

FUTURE

EXPERIMENTS IN
AESTHETIC AND
SOCIAL PRACTICES

Printed by United Graphic

Design by Kimberly Varela

Contact:
Colin Dickey, 2425 Silver Lake Blvd. #B, Los Angeles, CA 90039
auriscalpius@hotmail.com

Edited by Nicole Antebi, Colin Dickey and Robby Herbst.

Failure! Experiments in Aesthetic and Social Practices is published
in conjunction with the Journal of Aesthetics and Protest. For more
information on the journal and its activities, visit www.joaap.org.

(ISBN-13 978-0-9791377-0-9)
(ISBN-10 0-9791377-0-2)

Failure! Experiments in Aesthetic and Social Practices

Special thanks to Cara Baldwin, Mark Cunningham, Sam Green,
Marc Herbst, Catherine Hollander, Gabriela Jarregui, Brandon Joseph,
Sunyoung Lee, Irene Tatzos and Christina Ulke.

**SOCIAL PRACTICES
AND
EXPERIMENTS IN**

**FUR
A
RE**

**AND ROBBY HERBST
ANTEBI, COLIN DICKEY,
EDITED BY NICOLE**

*The death of the flesh trumps the
life of the image.*

I created this sentence to express several linked failures: Jim's failure to survive AIDS; my failure to represent him after he ceased; his failure to represent himself even as he lived; our movement's (AIDS activism) failure to figure flesh.

But please look at, contemplate, go back to that first sentence.

There are several lessons in *its* failures.

We see two oxymorons hinging upon, caught in the balance between, in a skirmish for political efficacy. Did representation *ever* supercede the needs of the body?

This AIDS activism set forth as credo, as art-and-analysis-battle-cry. The first successful postmodern political movement, we believed, as Douglas Crimp so famously put forth in his 1988 seminal collection, *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, that "AIDS does not exist apart from the practices that conceptualize it, represent it, and respond to it. We know AIDS only in and through these practices."

And in many ways we were right; and in several ways we were effective.

We engaged in activist practices of naming, visibility, imaging, and speaking.

Silence equals death; language means life.

ALEXANDRA JUHASZ

**THE FAILURES OF THE
FLESH AND THE REVIVAL**

PWA instead of AIDS victim.

Self-representation to counter mis-representation.

I joined the fray, producing quite a few activist AIDS videos, and then writing a book on this micro-cultural production and politics.

I was missionary in my zeal to expose and understand what movement and majesty could be built from the making and watching of images. We all were; we understood our movement, and its art, as a success.

But please scrutinize, worry, return to my malfunctioning first phrase.

Here I express a battle between dead flesh and live image, and in this later version of the AIDS activist mantra it is finished tissue that prevails.

This is a saddest of endings for AIDS activism:

death beats life; flesh trounces image.

Now I look back in failure, and think we were wrong. There is so much that words and images can't do, didn't do. So much that falls outside the cold copy of the warm thing, the smart reflection of stupid skin.

In the winter of 1993, Jim and I decided to take a trip to Florida. I had moved from New York City to my first job, and we were seeing very little of each other. In the meantime, Jim had become extremely depressed about his diagnosis, although as far as we knew there was nothing physically wrong with him.

This was also the peak of Jim's mania, a stage that lasted for about six months until he was diagnosed with KS in his lungs and had something real upon which to focus his terror. His was a shocking and terrifying performance of illness, complete with all-night jags

of walking down freezing New York City streets without shoes, evenings when he would cut off one side of his hair with children's scissors and call it a cure, or days when he would only speak in mean-spirited couplets. During this period, he'd stay in for days cutting up pictures of friends and reviews of his plays, taping them together in horrific collages of chopped heads, grafted bodies, and strange headlines, matched with endlessly duplicated images of his buffed male-model's body. Evil incantations were written across these hodgepodes: I HATE YOU, I HATE YOU.

Perhaps AIDS dementia, or a side effect of AZT, this horrid behavior was also a carefully crafted version of what he believed illness to look and sound like, a sad representation of a sickly but not sick state. He was mimicking mannerisms of derangement from the aged homeless population he had befriended in South Beach.

I arrived in Florida late one night and he picked me up at the airport. He had been there for a couple of days, getting the place ready for me, preparing for our video project, and he was tan and wearing beach attire. But all was not sunny. On our walk through the terminal, he kept inching to the empty waiting areas, opening and closing the newspaper bag always slung over his shoulder and secretly dabbling in the bottles and crusted envelopes he had stored there.

"What are you doing?" I finally had to ask.

"Taking my medication." This, as he rubbed Vaseline into his hands, chewed on antiseptic lozenges, or ate a handful of baby aspirin.

Somehow he had rented a huge van instead of a car, and we drove from the airport in a nervous thrust of missed exits, near

collisions, and his constant chatter about the displaced elderly, this followed by even less typical moments of silence.

He took me to a welfare hotel on South Beach where there were roaches everywhere. He spent the night, roving from bathtub to bed to lobby, whimpering with pain—his throat hurt and he was already plagued by diarrhea—and applying strange over-the-counter remedies to his throat, skin, and lips. Balms for the barmy. Potions. Salves of disrepute.

The next day we went to the beach and I brought my VHS camcorder so that we could at last work on the project he had been desperately anticipating over the last several weeks. He had refused to tell me the details about our opus until my arrival, saving the big news until we could speak in person. It appeared that by staying up nights on end and speaking to many of the elderly locals, all the while taking notes and mulling through the connections, he had come up with what could quite possibly be a solution to both the AIDS crisis and the displacement of elderly Jews from their South Beach apartments. This is what I would capture on tape.

We sat on the beach and I turned my camera upon him. He still looked gorgeous: blue-eyed, tan, body chiseled, unsightly hair efficiently plucked and Naired away. Then he talked. For an hour I taped him in real time as he rambled, showed off, often gesticulating broadly, playing the diva, living the swan song, relaying the story of his life in freaky fragments. He moved himself to tears. He was enacting the preamble to his death scene. With his still alive flesh he badly performed an image of death and I taped it all.

So please inspect, pick at the scabs of, embellish that sickly opening sentence:

"The death of the flesh trumps the life of the image."

Jim's live flesh overwhelmed his death play, but not for long.

He went on to get really sick. Really fast. Bloated. Serious pain. Engorged organs.

Dead flesh or live image? The words are all wrong, like I said before.

Neither of these pairings exist except as yearnings; both are mutually-exclusive phrases that attempt to communicate my thirst for permanence and place, for his trace.

We long for the lasting of the material, sensual, daily good.

We fight to secure its relevance.

I want the feel of his skin, the vividness of his wit, the very beingness which is his alone. With video I battled the forces of all who wouldn't listen, who couldn't empathize, who wouldn't know him through their homophobic dread. With video I fought to hold him and hold onto him. Losing battles. Crusades lost to biology and technology as much as indifference.

The death of the flesh trumps the life of the image.

I shot my best friend Jim on the beach in Miami as he was dying of AIDS in 1993. He asked me to. He wanted to be remembered and he wanted to be saved. But this was a supreme failure. I caught him on tape as his words wouldn't add up. He built no stable story of self; he was too confused, his ear hurt, he refused. He performed bad renditions of Truman Capote and himself. He declined to be; to be still; to be noble. There is a beauty and majesty in Jim's incapacity to resolve himself into the majestic martyr. He performs his inability to show himself, to know himself, to know his death. The tape captures and repeats these failures. And it is

all that is absent and failed that comes to compel; his inabilities trump all. For who among us will perform our impending death as cinema's scripts have been written, performed, and shot—with grace, dignity, majesty, head lifted high, answers and peace found, meanings made, sound-track soaring?

I shot my best friend Jim on the beach in Miami as he was dying of AIDS in 1993. He asked me to. He wanted to be remembered and he wanted to be saved. But this was a supreme failure. I failed to represent the depth of him, the warmth of him. All that is left is sound and image, caught in a box, stuck on a screen: cold, and flat, and pixilated. Compelled and responsible to keep him here on earth, in the stuff of life, I must fail to replicate the wonder and ordinariness of him. I cannot revive him through representation.

*AIDS exists inside of bodies. We know
AIDS only in and through flesh.*

Of course we knew that then. Our postmodern rhetoric was largely a tool to embolden, encourage, empower. It let us do things, make things, create change. It worked well for politics and for art. That is until the flesh began to speak, louder and more compelling than the images we made: rotting, putrid, diseased, dead. We changed meanings but we didn't save lives. The bodies around us failed and our representations failed these bodies. It seemed hard to stay the course.

Given the failures of the flesh, can we revive AIDS activism? As artists, we have a role in politics that is partial. We represent the things that are, the flesh that was. We put what is and was into context, hold it in place for history, move it from here to there, think and color it, project it farther and faster than any body could ever move. We also represent what might be: vivid dreams, caustic

visions, material manifestos. We secure the past, project the future, and better the present. AIDS activism needs such practices but only if they can work in tandem with and not in contradiction to those living, loving, angry bodies that feel and bleed and love in the unrepresentable time and space of lived reality. AIDS activism requires linked projects between the flesh and the image, those who work in representation and those who engage with the gritty impermanent world.

Thus, we might begin anew, and revive AIDS activism, by celebrating rather than suffering our failures, not a battle but a communion. Our failures serve to remind us that we are alive, still the stuff of flesh, and in this state truly capable of, and responsible for, naming what is and also what must be changed: that AIDS continues, that it hurts and sometimes kills, and that this is political.