

#### **4. The Photographic Visualization of HIV/AIDS 1981-2000**

Diseases are most often pictured through portraits of the suffering patient, which become images of the disease anthropomorphized. These portraits help establish the structural limits that define the boundaries of the disease, and these boundaries are in turn produced in part by the aesthetic limits of the specific media in which the portrait appears – such as the perspective of the photograph (Gilman, 1988: 2). Viewed historically, the image of a given disease, as made available through the face of a patient, is a continuous one only marginally influenced by changing understandings about the nature or scope of the disease in question (Gilman, 1988: 3). The overall 'look' of the disease in the first decade of HIV/AIDS was consistent with this conclusion (Watney, 1990: 173).

Starting with photographs of gay men, their bodies marked by the lesions of Kaposi's Sarcoma and with visible wastage, the early images of HIV/AIDS emanating from the US were what Douglas Crimp has called portraits of abjection and otherness (Takemoto, 2003: 84). Sometimes combined with scientific close-ups of the isolated virus in a diptych, these pictures constructed the disease as an individual problem rather than a social responsibility (Watney, 1990: 1987, 190). Most notable in this regard was Nicholas Nixon's famous series of portraits people with AIDS, originally part of his 1988 Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) show "Pictures of People," and later the subject of this book *People with AIDS* (Nixon and Nixon, 1991).



Figure 4: Nicholas Nixon, *Tom Moran*, 1987

Nixon's portraits (Figure 4) were well received by art and photography critics, who praised the way their individualization of the disease was said to challenge stereotypes. In contrast, AIDS activists regarded the photographs – many of them showing people with cases of AIDS more advanced than that pictured here – as doing little more than replicating standard media images of ravaged, debilitated, hopeless victims. For Crimp (1992: 118, 130), while they embodied the liberal hope that giving AIDS a face would overcome the bureaucratic inertia blocking research on HIV, they were "phobic images" that lacked context and promoted fear. They promoted the idea that the hospital or hospice was the true location of AIDS, and that people with AIDS were passive individuals who had been "sentenced to the black-and-white testimonial space of the 'AIDS victim'" (Watney, 1990: 182-83). Nixon's images, and others like them, were emphatic statements of the idea that AIDS=death that transformed "distinct and distinguishable social beings into interchangeable examples of that equation" (Ogdon, 2001: 76). The resultant effect of this consistent mode of representation was to "abstract the experience of people living with AIDS away from the determining context of the major institutions of health care provision and the state. By being repeatedly individualized, AIDS is subtly and efficiently de-politicized" (Watney, 1990: 187).

Portraits like Nixon's used the photographic convention of the close-up, often of the face, to make their point. While this strategy was read by the art and photography critics as humanising, it is possible to understand this approach as achieving the reverse. This point is well made in Ogdon's (2001: 84-87) critique of Nixon's photographs, where she deploys Gilles Deleuze's arguments about the way the close-up relies on the face, how it works to "facify" its subject, and what the effects of this operation are. For Deleuze (1986: ch. 6) the close-up is the face and is more than just the result of a zoom. It effects an absolute change in which the person in the frame becomes an object: "*the close up abstracts it [the subject] from all its spatio-temporal co-ordinates, that is to say it raises it to the state of Entity*" (Deleuze, 1986: 96). Facification – the reliance on the close-up – is thus a form of effacement in which

ironically the capacity of the face to individualize is lost, along with its role in socialization and communication (Deleuze, 1986: 99-100).<sup>1</sup>

Nixon's MoMA show was met with quiet dissent from AIDS activists who objected precisely to the way the focus on the face had dehumanizing effects. The year previous to the exhibition had seen the formation of the People with AIDS Coalition the founding statement of which decried their labelling as 'victims', said they were only occasionally 'patients' (because of the implied helplessness), and declared they were above all else 'people with AIDS' (Jones, 1997: 394). In this vein, ACTUP protested the Nixon show with a flyer that called for "no more pictures without context" and an end to photographs that displayed passive and ravaged individuals (Crimp, 1992: 118).



Figure 5: Benetton, AIDS – David Kirby, February 1992.<sup>2</sup>

ACTUP's campaign did not prevent the continued use of such photographs. In 1992, in a controversial development that blurred the boundaries between advertising and editorial photography, the Italian clothing corporation Benetton used a news photograph of a man dying from AIDS as part of a campaign. Under the guidance of its creative director Oliviero Toscani, Benetton had pioneered the use of constructed and documentary photography to

associate its brand with humanitarian values and promote social causes. To raise awareness of AIDS, Toscani and the designer Tibor Kalman used a photograph of David Kirby (Figure 5), dying in the Ohio State University Memorial hospital in May 1990. Kalman had come across this photograph – taken by Therese Frare and originally published as a black and white image – while reading an issue of *Life* in November 1990. Frare’s photograph won a World Press Photo award in 1991, but it was the Benetton campaign which brought it to wider public attention and provoked debate, about AIDS and the ethics of this image. Frare had taken the photograph at Kirby’s request, and both Frare and the Kirby family gave their consent to Benetton for the photograph to be colourized and used in the campaign. In 2003 *Life* made it part of the collection of 100 images the magazine claimed changed the world (Benetton, 2006; Kalman, 2006).

Despite widespread concerns, phobic images such as those of Nixon and Frare abounded in the 1980s and 1990s, especially when the subject was AIDS in Africa and other foreign locations.<sup>3</sup> As Bleiker and Kay (2007: 147-51) demonstrate in their incisive reading of a 1986 news photograph taken in Uganda by Ed Hooper (see Figure 6), which was published in *Newsweek* and *The Washington Post*, distant locations lend themselves to the production of the iconography of anonymous victimhood (Campbell, 2003). Hooper’s picture “is an attempt to capture the universal nature of death, stripped free of context and culture. As a result, it shows an image of passive victims, void of agency, history, belonging, or social attachment” (Bleiker and Kay, 2007: 149).



Figure 6: Two victims: Ugandan barmaid and son

Bleiker and Kay (2007: 140-41) offer three accounts of the practice of photography – the naturalist, the humanist and the pluralist. Dispensing with the first because of its untenable assumptions about mimetically reproducing an objective and value free reality, they focus on the other two. They read most photojournalism as embodying a humanist ethos that seeks to elicit compassion in order to enable change. The pluralist conception of photography comprises local practices that seek to shun stereotypes. They stress that these are ideal types and that a single photograph could encompass more than one mode. Nonetheless, their discussion of humanist photography is especially relevant to this report.

Bleiker and Kay's analysis draws out the function of photographs like that of Hooper. Pity, compassion, sympathy and empathy are related but distinct emotions that photographs – even when they are published simply as illustrations to accompany reports – can inspire. The meaning of each is complex, but insofar as photographs of suffering are meant to affectively arouse the more fortunate, pictures such as Hooper's can have a paradoxical effect. While they may disturb viewers at one level, they can be comforting at another: "death in a distant and dangerous elsewhere can...become a way of affirming life in the safe here and now" (Bleiker and Kay, 2007: 151).

The familiar persistence of photographs like Hooper's in the representation of HIV/AIDS in Africa suggests that the images are a product of what social scientists call "path dependence" – the way in which current visual forms replicate orientalist historical traditions (Bleiker and Kay, 2007: 145) rather than current conditions. As Schell (1997: 101) argues, "perhaps the media images of devastation and starvation in Africa have helped constitute the continent to Americans as a habitat where humans are victims and disease and famine have the upper hand." That these particular visual forms are not natural is demonstrated by the changes in strategies for representing people living with HIV/AIDS in the United States over the last decade. In a shift that is both driven by and parallels the relative de-stigmatization of HIV/AIDS discussed in Section 2, photographs of HIV/AIDS patients are now more likely to represent robust individuals free from the external marks of the disease (such as the former basketball star Magic Johnson) than the emaciated figure of the dying victim as seen in the 1993 film *Philadelphia* (Fernandes, 2008: 94-95).

These portrayals of people living with AIDS as healthy survivors have been actively promoted by commercial interests that see the gay community in the US as a significant market. In his study of advertisements in three gay newspapers, using a seven-month sample from 1995, Jones (1997) detailed how individuals were pictured as empowered, heroic and even athletic. These images manifest the changing of understanding of HIV/AIDS in the US that has seen it move from being an automatic death sentence to a disease that can be managed by antiretroviral drugs. The pharmaceutical industry has been active in using pictures that represent this shift, creating the idea that such drugs are treatments for a condition that need not compromise the lifestyle of their consumers. Reacting against this representation, in April 2001 the US Food and Drug Administration ordered the industry to change its advertising strategy to better reflect the issues facing people living with HIV/AIDS (Lindsey, 2001).

These 'positive' photographs of the healthy, active but infected person, while representing a significant shift in the media construction of HIV/AIDS that estranges the naturalization of the 'negative' pictures emanating from Africa, do not in the end escape the stigmatization of HIV/AIDS. As Jones (1997: 409) concluded:

The creation of the 'idealized' self – healthy, empowered and possessing options – is intertwined with and dependent upon the creation of its opposite, a 'damaged' self – diseased powerless, guilty of both ignorance and moral failing – fulfilling in fact, all of the worst indictments of the less generous popular press. Neither of these identities is a 'realistic' portrayal of or helpful model for people with HIV/AIDS. They merely fuel the already powerful pattern of stigmatization existing in the larger social frame.

#### (a) Questions for photographic practice

This review has demonstrated how what Douglas Crimp called phobic images – the portraits of abjection and otherness that individualize responsibility and depoliticize the pandemic – were prominent in the photographic visualization of HIV/AIDS between 1981 and 2000. Drawing on the established tradition of anthropomorphizing disease through pictures of the patient, these images of ravaged, debilitated and helpless people, often in hospital settings, gave the disease a face but nonetheless help to establish the biopolitical border between the healthy/unhealthy.

There have, however, been changes in visual representation throughout this period, at least in North American and Europe. Most notably, we have seen the way photographs shifted to a concern with people living with AIDS rather than simply dying from the disease. This transformation might have been made possible, at least in part, by the relocation of the phobic images from the domestic space of northern societies to the foreign realm of the global south. As section 3 demonstrated, the internationalization of news coverage of the

pandemic meant that there was increased attention on AIDS in Africa, and visually that focus came through photographs that replayed colonial stereotypes of the 'dark continent' through an iconography of anonymous victimhood. This has meant that images of death abroad have helped secure life at home.

Building on the issues for photographic practice raised in sections 1(a), 2(a) and 3(a), this discussion gives rise to a number of questions for that practice in the wake of this review of the photographic visualization of HIV/AIDS between 1981 and 2000:

- (i) Did the increased photographic attention to HIV/AIDS internationally simply replicate the phobic images of the 1980s?
- (ii) Did the photography of HIV/AIDS continue to rely on the body and the face of individuals associated with the pandemic?

#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The photographic history and meaning of the head and shoulders portrait, and the practice of "frontality" (where the subject looks directly into the camera), is discussed in Roberts (1988: 75-77), Tagg (1988: ch. 1), and Kozloff (2007).

<sup>2</sup> The Benetton photograph is publicly available from [http://production.investis.com/ben\\_en/about/campaigns/list/aids\\_david\\_kirby/](http://production.investis.com/ben_en/about/campaigns/list/aids_david_kirby/). Frare's original black and white photo and caption can be seen at <http://therese-frare-photography.com/gallery/2004gallery900.stm> (accessed 29 March 2008).

<sup>3</sup> These issues are not restricted to Anglo-American domains, or Anglo-American representations of foreign locations. As Varas-Diaz and Toro-Alfonso (2003) demonstrate in their content analysis of images of HIV/AIDS in the main Puerto Rican newspaper between 1995 and 2000, familiar representations of subjects close to death, fragmented, isolated, in decay, and dangerous to a healthy society dominate the pictorial coverage.