

## 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."<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

Andy Grundberg, photography critic for 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

<sup>1</sup>Nick and Bebe Nixon, "AIDS Portrait Project Update," 1 January 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).

camera seems to become invisible, and consequently there is almost no boundary between the image and ourselves.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

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."<sup>5</sup>

Such mainstream photography criticism exhibits 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 to accord the subjects the individuality of their lives and deaths? or do their lives and deaths become, through some process of identification, one with the viewer's?

<sup>2</sup>Robert Atkins, "Nicholas Nixon," 7 Days 5 October 1988.

<sup>3</sup>Andy Grundberg, "Nicholas Nixon Seeks a Path to the Heart," *New York Times* 11 September 1988: H37.

<sup>4</sup>Peter Galassi, "Introduction," *Nicholas Nixon: Pictures of People* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1988) 26.

<sup>5</sup>Galassi 27.





Figure 1. Nicholas Nixon, "Tony and Anna Mastrotilli" (Mansfield, MA, July 1987)

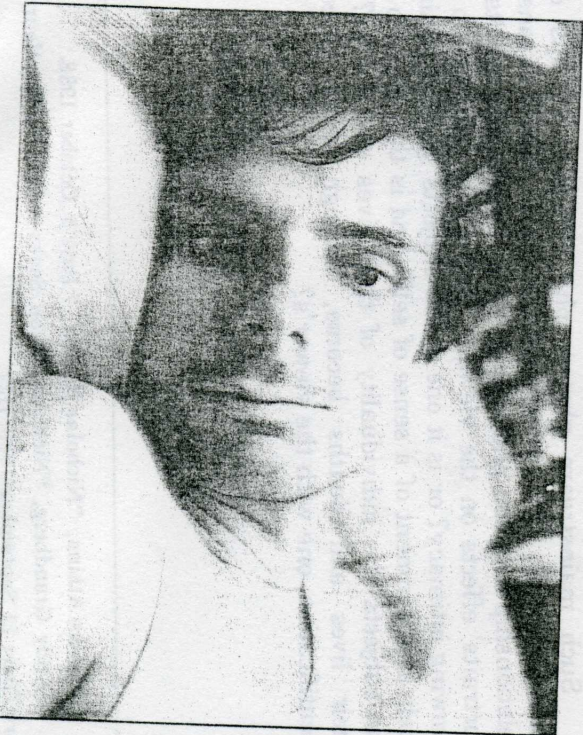


Figure 2. "Tony Mastrotilli" (Mansfield, MA, December 1987)



Figure 3. "Tony Mastrotilli" (Mansfield, MA, April 1988)



Figure 4. "Tony Mastrotilli" (Mansfield, MA, May 1988)





Figure 5. "Tony Mastorilli"  
(Mansfield, MA, June 1988)

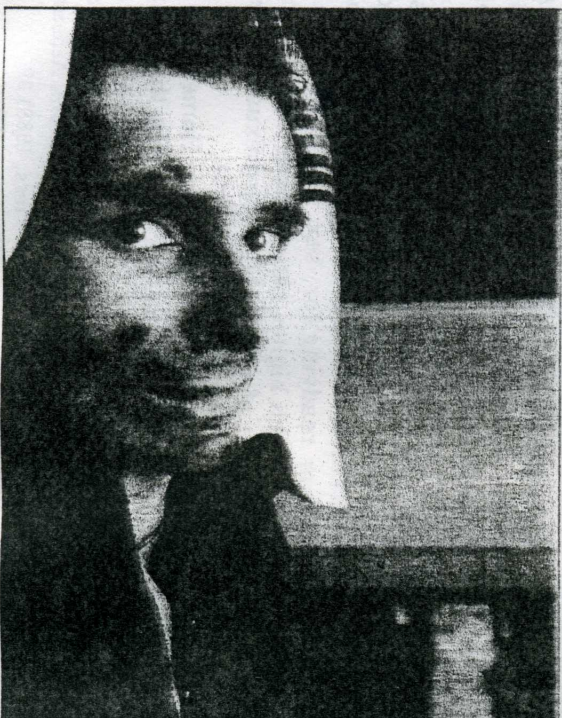


Figure 6. "Tony Mastorilli"  
(Mansfield, MA, June 1988)

For those who have paid careful attention to media representations of AIDS, none of this appears to matter, because first and foremost Nixon's photographs reiterate media truisms 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 that 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 physi-



cian, 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 needing to be combated 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—Rosaland Solomon’s *Portraits in the Time of AIDS*—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 truly describe it. Our picture of AIDS was a totally conceptual one.”<sup>6</sup> Sokolowski’s catalogue essay is entitled “Looking in a Mirror,” and it begins with an epigraph 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.” Sokolowski’s appropriation of these sentences from a man who himself had AIDS once again creates—as with the texts written in response to the Nixon photographs—a defense mechanism, that denies the difference, the obvious sense of oth-

erness, shown in the photographs by insisting that what viewers really see is themselves.

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 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.”<sup>7</sup>

“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 repertoire 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 might be called 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, as all gay men are understood, to be 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.

The gallery of portraits in “AIDS Hits Home” also includes individuals, of course. These are the portraits that Dan Rather

<sup>6</sup>Thomas Sokolowski, preface to *Rosalind Solomon: Portraits in the Time of AIDS* (New York: Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, 1988) n.p.

<sup>7</sup>Paula Treichler, “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification,” *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1988) 39.



warns 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 *only* the face is shown, but in such extreme close-up that the whole visage cannot be seen. 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?"

The *Sixty Minutes* portrait gallery moves 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 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.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup>For both *Sixty Minutes* and 20/20, the ostensible reason for showing the twins is to discuss an experimental bone marrow transplant therapy,

Indeed, the intended messages of "AIDS Hits Home" are so obvious that I do not 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 reveal what has happened to each PWA since the taping of the show. This coda ends with a sequence showing a priest—his hand on a PWA's head covered with Kaposi's sarcoma lesions—administering last rites. Rather interrupts to say, "Bill died last Sunday," and the voice of the priest returns: "Amen."

Secondly, the privacy of the people portrayed is both brutally invaded and brutally maintained. Invaded, in the obvious sense that the subjects' 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 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 faces. Sokolowski acknowledges this fact in his preface to the Rosalind Solomon catalogue:

which requires an identical twin donor. It does not, of course, require that the donor twin be straight.



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 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.<sup>9</sup>

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 his interpretations of the photographs 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*, the viewer is 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."<sup>10</sup> He completes his analysis of this photograph by comparing it with an "early fifteenth-century *Imago Pietatis* of the scourged Christ." Other photographs suggest to him the medieval *Ostentatio Veneris*, the *Memento Mori*, the *Imago Clipeata*, and the image of the *Maja* or *Venus*.

Clearly most viewers of Solomon's photographs will not seek to place them within art historical categories. Nor will they 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

made familiar by 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 Sarcoma. 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.<sup>11</sup>

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 explains, "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, viewers might conclude that Fabian would have been better off if he had 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

<sup>9</sup>Sokolowski, preface to *Rosalind Solomon*.

<sup>10</sup>Thomas W. Sokolowski, "Looking in a Mirror," *Rosalind Solomon*.

<sup>11</sup>William Olander, "I Undertook this Project as a Personal Exploration of the Human Components of an *Alarming Situation*," 3 Vignettes (2)," *New Observations* n. 61 (October 1988): 5. (The quote used as a title is Rosalind Solomon's.)



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 are 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 Niedrepren'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 seems 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.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup>The fascination of the media with the supposed threat of "AIDS carriers" was most dramatically revealed in the response to Randy Shilts' *And the Band Played On*, which focused almost exclusively on Shilts' story of the so-called Patient Zero (see my essay "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, esp. 237–46. The fascina-

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 themselves? 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."

tion 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 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 forty prostitutes. The soldier's "past" had him frequenting prostitutes in Uganda and bathhouses in the Castro district of San Francisco.



But *Frontline* has now lost its story. As the narrator admits, "The gay community was protecting him from the local 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 persons 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 returns 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."

Such a contract sheds new light on the various claims that the work of photographers Nicholas Nixon and Rosalind Solomon differs from ordinary photojournalism's exploitation of people with AIDS because of 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."<sup>13</sup> 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 as worked with a large, old-fashioned view camera which stands on a tripod and makes negatives measuring eight by ten inches.<sup>14</sup>

The point about the size of Nixon's equipment, of course, is that it is so obtrusive that he could never be accused 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

<sup>13</sup>Sokolowski, preface to *Rosalind Solomon*.

<sup>14</sup>This introduction by Peter Galassi and the following statements by Nicholas Nixon are transcribed from Nixon's talk at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 October 1988.



or actions."<sup>15</sup> 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 again during the past decade, might have had some effect. A single paragraph from a founding text of this criticism, written in 1976, indicates the lessons not learned:

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.<sup>16</sup>

Here is one indication of the photographer's disdain while negotiating with his sitter: Showing one of his serial PWA portraits, 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.

<sup>15</sup>Neil Miller, "The Compassionate Eye," *Boston Globe Magazine*, 29 January 1989: 36.

<sup>16</sup>Allan Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)," *Photography against the Grain* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984) 59.

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 about be constructed differently?

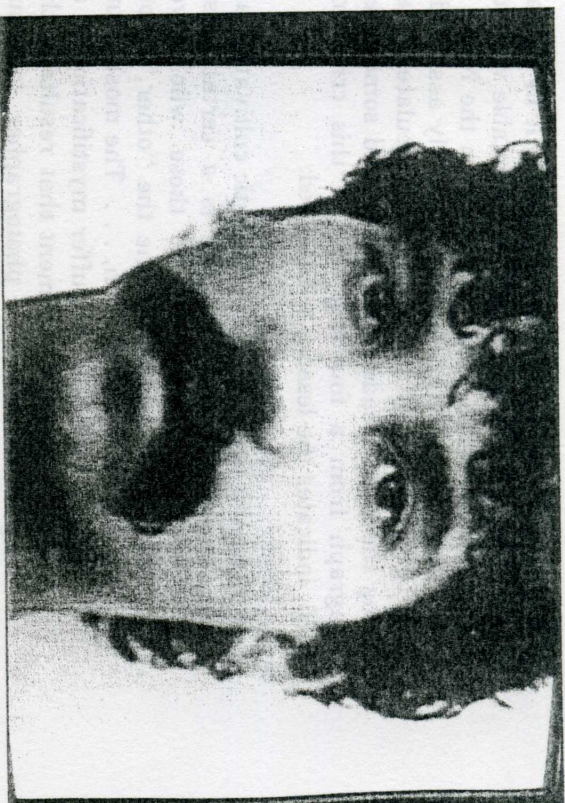
It can perhaps be agreed that images of people with AIDS created by the media and art photographers alike are demeaning, and that they are overdetermined by a number of prejudices that precede them about the majority of the people who have AIDS—about gay men, IV drug users, people of color, poor people. Not only do journalism's (and 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 focused on the fear that Fabian would be seen as the stereotype of the homosexual with AIDS. When we see homosexuality portrayed in the media, many of us 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 that 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 at best they 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.

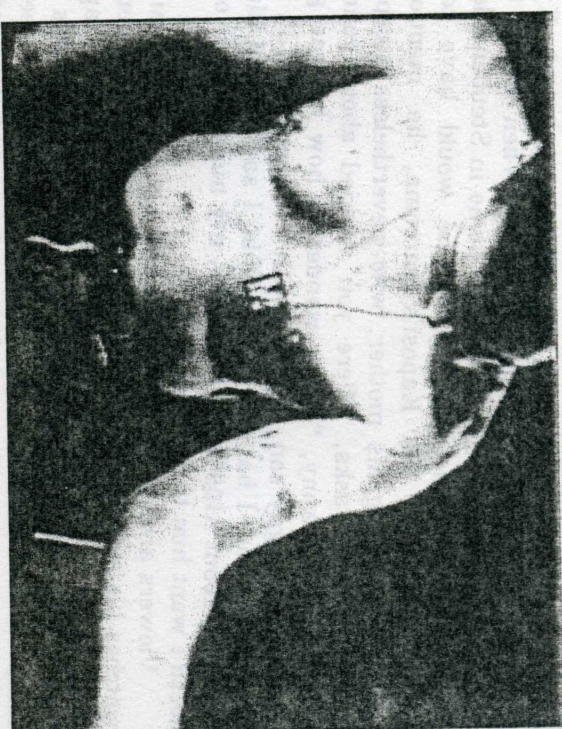
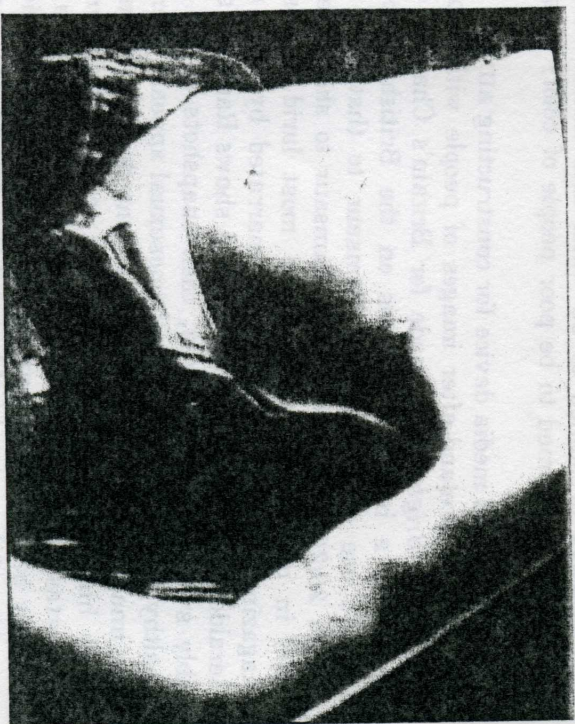
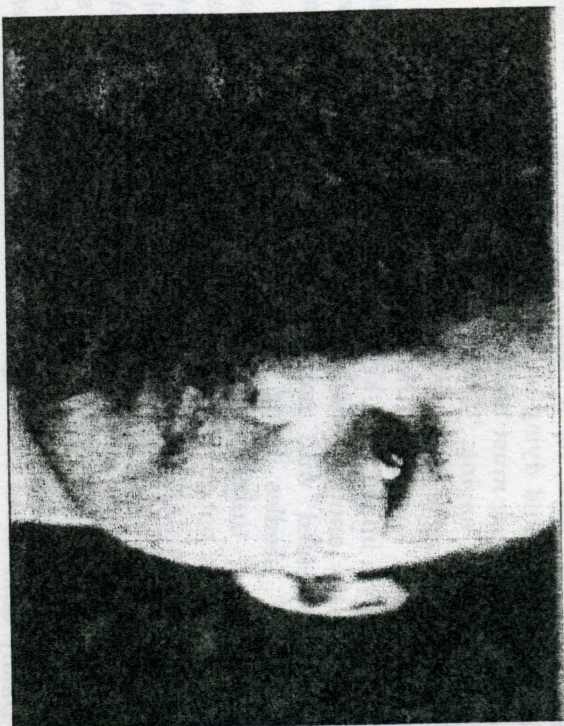
I want to conclude, therefore, with a work that does not seek to displace negative images with positive ones, that does not substitute the good PWA for the bad, the apparently healthy for the visibly ill, the active for the passive, the exceptional for the ordinary. My interest in the videotape *Danny*, made by Shashu Kybartas,<sup>17</sup> does not derive from its creation of a counter-type but rather from its insistence upon a particular stereotype, one that is referred to among gay men, whether endearingly or deprecatingly, as the clone.

Without doing so deliberately or programmatically, I think, *Danny* constitutes one of the most powerful critiques of media images of PWAs. This is in part because many of its features duplicate the stereotypes of PWA portraiture but at the same time reclaim 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' subjective investment in the project and celebrates Danny's own sense of gay identity and hard-won sexual freedom.



<sup>17</sup>*Danny*, 1987, is distributed by Video Data Bank, Chicago.





Figures 7-11. Stashu Kybartas,  
"Danny"

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 any image has appeared. Thus, although the video ends at the second recounting of Danny's death, it does not come as a coda revealing what has happened to the subject after the tape was made. Indeed, as the apostrophizing voice-over makes clear, 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.

In a voice that is somewhat difficult to understand, Danny opens with these words: "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 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 would 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."

Viewers 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. 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' 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 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 carotid angiogram that he performed. Although a full human being with a respectable profession, Danny is not heroicized by Kybartas. Immediately following his 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. This sequence interferes with still another media myth: 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 news-magazine 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 the live image returns as the camera pans down to Kenny's arm to show him pulling up his sleeve to reveal his sarcoma lesions. Kybartas reworks this ploy in *Danny*. Snapshots of a young and healthy hedonist in Miami appear 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 lesions, taken in Kybartas' studio in Pittsburgh during Danny's illness. And when a second series of early snapshots of Danny changes 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.<sup>18</sup> [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 sarcoma lesions, as stop-motion footage of Danny removing his shirt repeats time and again, or as still images show fragments of his chest and arms covered with lesions. But, like scars or tattoos, the lesions are always seen as marking the body as sexually attractive, a sexiness that Kybartas indicates 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 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 im-

<sup>18</sup>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.

ages intended to overcome the 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 often charged. 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 anyone who thinks it only preoccupies the minds of the likes of Jesse Helms and Patrick Buchanan will fail to understand its pervasiveness. I want to end, therefore, by bringing this phobic fantasy close to home. 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 un-



derstood as a counterforce against the total elimination of structure and the total unfolding of sexuality.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> "Virtuelle Katastrophen" (interview with Jean Baudrillard by Florian Rotzer), *Kunstforum*, January-February 1990: 266. Thanks to Hans Haacke for bringing this interview to my attention.