

to Me



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**NEVER TOO
MANY PICTURES**

What happens when a military archive becomes a fashion lexicon? One year on, Matthieu Nicol's *Fashion Army* shows us.

words RACHEL WEINBERG

Almost a year ago, cultural collector Matthieu Nicol released *Fashion Army*, his second book drawn from a corpus of 14,000 US Army photographs. Across 176 pages, the volume traces the systematic cataloguing of military uniforms and supplies from the 1970s and '80s, medium-format images originally produced for internal use within the US Army branches much like a utilitarian department-store catalogue. Over the course of eighteen months, Nicol repeatedly contacted the Army in an attempt to understand the origins and function of these images, only to receive a final refusal: they claimed to lack the resources to dedicate to his inquiry, confirming only that the photographs were free to use. It is precisely for this reason that the sequencing and editing of *Fashion Army* rests solely on visual criteria. And the results are striking. Unlike the stark, perfunctory studio shots typical of catalogues, these photographs possess an unexpected aesthetic quality. Set against baby blue, magenta, or cyan-yellow backdrops, young men and women stand fixed to the lens—front-facing, bent forward, or in profile—modelling garments intended for procurement. “We must not forget these images were produced by a killing machine,” Nicol laments. On the surface, they may appear humorous, even absurd, but that humour is uneasy. What the French call a *rire jaune*, a yellow laugh.

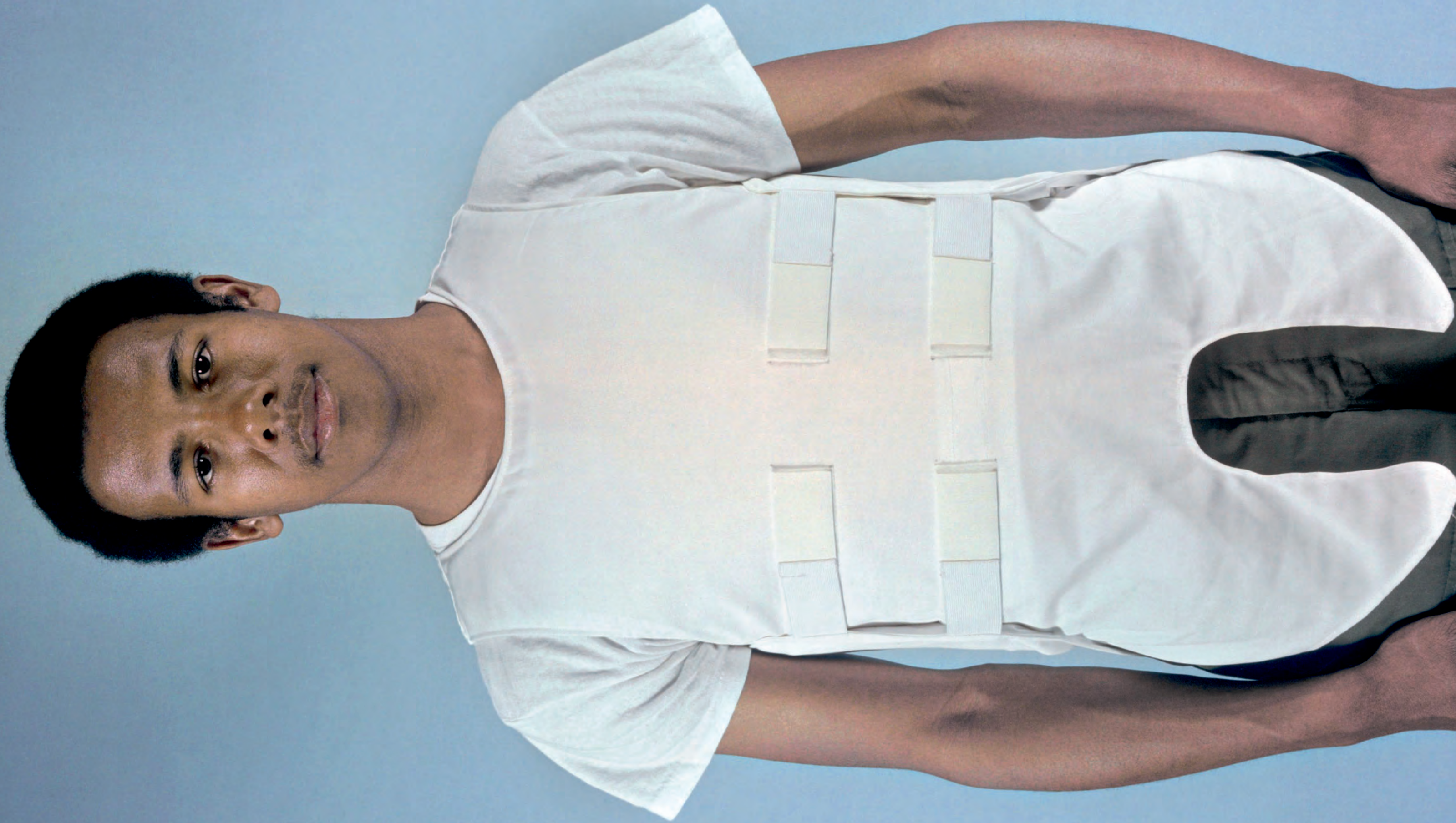
Viewed in isolation, an individual image might appear unremarkable. But through sequencing, editing and repetition, Nicol transforms the corpus into a coherent and clear visual language, a fashion language, that dislocates the images from their original function and reassigns them a new, more desirable form. This act of redistribution reflects the logic of Nicol’s hybrid practice, in which collecting, curating and recontextualising converge.

Based in Paris, Nicol moves between roles as curator, editor, publisher and consultant, yet insists that the thread tying all of his work together is not authorship, but adoption, borrowed from Joan Fontcuberta’s idea that images can be reactivated without being owned. Appropriation, he argues, belongs to a 1970s tradition of conceptual art, tethered to questions of authorship and ownership. Adoption, by contrast, is about care. It is about taking in images that have been abandoned, stripped of purpose, and giving them new life. “These images don’t belong to me,” he says over a Zoom call in April. “They belong to everyone, to humanity. And I’m very comfortable with that.”

By treating these materials as public domain, as cultural archaeology rather than property, Nicol frames collecting as a practice of care. He has built a body of work devoted to reimagining or recirculating lost or overlooked images—photographs once produced for functional or bureaucratic use that now circulate in new cultural contexts. His projects are less about possession than about assembling, less about making images than about giving existing ones new purpose.

The foundation of Nicol’s practice lies in something even more attentive: the impulse to collect. He recalls childhood habits of gathering stones, stamps or even golf balls, the instinct to build order and meaning from abundance. This tendency, he suggests, has never left him. “Some people are collectors. I’m one of them,” he admits. But instead of accumulating physical objects, he began to assemble “imaginary collections” of images, first while working at Magnum Photos in his twenties while exposed to the work of photographers Henri Cartier-Bresson, Josef Koudelka and René Burri, and later while editing press material. Patterns emerged in these endless flows of news wires and stock







archives, and Nicol began grouping them, privately building ensembles of photographs in his mind.

The obsessive dimension of the work is something Nicol acknowledges openly. “It drove me crazy for six months, night and day,” he admits, describing the process of editing *Fashion Army*. Yet rather than seeing this fixation as destructive, he reframes it as a form of discipline: “I canalised that neurosis into something useful.” This channelling of neurosis recalls Walter Benjamin’s reflections on the collector, for whom obsession is not a distraction but a structure for meaning, a “locking of individual items within a magic circle in which they are fixed as the final thrill.” In Nicol’s practice, as in Benjamin’s, control transforms repetition into narrative, and the act of assembling becomes its own form of storytelling. What might otherwise appear pathological becomes a generative mode of working. Obsession is not the by-product but the very engine of his methodology, and control is the structure through which meaning is extracted from excess.

What distinguishes Nicol’s practice is his devotion to what he defines as “lost images.” These are photographs stripped of function and value: technical records, declassified military archives, product shots or vernacular fragments uploaded to forgotten corners of the internet. Once useful, they now drift without context. “They don’t have authorship, they don’t have market value, they don’t have use anymore,” he explains. “They’re just lost.”

In this, Nicol positions himself less as an owner and more as an archaeologist. His book, *Better Food For Our Fighting Men*, published in 2022 by RVB Books, drew on an archive of the same 14,000 US Army photographs as used for *Fashion Army*, documenting the early decades of processed food in the United States: material that reveals the invention

of junk food as much as it records military rations. Adopting this process, *Fashion Army* narrows the plethora of images down to an edit of 350 in an endeavour to reframe military prototypes as a fashion catalogue.

If collecting provides the source, editing is the true engine of Nicol’s work. He insists that photography, for him, is always discursive: “Photography is storytelling,” as he says. The act of sequencing is what transforms isolated images into narrative. Repetition becomes rhythm, and variation within sameness produces surprise. A single photograph might hold power on a wall, but in book form, images converse with each other across a spread, or in the act of turning a page, from left to right and back again.

This is why the book form has become central to his practice. Exhibitions, he admits, can carry narrative, but they are costly, short-lived, and geographically bound. A book, by contrast, fixes an edit, preserves it, and allows it to circulate widely. “All my projects are first book projects,” Nicol explains. “Then I do exhibitions, performances, talks, screenings. But first of all, it’s a book.” Editing, then, is both method and message: the way he makes sense of abandoned images and the way he invites readers to discover new meanings.

By recontextualising images, Nicol argues that re-use can generate new conversations. Just as the *Food Army* project became a platform for reflecting on industrialised diets, *Fashion Army* revealed the uncanny overlap between aesthetics and militarism. Produced in collaboration with SPBH Editions, the highly designed, glossy, soft-cover volume deliberately borrows codes of fashion magazines. Soldiers-turned-models stare out from studio portraits, their prototypes and uniforms suddenly transformed into ‘looks’, as if destined for Angelo Flaccavento’s show notes in the book’s closing pages.





For Flaccavento, these images “have an essential quality of fashion”, recalling the raw directness of Anette Aurell, David Sims, and Juergen Teller—photographers who privilege the unvarnished and real over the polished and glamorous. *Fashion Army*’s pared-back form and function, he observed, “ooze a glaring sense of now, with an urgency that makes the content highly covetable.” While Flaccavento located this modernity in the garments themselves—the army jackets echoing C.P. Company’s Goggle jacket, or the sharply tailored cotton shirts reminiscent of Helmut Lang’s 1990s collections—it also resides in fashion’s enduring compulsion to document and circulate images, whether through lookbooks, campaigns or e-commerce catalogues. The endless repetition—look after look, expressionless face after expressionless face—defines the very grammar of fashion photography. That such a process unfolded within a military base, orchestrated by anonymous operators, only renders the project more strange.

Nicol acknowledges these synchronicities in image-making. He points to Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and Tony Scott’s *Top Gun* (1986), noting visual echoes across cinema and the Army archive. “You don’t know who influences who,” he observes. “It’s the *air du temps*, a spirit of the time in imagery, image-making, and style. Did the Army operators, or the tailors producing prototypes, see what Kubrick was doing? Or was it simply functionality arriving at the same aesthetic? You can’t know where the influence runs, but what you do see is the zeitgeist.”

The irony is not lost on Nicol, for the fashion industry itself recognised the project, awarding it the prize for Best Fashion Book of 2024 during Paris Fashion Week. What began as an act of editing military leftovers became, quite literally, a reference book for the fashion industry.

Alongside Nicol’s curatorial and publishing work, he runs a consultancy called Too Many Pictures that builds websites and digital ecosystems for museums, and cultural institutions including the Azzedine Alaïa Foundation, delpire & co and Paris Photo, to name a few. He describes this as “information architecture”, a process rooted less in image direction and more in writing, structuring and presenting archives. Whether advising a Swiss Museum of Photography on their digital strategy or working with Carla Sozzani on Alaïa Foundation’s digital presence, Nicol frames this as another form of editing: understanding their needs and translating them into coherent online narratives.

Although *Fashion Army* has garnered international recognition, Nicol insists it is finished. “I don’t want to go back to those images anymore,” he says. Instead, his focus has shifted. At the time of speaking, he would soon teach a course on fashion photography, an irony he relishes given his oft-stated indifference to fashion itself. At the same time, he is preparing new publishing projects: a hybrid cookbook-poetry-photobook drawn from a 1960s postcard collection, and a body of work based on vernacular images of rear-view mirrors harvested from online classifieds.

Continuity is clear here. Throughout each collection, Nicol continues to treat photography as an archaeology of the everyday. What changes is the corpus, the lens through which he invites us to reconsider images that might otherwise disappear. In reframing photography as something to be adopted and recirculated, Nicol suggests a model of practice that resists both the fetish of ownership and the amnesia of digital ephemera. Rather than endpoints, his work functions as renewed contexts, places where silenced images can speak again. There is no such thing as too many pictures, only new ways to view them.