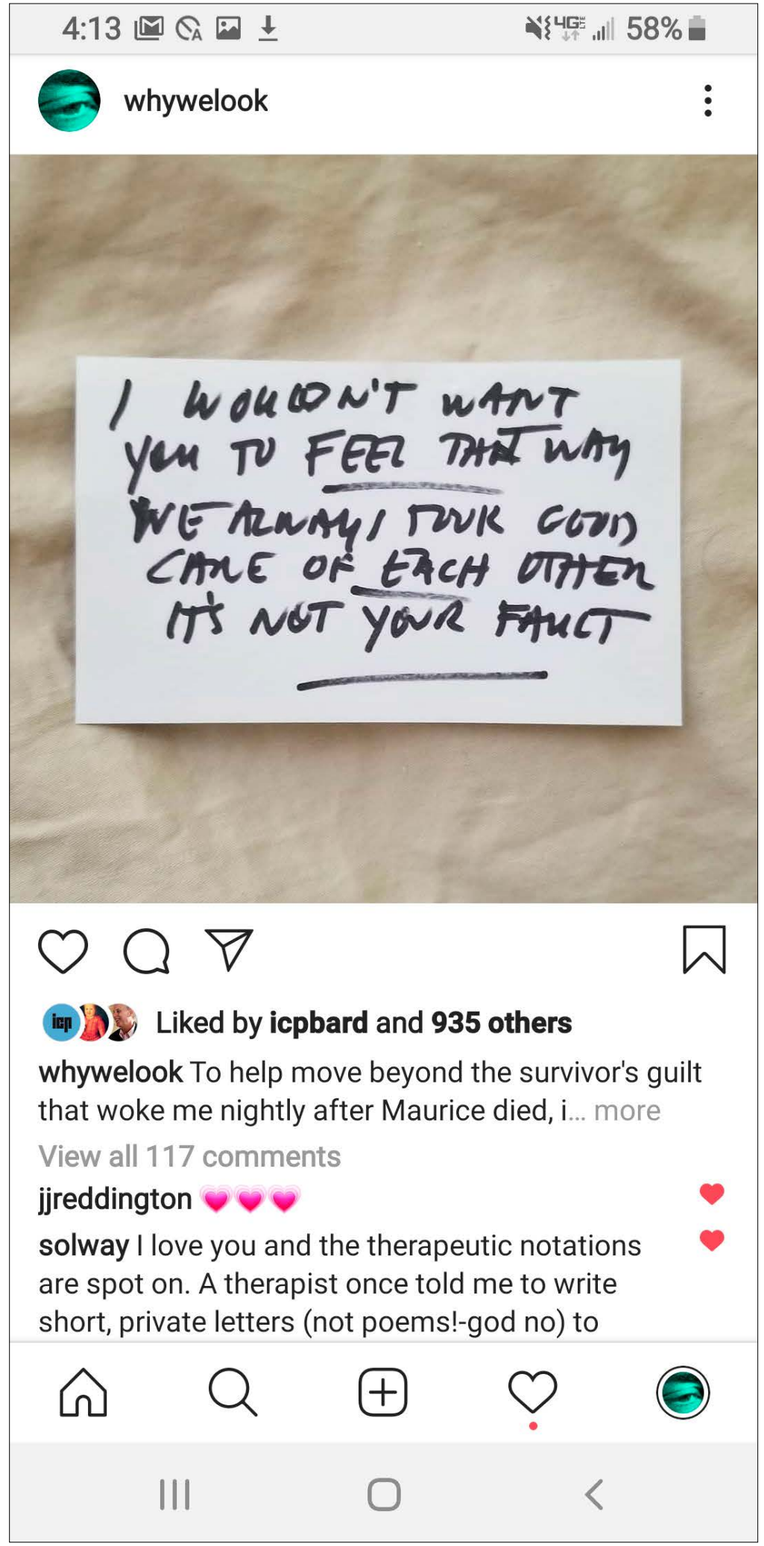
*um's power as an agent of transformation. And now you're using photography in a much more personal way and since we're talking about identity, it's fascinating how people are now* identifying *with your emotions.* **MARVIN:** In the past, I've always looked at how photography works in culture and for others. Now, all of a sudden, I'm using photography because I have to in order to make sense of myself, for myself. It didn't and still doesn't feel like a choice. Making pictures was the only way I was going to be able to face up to and make peace with my own vulnerability. I was no longer the professional saying, "This is how photographs work." I was me, Marvin, saying "I don't know what the fuck is going on, but making pictures is the only thing that allows me to capture and take a step back from my experience, to literally see and get some perspective on what I was going through. While I did that for myself, I was well aware that people would be looking at it. And that seemed okay to me because it was yet another example of what photography does to and for us. And when people looked, I'd wonder why. Some were people who'd previously followed me on Instagram, but a lot were people who didn't, who I didn't know. What I came to realize was that while my subject was my particular loss in the midst of a pandemic, grief was in the air. People were afraid for themselves, their families, and their well-beings. They were afraid for their jobs, careers, homes and their futures. They were fearful of the ideologies and politics that hampered effective response. After the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, demands for racial equity and social justice made our vulnerabilities ever more obvious. My pictures, making my vulnerability visible, seemed to allow people to express and share their vulnerabilities with me and others. One day, I put up a picture of a container of chicken curry I'd found in the freezer and wrote about how I realized that Maurice cooked it and that once I defrosted and ate it, it, would be the last time I'd taste his cooking. It was, on its surface, a mundane image, but it was heavily loaded one for me. But then, almost immediately, people started describing similar situations, tomato sauce made by a mother right before she died, frozen pieces of birthday cake too aligned with sorrow to consume. **STEVE:** *I guess you must ask yourself, from time to time, how much to reveal and what should remain private on social media? Or did you just decide to ditch those boundaries?* **MARVIN:** That's an interesting question. Maurice dies, and I'm left to decide how to represent him, me, and our relationship. The first thing I did was go through every photograph I've taken to see how many photographs of Maurice there are. Ironically, for someone as involved in photography as I am, there weren't many until digital photography made it so easy. I've got a handful of pictures of Maurice prior to 2007 when I got a little digital camera and shot sporadically for a year or two. It's not until 2011 that I've got a lot of pictures of Maurice because I started using my phone's camera. And it was only after 2014, when I joined Instagram and wanted to be photographing everyday, that I began compiling what grew into an archive of pictures of my personal experience and our life together. So yeah, what's private, and what's public? Maurice was a brilliant guy. He had a critical mind, rigorous practice, a dedicated online following and a very, very carefully crafted public persona. He was a public intellectual but an extremely very private person. How do you reconcile and represent that? There's Maurice, who did groundbreaking work on race and representation, curated fantastic exhibitions and wrote prize-winning columns for *The New York Times*. And then there's my Maurice, the adorable guy, wickedly funny, sweet, supportive and fiercely protective in ways that those who didn't know him could never imagine. I want to acknowledge both and am always wanting to strike a balance.



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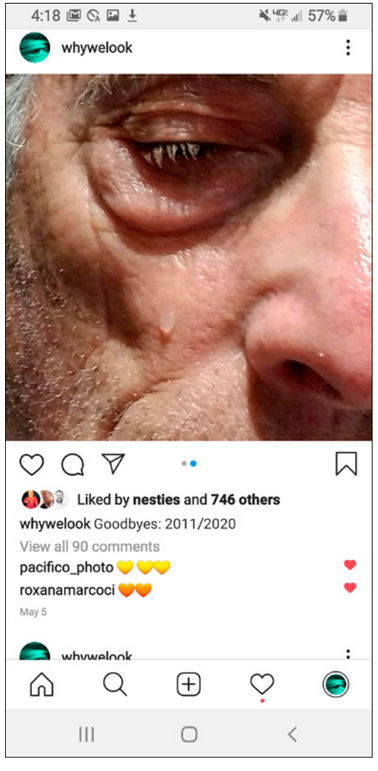
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**STEVE:** *One thing you've certainly made public is your sadness. There's one image, for example, of you with a tear flowing down your cheek that really got to me. When I saw it, I thought, wow, that's brave. What were you thinking when you photographed yourself? What was that experience like?* **MARVIN:** I was just being honest. There was no way to shy away from the fact that I was crying a lot. And, after a while and every time I did, I thought I should probably picture that, too. Instagram is so bound up in projecting an image of yourself, and there I was, miserable a lot of the time, and I figured fuck it. If crying is what I do, I'm just putting that out there, too. **STEVE:** *Part of me has wanted to do something like that in the past, but I didn't have the nerve to do that and see what it looked like. Your willingness to photograph and acknowledge your own vulnerability struck me as particularly courageous, which leads me to another question: How'd you come up with the name "WHY WE LOOK?"* **MARVIN:** That's an outgrowth of the Smithsonian project, where I was also the creative director of a blog about photography and visual culture. Once that gig was over, I missed having a platform and was trying to figure out a way to keep me and my interests and adventures in visual culture visible and public. A friend suggested posting about things that interested me on social media, so I started curating links to stories about photographic imaging and visual culture to Twitter and Facebook, something I continue to do every day. "WHY WE LOOK?" seemed like the perfect handle to hint at what makes photography compelling, useful, and ever-evolving. So, when I started my Instagram account, the name stuck. **STEVE:** *In terms of your recent Instagram feed, I feel like I look because I'm watching a true, emotional story unfold. It's riveting, I'm always waiting for what comes next. And while I feel like the explanation you just gave me made sense, I feel, as an observer, that you're on to a whole new thing. "WHY WE LOOK?" started out being rhetorical, but, now, the answer to the question is more often extremely personal.* **MARVIN:** You're right. All of my curatorial work—the books, exhibition and online projects—points fingers at photography, trying to understand what we look at and why. Now, I've become the story. That's the weird thing about doing this. Previously, my Instagram was saying, "Hey, look at this, look at that, now look at this." After Maurice died, everything changed, and the pictures are saying, "This was us. This was him. This is me." My interest, now, is neither being nor looking smart. I'm trying to describe and come to terms with my life, which has been turned upside down. There were days when hundreds of people would write and respond to a picture I'd put up. I never anticipated that anything like that would happen. I realize that people are concerned, for me and for themselves, that we're all trying to figure out what's going on, all grappling with somewhat similar questions simultaneously. What I have been and am still going through is extremely difficult. People now reach out all the time saying we've never met, I didn't know Maurice, but I'm drawn to what you're doing and moved by it. And while much has been said about social media and community; this was my first profound experience of it. Frankly, I don't know if or how I would have gotten through the past months if I hadn't been making and sharing pictures. I am deeply touched by the fact that people have looked and thought about them and grateful that they've reached out to me. Early in this process, someone on Instagram commented that what I seemed to be doing on Instagram, in the midst of a pandemic, was hosting a photo shiva, creating a space for people to come together to honor a man, mourn a death, and support the living. And I think that's right. "WHY WE LOOK?" became something to participate in and identify with. We look—especially in the precarious time we're living through—because we care about each other.