

8

Portraits of People with AIDS

DOUGLAS CRIMP

In the fall of 1988, the Museum of Modern Art in New York presented an exhibition of Nicholas Nixon's photographs called "Pictures of People." Among the people pictured by Nixon are people with AIDS (PWAs), each portrayed in a series of images taken at intervals of about a week or a month. The photographs form part of a larger work-in-progress, undertaken by Nixon and his wife, a science journalist, to, as they explain it, "tell the story of AIDS: to show what this disease truly is, how it affects those who have it, their lovers, families and friends, and that it is both the most devastating and the most important social and medical issue of our time."¹ These photographs were highly praised by reviewers, who saw in them an unsentimental, honest, and committed portrayal of the effects of this devastating illness. One photography critic wrote:

Nixon literally and figuratively moves in so close we're convinced that his subjects hold nothing back. The viewer marvels at the trust between photographer and subject. Gradually one's own feelings about AIDS melt away and one feels both vulnerable and privileged to share the life and (impending) death of a few individuals. (Atkins, 1988)

Andy Grundberg, photography critic of the *New York Times*, concurred:

The result is overwhelming, since one sees not only the wasting away of the flesh (in photographs, emaciation has become emblematic of AIDS) but also the gradual dimming of the subjects' ability to compose themselves for the camera. What each series begins as a conventional effort to pose for a picture ends in a kind of abandon; as the subjects' self-consciousness disappears, the camera seems to become invisible, and consequently there is almost no boundary between the image and ourselves. (1988, p. H37)

In his catalogue introduction for the show, MOMA curator Peter Galassi also mentions the relationship between Nixon and his sitters:

Any portrait is a collaboration between subject and photographer. Extended over time, the relationship can become richer and more intimate. Nixon has said that most of the people with AIDS he has photographed are, perhaps because stripped of so many of their hopes, less masked than others, more open to collaboration. (Galassi, 1988, p. 26)

And, after explaining that there can be no representative portrait of a person with AIDS, given the diversity of those affected, he concludes, "Beside and against this fact is the irreducible fact of the individual, made present to us in body and spirit. The life and death of Tom Moran [one of Nixon's subjects] were his own" (p. 27).

I quote this standard mainstream photography criticism to draw attention to its curious contradictions. All these writers agree that there is a consensual relationship

between photographer and subject that results in the portraits' effects on the viewer. But is this relationship one of growing intimacy? or is it one of the subjects' gradual tuning out, their abandonment of a sense of self? And is the result one of according the subjects the individuality of their lives and deaths? or do their lives and deaths become, through some process of identification, ours?

For those of us who have paid careful attention to media representations of AIDS, none of this would appear to matter, because what we see first and foremost in Nixon's photographs is their reiteration of what we have already been told or shown about people with AIDS: that they are ravaged, disfigured, and debilitated by the syndrome; they are generally alone, desperate, but resigned to their "inevitable" deaths.

During the time of the MOMA exhibition, a small group from ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, staged an uncharacteristically quiet protest of Nixon's portraits. Sitting on a bench in the gallery where the photographs of PWAs were hung, a young lesbian held a snapshot of a smiling middle-aged man. It bore the caption, "This is a picture of my father taken when he'd been living with AIDS for three years." Another woman held a photograph of PWA Coalition cofounder David Summers, shown speaking into a bank of microphones. Its caption read, "My friend David Summers living with AIDS." They and a small support group spoke with museum visitors about pictures of PWAs and handed out a flier which read, in part:

NO MORE PICTURES WITHOUT CONTEXT

We believe that the representation of people with AIDS affects not only how viewers will perceive PWAs outside the museum, but, ultimately, crucial issues of AIDS funding, legislation, and education.

In portraying PWAs as people to be pitied or feared, as people alone and lonely, we believe that this show perpetuates general misconceptions about AIDS without addressing the realities of those of us living every day with this crisis as PWAs and people who love PWAs.

FACT: Many PWAs now live longer after diagnosis due to experimental drug treatments, better information about nutrition and health care, and due to the efforts of PWAs engaged in a continuing battle to define and save their lives.

FACT: The majority of AIDS cases in New York City are among people of color, including women. Typically, women do not live long after diagnosis because of lack of access to affordable health care, a primary care physician, or even basic information about what to do if you have AIDS.

The PWA is a human being whose health has deteriorated not simply due to a virus, but due to government inaction, the inaccessibility of affordable health care, and institutionalized neglect in the forms of heterosexism, racism, and sexism.

We demand the visibility of PWAs who are vibrant, angry, loving, sexy, beautiful, acting up and fighting back.

STOP LOOKING AT US; START LISTENING TO US.

As against this demand—stop looking at us—the typical liberal position has held, from very early in the epidemic, that one of the central problems of AIDS, one of the things we needed to combat, was bureaucratic abstraction. What was needed was to "give AIDS a face," to "bring AIDS home." And thus the portrait of the person with AIDS had become something of a genre long before a famous photographer like Nicholas Nixon entered the field. In the catalogue for an exhibition of another well-known photographer's efforts to give AIDS a human face—Rosalind Solomon's *Portraits in the Time of AIDS* (1988)—Grey Art Gallery director Thomas Sokolowski wrote of their perceived necessity: "As our awareness of [AIDS] grew through the accumulation of vast amounts of numerically derived evidence, we still had not seen its face. We could

count it, but not . . ." (1988a, n.p.). It begins with an Jim—and that could be the same person. We're of these sentences as with the texts of anism, which deny photographs by insisting

A remarkably to AIDS, in which they look a lot like anchor Dan Rather PWAs look like you other designations: this program was in news—what the more grave danger of AIDS

"AIDS Hits television's by-the collective portraits, arm in arm in the who apparently always nymically as an arm generically portrayed ordinary in the series ostensible subject of and me. Since television unnecessary to define of AIDS. As seen in aerobics classes, discussed, as always reaching much higher rate of heterosexuals portrayed

"AIDS Hits H are the portraits that he says, "The image come to terms with not seen, or only perceived they are subjected to illnesses and their en often they appear, likequette, backlit with partially revealed, as camera, although in we cannot perceive instance, the portrait bisexual, whose unusual not shown—responding on, it's not easy, but

count it, but not truly describe it. Our picture of AIDS was a totally conceptual one . . ." (1988a, n.p.). Sokolowski's catalogue essay is entitled "Looking in a Mirror," and it begins with an epigraph quoted from the late George Whitmore, which reads, "I see Jim—and that could be me. It's a mirror. It's not a victim-savior relationship. We're the same person. We're just on different sides of the fence." With Sokolowski's appropriation of these sentences from a man who himself had AIDS, we are confronted once again—as with the texts written in response to the Nixon photographs—with a defense mechanism, which denies the difference, the obvious sense of otherness, shown in the photographs by insisting that what we really see is ourselves.

A remarkably similar statement begins a CBS *Sixty Minutes* newsmagazine devoted to AIDS, in which a service organization director says, "We know the individuals, and they look a lot like you, they look a lot like me." The program, narrated by CBS news anchor Dan Rather, is titled "AIDS Hits Home." Resonating with the assertion that PWAs look like you and me, the "home" of the show's title is intended to stand in for other designations: white, middle class, middle American, but primarily *heterosexual*. For this program was made in 1986, when, as Paula Treichler (1988) has written, "the big news—what the major U.S. news magazines were running cover stories on—was the grave danger of AIDS to heterosexuals" (p. 39).

"AIDS Hits Home" nevertheless consists of a veritable catalogue of broadcast television's by-then typical portraits of people with AIDS, for example, the generic or collective portraits, portraits of so-called risk groups: gay men in their tight 501s walking arm in arm in the Castro district of San Francisco; impoverished Africans; prostitutes, who apparently always work on streets; and drug addicts, generally shown only metonymically as an arm with a spike seeking its vein. Also included in this category of the generically portrayed in "AIDS Hits Home," however, are "ordinary" heterosexuals—ordinary in the sense that they are white and don't shoot drugs—since they are the ostensible subject of the show. But the heterosexual in AIDS reportage is not quite you and me. Since television routinely assumes its audience as heterosexual and therefore unnecessary to define or explain, it had to invent what we might call the heterosexual of AIDS. As seen on *Sixty Minutes*, the heterosexual of AIDS appears to inhabit only aerobics classes, discos, and singles bars, and is understood, like *all* gay men are understood, as always ready for, or readying for, sex. In addition, in spite of the proportionately much higher rate of heterosexually transmitted AIDS among people of color, the heterosexuals portrayed on *Sixty Minutes* are, with one exception, white.

"AIDS Hits Home"'s gallery of portraits also includes individuals, of course. These are the portraits that Dan Rather warns us of in the beginning of the program, when he says, "The images we have found are brutal and heartbreaking, but if America is to come to terms with this killer, they must be seen." For the most part, though, they are not seen, or only partially seen, for these are portraits of the ashamed and dying. As they are subjected to callous interviews and voice-overs about the particularities of their illnesses and their emotions, they are obscured by television's inventive techniques. Most often they appear, like terrorists, drug kingpins, and child molesters, in shadowy silhouette, backlit with light from their hospital room windows. Sometimes the PWA is partially revealed, as doctors and nurses manipulate his body while his face remains off-camera, although in some cases, we see *only* the face, but in such extreme close-up that we cannot perceive the whole visage. And in the most technologically dehumanizing instance, the portrait of the PWA is digitized. This is the case of the feared and loathed bisexual, whose unsuspecting suburbanite wife has died of AIDS. He is shown—or rather not shown—responding to an interlocutor who says, "Forgive me asking you this question, it's not easy, but do you feel in some way as if you murdered your wife?"

As we continue to move through the *Sixty Minutes* portrait gallery, we come eventually to those whose faces can see the light of day. Among these are a few gay men, but most are women. They are less ashamed, for they are "innocent." They or the narrator explain how it is that these perfectly normal women came to be infected with HIV: one had a boyfriend who used drugs, another had a brief affair with a bisexual, and another had a bisexual husband; none of them suspected the sins of their partners. And finally there are the most innocent of all, the white, middle-class hemophiliac children. They are so innocent that they can even be shown being comforted, hugged, and played with.

Among the gay men who dare to show their faces, one is particularly useful for the purposes of *Sixty Minutes*, and interestingly he has a counterpart in an ABC 20/20 segment of a few years earlier. He is the identical twin whose brother is straight. The double portrait of the sick gay man and his healthy straight brother makes its moral lesson so clear that it needs no elaboration.²

Indeed, the intended messages of "AIDS Hits Home" are so obvious that I don't want to belabor them, but only to make two further points about the program. First, there is the reinforcement of hopelessness. Whenever a person with AIDS is allowed to utter words of optimism, a voice-over adds a caveat such as: "Six weeks after she said this, she was dead." Following this logic, the program ends with a standard device. Dan Rather mentions the "little victories and the inevitable defeats," and then proceeds to tell us what has happened to each PWA since the taping of the show. This coda ends with a sequence showing a priest—his hand on the KS-lesion-covered head of a PWA—administering last rights. Rather interrupts to say, "Bill died last Sunday," and the voice of the priest returns: "Amen."

My second point is that the privacy of the people portrayed is both brutally invaded and brutally maintained. Invaded, in the obvious sense that these people's difficult personal circumstances have been exploited for public spectacle, their most private thoughts and emotions exposed. But at the same time, maintained: The portrayal of these people's personal circumstances never includes an articulation of the public dimension of the crisis, the social conditions that made AIDS a crisis and continue to perpetuate it as a crisis. People with AIDS are kept safely within the boundaries of their private tragedies. No one utters a word about the politics of AIDS, the mostly deliberate failure of public policy at every level of government to stem the course of the epidemic, to fund biomedical research into effective treatments, provide adequate health care and housing, and conduct massive and ongoing preventive education campaigns. Even when the issue of discrimination is raised—in the case of children expelled from school—this too is presented as a problem of individual fears, prejudices, and misunderstandings. The role of broadcast television in creating and maintaining those fears, prejudices, and misunderstandings is, needless to say, not addressed.

It is, then, not merely faceless statistics that have prevented a sympathetic response to people with AIDS. The media has, from very early in the epidemic, provided us with faces. Sokolowski acknowledges this fact in his preface to the Rosalind Solomon catalogue:

Popular representations of AIDS have been devoid of depictions of people living with AIDS, save for the lurid journalistic images of patients *in extremis*, published in the popular press where the subjects are depicted as decidedly *not* persons living with AIDS, but as victims. The portraits in this exhibition have a different focus. They are, by definition, portraits of individuals with AIDS, not archetypes of some abstract notion of the syndrome. Rosalind Solomon's photographs are portraits of the human condition; vignettes of the intense personal encounters she had with over seventy-

five people
who was H
lives."

The re
portrait galle

The brute c
AIDS, not archet
of the human co
kolowski's introd
read as if they w
source mongering
are asked to "com
lesions and the th
He completes his
century *Imago Pe
medieval *Ostentat
Maja* or *Venus*.*

Clearly wh
them within art
positional interest
of Sokolowski's j
accustomed to in
Museum of Cont
what I saw:

The majority
sick, in bed.
least their me
tographer, "T
ing them as i
than their illn
than half of t
associated wit
fraction are de
other than as

But giving th
enterprise, as is cl
with AIDS that F
PBS *Frontline*, "AI
informs us, "and I
One curious aspect
It begins with the
search of a good
Bridges. He was j
conclude that Fabi
Inquiry" is the sto
hands of virtually
Bridges was first di
and given a one-w
in-law live. They
about whom the br

five people over a ten-month period. "I photographed everyone who would let me, who was HIV-positive, or had ARC, or AIDS . . . they talked to me about their lives."

The resulting seventy-five images that comprise this exhibition provide a unique portrait gallery of the faces of AIDS. (1988a, n.p.)

The brute contradiction in this statement, in which "portraits of individuals with AIDS, not archetypes of some abstract notion" is immediately conflated with "portraits of the human condition"—as if that were not an abstract notion—is exacerbated in Sokolowski's introductory text, where he applies to the photographs interpretations that read as if they were contrived as parodies of the art historian's formal descriptions and source mongering. In one image, which reminds Sokolowski of Watteau's *Gilles*, we are asked to "contemplate the formal differences between the haphazard pattern of facial lesions and the thoughtful placement of buttons fastened to the man's pullover" (1988b). He completes his analysis of this photograph by comparing it with an "early fifteenth-century *Imago Peitatis* of the scourged Christ." Other photographs suggest to him the medieval *Ostentatio Vulneris*, the *Memento Mori*, the *Imago Clipeata*, and the image of the *Maja* or *Venus*.

Clearly when viewing Solomon's photographs most of us will not seek to place them within art historical categories. Nor will we be struck by their formal or compositional interest. Rather, many of us will see in these images, once again, and in spite of Sokolowski's insistence to the contrary, the very representations we have grown accustomed to in the mass media. William Olander, a curator at New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art who died of AIDS on March 18, 1989, saw precisely what I saw:

The majority of the sitters are shown alone; many are in the hospital; or at home, sick, in bed. Over 90% are men. Some are photographed with their parents, or at least their mothers. Only four are shown with male lovers or friends. For the photographer, "The thing that became very compelling was knowing the people—knowing them as individuals. . . ." For the viewer, however, there is little to know other than their illness. The majority of sitters are clearly ravaged by the disease. (No fewer than half of those portrayed bear the most visible signs of AIDS—the skin lesions associated with Kaposi's Sacroma. Not one is shown in a work environment; only a fraction are depicted outside. None of the sitters is identified. They have no identities other than as victims of AIDS. (1988, p. 5)³

But giving the person with AIDS an identity as well as a face can also be a dangerous enterprise, as is clear from the most extended, and the most vicious, story of a person with AIDS that American television has thus far presented: the notorious episode of PBS *Frontline*, "AIDS: A National Inquiry." "This is Fabian's story," host Judy Woodruff informs us, "and I must warn you it contains graphic descriptions of sexual behavior." One curious aspect of this program, given its ruthlessness, is its unabashed self-reflexivity. It begins with the TV crew narrating about itself, apparently roaming the country in search of a good AIDS story: "When we came to Houston, we didn't know Fabian Bridges. He was just one of the faceless victims." After seeing the show, we might conclude that Fabian would have been better off if he'd remained so. "AIDS: A National Inquiry" is the story of the degradation of a homeless black gay man with AIDS at the hands of virtually every institution he encountered, certainly including PBS. Fabian Bridges was first diagnosed with AIDS in a public hospital in Houston, treated, released, and given a one-way ticket out of town—to Indianapolis, where his sister and brother-in-law live. They refuse to take him in, because they're afraid for their young child, about whom the brother-in-law says, "He doesn't know what AIDS is. He doesn't know

what homosexuality is. He's innocent." Arrested for stealing a bicycle, Fabian is harassed and humiliated by the local police, who are also under the illusion that they might "catch" AIDS from him. After a prosecutor drops the charges against him, Fabian is once again provided with a one-way ticket out of town, this time to Cleveland, where his mother lives. But in Indianapolis, a police reporter has picked up the story, and, as the *Frontline* crew informs us, "It was Kyle Niederpreun's story that first led us to Fabian. It was a story about the alienation and rejection that many AIDS victims suffer"—an alienation and rejection that the crew seemed all too happy to perpetuate.

Frontline finally locates its "AIDS victim" in a cheap hotel room in Cleveland. "We spent several days with Fabian," the narrator reports, "and he agreed to let us tell his story." Cut to Fabian phoning his mother in order that her refusal to let him come home can be reenacted for the video camera. "He said he had no money," the crew goes on, "so sometimes we bought him meals, and we had his laundry done. One day Fabian saw a small portable radio he liked, so we bought it for him." The narration continues, "He spent time in adult bookstores and movie houses, and he admitted it was a way he helped support himself." Then, in what is surely the most degrading invasion of privacy ever shown on TV, Fabian describes, on camera, one of his tricks, ending with the confession, "I came inside him . . . accident . . . as I was pulling out, I was coming." "After Fabian told us he was having unsafe sex, we faced a dilemma," the narrator explains. "Should we report him to authorities or keep his story confidential, knowing that he could be infecting others? We decided to tell health officials what we knew."

At this point begins the story *Frontline* has really set out to tell, that of the supposed conflict between individual rights and the public welfare.⁴ It is a story of the futile attempts of health officials, policemen, and the vice squad to lock Fabian up, protected as he is by troublesome civil rights. A city council member in Cleveland poses the problem: "The bottom line is we've got a guy on the street here. The guy's got a gun and he's out shootin' people. . . . What do we say collectively as a group of people representing this society?" But while the city council contemplates its draconian options, the disability benefits Fabian had applied for several months earlier arrive, and after a nasty sequence involving his sadly ill-counseled mother, who has momentarily confiscated the money in order to put it aside for Fabian's funeral, Fabian takes the money and runs.

By now *Time* magazine has published a story on what it calls this "pitiful nomad," and the local media in Houston, where Fabian has reappeared, have a sensational story for the evening news. The *Frontline* crew finds him, homeless and still supporting himself as a hustler, so, they report, "We gave him \$15 a night for three nights to buy a cheap hotel room. We gave him the money on the condition that he not practice unsafe sex and that he stay away from the bathhouses." Pocketing the generous gift of \$45, Fabian continues to hustle, and the vice squad moves in to enforce an order by the Houston health department, issued in a letter to Fabian, that he refrain from exchanging bodily fluids. But now the vice squad, too, faces a dilemma. "Catch 22," one of the officers says. How do you entrap someone into exchanging bodily fluids without endangering yourself? They decide to get Fabian on a simple solicitation charge instead, to "get him to hit on one of us," as they put it, but Fabian doesn't take the bait.

Ultimately a leader of the gay community decides on his own to try to help Fabian, and a lawyer from the Houston AIDS Foundation offers him a home, developments about which the Houston health commissioner blandly remarks, "It would never have occurred to me to turn to the gay community for help." But *Frontline* has now lost its story. As the narrator admits, "The gay community was protecting him from the local

press and from us. Fabian's AIDS syr he went back into November 17. Hi pauper's funeral at

Judy Woodr to see is controver to be promiscuous protesting the film as a very ambigu community's posit person with AIDS to Fabian Bridges' are the dangerous free movement w sponisibly spread F racist presumption his entire family. the film who wot extraordinary mis ficial in the film. it is so clear that the psychological to social service a his family, they l betrayed him to the end of the filr something he'd : affectless voice, " somebody that'll related to, becaus go."

Here we ha Fabian Bridges. i many people wit sometimes preter mass media. The make you a star.

After witne for photographe work from ordin pact they have n mon's portraits, subjects have be curatorial apolog Art, Peter Galas

Mr. Nixon : know, and t Nixon has t about half c

press and from us." There is, nevertheless, the usual coda: "The inevitable happened. Fabian's AIDS symptoms returned. Just one week after he moved into his new home, he went back into the hospital. This time, he stayed just over a month. Fabian died on November 17. His family had no money to bury him, so after a week he was given a pauper's funeral and buried in a county grave."

Judy Woodruff had introduced this program by saying, "The film you are about to see is controversial; that's because it's a portrait of a man with AIDS who continued to be promiscuous. In San Francisco and other cities, the organized gay community is protesting the film, because they say it is unfair to persons with AIDS." This strikes me as a very ambiguous reason to protest, and I have no doubt that the organized gay community's position against the film was articulated more broadly. How is it unfair to person with AIDS? What persons with AIDS? Isn't the film unfair, first and foremost, to Fabian Bridges? The true grounds on which I imagine the gay community protested are the dangerous insinuations of the film: that the public health is endangered by the free movement within society of people with AIDS; that gay people with AIDS irresponsibly spread HIV to unsuspecting victims. They might also have protested the film's racist presumptions and class biases, its exploitation not only of Fabian Bridges but of his entire family. In addition, it seems hard to imagine a knowledgeable person seeing the film who would not be appalled at the failure of PBS to inform its audience of the extraordinary misinformation about AIDS conveyed by virtually every bureaucratic official in the film. And finally I imagine the gay community protested the film because it is so clear that the filmmakers were more interested in getting their footage than in the psychological and physical welfare of their protagonist, that instead of leading him to social service agencies or AIDS service organizations that could have helped him and his family, they lured him with small bribes, made him dependent upon them, and then betrayed him to various authorities. A particularly revealing sequence intercut toward the end of the film takes us back to Fabian's hotel room in Cleveland. "We remembered something he'd said to us earlier," the narrator says, and Fabian then intones in his affectless voice, "Let me go down in history as being . . . I am somebody, you know, somebody that'll be respected, somebody who's appreciated, and somebody who can be related to, because a whole lot of people just go, they're not even on the map, they just go."

Here we have explicitly the terms of the contract between the *Frontline* crew and Fabian Bridges. *Frontline* found in Fabian, indeed, the "alienation and rejection" that many people with AIDS suffer, and offered him the false means by which our society sometimes pretends to grant transcendence of that condition, a moment of glory in the mass media. They said to this lonely, ill, and scared young man, in effect, "We're gonna make you a star."

After witnessing this contract, we may wish to reconsider the various claims made for photographers Nicholas Nixon and Rosalind Solomon that the difference of their work from ordinary photojournalism's exploitation of people with AIDS resides in the pact they have made with their sitters. "The rather unique situation of Rosalind Solomon's portraits, done in the time of AIDS," writes Thomas Sokolowski, "is that the subjects have been asked" (1988a). The claim for Nixon is made less directly by his curatorial apologist. When introducing Nixon for a lecture at the Museum of Modern Art, Peter Galassi said,

Mr. Nixon was born in Detroit in 1947. It seems to me that's all you really need to know, and the part about Detroit isn't absolutely essential. What is relevant is that Nixon has been on the planet for about forty years and has been a photographer for about half of that time. It's also relevant that for about the past fifteen years he has

worked with a large, old-fashioned view camera which stands on a tripod and makes negatives measuring eight by ten inches.⁵

The point about the size of Nixon's equipment, of course, is that it is so obtrusive that we can never accuse him of catching his subjects unawares; he has to win their confidence. According to a friend of Nixon quoted in the *Boston Globe*, "The reason people trust him is that he has no misgivings about his own motivations or actions" (N. Miller, 1989, p. 36). Or, as Nixon himself put it in his talk at MOMA, "I know how cruel I am, and I'm comfortable with it."

My initial reaction upon seeing both the Nixon and Solomon exhibitions was incredulity. I had naively assumed that the critique of this sort of photography, articulated over and over again during the past decade, might have had some effect. I will cite just one paragraph from a founding text of this criticism as an indication of the lessons not learned. It comes from Allan Sekula's "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)," written in 1976:



FIGURE 1. Nicholas Nixon, "Tony and Anna Mastrorilli" (Mansfield, MA, July 1987).



FIGURE 2. Nicholas Nixon, "Tony Mastrorilli" (Mansfield, MA, December 1987).

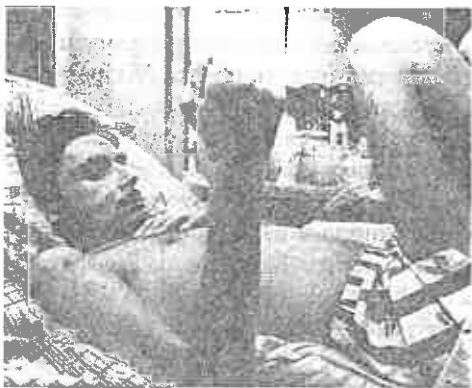


FIGURE 3. Nicholas Nixon, "Tony Mastrorilli" (Mansfield, MA, April 1988).



FIGURE 4. Nicholas Nixon, "Tony Mastrorilli" (Mansfield, MA, May 1988).



FIGURE 5. Nicholas Nixon, "Tony Mastrorilli" (Mansfield, MA, May 1988).

At the heart of a certain discourse they become intimate, but socially engaged and subjectively off. (Sekula)

Here is one individual showing one of

I started talking even though he was so you really a day in December and this picture gotten from from the w

An audience subject was resist

He wasn't i this is some camera, I do fact that yo same time l house. I'm short.

How, then about be constr

We can pe art photographs of prejudices th gay men, IV dr



FIGURE 5. Nicholas Nixon, "Tony Mastroilli" (Mansfield, MA, June 1988).



FIGURE 6. Nicholas Nixon, "Tony Mastroilli" (Mansfield, MA, June 1988).

At the heart of [the] fetishistic cultivation and promotion of the artist's humanity is a certain disdain for the "ordinary" humanity of those who have been photographed. They become the "other," exotic creatures, objects of contemplation. . . . The most intimate, human-scale relationship to suffer mystification in all this is the specific social engagement that results in the image; the negotiation between photographer and subject in the making of a portrait, the seduction, coercion, collaboration, or rip off. (Sekula, 1984, p. 59)

Here is one indication of the photographer's disdain while negotiating with his sitter: Showing one of his serial PWA portraits (of Tony Mastroilli), Nixon explained,

I started taking his picture in June of '87, and he was so resistant to the process—even though he kept saying "Oh no, I love it, I want to do it"—every other part of him was so resistant that after three times I kind of kicked him out and said, "When you really want to do this, call me up, you don't really want to do this." Then one day in December he called me up and said, "I'm ready now," and so I went, of course, and this picture doesn't kill me, but, I'll tell you, it's miles better than anything I'd gotten from him before. I really felt like he *was* ready when I saw it. He was paralyzed from the waist down. That was part of the challenge, I guess.

An audience member asked Nixon to explain what he meant when he said the subject was resistant, and he replied,

He wasn't interested. He was giving me a blank wall. He was saying, "Yes, I think this is something I'm interested in, but I don't like this process, I don't like this big camera, I don't like it close to me, I don't like cooperating with you, I don't like the fact that your being here reminds me of my illness, I'm uncomfortable." But at the same time he kept on going through the motions. I had to drive forty minutes to his house. I'm not interested in somebody just going through the motions. Life's too short.

How, then, might this intimate, human-scale relationship that Sekula cautions us about be constructed differently?

We can perhaps agree that images of people with AIDS created by the media and art photographers alike are demeaning, and that they are overdetermined by a number of prejudices that precede them about the majority of the people who have AIDS—about gay men, IV drug users, people of color, poor people. Not only do journalism's (and

tripod and makes

it is so obtrusive that
win their confidence.
e reason people trust
actions" (N. Miller,
"I know how cruel I

non exhibitions was
photography, artice-
ne effect. I will cite
cation of the lessons
n, Reinventing Doc-
976:



Nixon, "Tony
MA, December



on, "Tony
MA, May 1988).

art's) images create false stereotypes of people with AIDS, they depend upon already existing false stereotypes about the groups most significantly affected by AIDS. Much of the PBS discussion with "experts" that followed its airing of Fabian's story involved the fear that Fabian would be seen as the stereotype of the homosexual with AIDS. The reaction of many of us when we see homosexuality portrayed in the media is to respond by saying, "That's not true. We're not like that" or "I'm not like that" or "we're not all like that." But what *are* we like? What portrait of a gay person, or of a PWA, would we feel comfortable with? Which one would be representative? How could it be? and why should it be? One problem of opposing a stereotype, a stereotype which Fabian Bridges was indeed intended to convey, is that we tacitly side with those who would distance themselves from the image portrayed, we tacitly agree that it is other, whereas our foremost responsibility in this case is to *defend* Fabian Bridges, to acknowledge that he is one of us. To say that it is unfair to represent a gay man or a PWA as a hustler is tacitly to collaborate in the media's ready condemnation of hustlers, to pretend along with the media that prostitution is a moral failing rather than a choice based on economic and other factors limiting autonomy. Or, to take another example, do we really wish to claim that the photographs by Nicholas Nixon are untrue? Do we want to find ourselves in the position of denying the horrible suffering of people with AIDS, the fact that very many PWAs become disfigured and helpless, and that they die? Certainly we can say that these representations do not help us, and that they probably hinder us, in our struggle, because the best they can do is elicit pity, and pity is not solidarity. We must continue to demand and create our own counter-images, images of PWA self-empowerment, of the organized PWA movement and of the larger AIDS activist movement, as the ACT UP demonstrators insisted at MOMA. But we must also recognize that every image of a PWA is a *representation*, and formulate our activist demands not in relation to the "truth" of the image, but in relation to the conditions of its construction and to its social effects.

I want to conclude this discussion, therefore, with a work that does not seek to displace negative images with positive ones, that does not substitute the good PWA for the bad, the apparently healthy for the visibly ill, the active for the passive, the exceptional for the ordinary. My interest in the videotape *Danny* (1987), made by Stashu Kybartas,⁶ does not derive from its creation of a counter-type, but rather from its insistence upon a particular stereotype, one which is referred to among gay men, whether endearingly or deprecatingly, as the clone.

Without, I think, setting out deliberately or programmatically to articulate a critique of media images of PWAs, *Danny* nevertheless constitutes one of the most powerful critiques that exists to date. This is in part because it duplicates, in so many of its features, the stereotypes of PWA portraiture, but at the same time reclaims the portrait for the community from which it emerges, the community of gay men, who have thus far been the population most drastically affected by AIDS in the United States. *Danny* accomplishes this through one overriding difference: the formulation of the relationship between artist and subject not as one of empathy or identification, but as one of explicit sexual desire, a desire that simultaneously accounts for Kybartas's subjective investment in the project and celebrates Danny's own sense of gay identity and hard-won sexual freedom.

A great many of the conventions of media portraits of the PWA appear in *Danny*, but their meanings are reinvested or reversed. *Danny* begins, for example, where virtually every other television portrait ends: with the information about the death of the video's subject, here matter-of-factly announced in a rolling text before we have even seen an image. Thus, although the video ends at the second recounting of Danny's death, it

does not come a made. Indeed, a a work of mour movement. The movement. Using Kybartas compil still photograph

The first v are the followin up to get it,' Th Tarzan and the come to those f his father. Whe benville, Ohio, his Kaposi's sarc accepted the fac Danny, "I was AIDS on top of if anything abou hear about it."

We are left never bothers to the tape ends, E the funeral hom there, instead of and my father s to be faced with about his reactio "Why?," Kybar either." "Why :

It is this g men's relations v going home to resort when me



FIGURE 7. Stas

does not come as a coda to tell us what has happened to the subject after the tape was made. Indeed, as we discern from the apostrophizing voice-over, the tape was made as a work of mourning, the artist's working through of his loss of a friend in the AIDS movement. The retrospective voice is reinforced by a refusal of the live video image's movement. Using videotape that he shot with Danny during their brief friendship, Kybartas compiled it as a series of stills, which also serves to make it equivalent to the still photographs taken of Danny prior to his illness, when he lived in Miami.

The first words uttered by Danny, in his somewhat difficult-to-understand voice, are the following: "He doesn't refer to me as his son. Instead of saying, 'My son'll be up to get it,' 'The boy'll be up to get it.' Whadaya mean the boy? It makes me feel like Tarzan and the jungle. Me boy." The statement remains somewhat opaque until we come to those fragments of dialogue in which Kybartas queries Danny further about his father. When Danny talks of his decision to return to his parents' home in Steubenville, Ohio, at the moment when he learned he'd have to begin chemotherapy for his Kaposi's sarcoma, he mentions the difficulty of telling his mother, who nevertheless accepted the fact. Kybartas asks, "Were you worried about your dad?" "Yeah," says Danny, "I was wondering how he was going to take having a gay son, and one with AIDS on top of it, but she never told him. I have to watch what I say around him, or if anything about AIDS is on television, my mom flicks it off. She doesn't want him to hear about it."

We are left to imagine Danny's home life, as his father watches his son die and never bothers to ask why. Then, in the final conversation between the two friends before the tape ends, Danny says, "What I should have done this week was to have contacted the funeral home, because I would like to feel secure knowing that I could be buried there, instead of their getting the body and saying, 'No, we can't handle that body,' and my father saying, 'Why?' 'Because he has AIDS.' That's not a time that he needs to be faced with that, not after my dying." Kybartas probes, "Why are you concerned about his reaction to that?," and Danny answers, "Trying to spare his feelings, I guess." "Why?," Kybartas persists. "I guess as much as I dislike him, I don't want to hurt him either." "Why not?," Kybartas chides, and the dialogue fades out.

It is this gruesome family scene, so typical—perhaps even stereotypical—of gay men's relations with their fathers, that is denied in sentimental media stories of gay men going home to die in the caring fold of the family, something they often do as a last resort when medical insurance has run out or disability benefits won't cover the rent.



FIGURE 7. Stashu Kybartas, "Danny."



FIGURE 8. Stashu Kybartas, "Danny."



FIGURE 9. Stashu Kybartas, "Danny."



FIGURE 10. Stashu Kybartas, "Danny."

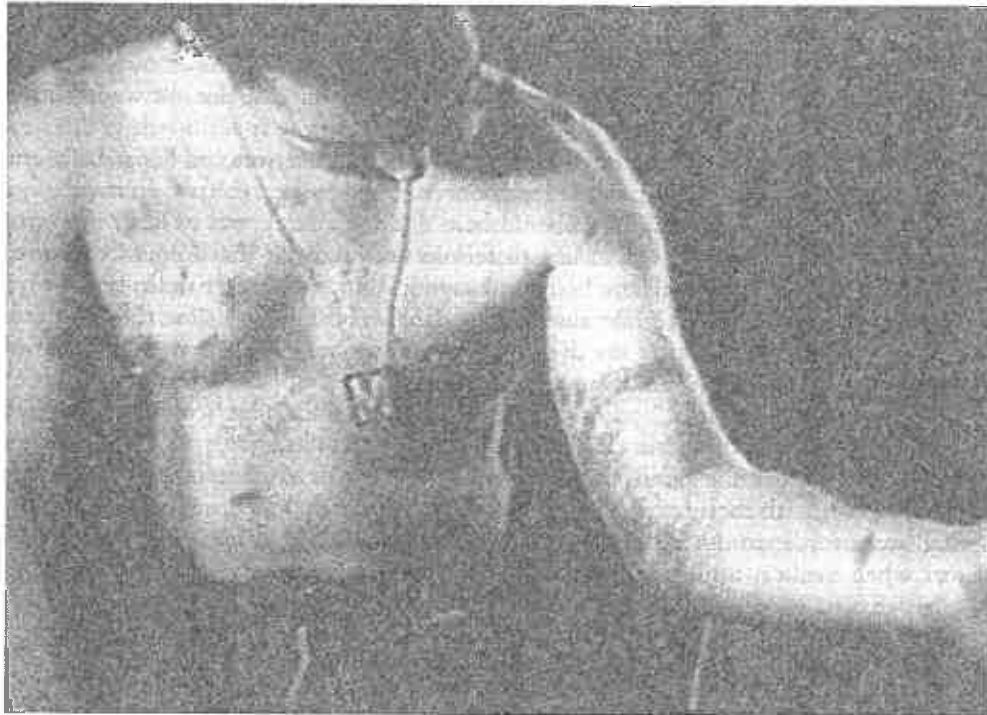


FIGURE 11. Stashu Kybartas, "Danny."

In the mainstream media, though, this scenario tells of the abandonment of gay men by their friends in the dark and sinful cities they inhabit, and the return to comfort and normality in some small town in the Midwest. But in Kybartas's tape it is the small hometown, a steel town near Pittsburgh, that is dark and sinister, "slowly dying," as Danny puts it, whereas the metropolis to which Danny fled to find his sexual freedom is the very opposite of dark, though it may, in conventional moralizing terms, be sinful—that, of course, is its appeal.

This reversal of mainstream media pieties about hometown USA and the biological family serves to delimit the space of the sexual for gay men, for if Danny's father has

not discerned that a sexual being may want you to come to bars in Pittsburgh.

Danny's image is a subtle reversal. In a medical procedure, tinkering in laboratory to his profession, that he performs his profession doesn't remind us from that program back in 1981, before the media myth is in white and middle "risk groups."

A standard image after images of p Channel 4 in 198 use of PWA Kenny to show the effect stories on the subject shows Ramsaur's healthy Kenny as as the camera pans lesions. Kybartas hedonist in Miami day on the beach douching in the put on his tight 5 ring are intercut Kybartas's studio series of early sn returned to Steub sexualized. Kybart look at all these p to change from v you looked like a I saw you cry was was no longer we from desiring to g text of the tape, a sexuality as well revelation of the removing his shirt lesions. But, like sexually attractive do you remember off your shirt and

not discerned that his son is gay and dying of AIDS, it is because Danny's identity as a sexual being must be disavowed. Kybartas articulates this in the tape by saying, "I wanted you to come and live with us. We'd take care of you. We could go to the gay bars in Pittsburgh, dance, and watch the go-go boys."

Danny's image as a kid who lived for sex is complicated in the video by another subtle reversal. Mainstream coverage of AIDS is padded with portentous pictures of medical procedures—IV needles being inserted, doctors listening through stethoscopes, tinkering in laboratories. Parallel imagery in *Danny* refers not to Danny's disease, but to his profession as a medical technician, showing the procedure of the carotid angiogram that he performed. But just because Danny is a full human being with a respectable profession doesn't mean he's heroicized by Kybartas. Immediately following Danny's reminiscence about his job is the "Miami Vice" sequence, in which Kybartas uses footage from that program's credits as Danny talks about shooting cocaine with shared needles back in 1981, before anyone knew the transmission risks. The result is that still another media myth is interfered with: the one that makes gay men (always presumed to be white and middle class) and IV drug users (presumed to be poor people of color) separate "risk groups."

A standard media device for constructing AIDS as a morality tale uses before-and-after images of people with AIDS. Stuart Marshall's *Bright Eyes*, made for Britain's Channel 4 in 1984, performed a brilliant analysis on the British tabloid *Sunday People's* use of PWA Kenny Ramsaur to that end. In 1983, ABC's *20/20* also used Kenny Ramsaur to show the effects of AIDS in one of the earliest and most lurid television newsmagazine stories on the subject, narrated by none other than Geraldo Rivera. ABC's camera first shows Ramsaur's face, horribly swollen and disfigured; then snapshots of the handsome, healthy Kenny as hedonistic homosexual appear, after which we return to the live image as the camera pans down to Kenny's arm to see him pull up his sleeve to reveal his KS lesions. Kybartas reworks this ploy in *Danny*. We see snapshots of a young and healthy hedonist in Miami as Danny talks with relish of his life, of how he would spend the day on the beach, return home and let the suntan oil sink in, and then shower. After douching in the shower, he tells us, he would shave his balls and the side of his cock, put on his tight 501s, and go out and cruise. Close-ups of Danny putting in his nipple ring are intercut with a close-up of the nipple surrounded by KS lesions, taken in Kybartas's studio in Pittsburgh during Danny's illness. And when we move from a second series of early snapshots of Danny to the video images of his face, shot after he has returned to Steubenville, it is bloated from chemotherapy. He is nevertheless still fully sexualized. Kybartas, narrating over the image of the face, laments, "Danny, when I look at all these pictures of you, I can see that the chemotherapy caused your appearance to change from week to week. One day when you walked into the studio, I thought you looked like a longshoreman who had just been in a fight." [pause] The only time I saw you cry was on Christmas Eve, when your doctor told you that the chemotherapy was no longer working." This movement back and forth from the tough to the tender, from desiring to grieving in relation to the whole series of images constitutes the major text of the tape, and it may be said to encompass something of the range of gay men's sexuality as well as our present condition. The thematic is most often shown in the revelation of the KS lesions, as time and again we see stop-motion footage of Danny removing his shirt, or as still images show fragments of his chest and arms covered with lesions. But, like scars or tatoos, the lesions are always seen as marking the body as sexually attractive, a sexiness that is indicated by Kybartas in the following way: "Danny, do you remember the first night we were shooting the film at my studio? You'd taken off your shirt and we were looking at all your lesions. Later, as I was rubbing your back



1 Kybartas, "Danny."



onment of gay men
turn to comfort and
tape it is the small
"slowly dying," as
his sexual freedom
g terms, be sinful—

A and the biological
Danny's father has

and you were telling me about the problems you were having with relationships and sex, something happened. It was suddenly very quiet in the studio, and my heart was beating fast. I don't know what it was . . . the heat, your body. The only sound was the steam hissing out of the radiator. . . ."

After seeing *Danny*, it occurred to me that there is a deeper explanation for portrayals of PWAs, and especially of gay male PWAs, as desperately ill, as either grotesquely disfigured or as having wasted to fleshless, ethereal bodies. These are not images that are intended to overcome our fear of disease and death, as is sometimes claimed. Nor are they meant only to reinforce the status of the PWA as victim or pariah, as we often charge. Rather, they are, precisely, *phobic* images, images of the terror at imagining the person with AIDS as still sexual. In the *Frontline* special the Houston public health commissioner says, with patent fear and loathing, "Fabian was only diagnosed last April. He might live another two years, and furthermore this person is in remission now. He's not demonstrating any *signs* of illness!" The unwillingness to show PWAs as active, as in control of their lives, as acting up and fighting back, is the fear that they might also still be sexual, or as Judy Woodruff said of Fabian Bridges, that "he was a man with AIDS who continued to be promiscuous."

The comfortable fantasy that AIDS would spell the end of gay promiscuity, or perhaps of gay sex altogether, has pervaded American and Western European culture for a decade now. But we will fail to understand its pervasiveness and its representational effects if we think it only occupies the minds of the likes of Jesse Helms and Patrick Buchanan. I want to end, therefore, with a quotation that will bring this phobic fantasy closer to home in the context of cultural studies. In an interview published in the German art magazine *Kunstforum*, Jean Baudrillard appears sanguine about William Burroughs's (and Laurie Anderson's) dictum that "language is a virus."

Language, particularly in all areas of information, is used in a more and more formulaic way, and thereby gets sicker and sicker from its own formulas. One should no longer speak of sickness, however, but of virality, which is a form of mutation. . . . Perhaps the new pathology of virality is the last remedy against the total disintegration of language and of the body. I don't know, for example, whether a stock market crash such as that of 1987 should be understood as a terrorist process of economy or as a form of viral catharsis of the economic system. Possibly, though, it is like AIDS, if we understand AIDS as a remedy against total sexual liberation, which is sometimes more dangerous than an epidemic, because the latter always ends. Thus AIDS could be understood as a counterforce against the total elimination of structure and the total unfolding of sexuality. (Rötzer, 1990, p. 266)⁸

NOTES

1. Nick and Bebe Nixon, "AIDS Portrait Project Update," January 1, 1988, quoted in the press release for "People with AIDS: Work in Progress," New York, Zabriskie Gallery, 1988 (this exhibition was shown at the same time as the MOMA show).

2. For both *Sixty Minutes* and *20/20*, the ostensible reason for showing the twins is to discuss an experimental bone marrow transplant therapy, which requires an identical twin donor. It does not, of course, require that the donor twin be straight.

3. William Olander (1988), "I Undertook this Project as a Personal Exploration of the Human Components of an Alarming Situation' 3 Vignettes (2)." The quote used as a title is Rosalind Solomon's.

4. The fascination of the media with the supposed threat of "AIDS carriers" was most dramatically revealed in the response to Randy Shilts's *And the Band Played On*, which focused almost exclusively on Shilts's story of the so-called Patient Zero (see my essay "How to Have

Promiscuity in an E
fascination has clearl
June 20-24, 1990, 1
A Hypothetical Cas
the Philippines acc
prostitutes in Ugand

5. This intro
transcribed from Ni

6. *Danny*, 198

7. The sexual
clichéd hyper-masc
longshoreman.

8. Thanks to

DISCUS

MARTIN ALLOI
and talk about the
for your analysis.

CRIMP: Since 15
questions I've wa
from within the r
resource, a reservo
strength of the A
and kinds of expe
develop while wo
in 1987, it became
and that this was

When Nich
Art and a group f
UP meeting was
sacred, as above p
censorship of "fre
they produced a h
the effects of the
context of AIDS.]
That was a deman
of Nixon's and Ro
images" produced
critical "solution"
seen a year earlie
complex represent
stereotype.

My hope is t
take place all the
that my primary a
of AIDS in univer
world institutions
a direct-action mc
oretical work and
absent.

Promiscuity in an Epidemic," in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, esp. pp. 237-46). The fascination has clearly not abated. At the Sixth International Conference on AIDS in San Francisco, June 20-24, 1990, members of the media took part in a panel addressing "AIDS and the Media: A Hypothetical Case Study." The hypothetical case was that of an American soldier stationed in the Philippines accused of infecting 40 prostitutes. The soldier's "past" had him frequenting prostitutes in Uganda and bathhouses in the Castro district of San Francisco.

5. This introduction by Peter Galassi and the following statements by Nicholas Nixon are transcribed from Nixon's talk at the Museum of Modern Art, October 11, 1988.

6. *Danny*, 1987, is distributed by Video Data Bank, Chicago.

7. The sexual attractiveness of the gay clone was constructed through stylistic reference to clichéd hyper-masculine professions such as the cowboy, policeman, sailor, and, indeed, the longshoreman.

8. Thanks to Hans Haacke for bringing this interview to my attention.

DISCUSSION: DOUGLAS CRIMP

MARTIN ALLOR: I would like to invite you to go back to your opening comments and talk about the resources that you drew on from gay culture, gay politics, gay theory for your analysis.

CRIMP: Since 1987, when I got involved with ACT UP, the cultural and political questions I've wanted to address, and the analysis I've wanted to provide, have arisen from within the movement. ACT UP has been, among other things, an extraordinary resource, a reservoir of knowledge about every aspect of AIDS in the United States. The strength of the AIDS activist movement derives in part from the many various skills and kinds of expertise members of ACT UP are able to bring to the movement or to develop while working within it. After producing the special issue of *October* on AIDS in 1987, it became clear to me that my own expertise involved problems of representation and that this was the area I wanted to focus on.

When Nicholas Nixon's PWA portraits were shown at the Museum of Modern Art and a group from ACT UP decided to protest, the discussion at the weekly ACT UP meeting was divided. Many people still think of artists and museums as somehow sacred, as above politics. For them, a demonstration in a museum is tantamount to censorship of "free expression." When some members of ACT UP did demonstrate, they produced a handout with which I generally agreed, insofar as it was able to detail the effects of these representations through their effacement of the social and political context of AIDS. But in the end, that flier resorted to the demand for "positive images." That was a demand I wanted to rethink. On the one hand, I wanted to show the similarity of Nixon's and Rosalind Solomon's fine-art PWA portraits to the stereotypical "negative images" produced by broadcast television. But I also wanted to suggest a different, more critical "solution" than the call for positive images. The videotape *Danny*, which I'd seen a year earlier and had wanted to write about, provided the example of a more complex representation and at the same time suggested the less conscious agenda of the stereotype.

My hope is that the work I do will have direct effects on the cultural analyses that take place all the time within the AIDS activist movement. At the same time, I know that my primary audience is an academic one. I've taught courses on the representation of AIDS in universities and art schools, and I lecture mostly within academic and art-world institutions. I find that it is very useful to bring the example and the lessons of a direct-action movement into these contexts. It provides a concrete grounding for theoretical work and it puts the politics of AIDS on the agenda where it is otherwise largely absent.

From: Patterns Plus, 6th ed. Ed. Mary Lou Conlin.
Boston and N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin, 1998.

The Thirsty Animal

Brian Manning

In this personal essay, Brian Manning recounts how he developed into a problem drinker and describes his life now as an alcoholic who has quit drinking. Straightforwardly, he tells of his bittersweet memories of drinking and of his struggle, successful so far, to keep the thirsty "animal living inside" locked in its cage.

Words to Know

accouterments the items and sensations that go along with something; accompanying effects or activities

Bordeaux a type of French wine, usually red
lolling lounging, relaxing

Getting Started

Can you describe, from a firsthand experience, some of the negative effects of alcohol on you or someone you know?

I was very young, but I still vividly remember how my father fascinated my brothers and me at the dinner table by running his finger around the rim of his wineglass. He sent a wonderful, crystal tone wafting through the room, and we loved it. When we laughed too raucously, he would stop, swirl the red liquid in his glass and take a sip.

There was a wine cellar in the basement of the house we moved into when I was eleven. My father put a few cases of Bordeaux down there in the dark. We played there with other boys in the neighborhood, hid there, made a secret place. It was musty and cool and private. We wrote things and stuck them in among the bottles and imagined someone way in the future baffled by our messages from the past.

Many years later, the very first time I drank, I had far too much. But I found I was suddenly able to tell a girl at my high school that I was mad about her.

When I drank in college with the men in my class, I was trying to develop a self-image I could feel comfortable with. I wanted to be "an Irishman," I decided, a man who could drink a lot of liquor and hold it. My favorite play was Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, my model the drunken Jamie Tyrone.

I got out of college, into the real world, and the drunk on weekends started to slip into the weekdays. Often I didn't know when one drunk ended and another began. The years were measured in hangovers. It took a long time to accept, and then to let the idea sink in, that I was an alcoholic.

It took even longer to do anything about it. I didn't want to believe it, and I didn't want to deny myself the exciting, brotherly feeling I had whenever I went boozing with my friends. For a long time, in my relationships with women, I could only feel comfortable with a woman who drank as much as I did. So I didn't meet many women and spent my time with men in dark barrooms, trying to be like them and hoping I'd be accepted.

It is now two years since I quit drinking, and that, as all alcoholics know who have come to grips with their problem, is not long ago at all. The urge to have "just one" includes a genuine longing for all the accouterments of drink: the popping of a cork, the color of Scotch through a glass, the warmth creeping over my shoulders with the third glass of stout. Those were joys. Ever since I gave them up I remember them as delicious.

I go to parties now and start off fine, but I have difficulty dealing with the changing rhythms as the night wears on. Everyone around me seems to be having a better time the more they drink, and I, not they, become awkward. I feel like a kid with a broken chain when everyone else has bicycled around the corner out of sight. I fight against feeling sorry for myself.

What were the things I was looking for and needed when I drank? I often find that what I am looking for when I want a drink is not really the alcohol, but the memories and laughter that seemed possible only with a glass in my hand. In a restaurant, I see the bottle of vintage port on the shelf, and imagine lolling in my chair, swirling the liquid around in the glass, inhaling those marvelous fumes. I think of my neighbor, Eileen, the funniest woman I ever got smashed with, and I want to get up on the bar stool next to her to hear again the wonderful stories she told. She could drink any man under the table, she claimed, and I wanted to be one of those men who tried. She always won, but it made me feel I belonged when I staggered out of the bar, her delighted laughter following me.

I had found a world to cling to, a way of belonging, and it still attracts me. I pass by the gin mills and pubs now and glance in at the men lined up inside, and I don't see them as suckers or fools. I remember how I felt sitting there after work, or watching a Sunday afternoon ball game, and I long for the smell of the barroom and that ease—toasts and songs, jokes

and equality. I have to keep reminding myself of the wasting hangovers, the lost money, the days down the drain.

I imagine my problem as an animal living inside me, demanding a drink before it dies of thirst. That's what it says, but it will never die of thirst. The fact an alcoholic faces is that this animal breathes and waits. It is incapable of death and will spring back to lustful, consuming life with even one drop of sustenance.

When I was eighteen and my drinking began in earnest, I didn't play in the wine cellar at home anymore; I stole there. I sneaked bottles to my room, sat in the window and drank alone while my parents were away. I hated the taste of it, but I kept drinking it, without the kids from the neighborhood, without any thought that I was feeding the animal. And one day, I found one of those old notes we had hidden down there years before. It fell to the ground when I pulled a bottle from its cubbyhole. I read it with bleary eyes, then put the paper back into the rack. "Beware," it said, above a childish skull and crossbones, "all ye who enter here." A child, wiser than I was that day, had written that note.

I did a lot of stupid, disastrous, sometimes mean things in the years that followed, and remembering them is enough to snap me out of the memories and back to the reality that I quit just in time. I've done something I had to do, something difficult and necessary, and that gives me satisfaction and the strength to stay on the wagon. I'm very lucky so far. I don't get mad that I can't drink anymore; I can handle the self-pity that overwhelmed me in my early days of sobriety. From time to time, I daydream about summer afternoons and cold beer. I know such dreams will never go away. The thirsty animal is there, getting a little fainter every day. It will never die. A lot of my life now is all about keeping it in a very lonely cage.

Questions About the Reading

1. What went along with drinking for the writer? Why did he need alcohol to achieve those effects?
2. Why are parties difficult for the writer?
3. Why did the writer stop drinking?
4. When you finished reading the essay, what opinions had you formed of the writer's personality and character? Cite specific examples from the essay to support your opinions.

Questions About the Writer's Strategies

1. What is the main idea of this essay? In which sentences is it most clearly suggested?

That Lean and Hungry Look

Suzanne Britt

In this paragraph, taken from a humorous, sarcastic essay about being overweight, Suzanne Britt uses broad generalizations to contrast thin people and fat people.

Words to Know

chortling chuckling joyfully
neurotic a person suffering from anxiety or phobia; having to do with abnormal or unstable behavior
surly domineering, gruff
wizened withered, wrinkled

Getting Started

What are some of your preconceived notions about thin people and overweight people?

Some people say the business about the jolly fat person is a myth, that all of us chubbies are neurotic, sick, sad people. I disagree. Fat people may not be chortling all day long, but they're a hell of a lot *nicer* than the wizened and shriveled. Thin people turn surly, mean, and hard at a young age because they never learn the value of a hot-fudge sundae for easing tension. Thin people don't like gooey soft things because they themselves are neither gooey nor soft. They are crunchy and dull, like carrots. They go straight to the heart of the matter while fat people let things stay all blurry and hazy and vague, the way things actually are. Thin people want to face the truth. Fat people know there is no truth. One of my thin friends is always staring at complex, unsolvable problems and saying, "The key thing is . . ." Fat people never say that. They know there isn't any such thing as the key thing about anything.