

**Visualizing AIDS:
Re-codify the Body to Re-codify Society**

Two Volumes

Volume I

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PhD

University of York

History of Art

July 2018

Abstract

Scientifically analysed, photographically exploited, artistically dematerialized, the body of the 1980s and 1990s AIDS epidemic continues to influence the contemporary perception of healthy and ill physicalities. Moving from the identification of a presence in absence dialectic, made of bodies physically absent, and yet still present in the works produced during the crisis, the project explores how the disease has been represented by gay male artists. Written in the first person, the thesis looks at AIDS educational materials, photographs, choreography, and installations under a Lacanian perspective. Dealing with a shattered temporality, the text re-performs the bodies of the crisis as they appear in the Lacanian Mirror of postmodernity, discussing their present and past impact.

Structured in four chapters, the dissertation follows my journey through the Mirror, retracing the fragmentation of a body and of a temporality that is in fact uncatchable. The first chapter sets the issues arising from a scholarly reading of the crisis, defining the chronology of the epidemic. Using photographs, drawings, and educational materials, I trace a timeline of the homoerotic body of desire as it appears in the “pre” and the “post-AIDS” reality. The chapter introduces the concept of *Aesthetic of Illness*, theorizing its double nature. In chapter two, I analyse the photo-biographies of Arnie Zane, Tom Bianchi, Samuel Wagstaff, and Albert J. Winn, and Richard Sawdon-Smith, reflecting on the ideas of the visible and invisible, and on the patient/doctor relationship. The third chapter marks the beginning of my journey across the Mirror: the text focuses on the choreographic work of Neil Greenberg and Bill T. Jones, presenting the reader with a reflection on death. Finally, the last chapter addresses the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres going back to the body to answer the question that has accompanied the reader throughout the thesis: *What Am I Looking At?*

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Fig.99 Richard Sawdon-Smith, *Observe 1994-2011*, 2012. Handmade artist book 4 x 6. “Richard Sawdon Smith,” *Artists+*, Visual AIDS, accessed June 14, 2018, <https://www.visualaids.org/artists/detail/richard-sawdon-smith>.

Fig.100 Richard Sawdon-Smith, *Observe 1994-2011*, 2012. Handmade artist book 4 x 6 inches. “Richard Sawdon Smith,” *Artists+*, Visual AIDS, accessed June 14, 2018, <https://www.visualaids.org/artists/detail/richard-sawdon-smith>.

Fig.101 Richard Sawdon-Smith, *The Anatomical Man*, 2009. C-type print; 17 x 30 and 48 x 60 inches. “Richard Sawdon Smith,” *Artists+*, Visual AIDS, accessed June 14, 2018, <https://www.visualaids.org/artists/detail/richard-sawdon-smith>.

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Fig.104 Albert J. Winn, *AIDS Tribal Making #5*, 2006. Chromogenic color print; 20 x 24 inches. “Blood Brothers,” *Gallery, The Body*, 2012, accessed June 14, 2018, http://www.thebody.com/visualaids/web_gallery/2012/serotte/19.html.

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Fig.108 Neil Greenberg, still from *Not-About-AIDS-Dance*, choreographed by Neil Greenberg, The Kitchen, New York, 1994. Screenshot from recorded performance. Neil Greenberg, “Not-About-AIDS-Dance – 1994,” Vimeo video, 53:58, posted by “Neil Greenberg”, June 19, 2012, accessed June 14, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/44322468>.

Fig.109 Neil Greenberg, still from *Not-About-AIDS-Dance*, choreographed by Neil Greenberg, The Kitchen, New York, 1994. Screenshot from recorded performance. Neil Greenberg, “Not-About-AIDS-Dance – 1994,” Vimeo video, 53:58, posted by “Neil Greenberg”, June 19, 2012, accessed June 14, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/44322468>.

Fig.110 Neil Greenberg, still from *Not-About-AIDS-Dance*, choreographed by Neil Greenberg, The Kitchen, New York, 1994. Screenshot from recorded performance. Neil Greenberg, “Not-About-AIDS-Dance – 1994,” Vimeo video, 53:58, posted by “Neil Greenberg”, June 19, 2012, accessed June 14, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/44322468>.

Fig.111 Neil Greenberg, still from *Not-About-AIDS-Dance*, choreographed by Neil Greenberg, The Kitchen, New York, 1994. Screenshot from recorded performance. Neil Greenberg, “Not-About-AIDS-Dance – 1994,” Vimeo video, 53:58, posted by “Neil Greenberg”, June 19, 2012, accessed June 14, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/44322468>.

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Fig.113 AA Bronson, *Felix Parts June 5, 1994*, 1994/1999. Inkjet print on vinyl; overall 84 x 168 inch. “AA Bronson,” *Art & Artists*, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2018, accessed June 14, 2018, <http://collection.whitney.org/object/16348>.

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Fig.115 Bill T. Jones, Untitled, 1994. Drawing. Halbreich, Kathy, Philip Vergne ed., *Art Performs Life: Merce Cunningham, Meredith Monk, Bill T. Jones* (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Centre; New York: Available through Distributed Art Publishers, 1998).

Fig.116 Re-drawing Bill T. Jones, Untitled, 1994. Drawing on photocopy of original drawing. Halbreich, Kathy, Philip Vergne ed., *Art Performs Life: Merce Cunningham, Meredith Monk, Bill T. Jones* (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Centre; New York: Available through Distributed Art Publishers, 1998).

Fig.117 Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, *Still/Here*, choreographed by Bill T. Jones, 1994. Screenshot from video. Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, “Still/Here,” Vimeo Video, 3:33, posted by “usqProductions,” February 5, 2012, accessed June 14, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/36236488>.

Fig.118 Bill T. Jones, *Untitled*, 1989. Promotional image for DVD taken from performance. Electronic Arts Intermix, “John Sanborn and Mary Perillo: Selected Works, 1987-89,” 1997-2018, accessed June 14, 2018, <https://www.eai.org/titles/untitled-bill-t-jones-14168>.

Fig.119 Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, *D-Man in the Waters*, choreographed by Bill T. Jones, Joyce Theatre, New York, 2013. Photograph by Michelle V. Agins (The New York Times). Brian Seibert, “Indomitable Yet Prone to Grieving: Bill T. Jones/ Arnie Zane, at the Joyce Theater,” *The New York Times*, March 27, 2013, accessed June 14, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/28/arts/dance/bill-t-jones-arnie-zane-at-the-joyce-theater.html>.

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Fig.121 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “*Untitled*” (*Lover boys*), 1991. Cellophane-wrapped blue-and-white candies, endless supply, ideal weight 355 pounds; dimensions vary with installation. Installation view: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: This Place*, The MAC Belfast, 2016. Photograph by Ilaria Grando - Detail.

Fig.122 Ross Laycock and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Postcard to Carl George (June 17, 1985). Postcard - front. The Carl George/ Felix Gonzalez-Torres/ Ross Laycock Archive at Visual AIDS. The Visual AIDS Archive Project: New York, NY.

Fig.123 Ross Laycock and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Postcard to Carl George (June 17, 1985). Postcard - back. The Carl George/ Felix Gonzalez-Torres/ Ross Laycock Archive at Visual AIDS. The Visual AIDS Archive Project: New York, NY.

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installation. Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: The Salomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2007), 151; 223. Image copyright © The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.

Fig.125 Felix Gonzalez-Torres “*Untitled*” (*Placebo*), 1991. Silver-cellophane-wrapped candies, endless supply, ideal weight 1,000 – 1,200 pounds; dimensions vary with installation. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Elisa and Barry Stevens. Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: The Salomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2007), 105; 222. Image copyright © The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.

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Fig.127 Roni Horn, *Gold Field*, 1980-1982. Pure gold (99.9%); 49 x 60 x .0008 inch. Edition of 3, 1 A.P. Julie Ault ed., *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York; Göttingen: Steidl/dangin Publisher, 2006), 148-149.

Fig.128 Roni Horn, *Golden Mats Paired – for Ross and Felix*, 1994/1995. Pure gold (99.9%); 49 x 60 x .0008 inch. “About This Artwork,” *Collections*, Art Institute of Chicago, 1995, accessed June 14, 2018, <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/184106>. Image copyright © Roni Horn.

Fig.129 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “*Untitled*” (*Golden*), 1995. Plastic beads with metal rod; dimensions vary with installation. Installation view: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: 2 Installationen* at Neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst, Berlin, 1996. Julie Ault ed., *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, (New York; Göttingen: Steidl/dangin Publisher, 2006), viii. Image copyright © The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.

Fig.130 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “*Untitled*” (*March 5th*) #2, 1991. Lightbulbs, porcelain light sockets and extension cords. “Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” *Past Auction*, Artnet, 2018, accessed

June 14, 2018, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/felix-gonzalez-torres/untitled-march-5th-2-qbfK1MnZPfyjZBn0EdgHNQ2>.

Fig.131 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “*Untitled*” (*Rossmore*), 1991. Lightbulbs, porcelain light sockets and extension cords. Installation view: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: This Place*, The MAC Belfast, 2016. Photograph by Ilaria Grando.

Fig.132 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “*Untitled*,” 1987. China plates with lacquered C-prints; eight parts: approximately 48 x 60 inches overall. Julie Ault ed., *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York; Göttingen: Steidl/Pangloss Publisher, 2006), 332. Image copyright © The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.

Fig.133 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Double Fear*, 1987. Rub-on transfer; edition of 20; 4 ½ x 9 ½ inches overall. Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: The Salomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2007), 128; 218. Image copyright © The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.

Fig.134 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “*Untitled*” (*Go Go dancing Platform*), 1991. Wood, light bulbs, acrylic paint, and Go-Go dancer in silver lamé bathing suit, sneakers, and Walkman (when installed publicly); 21 ½ x 72 x 72 inches. Julie Ault ed., *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York; Göttingen: Steidl/Pangloss Publisher, 2006), 17. Image copyright © The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.

Fig.135 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “*Untitled*” (*Orpheus, Twice*), 1991. Two mirrors; each 75 x 25 ½ inches; 75 x 55 inches overall. Installation view: *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: This Place*, The MAC Belfast, 2016. Photograph by Ilaria Grando

Fig.136 Nicholas Nixon, *Tom Moran, Boston, October 1987* from the *People with AIDS* Project, 1987. Gelatin silver print. “Nicholas Nixon, Tom Moran, Boston,” *Art and Artists*, MOMA, 2018, accessed June 14, 2018, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/50239>.

Fig.137 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “*Untitled*” (*March 5th*) #1, 1991. Two mirrors; each 12 inches in diameter; 12 x 24 inches overall. Collection of Barbara and Howard Morse. Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: The Salomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2007), 71. Image copyright © The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.

Fig.138 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “*Untitled*” (*Fear*), 1991. Blue mirror. Pinterest, accessed June 14, 2018, <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/17944098495178553/?lp=true>.

Fig.139 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “*Untitled*,” 1992-1995. Medium varies with installation, water. Two parts: 12 feet or 24 diameter each. Overall dimension 24 x 12 feet or 48 x 24 feet, height varies with installation. Above the pools: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “*Untitled*” (*America*), 1994. Light bulbs, waterproof rubber light sockets and waterproof extension cords. “Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” Andrea Rosen Gallery, accessed June 14, 2018, <http://www.andrearosengallery.com/artists/felix-gonzalez-torres/images>. Image copyright © The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.

Fig.140 Installation view of *Art AIDS America*, The Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York, 2016. Photograph by Ilaria Grando.

Fig.141 Pacjfico Silano, *Blue Boy Magazine*, 2012. 100 pigment prints; 114½ x 89½ inches, overall; Brian Buczak, *Séance*, 1985. Acrylic on canvas; 86 x 48 inches. Installation view: *Art AIDS America*, The Bronx Museum of Arts, New York, 2017. Photograph by Ilaria Grando.

Fig.142 Dan Goldstein, *Icarian I Incline*, 1993. Leather, sweat, wood, copper, felt and Plexiglas; 73 x 37 x 6 inches. Installation view: *Art AIDS America*, The Bronx Museum of Arts, New York, 2017. Photography by Ilaria Grando.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr James Boaden for believing in me and in this project, and for the continuous support in the past three years. This thesis would have not been possible without his guidance: I am extremely grateful for every conversation, supervision, and advice.

I would like to thank my parents, Claudio and Roberta, for enabling me to enrol in this PhD program, and my boyfriend, Thom, for proofreading the text in accordance to the University's Guidance on Proofreading and Editing, and supporting me in the final stage of this process.

This research has been possible thanks to the following institutions:

- Santander International Connection Award which enabled me to conduct research in New York in the early stages of my PhD;
- The Worldwide Universities Network (WUN) Research Mobility Program that enabled me to spend six weeks at the University of Rochester (NY), work with Professor Douglas Crimp, and study the Atwater Collection for AIDS Educational Materials;
- The Terra Foundation for American Art for awarding me with the Terra Foundation for American Art Travel Grant, and giving me the opportunity to visit archives in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Indiana, and New York;
- The Getty Research Institute for granting me with the Getty Research Institute Library Grant, which enabled me to view their Special Collections.

I would also like to thank archives and libraries that let me conduct on-site research. Specifically: Visual AIDS (New York), the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation (New York), the Frances Mulhall Achilles Library at the Whitney Museum of American Art (New York), the Fales Library & Special Collections at New York University (New York), the University of Rochester River Campus Libraries Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation

(Rochester, New York), the Getty Research Institute (Los Angeles), the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives (Los Angeles), the Bob Mizer Foundation (San Francisco), the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction (Bloomington, IN), the archives of the New York Public Library and its Performing Arts Division.

In the thesis are reflected the conversations I had with scholars, PhD students, archivists and artists. I have presented my work at various conferences, receiving useful feedback and interesting questions. Particularly important for the project was the Association for Art History Summer Symposium “Re/Presenting the Body: Between Art and Science,” held at University of Glasgow in 2017, and for this I would like to thank organizers, and speakers.

In my second year I co-organized with PhD colleague Grace Linden, the conference “ACT UP: Thirty Years Fighting AIDS,” an event that gave me the possibility to get in touch with people sharing similar research interests. A special thanks to Jim Hubbard, Sarah Schulman, and Dr Monica Pearl for the support in organizing the event, and the productive conversations.

The research visit at the University of Rochester had a great impact on my work. I would like to thank the PhD community of Rochester, the Department of Art and Art History, and Professor Douglas Crimp, who guided me in investigating the Atwater Collection and invited me to audit his class on the history of dance and film. The conversations and meeting I had with Prof Crimp, as well as his classes, reflects on this PhD, and I am extremely grateful for that.

The participation in the Manchester Sexuality Summer School did also influence my work, and for this I would like to thank the students and academics of the 2017 edition.

I would also like to thank Dennis Bell (Bob Mizer Foundation), Tom Bianchi, Lori Birrel (University of Rochester), Virginia Dodier (George Eastman Museum), Andrew Blackley (former archivist for the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation), Eoin Dara (curator for the MAC, Belfast), Alex Fialho (Visual AIDS), Jim Hubbard, Philip Kerrigan (Centre for Chronic

Diseases and Disorders, University of York), Rosalynde LeBlanc (Director of the movie *D-Man*), Esther McGowan (Visual AIDS), and Richard Sawdon-Smith, for the informal conversation either in person or via email/phone around the themes that shaped this project. Kirstyn Radford (University of York) for the useful advices in terms of copyright, and Virginia Mokslaveskas (The Getty Research Institute), Patricia Delara (GLBT Historical Society) Shawn C. Wilson (The Kinsey Institute), Loni A. Shibuyama (ONE Archives), for helping me in consulting the collections, and getting permission to reproduce the images in the thesis.

Finally, I will like thank the Department of History of Art of the University of York for constant support in this journey, my Thesis Advisory Panel, Prof Michael White, and Dr Teresa Kittler, all the friends, and PhD colleagues, Grace Linden and Maria-Anna Aristova, who have crossed my path in the past three years. It has been an incredible journey, and it would not have been possible without any of the people, or the institutions above mentioned. With all my heart, thank you!

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author.

This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References. The thesis has been proofread for grammatical mistakes in accordance with the University's Guidelines on Proofreading and Editing by my boyfriend. I have presented part of the material here discussed at the following conferences:

May 31, 2018 - **"The David was an Activist! Art + Activism in the AIDS Crisis"** – Workshop delivered at York MESMAC.

July 7, 2017 - **"Chronicles from the AIDS Crisis: Sick Bodies, Medical Gaze, and Phototherapy"** - Paper Presented at the AAH Summer Symposium "Re/Presenting the Body: Between Art and Science" at University of Glasgow.

June 30, 2017 - **"Autobiography of the Flesh: Albert J. Winn's Narrative of AIDS in the *Band-AIDS Series*"** - Paper presented at the Association for Medical Humanities Annual Conference 2017 "Critical Stories" at Keele University.

June 22, 2017 – **"Macho Men: The David, Calvin Klein, and the AIDS crisis"** - Lecture given at the Ca' Foscari International College, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy.

November 11, 2016 - **"Synchronizing the Anachronic: The Question of Time in Felix Gonzalez Torres's "Untitled" (Perfect Lovers), 1991"** - Paper Presented at "Time Immaterial – Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Research Symposium" at The University of York.

June 3, 2016 - **"Muscular Gods: Researching Male Beauty Prototypes during the 1980s and the 1990s AIDS Crisis"** - Paper presented at the Centre For Modern Studies Postgraduate Symposium "The Modern Body: 1830-Present" at the University of York.

May 11, 2016 - **"Bodily Shaped: Controversial Narrations of the Body in the 1980s and the 1990s AIDS Crisis"** - Paper presented at the Centre for Modern Studies, Small Talk at the University of York.

Like Chewing Gum on the Sidewalk:

An introduction to the project

“If you spit a piece of chewing gum on the sidewalk no one will notice, but if you and everyone you know spit a piece of gum onto the same sidewalk then people will have to deal with it”.¹

A mid-sentence in an open-ended conversation. This, in short, is what this project represents. To establish a comprehensive narrative of the artistic responses to the 1980s and 1990s AIDS crisis in North America is unrealistic, if not impossible. Thus, my decision to present this thesis as a mid-sentence in an open-ended conversation aiming to reinvigorate the critical and public discussion on the represented bodies of the epidemic. AIDS is not over, yet its stories seem to be lost in the maze of History. In the last couple of years, the interest in the crisis has visibly grown: there have been exhibitions, publications, and conferences of many kinds. These events, including the recent and well-curated exhibition “An Incomplete History of Protest” at the Whitney Museum of American Art (2017) have explored social, and political aspects of the crisis without fully acknowledging the recodification process it initiated.

“To re-codify” means to appropriate a pre-existing system of words, symbols, and images, in other words a code, and provide it with new meanings.² Using the verb “to re-codify” I argue for the subtle, and viral like quality of the works artists and activists produced during the crisis. To re-codify society, and more specifically to fight and change those social codes that visualized AIDS in the spectacle of immediately noticeable signs of malady (eg. skeletal bodies, and Kaposi sarcoma lesions), the art of the epidemic, did not construct new systems of representation of healthy and ill bodies, but rather infiltrated existing ones, testing them through the notions of visibility and invisibility and presence and absence. The codes

¹ David Wojanarowicz, “Do not Doubt the Dangerousness of the 12 Inch Tall Politician,” Series I. Artist Files, 1953-2001, 2006.M.8, Box 60, Folder 1, High Performance Magazine Records 1953-2005, 4, The Getty Research Institute Special Collections, Los Angeles, California.

² The definition of the code as a system see: Angus Stevenson ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of English*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Orford University Press, 2010).

secretly developed in the 1950s physique culture to portray the homoerotic body of desire, and appropriated by Bruce Weber in the 1980s and 1990s Calvin Klein advertising campaigns, becomes an opportunity to challenge the idea of what a person with HIV and AIDS should look like. The perfect body of Michelangelo's *David* becomes a revolutionary statement of beauty to be used against the demonization of sex. Rambo's hard body, expression of the Reaganian era, becomes a symbol of the fight against the media phobic representation of AIDS. Gonzalez-Torres's candy sculptures becomes a space of debate where to revise the idea of contagion. The movement from a body to society is enhanced by the participatory character of the art of the crisis. Art performs and requires its spectators to re-perform the revised system of images, words, and symbols within their body, challenging pre-existing definitions of health and illness with the question: "*What am I looking at?*".

Moving from this assumption, I approach the project in the first person and in a (perhaps questionable) present tense. The decision, theoretically founded in Catherine Grant's article "A narrative of what wishes what it wishes it to be: An Introduction to 'Creative Writing and Art History'," and scholarly rooted in the works of Carol Mavor, Irit Rogoff, and Peggy Phelan, draws from Elizabeth Lebovici's pointing title *Ce Que la Sida M'a Fait*.³ Reading out loud the words *Ce Que la Sida M'a Fait*, I use my voice to re-evoke, re-perform, and to a certain extent, re-codify an *m'* into an *I* beyond its historical narrative.⁴ Similarly, when I look at works and performances made during the epidemic, the codes of representation there adopted, manipulated and challenged are redirected towards my body in the attempt to generate a re-codification of my own corporeality that in conjunction to the re-codification process induced in all who experienced the works before and/or after me, has the potential to activate a chewing-

³ Catherine Grant, "A narrative of what wishes what it wishes it to be: An Introduction to 'Creative Writing and Art History'," *Art History* 34, no.2 (April 2011): 231-232.

⁴ Elizabeth Lebovici, *Ce Que le Sida M'a Fait: Art et Activism à la Fin du XX^e Siècle*. This analysis benefits from Lebovici's presentation of her book at the event "Vulnerability, Viability and Life of AIDS: Elizabeth Lebovici in conversation with Oliver Davis" held at the UCL Institute of Advanced Studies, London, on January 29, 2018.

gum-on-the-sidewalk domino effect resulting in that social change addressed by the project title.

As in Gonzalez-Torres' candy sculpture "*Untitled*" (*Lover Boys*), 1991, I am asked to take and eat the sweets, letting the artwork use my body in a public space of social encounter (the museum/gallery) to re-perform the death of the artist's lover, the works about to be here discussed ask me to use my *I* to disclose, in the acknowledgment of my story, the lost narratives of the epidemic. The *m*' of the artist's personal story moves beyond history to be re-codified in the art historian's, in my, body. As the movement occurs, affecting myself, and possibly other spectators/readers through time, I am tasked to record if and how I am affected by the work, and use that experience to investigate the consequences of the pieces in the wider social context. What is at stake here is the possibility to build an art historical discourse that protecting the origin of the works considered let the text show the deep sociological changes it generated in a personal, conscious assertion. In the article above cited, Grant defines the body of the art historian "as a way into the desires and performances that take place in the writing of a history".⁵ Writing as a body, as an individual who witnesses in the development of her research, a body of works partly unrecorded, I research a performative dialogue with the *m(s)*' of the epidemic and establish a present in absence space of critical analysis. The action, I realize, risks to jeopardize the authority of my figure as a researcher, especially in light of the existing scholarship.

Motivated by a social and political urgency, the discussion around the art of the epidemic began to develop during the crisis itself. Taking the form of sharp articles to be later published in edited volumes, it often confuses the figure of the art historian with that of the activist, creating a space of analysis somehow limited. Exemplary the case of Douglas Crimp,

⁵ Grant, "A Narrative of what wishes what it wishes it to be," 232.

art historian and activist, who at the peak of the crisis edited the collection of essays *AIDS: Cultural Analysis /Cultural Activism* (1987), and co-authored with Adam Rolston, *AIDS Demo Graphics* (1990) a written and visual account of the educational material produced by activists to fight for the end of AIDS. The union activism-art-critic returns stronger in another collection of essays, James Miller's *Fluids Exchange: Artists and Critics* (1992). Where Crimp unites art historical analysis to texts of sociological, philosophical and political breadth, Miller maintains the art criticism filter and use it to raise the voice of the artists considered. As the bind art history-activism develops, a necessary discourse on remembrance and mourning is also established. Keeping a direct engagement with the lost voices of the epidemic, scholars began to explore the medical spectacle of the disease and the dialectics of the visible and the invisible, and of absence and presence it generated. Among the texts working within these themes: Sander Gilman's "Seeing the AIDS Patient" in *Disease and Representation: Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS* (1988), Rob Baker's *The Art of AIDS* (1994) and Peggy Phelan's *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (1997).

To write myself in the art historical discourse advanced during the AIDS crisis, I embrace Irit Rogoff's definition of the participatory and take full advantage of what she interprets as the "with(s)/without(s)" of the art historical investigation. In a conversation with Peggy Phelan, Rogoff explains:

When you're being participatory, you're allowing yourself to be interpellated by the sentiment so that you cannot distance yourself from it. You can do something that's much more reflective, much more conscious.⁶

If the first-person narrative allows me to be interpellated and work from a more reflective and conscious perspective, disclosing "that funny state when you think you're doing one thing, then realize that you're doing something completely different, which always builds on the familiar quagmire of knowledge" - my "without" - I am able to acknowledge the existing scholarship,

⁶ Peggy Phelan and Irit Rogoff, "'Without': A Conversation," *Art Journal* 60, no.3 (2001): 37.

and respectfully move beyond it, shaping that original, personal analysis that the art of the epidemic requests.⁷ The action takes into account the existence of a reader that may or may not be aware of the complexity of the critical discourse developed during the epidemic, and that, like me, may not have lived through the crisis. Moving back and forth in the tale of my research process, I let the text show my “without(s)” and with them that place of discovery, normally hidden in the writing process, where, according to Grant, “art history’s stories and silences” are revealed.⁸

The possibly jarring strategy is mediated by a literary device of conveniently blurred nature: the mirror. Throughout the text I pretend to be standing in front of what I call the Lacanian Mirror of postmodernity. A space of encounter, the mirror acts in the last two chapters as a doorway: crossing the surface I let the *m’* into *I* passage take place, offering intimate readings of the works analysed. Using the capital M when the metaphor acquires a more defined Lacanian dimension, I confuse the Mirror as a psychoanalytical concept and the mirror as a physical object suggesting the possibility of merging my art historian body with the images reflecting on the surface. The device stands at the crossroads of Jacques Lacan’s Mirror Stage and Jean Cocteau’s *Orpheus* (1949). Wearing the gloves of Cocteau’s Princess/Death, I access a proto-linguistic and therefore proto-symbolic order where I can become proxy participant of the art of the epidemic. Lacan defines the mirror stage as:

the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes [*assume*] an image – an image that is seemingly predestined to have an effect at this phase, as witnessed by the use in analytic theory of antiquity’s term, “*imago*”.⁹

The Mirror enables the child to begin the self-discovery process leading to his full development.¹⁰ In the mirror, Jane Gallop explained, is staged an illusion suspended between

⁷ Phelan and Rogoff, “‘Without’,” 35-36.

⁸ Grant, “A narrative of what wishes it to be,” 241.

⁹ Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, translated by Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg, (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2006), 76.

¹⁰ Lacan, “The Mirror Stage,” 75-76.

the individual's past and future.¹¹ Staring at his image, the infant understands his body in a virtual totality and experiences the imaginary order.¹² The simplified projection terminates with the introduction of speech through which the subject, now able to understand and process the virtuality of the first image, is initiated to the symbolic order.¹³ As in Lacan's mirror stage the infant grows from the identification of a reflection into a conscious participant of his subjecthood, so I resort to the reflective surface of my literary device to write my art historical body in a selected body of works, and later develop a personal discourse mediated by language. Looking at the present and absent reflections made visible in the mirror surface, I move across time, revealing, to borrow Lacan's words, that: "what is essential is not what is there, what is seen. What structures it is what is not there".¹⁴

The epidemic floats in a time forever frozen, in a time eternally suspended. It was, it has been, and it still is. In the introduction to *Ce Que la Sida M'a Fait*, Lebovici highlights how the story of AIDS is necessarily unfinished: an impossible participant in the linearity of time, she argues, the AIDS crisis reveals the shattered fluidity of an era.¹⁵ An alien to the days of the epidemic, I analyse the works taking advantage of the English present tense anonymity.¹⁶ In the present, I make sense of those shattered years discussed by Lebovici by adopting an equally shattered PhD narrative. In the present, I experience "the object of a future memory," and understand the reflections my readers, and I before them, perceive in the art of the crisis, "in anticipation of the story we will tell later, envisaging the past as the present".¹⁷ In the

¹¹ Jane Gallop, "Lacan's "Mirror Stage": Where to Begin," *Substance* 11/12, no.4/1, issue 37-38: A Special Issue from the Center for Twentieth Century Studies (1982/1983): 121.

¹² Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 76-79.

¹³ Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 76-79.

¹⁴ Jacques Lacan, "The Symbolic Order," in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: I Freud's Papers on Technique*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, translated with notes by John Forrester, (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), 224.

¹⁵ See: Lebovici, "Avant-propos," 9-19.

¹⁶ See: Mark Currie, *Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 138.

¹⁷ Currie, *Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time*, 5.

present, I ease my readers in an uncomfortably broken chronology, and ask them to reflect the shattered time of the epidemic onto their own bodies.

Gonzalez-Torres has it all figured it out long before me and Lebovici. His “linguistic portraits” capture the individual in a sequence of dates, and names of private and public origin [Fig.1].¹⁸ The subject’s formative moments are associated, confused, and fragmented in a series of historical events subjected to change: the dates listed in the original work can be selected, included, and/or excluded by owners and galleries depending on intention and/or exhibition theme. Public and private meets in the middle of a sentence, in the middle of a life, merging with the story of the individual staring back at them. A person, Gonzalez-Torres seems to say, can only be understood in the uncomfortable nature of a shared non-chronology. The portraits work *per* passive and active associations. Looking at them now, the spectator might recall something, or nothing at all; he/she might remember a date in his/her life, or maybe be a complete stranger to those references. In the spectator’s view, the life of ‘Person 0’ has no longer a central importance: lost, suspended, that life is forever frozen in a broken history.

With their cold, encrypted nature, the portraits feel unnatural, dehumanizing even. Perhaps, it is for this reason that I chose not to write about them. Well, not until now, at least. Now, they represent a reality that I have been facing every day for the past three years: time in postmodernity does not work chronologically.

“So I asked myself, at this point in history, how can I do portraits?”¹⁹

The words of Gonzalez-Torres overlaps with mine.

“So I asked myself, at this point in history, how can I talk about the bodies of the epidemic?”

2016 New York. 1991 Ross dies of AIDS. 1957 Felix is born. 1992 Ilaria.

1981 AIDS. 1984 Bobby. 2017 Rochester and Crimp. 2015 PhD. 1996 Felix.

¹⁸ The term “linguistic portrait” is borrowed from Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2007), 146.

¹⁹ Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 146.

2018 Lacan's M/mirror.²⁰

In the present, I ask a reader that might not be familiar with the stories narrated, to stand, as I did before him/her, in front of the M/mirror: to be the body described and his/her onlookers. In the now, I invite him/her to be the doctor and the patient, the absences and the presences of the crisis; to use his/her, or my own body, as a tool of understanding. In the present, I ask him/her to enter the timeline above and expand it at his/her own leisure. In the now, I asked him/her to become the I of the thesis and respond to a request advanced by many artists during the crisis, and too often ignored: take responsibility, become the active participant.

Gonzalez-Torres gave past and future generations the opportunity to alter his candy sculptures, inviting them to take, eat, or share a sweet. I, as him, want to do the same with this piece of writing. Positioning myself at the centre of debates animating the social understanding of the body during the epidemic, experiencing the works, analysing and to a certain extent re-performing them for my readers, I propose to define a shared literature for a newer generation, more or less familiar with the works discussed, to approach the art of the crisis. In the act of suspending my reflection in the Lacanian Mirror of History, I witness the continuous impact that the bodies of the epidemic have on my world, rediscovering psychoanalytic aspects implicit in my corporeality.

Visual materialization of Lacan's imaginary, symbolic, and real bodies, the body of works here presented asks its viewers, myself, and consequently my readers, to step up, retrace, and re-perform a succession of absent physicalities in the presence of their own bodies. To further explain this idea, I quote a passage from an essay bell hooks wrote on the art of Gonzalez-Torres. Analysing the billboard/linguistic portrait *Untitled*, 1989, he realized to commemorate the Stonewall riot, hooks explains:

²⁰ This wants to be my own version of Gonzalez-Torres' "linguistic portrait". It is a portrait of this project, and to a certain extent of myself.

Here, in this moment of testimony, art returns the gaze of the onlooker, demanding an interrogation of our individual subjectivity – our locations. Who were we, where were we, how did we experience these events?²¹

The act of writing a PhD thesis, I believe, respond essentially to a similar process. Here, in this moment of the testimony of my research, I ask myself: *Who was I, where was I, how did I experience these events?* Yes, I was not there. Yes, when the majority of the works here analysed were made, I was not even born. And yes, I most certainly did not experience these events directly. *Should I be writing about the AIDS crisis then? If so, who is my reader? If not, who is supposed to write? Who are they, where are they, what did they experience?*

In *The Gentrification of the Mind*, Sarah Schulman refers to a generational ‘Us’ – those who lived the epidemic – and a ‘Them’ – young people willing to write about it.²² Needless to say, I immediately inscribe myself in ‘Them,’ noticing soon afterwards how I am not technically “Them”, and how the distinction, although temporally correct, contrasts with the immanence of the art produced during the crisis. Schulman’s “Them” is a group of young queer artists who does not understand the urgency that moved artists and activists during the epidemic.²³ I am not a young queer artist, and I am not HIV+. I am another kind of “Them” in the “Them” of the epidemic: I am an ally of the LGBTQA community with an urgency to know, rooted in the conviction that the AIDS epidemic did shape my world.

In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue for “Art AIDS America,” the Them/Us distinction returns to separate the communities that were mostly affected by AIDS (Them) and

²¹ bell hooks, “Subversive Beauty: New Modes of Contestation,” in *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995), 50. hooks’ essay returns in Julie Ault’s edited volume *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*. In Ault’s volume, hooks’ sentence does not end with a question mark. Despite the different punctuation does not affect the overall argument of the text, for the purpose of this thesis, and the active level of participation it requests, the question mark is essential. Hence, from now on, quoting bell hooks’ essay “Subversive Beauty” I will refer to the version published in *Art on my Mind*. See also: bell hooks, “Subversive Beauty: New Modes of Contestation,” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault, (New York; Gottingen: Steidl/Pangloss Publisher, 2006), 177.

²² Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), “Introduction: Making Record from Memory”.

²³ Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), “Introduction: Making Record from Memory”.

a contemporary social body who perceive AIDS a distant reality (Us).²⁴ The line is traced only to highlight how important it is to break it. Jonathan David Katz writes: “To make AIDS an active historical protagonist requires understanding that it is in fact ours, a collective trauma with a collective impact”; he then continues by arguing the importance of “reframing AIDS from something that happened to them to something that happened to us”.²⁵ This thesis does not want to overstep the stories of those who lived the epidemic, and of those who are living with HIV now, but it does want to shorten the distance, and acknowledge a history that is too often forgotten.

I wish for this thesis to be read as a personal journey of discovery developed in the present of my reality; I disclose my research process in the attempt to be, in the development of a critical analysis, as transparent and respectful as possible. Possibly more suitable for someone who, like me, is learning or wishes to learn more about the AIDS crisis, the text wants to remain open to readers of different backgrounds. I realize that artists and activists who lived through the crisis might disagree with my analysis, finding it either too distant from their experience of the epidemic, too embedded in my world, or too simplistic. The thought has consistently informed my writing, at times influencing my decision on how to develop, explain, or re-codify a work into my story. I invite these readers to consider the project as an attempt to identify the effect of the crisis in the history of a person, and in the contemporary world in which she lives, and use the text as a point of discussion on the legacy of the art of the crisis. Researching known and forgotten stories from the AIDS epidemic I have developed ideas and theories that I believe could contribute to abolish the line between “Them” and “Us,” suggest a more personal and responsible approach to the art of the crisis, and give people who might not have an awareness of AIDS or HIV the possibility to find a way into the scholarship. This

²⁴ Jonathan David Katz, “How AIDS Changed America,” in *Art AIDS America*, ed. Jonathan David Katz, Rock Hushka (London; Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2015), 24.

²⁵ Jonathan David Katz, “How AIDS Changed America,” 24.

work is addressed to anyone who feels the urgency mentioned by Schulman to understand how the epidemic has changed their world. This work is addressed to anyone who feels the urgency to let the art of the epidemic speak again, and find a dialogue between all the “Us,” being them activists, survivors, known and forgotten artists, and all the “Them,” being them straight, queer, HIV+ or not, of the epidemic.

Having clarified who the readers of this project are, I need to go back to my initial interrogative. Given what I have disclosed about myself: *Should I be writing about the AIDS crisis?*

The question, before being art historical is ontological. A contemporary writer, I cannot avoid acknowledging the distance that separates me from the artists I study. Neither can I ignore the present impact their works continue to have on the social and the artistic world, on my world. Josette Féral explains what it means to ‘be present’ by distinguishing it from what it means to have a presence. She refers to “the quality of my being” as:

A way of being present that not only affirms my presence but underlines the particular aspect that I am not only present, but that I also have presence, which is not the same thing.²⁶

I am present in the act of analysing the artworks, but I also have a presence in approaching them.

The 15 years that separate the discovery of the HIV virus from the introduction of functioning treatments are particularly challenging to a traditional understanding of Western history. As I said before, the years of the crisis cannot, for the most part, be placed in a linear and comprehensive succession of events.²⁷ I can pick individual dates shaping the ‘history of the epidemic’ but I will never be able to catch it as a whole. Sarah Brophy writes:

²⁶ Josette Féral, “How to Define Presence Effects: The Work of Janet Cardiff,” in *Archaeologies of Presence: Art, Performance and the Persistence of Being*, ed. Gabriella Giannachi, Nick Kaye, Michael Shanks (London; New York: Routledge, 2012), 29.

²⁷ See: Avram Finkelstein, “Introduction: AIDS 2.0,” in *After Silence: A History of AIDS through its Images* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018).

The epidemic's ghosts protest through the voices of their spokespersons against their being exorcized, rendered untroublesome by a public rhetoric of future world, in other words, purified of grief and mourning.²⁸

As unsolved stories from a shattered past, the narratives that develop during the epidemic continue to speak in ghostly demonstrations at the crossroad of a generational anger and a historical misunderstanding.

The events of the AIDS epidemic participate in a time that belongs to what Ewa Domanska defines as non-present and non-absent pasts. A realm "whose presence is not manifest," the 'non-present' past enters the historical discourse in opposition to the 'non-absent' past where "absence is manifest".²⁹ Domanska's terminology, originally used to write about relics, speaks directly to this project. Throughout the thesis I will refer to a pre-AIDS and a post-AIDS era.³⁰ The terms belong respectively to the notions of a non-present past, the years before the crisis manifestly absent during the epidemic, and a non-absent past, whose presence is widely manifest in the activist narrative of the crisis. It is a performance of the past in the present; it is a performance of a fragmented postmodernity, and of a history that is still approached as a multitude of stories. In the first part of the text, the Act One of my performance, I explore the world before the discovery of AIDS in North America. In the second part of the text, the Act Two of this written show, I unravel the years following that discovery.

The idea to break my work into two acts fulfils a functional purpose. The acts highlight the changes brought by the disease in the social panorama, putting a date in a vague, and purposely anti-historical narrative. If the "pre-AIDS" era indicates the social, political, and artistic production realized before 1981, the "post-AIDS" era speaks of the years that follow

²⁸ Sarah Brophy, *Witnessing AIDS: Writing, Testimony, and the Work of Mourning* (Toronto; Buffalo, NY; London: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 8.

²⁹ Ewa Domanska, "The Material Presence of the Past," *History and Theory* 45, no.3 (October 2006): 345.

³⁰ Robert Atkins adopts a similar temporal construction in the essay "Bodily Presence and Absence". According to Atkins the distinction affects mostly men who were born in the Forties and the Fifties. See: Robert Atkins "Bodily Presence and Absence," *Queer Arts*, accessed March 13, 2018, <http://www.queer-arts.org/archive/show1/goldstein/atkins.html>.

the discovery of the HIV virus.³¹ I invite my readers to take the definitions as a generalized, and in no way precise indication: the periodization is oversimplified and clearly debatable. I will specify any particular change of intention in the use of the terms, when and if it is necessary.

The written performance soon to follow involves almost exclusively male characters. The subjects of my investigation are male bodies portrayed, and performed by gay artists, in New York. HIV does not discriminate between women, straight people, drug addicts, etc. and its demographic goes well beyond the area of New York. An art historian with an interest in dance, when I commenced the project, I had few things clear in my mind: I wanted to write about Felix Gonzalez-Torres, the artist who made me discover the untold stories of the epidemic; I wanted to write about Bill T. Jones, the choreographer who made a huge impact on me when as an undergraduate student I took my first dance history class; and I wanted to work exclusively on, about and with bodies. I began to look more in depth at the stories of the crisis, spending time on the ACT UP Oral History Project Website, and discovering a reality somehow lost.³² The desire to focus on Gonzalez-Torres and Jones led me to look at the New York art scene first and to limit my analysis to an all-male exploration later.

2015, York. I started my project with the idea to re-trace that very presence in absence dialectic that leads the viewers of Gonzalez-Torres' *"Untitled,"* 1991 to talk about two absences as presences, in a body of works more or less directly related to the corporeal realm [Fig.2]. The more I looked at artworks, photographs, and choreographies produced during the epidemic, however, the more I realized the existence of opposing aesthetics, of a tensed visual

³¹ Sarah Schulman advances a possible chronological distinction by using the term "past AIDS". Later she specifies that the terms refer to "the Plague (the overlapping period between Perestroika and Gentrification)," where with Gentrification she means the progressive process of un-remembering in the younger generation. See: Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind*, "Introduction: Making Record from Memory".

³² "About," *ACT UP Oral History Project*, accessed June 13, 2018, <http://www.actuporalhistory.org/about/index.html>.

vocabulary, of past codes, and of a process of recodification silently acting on society. My project began to evolve, soon adapting to its current form. With this thesis I argue that the AIDS discourse is responsible for how we make sense of healthy and ill physicalities. The body of the AIDS crisis asks us what it means to be seen, and to remain invisible; what is part of a private narrative and what of a public account. Miming the openness of the art of the epidemic, the work hopes, in a near future, to extend the conversation beyond the academic context, bringing it to hospitals, and patients struggling with terminal illnesses.³³

The thesis is organized into four chapters, each dedicated to a specific visual code. Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 guide me, and my readers in front of the Mirror, where flickering reflections start to reveal themselves. In the first chapter, I delineate a queer timeline of the male body of desire, in the attempt to understand the impact that the virus has had on society. The chapter introduces the presence of beauty in the discourse and suggests the existence of two aesthetics of illness, arguing the role AIDS has had on the contemporary definition of health and illness. In the text, I look at physique magazines and photographs by Bob Mizer, and Bruce of Los Angeles; homoerotic photographs by George Platt Lynes; drawings by Tom of Finland; adverts for Calvin Klein, and AIDS posters and comics. Showing an interconnection of themes and topics, I focus on the transversal presence of Michelangelo's *David* in the AIDS posters suggesting a new reading of the visual strategies adopted by activists

³³ In 2000, some of Gonzalez-Torres' work made from string of light bulbs were showed at the paediatric ward of the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital as part of the artist's solo exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery (London, United Kingdom). Numerous studies proved the positive influence of art in hospitals, highlighting how it can make the patients' recovery quicker, but I would like to suggest that, differently from other artistic productions, the art of the AIDS epidemic could play a fundamental role, when recovery is not an option. Additional studies need to be conducted in this direction. On Gonzalez-Torres' show, see: Laura Cumming, "All Sweeties and Light (not to Mention the Go-Go Dancer)," *The Guardian*, June 11, 2000, accessed May 3, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2000/jun/11/1>. On the therapeutic value of art, see: Pryle Berhman, "Art in Hospitals: Why is it there and what is it for?," *The Lancet* 350, August 23, 1997, accessed July 3, 2018: 584, [http://thelancet.com.journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(97\)03019-5/abstract](http://thelancet.com.journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(97)03019-5/abstract).

in the production of AIDS educational material. Briefly describing how the disease appeared in the media, the text advances, and further theorizes the idea of aesthetic of illness.

The second chapter is dedicated to photographic representations of AIDS. In the text, I introduce various narratives of the pre and the post-AIDS era, here including the post-medical treatment era, with the desire to discuss the changing body of AIDS as a fleshy entity marked by invisible signs.³⁴ I argue the performative nature of Arnie Zane, Tom Bianchi, Samuel Wagstaff, Albert J. Winn and Richard Sawdon-Smith's works introducing the reader to the temporal instability of the AIDS discourse. Specifically, I analyse the pre-AIDS photo-stories designed by Zane, Bianchi and Wagstaff, respectively on public and private levels, the post-AIDS journal produced by Winn in his *Band-AIDS series*, and in his collaboration with British photographer and performer, Sawdon-Smith. Using photography, as a tool of immediate visualisation, the chapter aims to draw attention to the effects of the autobiographical tale in the social understanding of the disease, and to a more conscious evaluation of the role assumed by an extended medical gaze in the construction of the re-codified body of the epidemic.

From an art that fixates time on paper, to an art that elevates the ephemerality of the moment, in the third chapter, I approach the surface of the Mirror, getting ready to cross it. Here I analyze the work of choreographers Neil Greenberg and Bill T. Jones. Mastering an artistic practice that requires bodies to move and enter in contact with other physicalities, Greenberg and Jones define a new way to talk about the ill bodies of the epidemic through the apparently healthy bodies of their dancers. Movements are presented along with words, images, and videos, establishing what I call a *performtext*.³⁵ Performances in texts, and texts in

³⁴ With the term "changing body" I intend a physicality that has changed due to a disease/illness. On the differences between a disease and an illness, see: Ch.1 "Deathly Beautiful," Subsection 1.1 "AIDS and Beauty: An Improbable Coexistence," 54; Havi Carel, *Phenomenology of Illness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 17.

³⁵ The term *performtext* is inspired by Bill T. Jones' introduction to the book *Last Night on Earth*. In the text, Jones refers to his book as a "performance in text" as the work does not follow a traditional narrative form. See: Bill T. Jones and Peggy Gillespie, *Last Night on Earth* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), ix. More on the concept of *performtext* in: Ch.3 "Untitled (Dancing your Absence),"

performances, the works of these two choreographers reverse biographical private experiences into the stories of their dancers and/or of strangers.

Using texts as soundtracks for movements that cannot quite speak, the choreographers mourn their loved ones placing the viewers in an unconventional position: as they look at Greenberg's *Not-About-AIDS-Dance* and Jones' *Untitled* they are enabled to assist at some of the most dramatic moments in the choreographers' lives. Once again, the spectators are asked to reconsider their privileged position, the effects of an intrusive and cold medical gaze, and the practical consequences of the social codes used to describe diseases and illnesses. Exploring the possibilities, and controversies beyond these moving narratives, the chapter questions the understanding of ill and healthy bodies as they translate into a staged, three-dimensional, and therefore more tangible, representation.

The fourth chapter takes the themes discussed previously and inscribes them in some of the installations realized by Gonzalez-Torres. The work of the American artist, often presented as one of the most effective examples of artistic production of the AIDS epidemic, is explored under a Lacanian lens new to the scholarship on his work. The chapter re-frames prior readings of Gonzalez-Torres' candy, light-bulbs, and mirrors pieces within Lacan's real, symbolic and imaginary bodies in the attempt to crack the code at the base of all the works considered in this project. The chapter includes original material from the Carl George collection to underline the importance of keeping a biographical record within the openness of Gonzalez-Torres' art. Begun as a project that wanted to re-discover a presence in absence dialectic, the thesis has soon developed into a work at the crossroads of the biographical, the private, the public, the physical, and the temporal. The text explores a variety of visual codes ultimately acknowledging the necessity to go back to the body.

Subsection 3.1 "When words are not enough and movements cannot quite speak: a comparative study of Neil Greenberg's *Not About AIDS Dance* and Bill T. Jones' *Still/Here*," 170.

In the thesis I reflect on four art forms, four time-constructions, and four purposes. In the first three chapters, I let my reader settle in a comfortably passive role: he/she is simply a spectator to the project. The graphic design of the AIDS poster belongs to a time specifically framed and respond to a specific educational purpose: directed to the audience of the 1980s and 1990s, the posters cannot speak to him/her directly. The photographic tales of the second chapter challenge the perception of AIDS within a time eternally fixed; once again the reader is observing from the distance, a spectator of a visual afterlife. The third chapter celebrates the passive position till now adopted by presenting dance performances; time becomes as ephemeral as the movement it hosts, getting lost in the irreproducibility of the work. My position in approaching the pieces, and by extension that of the reader following my thoughts, change dramatically in the fourth and final chapter. The artworks of Gonzalez-Torres live in the action of its public, defining a time anachronistically repeated.

Showing the process of re-codification the body underwent during the crisis in the four art-time realms just described I propose a new perspective to read the epidemic in the hope that, acting like a chewing gum on the academic sidewalk, it will spread and be used by others to offer the newer generation a way to approach the stories of the epidemic, and people suffering from any medical condition a tool to understand their changing bodies, and find their place in the social context.

ACT I
OR WHEN I FIND THE MIRROR.

1. DEATHLY BEAUTIFUL

Why Beauty?

*“When we hear the denigration of beauty, we hear the voice of a wounded person whose vision has been corrupted from seeing the power of beauty to create change”.*³⁶

Spring 2014, Venice. I am reading bell hooks’ essay “Subversive Beauty: New Modes of Contestation” when I encounter, for the first time, the work of Felix Gonzalez Torres.³⁷ hooks captures my attention talking about the uncatchable quality of his beautiful creations: the example she chooses is “*Untitled*,” 1991 [Fig.2-3].³⁸ A black and white photograph of an empty bed occupies a billboard in the middle of Manhattan. The sheets are unmade: someone has recently been there. Pillows and a mattress record the imprints of two bodies, the signatures of a living past. It is but a second, a moment in the middle of two lives.

My heart skips a beat.

And I think: “This is so beautiful”. At this point, I do not need to know what that unmade bed stands for: the work is for me universal. Like a mirror, it reflects a shared human experience, the unfolding of a multiplicity of stories without characters.

It is everyone’s bed and no one’s bed.

January 24th, 1991. Ross Laycock, Gonzalez-Torres’ partner of 8 years, dies of AIDS at the age of 32 years old.³⁹ “*Untitled*,” 1991 commemorates Laycock’s death, freezing in time the love story between him and Gonzalez-Torres.⁴⁰ The image records the last time the two of them shared a bed, but for me, it will forever mark the beginning of my journey beyond the body of the AIDS crisis.⁴¹

³⁶ Tom Bianchi, *In Defense of Beauty* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995), 51.

³⁷ bell hooks, “Subversive Beauty: New Modes of Contestation,” in *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995), 49-53.

³⁸ hooks, “Subversive Beauty,” 50-51.

³⁹ Joe Clark, “Ross Laycock Obituary,” *Outweek*, March 27, 1991, accessed July 2, 2018, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/joeclark/10627657255>.

⁴⁰ Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2007), 25.

⁴¹ See: Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 25-27. On the idea of going ‘beyond the body of the epidemic’ see also: Ch.2, “Autobiography of the Flesh,” Subsection “Beyond the Border of Your Body,” 106.

“Who were we, where were we, how did we experience these events?”⁴²

Autumn 2016, York. I am teaching a first-year undergraduate module. The students are relatively new to the subject and I decide to enhance the discussion by showing them a picture of *“Untitled,”* 1991. I do not provide any information; the work had a pivotal role in my academic career, and I am curious to see their responses. The reactions I obtain are almost identical to my own: the work is “poetic,” “nostalgic,” and more in general “about love”. As I listen to their more or less convincing interpretation I wonder: *Is it correct to think about this work in these terms? Are my students, and was I before them, wrong?* Not at all: the work is poetic, nostalgic, about love, beautiful. The discussion changes as soon as I share the story behind the piece. I tell my students about the artist and his lover, inscribing the work in a specific time. The image is still “poetic, nostalgic,” and more in general “about love,” but this time it is also Laycock’s gravestone. The atmosphere shifts from a buzzing discussion to an awkward, embarrassed silence. *Why is this happening? Is it inappropriate to see beauty in a work that, from a biographical point of view, represents a death?* The answer, I believe, resides in the level of engagement the work asks its viewers, and in the generational proximity/distance to the events described. My question changes: *What do you read if you want to learn more about the 1980s and 1990s AIDS crisis and you do not belong to the generation that experienced the events in the first place?*

October 2015, York. I begin my PhD, looking for a text that would help me find an answer. So far this is my first research question. I scan the library website. The majority of books available have been published during the crisis. The authors, often directly affected by HIV/AIDS, write in a vortex of measured terms and yelled words, performing rehearsed narratives, promoting codified interpretations, and ultimately establishing a series of do’s and don’ts for future writers. An archaeologist (by accident) of the postmodern, I am presented

⁴² hooks, “Subversive Beauty,” 50.

with texts that serve a history yet to be structured, and a future yet to be written.⁴³ Lost in a maze of repetition, affirmation and negation, I turn to Fredric Jameson's guide to postmodernity.⁴⁴ Jameson describes postmodernity as "an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place".⁴⁵ I begin to understand. Scholars working during the crisis have managed to fix their words in a time-frame so specifically codified that when it is approached it imposes a multiplicity of limitations. They thought the present historically, substituting (maybe unconsciously) the possibility of a future historicization with the tangibility of an after history.⁴⁶ In other words, they have skipped a step: they have recorded an era that is equally in and out of history, presenting it as a fragmented succession of stories made of bodies.

The time framing the AIDS epidemic is a time hardly definable. It is a time following the progression of a disease, and its visible impact on society. It is a time following the progression of an illness and its invisible impact on the individual. It is a time re-living in a body of works made by and of lost bodies. It is a time no longer reachable, and yet still tangible. It is a time repeated. It is a time suspended. The time framing the AIDS epidemic is a time defined within an idea of beauty that either belongs to a non-absent past, or to a comparative discourse reinforcing the misleading opposition of healthy and ill bodies.

In a temporally uncatchable era, beauty exits the historical discourse to be fragmented, fought over, re-invented. The books of and on the crisis evoke it as a meaningless trace in a complex and tragic story, almost managing to convince me that it is indeed wrong to look at

⁴³ The term 'Archaeologist of the postmodern' is inspired by the title of the book *Archaeologies of Presence: Art, Performance, and the Persistence of Being*, ed. Gabriella Giannachi, Nick Kaye and Michael Shanks (London; New York: Routledge, 2012).

⁴⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London; New York: Verso, 1991).

⁴⁵ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, ix.

⁴⁶ See: Elizabeth Lebovici, "Avant-propos," in *Ce Que le Sida M'a Fait: Art et Activism à la Fin du XX^e Siècle* (Zurich: JRP| Ringier, 2017), 9-19; Avram Finkelstein, *After Silence: A History of AIDS through its Images* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018).

Gonzalez-Torres' "*Untitled*," 1991 and think: "this is so beautiful". And yet, the more I look at AIDS educational materials, artworks and choreographies produced in that very tragic and complex period, the more I witness the persistent presence of beauty. *Why is beauty so little considered in the scholarship on works produced during the epidemic? Can I talk about beauty when I talk about AIDS? Does the beautiful change my understanding of the ill body? And if so, how?*

Present and absent, beauty crosses the AIDS discourse in many different ways. It is a distant past and an unsettled present. The taboo no one wants to talk about, and the political slogan resonating in the streets. It is a sexualized instrument of advertising and a public space of confrontation. *In Defence of Beauty* Tom Bianchi, an HIV+ photographer from New York, defends his desire to capture beautiful subjects during the epidemic, stating:

What my photographs do not reveal on their surface is that a large number of these perfect men in my pictures are HIV positive or have AIDS. I am myself a member of this group. [...] We had no idea how near we danced to the precipice. And yes, I have purposefully not included a KS lesion on occasion, not because I saw it as a fault, but because I believe in the possibility of its cure. And the pictures each of us carry mentally of this disease threaten to obliterate the fragile image of our hope.⁴⁷

Synonymous with hope, beauty has an undisclosed power. Writing a couple of years later, Arthur Danto and Suzanne Perling Hudson read beauty as a necessary moment of grieving.⁴⁸ *But what happens when that moment of mourning becomes political? What, when it causes a visual act of resistance?*

Responding to Danto's "Beauty and Morality," Kathleen Marie Higgins lists five reasons why beauty is essentially a form of political activism. Beauty, Higgins argues, reminds the individual of his/her moral principles; it forces political commitments to confront the truth; it prepares the individual to face the "uncomfortable"; it reveals all the nuances that permeate

⁴⁷ Bianchi, *In Defense of Beauty*, 51.

⁴⁸ Arthur C. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Chicago; La Salle, IL: Open Court, 2003), 111; Suzanne Perling Hudson, "Beauty and the Status of Contemporary Criticism," *October*, no.104 (Spring 2003): 115-130.

reality, and above all, it enables the subject to believe in the possibility of improvement.⁴⁹ She writes:

Beauty encourages a perspective from which our ordinary priorities are up for grabs. True, our political commitments are among these priorities. But the condition of contemplating beauty is essential to the total economy of political ‘engagement’.⁵⁰

A cultural mediator of the aesthetic/political fractures that shapes its activist role, beauty is rediscovered in the 1980s and the 1990s as a necessary status of the body fighting AIDS.

To clarify the role of beauty in the AIDS discourse I turn my attention to the male bodies of desire, and I consider the countless representations of People with AIDS (PWA) standing in front of a mirror.⁵¹

hooks' essay comes back to me.

“Subversive Beauty” reveals the untold threshold of Lacan’s Mirror, establishing the beautiful as a key part of a conscious discourse on the time of AIDS. In the Mirror, the individual gives a face to the social concepts of health and illness; he/she explores the association and opposition of his/her real, imaginary and symbolic bodies. In hooks’ article, I read:

The art object is merely a mirror, giving a glimpse that is also a shadow of what was once real, present, concrete.⁵²

Representations of male bodies realized before, during, and after the crisis, are reflected in the scholarship as shadows of a non-present and a non-absent past, of a before and an after AIDS.

⁴⁹ Kathleen Marie Higgins, “Whatever Happened to Beauty? A Response to Danto,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54, no.3 (Summer 1996): 283.

⁵⁰ Higgins, “Whatever Happened to Beauty? A Response to Danto,” 283.

⁵¹ Consider Nicholas Nixon’s *People with AIDS* project (1987-1988); Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ “Untitled” (*Orpheus, Twice*), 1991; and *Blood Mirror* realized by Jordan Eagles in 2015 as a form of protest towards the FDA’s blood donation ban to gay, bisexual and transgender men. See: Visual AIDS, “Blood Mirror by Jordan Eagles. Birmingham Civil Rights Institute,” Visual AIDS, December 21, 2018, accessed May 14, 2018, <https://www.visualaids.org/events/detail/blood-mirror-by-jordan-eagles>; Blood Equality, “Blood Mirror,” 2017, accessed May 14, 2018, <https://www.blood-equality.com/blood-mirror/>; Jordan Eagles, “Blood Mirror,” *Blood Mirror*, accessed May 14, 2018, <http://jordaneagles.com/blood-mirror/#blood-mirror-top>. On the use of mirrors see also: Ch.4 “A Piece of Candy, a Dancing Platform, and a Mirror: Going Back to the Body,” Subsection 4.3 “I Meet You Beyond the Mirror’s Surface: Gonzalez-Torres Present in Absence Bodies,” 247.

⁵² hooks, “Subversive Beauty,” 49.

From the bodies of the American physique culture of the early 1950s to the advertising strategies solidified in the 1980s and re-invented in the AIDS educational materials, the bodies of the epidemic question the social perspective of healthy and ill physicalities re-codifying past body prototypes in political and medical terms.

Looking at physical beauty in the attempt to understand an illness, I can live the non-present and non-absent pasts of the epidemic.

I can see the *imagos* of the crisis. The “veiled faces” whose “specular image seems to be the threshold of the visible world;” the mental pictures of socially shaped ideas of health and illness, the *imagos* merge with my reflection, inviting me to establish a relationship with them.⁵³

I step up and take my space in front of the Mirror.

1.1. AIDS and Beauty: An Improbable Coexistence

1987. Nicholas Nixon begins the *People with AIDS* project. The work fixes uncomfortable and dehumanizing depictions of people affected by AIDS turning the disease into the real subject of the photographs. It is 1987: the AIDS crisis is reaching its peak. It is 1987 and Calvin Klein is working to define another kind of bodily mythology. The famous fashion brand opts to strengthen its empire with the campaign: *Obsession: For Men for the Body* [Fig.4]. Using photographs by Bruce Weber, Klein celebrates sexy, beautiful, healthy versions of male bodies otherwise lost in the media. Side by side in a dysfunctional, and to a certain extent disturbing succession of stories, the images of Nixon and Weber interrogate me. *What does the male body of 1987 look like? Does it find its ultimate expression in the sexy models of Calvin Klein, or in the emaciated bodies of Nixon's photographs?* The answer is neither one nor the other. The

⁵³ Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, translated by Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg, (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2006), 77. On the definition of *imago* see: Donald Venes ed., *Taber's Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary* (Philadelphia, PA: F.A Davis Company, 2013), “Image,” 1200.

man of 1987 is the product of the tensions that lay in between Nixon's and Klein's vocabularies. What ill and healthy bodies look like is normalized in a limited selection of *imagos*. *How can this coexistence become not only possible but also socially acceptable?*

A knowledge of the AIDS epidemic limited to accounts written during the crisis can lead to an equally limited understanding of the disease. In key texts, such as Douglas Crimp's *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, and James Miller's *Fluid Exchanges*, I learn that the disease was initially called GRID (Gay Related Immunodeficiency).⁵⁴ The texts continue by explaining a crisis that was not just medical, inviting me, an art historian, to reflect on the existence of an imagery, now unimaginable. Jan Zita Grover's observations on past depictions of PWA have a shocking effect on me:

Broadcast television has developed conventions for depicting persons whose identity needs to be guarded – heavy backlighting, isolation of the subject in deep shadow. These have most commonly been used with felons or potential felons – such as rapists, child abusers, and drug abusers. These same conventions were often used to protect PWAs against backlash, with unintended secondary consequences: they made PWAs look as if they had something to hide as if they were criminals.⁵⁵

Weight loss, Kaposi sarcoma, and portraits in the dark become *imagos* for an immediate visual vocabulary: the media's signatures of a social, and medical stigmatization affecting directly its "victims".⁵⁶ *Is this AIDS?*

December 24th, 1981. *The Sentinel* publishes Bobby Campbell's article "WHAT IS 'GAY CANCER'?" [Fig.5].⁵⁷ Eloquently written, the piece introduces the reader, and therefore

⁵⁴ Douglas Crimp ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism* (Cambridge, MA; London: The MIT Press, 1989); James Miller ed., *Fluid Exchanges: Artists and Critics in the AIDS Crisis* (Toronto; Buffalo, NY; London: University of Toronto Press, 1992). Jan Zita Grover, "AIDS: Keywords," in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp, (Cambridge, MA; London: The MIT Press, 1989), 18.

⁵⁵ Jan Zita Grover, "Visible Lesions: Images of the PWA in America," in *Fluid Exchanges: Artists and Critics in the AIDS Crisis*, ed. James Miller, (Toronto; Buffalo, NY; London: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 32.

⁵⁶ On the use of the word "victim" during the epidemic, see: Grover, "AIDS: Keywords," 28-29.

⁵⁷ Bobby Campbell, "What is 'Gay Cancer'?": Nurse's First Person Story Continues," *The Sentinel*, December 24, 1981, coll2007-015, Box 94, Folder 1, AIDS History Project Collection, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, California.

myself, to what, a couple of years later, would be called AIDS. Campbell, a student in nursing at UCLA, has contracted the disease and is now writing about it. The article focuses on a new cancerous form manifested in skin lesions: Kaposi Sarcoma [Fig.6]. “Don’t panic!” he says, “It’s still a rare disease, though when it happened to me it wasn’t rare enough, *it is treatable*”.⁵⁸ Campbell reassures his readers, and yet, the title in bold letters is still screaming at me.

“Who were we, where were we, how did we experience these events?”⁵⁹

Thirty-six years later, I am reading Bobby’s words at the ONE Archives wondering what has happened. The naïve hope of the nursing student resonates along the lines. I find my answer couple of minutes later, in the second folder. The article, dated September 1984, titles: “Remembering Bobby Campbell” [Fig.7].⁶⁰ It is an obituary. The author, Patrick Haggerty speaks about a Bobby before and after the epidemic, using now explicitly the word AIDS. As I read the text, looking at the smiling photograph of Campbell, unwanted visual associations develop in my mind. Even if Haggerty does not talk about “gay cancer,” the visual vocabulary linked to that aged terminology subtly emerges. I find myself scanning the photograph for KS lesions.⁶¹ *Why am I doing so? Does this have anything to do with the imagos marking the art historical and social world in 1987?*

Intrigued by the subconscious associations my mind is making, I turn to other written testimonies of the epidemic, finding one of my interest in Indiana, at the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction. My new source is titled “AIDS: A Diary of the Plague in America”.⁶² Built on a daily-hours schedule, Jack Friedman’s “diary”, follows AIDS

⁵⁸ Campbell, “What is ‘Gay Cancer’?”.

⁵⁹ bell hooks, “Subversive Beauty: New Modes of Contestation,” in *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995), 50.

⁶⁰ Patrick Haggerty, “Remembering Bobby Campbell,” September 1984, coll2007-015, Box 94, Folder 2, AIDS History Project Collection, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, California.

⁶¹ Haggerty, “Remembering Bobby Campbell”.

⁶² Jack Friedman, “AIDS: A Diary of the Plague in America,” *People* 28, no.5, August 3, 1987, Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

patients in various cities of North America. The narration respects religiously the media imagery of the epidemic: there is a hospital, a man making his own drugs, and, of course, an emaciated PWA captured in the shadow. Accordingly, the writing is tinted with dramatic notes.

Take the story of PWA David Chickadal:

Then it's 4:20, time for another trip to another doctor. A pathologist, this time. David has found a spot on his wrist, and is terrified it might be Kaposi's sarcoma, a concern which has stricken 40 percent of all PWAs. [...]. At the pathologist's, David's jaw is clenched with dread, but the spot on his wrist turns out to be nothing more serious than a mole he'd never notice before.⁶³

A spot on the wrist that later turns out to be nothing more than a mole, is the clue used to enhance the dramatic narrative. An aesthetic of AIDS starts to develop in my head. The idea is inevitably followed by a question: *Can I actually talk about the aesthetic when I talk about illness?*

The term "aesthetic of illness" is not new to the academic context. Among others, Alan Radley attempted to define it in 1991.⁶⁴ A professor of Social Psychology, Radley acknowledged the limits of the definition by avoiding any sort of visual development. I understand his decision: the perspective of going visual is frightening to me. The words 'aesthetic' and 'illness' are *per se* opposite. While the term aesthetic is more likely to be associated with art, perfection, and beauty, the word illness conveys ideas of pain, weakness, and to a certain extent, ugliness. Before Radley, the word 'aesthetic' has been associated to the word 'illness' by Susan Sontag. In the well-known text *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Sontag writes:

Underlying some of the moral judgments attached to the disease are aesthetic judgments about the beautiful and the ugly, the clean and the unclean, the familiar and the alien or uncanny.⁶⁵

⁶³ Friedman, "AIDS: A Diary of the Plague in America," 75.

⁶⁴ Alan Radley, "The Aesthetic of Illness: Narrative, Horror, and the Sublime," *Sociology of Health & Illness* 21, no.6 (November 1991): 778-796.

⁶⁵ Susan Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 41.

Working under a Kantian light, Sontag brings up a truth: our perception of a disease is generally built around a visual code of judgment. Aestheticizing an illness, however, goes far beyond a Kantian reading. *What is an 'Aesthetic of Illness' then?*

I observe that the concept has been discussed exclusively in sociological contexts. Given the complexity of the theme, I first attempt to establish what an aesthetic of illness is not. For sure, it is not an “anti-aesthetic” in the way Hal Foster defines it:

The idea that aesthetic experience exists apart, without “purpose”, all but beyond history, or that art can now effect a world once (inter)subjective, concrete and universal – a symbolic totality.⁶⁶

The diminishment of the aesthetic of illness to an antithetic version of a positive idea of art does not allow us to reflect on the action of the disease on the body, as well as to consider the role of the observer’s gaze on the ill body. As a philosophy of the aesthetic is nothing more than a tool to discover new “ways of seeing nature and human activity, apart from the instrumental views offered by sciences and commerce,” so the aesthetic process, in the context of illness, provides us with another way of seeing, another way of visualizing disease, another way of understanding a body changed by illness.⁶⁷

To aestheticize an illness means to establish a dichotomy within the socially accepted idea of health.⁶⁸ The opposition is rooted in the human necessity to symbolize and romanticize what is not rationally explicable. “Sickness,” Deborah Lupton explains, “is a threat to rationality, for it threatens social life and erodes self-control”.⁶⁹ Criticizing Michel Maffesoli’s *The Time of the Tribes*, Thomas Osborne points out that the aesthetic analysis of an object is essentially a way of problematizing a reality.⁷⁰ Osborne writes:

⁶⁶ Hal Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1983), xv.

⁶⁷ Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), 4.

⁶⁸ See Radley, “The Aesthetic of Illness,” 781.

⁶⁹ Deborah Lupton, *Medicine as Culture: Illness, Disease and the Body* (Los Angeles, CA; London; New Delhi; Singapore; Washington DC: Sage, 2012), 24.

⁷⁰ Thomas Osborne, “The Aesthetic Problematic, Review Article,” *Economy and Society* 26, no.1 (February 1997): 133.

The art work involves a sort of manufacturing of time outside of the normal processes of isochronal time on the basis of which the artist inserts a new time and a new environment into his age.⁷¹

Thanks to the aesthetic process, I am now able to extend the limits imposed by the scholars of the epidemic.⁷² Establishing a new time for me to write and research, the concept of aesthetic of illness suspends the ill body in an abstracted space materially present, using the beautiful and the ugly as opposing forces.

From a historical point of view, the healthy, beautiful body has often been associated with a good imagery, while the sick, ugly body with an evil imagery. Mikhaël Elbaz and Ruth Murbach reflect on this idea in the essay “Fear of the Other, Condemned and Damned: AIDS, Epidemics and Exclusions”. Having established a brief summary of the social reaction to various epidemics since the advent of leprosy in the 14th century, they write:

AIDS has catalysed our memory of all past epidemics by condensing both the representations of the evil and its inscription in the body and the social reactions to them.⁷³

With AIDS, illness re-codifies the notion of the aesthetic body and its meaning. *But how can I inscribe this definition in a more complex, variegated narrative?* To answer the question, I need to go back to my first interrogative: *What is an Aesthetic of Illness?*

Radley defines the “aesthetic of illness” as a form of “social power” crystallized in the necessity to see an illness per se.⁷⁴ I prefer to think of it as a counter-narrative constructing and deconstructing the term “aesthetic” in multiple visual expressions. In other, more specific words, I describe the aesthetic of AIDS as a social power visually dictated by or opposing what

⁷¹ Osborne, “The Aesthetic Problematic,” 137.

⁷² Osborne, “The Aesthetic Problematic,” 139.

⁷³ Mikhaël Elbaz and Ruth Murbach, “Fear of the Other, Condemned and Damned: AIDS, Epidemics and Exclusions,” in *A Leap in the Dark: AIDS, Art & Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Allan Klusaček and Ken Morrison, (Montreal: Véhicule Press, Artextes Edition, 1993), 1.

⁷⁴ Radley, “The Aesthetic of Illness,” 793.

Crimp defines as the “cultural conventions” of the epidemic.⁷⁵ Adopting Crimp’s “cultural conventions” I am able to restrict the definition of an aesthetic of AIDS to two different aesthetics moving from what essentially is a forgotten medical distinction: that separating an illness from a disease. While an illness defines the physical and emotional experience of the patient, a disease is determined by the symptoms he/she presents.⁷⁶ Keeping this consideration in mind while I approach a social and activist understanding of AIDS, I argue the existence of an aesthetic of illness dictated by fear, and one dictated by activism.

In the fear realm, the “AIDS patient” is a skeletal being abandoned to his own fate. I call this aesthetic of illness a *diseasephobic aesthetic*. A *diseasephobic aesthetic of illness* visualizes a phobic, and in most cases homophobic, desire of healthy people to distance themselves from the experience of the sick body and create an exclusively virtual realm of the disease. The *diseasephobic aesthetic* of AIDS is an active participant of that virtual reality celebrated throughout Reagan’s presidency, and later theorized by Foster as an expression of the “techno-sublime”.⁷⁷ While watching the Gulf War on CNN, Foster writes:

A thrill of techno-mastery (my mere human perception become a super machine vision, able to see what it destroys and to destroy what it sees), but also a thrill of an imaginary dispersal of my own body, of my own subjecthood. Of course, when the screens of the smart bombs went dark, *my* body did not explode. On the contrary, it was bolstered: in a classic fascistic trope, my body, my subjecthood, was affirmed in the destruction of other bodies.⁷⁸

Foster’s experience is a product of a postmodern, fragmented reality that understands the body as an opposition of the self and the other.⁷⁹ The techno-sublime that let him experience a self-

⁷⁵ Douglas Crimp uses the term cultural convention in reference to Radly Shilts’s book *And the Band Played On*. See: Douglas Crimp, “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic,” *October* 43, (Winter 1987): 245.

⁷⁶ Havi Carel, *Phenomenology of Illness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 17.

⁷⁷ Howard Singerman, “Pictures and Positions in the 1980s,” in *Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell Pub, 2006), 83; Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA; London: The MIT Press, 1996), 222.

⁷⁸ Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 222.

⁷⁹ Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 210.

corporeal affirmation in the images of the Gulf War is the same techno-sublime that during the AIDS crisis enables the media to affirm socially approved bodies and neglected bodies, and myself to reflect my own physicality in the represented bodies of the epidemic.

The media techno-sublime adoption of a *diseasephobic aesthetic* transforms virtual absences into visual presences. A rough definition of this aesthetic of illness can be found in the words used by Nixon to describe his *People with AIDS* project:

Though I am dearly fond of most of the people in my project and, I think, deeply sympathetic, on some basic, primitive level, they are sick and I'm not and so they are victims.⁸⁰

Nixon's straightforward statement results in an equally straightforward work. I look in the Mirror and begin to see reflected the pictures of Donald and Nathaniel Perham [Fig.8]. The light and the subject's pose change to narrate the sickness, the dying, and eventually the death – these the three words used by Bebe Nixon in the introduction to the project - of Donald Perham, a haemophiliac man who contracted AIDS via a blood transfusion.⁸¹ In the *People with AIDS* project, the Nixons put the symptoms before their subject's experience of the disease further confusing the social and artistic function of the pictures. The *imagos* Nixon makes visible are the virtual projection of a socially confused world, that same world that brought me to look for traces of Kaposi Sarcoma in Bobby Campbell's obituary.

The fifth photograph of the "Donald and Nathaniel Perham" series stands side by side with two skeletal images of Donald's disappearing body. The subject is shown outside his own house [Fig.9]. Looking straight into the camera, Donald questions the viewer's, and, maybe, for the first and last time, the photographer's gaze, letting anger emerge. The hair is messy, the face is skeletal and quite blurry, the chest is bare to emphasize the loss of weight. Every element

⁸⁰ Nicholas Nixon and Christopher Lyon, "The AIDS Project: An Interview with Nicholas Nixon," *MoMA*, no.49 (Autumn 1988): 4.

⁸¹ Nicholas Nixon, and Bebe Nixon, *People with AIDS* (Boston, MA: David R. Godine Publisher INC, 1991), vii.

in the photograph is carefully constructed. The robe is open on the shoulder to reveal the skeletal features of Donald's upper body. It is not clear what Nixon wants me to see in this portrait. I am looking for a man who is presented as an alien. No longer part of the living, not yet part of the dead. Donald is suspended, along with his body, in a present in absence dialectic mediated by a present in absence temporality. Ultimately, I argue, the photograph stands as a fetishization of a dying body, prematurely turned by the camera into a breathing corpse. The body, to borrow a concept developed by Elbaz and Murbach forcefully "signed" by the disease, is defined in terms of: "disfiguration; decomposition; consumption;" and "fast or slow death".⁸² Assisting to, and visually enhancing the disappearance of the patient's corporeal identity, the bodily signature of AIDS increases the fear of the other sublimating its experience. Disfigured, decomposed, the imagery of a *diseasephobic aesthetic* is eventually codified in the translation of a corpse into a medical spectacle.

In the activist world, the person with AIDS, along with the person who fights to end AIDS, participates in a very different aesthetic. Hardly definable in one single word, this aesthetic incorporates the overdeveloped physicality, used in the Reaganite era to shape a new American identity, turning it into a political statement.⁸³ The argument, in its apparent inconsistency, is founded on Susan Jefford's identification of Reagan's presidency with the "era of bodies".⁸⁴ She writes:

From the anxieties about Reagan's age and the appearance of cancerous spots on his nose; to the profitable craze in aerobics and exercise; to the molding of a former Mr. Universe into the biggest box-office draw of the decade; [...] to the thematized aggression against persons with AIDS – these articulations of bodies constituted the imaginary of the Reagan agenda and the site of its materialization.⁸⁵

⁸² Elbaz and Murbach, "Fear of the Other," 8.

⁸³ Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 46.

⁸⁴ Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, 24.

⁸⁵ Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, 24.

In a country that identifies his national hero in Sylvester Stallone's *Rambo*, the aesthetic of illness chosen by artists (at least the majority) and activists, shifts the qualities attributed to that Rambodian body into the icon of a post-modernist fragmented era politically charged [Fig.10].⁸⁶ The activist version of the Post-Vietnam American National Hero is born.

Jefford's analysis of the Reaganian hard bodies puts AIDS aside. The disease is mentioned at the very beginning of the book, and in the passage cited above. In the social imagery mediated by a *diseasephobic aesthetic of illness*, Jeffords appears to subtly argue that the AIDS body stands outside the 'Hard Body' category. The educational materials activists produced during the epidemic reveal, however, a persistent presence of Reaganian bodies. The beautiful bodies of the gym culture are taken and reconfigured in educational figures politically charged. Beauty becomes a way to escape a socially mediated phobic anonymity. Christelle Klein-Scholz argues:

While the issue of the look was central to the construction of the gay identity, with AIDS, it is linked with the preservation of one's identity, since in the case of such epidemic there is a great risk to fall into anonymity.⁸⁷

The anonymity, proposed by Klein-Scholz, aims to justify the long-standing parallel between the AIDS epidemic and the Holocaust.⁸⁸ In the crisis, the possible loss of one's own identity translates in the opposition of the two aesthetics of illness here theorized. While the media opt for a *diseasephobic aesthetic* that fixates the social image of the PWA into that of a breathing corpse, artists and activists decide to confront the anonymization of death in the reproduction of beautiful bodies, overly muscular, strong and attractive.

If beauty were to be used just as an element of distinction such aesthetic would have fallen in the anonymity of the fashion industry failing its purpose. The overdeveloped body

⁸⁶ On Rambo as a national identity reference, see: Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, 46.

⁸⁷ Christelle Klein-Scholz, "From the Homosexual Clone to the "AIDS clone": The Impact of the AIDS on the Male Body of the Gay Male," *E-rea: Revue d'Etudes Anglophones* 12, no.1 (2014), 26-paragraphs.

⁸⁸ On the parallel AIDS-Holocaust, consider: Larry Kramer, *Reports from the Holocaust: The Story of an AIDS Activist* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1994).

presented in the activist's world, however, reflects in the M/mirror the "missing" corporeality of a non-present past.⁸⁹ In the book *Missing Bodies*, Monica J. Casper and Lisa Jean Moore introduce the reader to the problem of HIV/AIDS in Africa comparing it to the reactions generated by AIDS when it first entered the North American scene:

Whereas suffering and infected bodies were visible in the public health era, in the post 9/11 security era bodies are increasingly invisible to us. In the developed world, people with AIDS are concealed by pharmaceuticals which render infection undetectable, and in the developing world they are dehumanized and framed routinely as stealth weapons of mass destruction.⁹⁰

The "suffering and infected bodies" the authors are referring to are the bodies of people with AIDS as they appear on magazines, TV shows, and in some artistic productions. Those bodies are more than visible; they are so visible that they almost manage to wash away the memory of a beauty myth codified over a long period of time. What is missing in the AIDS epidemic, what is rendered invisible, is the body beautiful, erotically charged outside a military context. It is the body of Bob Mizer's *Physique Pictorial* and Bruce of Los Angeles' *The Male Figure* [Fig.11-12]. It is the body recurrent in the early drawings of Tom of Finland, and in the sculpted nudes photographed by Robert Mapplethorpe and Arthur Tress. It is the hard body of a veteran hero fighting in a much more recent war: AIDS.

Visible and invisible at the same time, this body translates the contradictions of an era into an imaginary realm. Before going any further, I distinguish between two recurrent dichotomies in the project: "visible/invisible" and "presence/absence". Even if sharing some similarities, the dialectics stand on different theoretical grounds: while the visible and the invisible revolve around seeing, presence and absence rely on being. The invisible is not

⁸⁹ In making this statement I am aware of Benetton's advertising campaigns portraying activist David Kirby in his deathbed, surrounded by family while dying of AIDS. Benetton constitutes an exception in the visual standard of fashion brands, and its presence stays at the boundaries of a *diseasephobic aesthetic* and a more activist/bodily beautiful oriented aesthetic. The image will be considered later in the chapter.

⁹⁰ Monica Casper and Lisa Jean Moore, *Missing Bodies: The Politics of Visibility* (New York: New York University, 2009), 88.

necessarily absent, but the absent is surely visible. Depending on a phenomenological gap, absence and presence stand out from the visible and the invisible as a lack or an occupation of being. In other words, while the visible/invisible dialectic is 2-dimensional (it depends on the visual engagement of the subject with the object of interest), the presence/absence dialectic is 4-dimensional: it occupies time and space, acting also on a sensorial level.

Space of contradiction, the body of what could be defined as an overly-physical aesthetic of illness shifts in between these two dichotomies, finding its definition in the adoption of a Lacanian terminology. Lacan argues that a body aware of its physical realm is essentially “the surface upon which the other writes”: it is the body visibly present.⁹¹ Beyond such definition, the body exists within a tripartite system - real, imaginary, and symbolic - later explained in the thesis. Leaving aside the real body for a moment, I briefly define the symbolic and imaginary body in the medical reading Hub Zwart offers in the article “Medicine, Symbolization and the Real”.⁹² The “symbolic body” becomes in Zwart’s translation, the body visually deconstructed by science, analyzed in parts, and translated into number: “a machine-like entity” whose presence “is explained in quasi-mechanistic terms”.⁹³ The “imaginary” body, visible and present to the individual, but possibly invisible to a larger audience, is, instead, defined as the projection of what the individual wants to perceive of him/herself; this body has a presence in the individual, probably reflecting in some of his/her own behaviour, but it is in fact absent.⁹⁴

Acting as a canvas for opposing forces to manifest their intentions, the official bodies of the Reagan era brings the symbolic and imaginary statuses closer. Fluctuating in between visible and invisible absences and presences, these bodies, the hard bodies, unconsciously

⁹¹ Paul Verhaeghe, “Lacan on the Body,” in *The New Klein-Lacan Dialogues*, ed. Julia Borossa, Catalina Bronstein and Claire Pajaczkowska, (London: Karnac Books, 2015), 120.

⁹² Hub Zwart, “Medicine, Symbolization and the “Real” Body – Lacan’s Understanding of Medical Science,” *Medicine Health Care and Philosophy* 1, no.2 (May 1998): 107

⁹³ Zwart, “Medicine, Symbolization and the “Real” Body,” 107.

⁹⁴ Zwart, “Medicine, Symbolization and the “Real” Body,” 107.

contribute to the definition of a physical act of resistance. The 1980s cinematic fascination with an imaginary overly physical corporeality invites me to blend my own self with an impossible body identity, materializing a present imaginary status, otherwise absent in reality. The statement, utterly Lacanian, is explained by Malcolm Bowie, who referring to the ‘imaginary’ status, writes:

[It] creates a bridge between inner-directed and outer-directed mental acts, and belongs as much to the objects of perception as to those internal objects for which the word is usually reserved in ordinary speech. The term has a strong pejorative force, and suggests that the subject is seeking, in a wilful and blameworthy fashion, to remove himself from the flux of becoming.⁹⁵

It is in these fluctuations of meaningful visible and invisible presences and absences that the hard bodies of Reagan’s government make their way into the body beautiful politically charged used by activists to fight the end of AIDS. Taking bodies used to externalise the contradictions of an era, and affirming them in an imaginary realm outwardly critical, and inwardly affirmative, activists are now able to turn those hard bodies around and substitute their fascistic quality with a socially invested role.

From Rambo to Disney’s Beast, the hard bodies, as Jeffords presents them in the text *Hard Bodies*, appears to be the counter-*imagos* of AIDS. Somehow convincing, the evolution traced by Jeffords of the Reaganian bodies neglects to mention, along with AIDS, the central importance wounds acquired in the construction and celebration of such overly developed physicality. Jeffords introduces the wounded body quite early on in her analysis. In reference to Rambo, she writes: “The wounds indicate that the hard body can be wounded, that it isn’t invulnerable or invincible, that it is not a machine but human flesh”.⁹⁶ She then continues observing how the spectators, after an initial fascination, “would not want a body like this if

⁹⁵ Malcom Bowie, *Lacan* (London: Fontana Press, 1991), 92.

⁹⁶ Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, 50.

having such a body means having to undergo such hardship, pain, and isolation”.⁹⁷ But they will still look at it as a source of protection and inspiration, I would add.

The qualities Jeffords identifies in the 1980s hard body disappears in her analysis of the 1990s body. In this case, Jeffords picks as the main example the Disney’s Beast, failing to recognize in the prince, an anguished character with a wounded body, later turned into a symbol of the counter-*imago* of the hard body itself: the PWA’s body. *What am I looking at?*

April 1st, 2017. Rochester, New York. Looking through the pamphlets preserved at the Atwater AIDS Educational Material Collection, I encounter the Rambo of the AIDS crisis. “Hey You Listen Up!” yells HIV+ Rambo: “If you’re using I.V. drugs like...crank, heroin, and cocaine or drinking alcohol, you’re at risk for getting HIV” [Fig.13].⁹⁸ Speaking through the page is a muscular general, wearing tight pants, a bandana, and sunglasses. The man of the flyer is the Rambo of the fight against AIDS [Fig.14]. The body of fascistic reminiscence, overly muscular and masculine, uses an imposing physicality to convey safe sex messages and criticize the system from within. The anti-AIDS general transforms Reagan’s national hero from a fighter into an activist. The Mirror onto which the subject, even the one who belongs to the *diseasephobic aesthetic* imagery, projects himself, the hard body becomes the space of visualization for the individual surviving in a wounded body.

Ten years into the American fascination with hard bodies, the imaginary prototype of masculine strength acquires a more emotional character. Rambo is substituted by a Disney prince equally muscular and troubled: the Beast. Premiered to the world in 1991, *The Beauty and the Beast* is considered to be a powerful metaphor of the AIDS epidemic.⁹⁹ A couple of

⁹⁷ Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, 50.

⁹⁸ Pamphlet “Hey you, Listen up! If You Are using I.V Drugs Like...Crank, Heroin and Cocaine Or Drinking Alcohol, You’re at Risk for Getting HIV,” (Delaware, DE: Delaware AIDS Program), Series II – Outreach Efforts, Sub-series IV, Pamphlets US (1 of 15), Box 28, Folder 17, Series II – Outreach Efforts, Sub-series IV, Pamphlets US (1 of 15), AIDS Education Collection D.500, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, River Campus Library, University of Rochester, Rochester, New York.

⁹⁹ See: Sean Griffin, *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens: The Walt Disney Company from the Inside Out* (New York; London: New York University Press, 2000); Robert Baker, *The Art of AIDS* (New York:

months before the Disney classic was released, Howard Ashman, executive producer, creator of the lyrics of the songs, and responsible for major changing to the script, died of AIDS.¹⁰⁰ There is no proof of Ashman's desire to establish an AIDS metaphor in *The Beauty and the Beast*, yet the AIDS reading appears to be very popular.¹⁰¹ Ashman's decision to focus on the anger of the Beast, a character who is forced to live in an unknown body raises suspicion.¹⁰² To borrow Dan Rather's words the Beast is just "a guy trying as hard as he can to find a little meaning—a little love, a little beauty—while he's still got a little life left".¹⁰³

Inspired by Jean Cocteau's *La Belle et la Bête* (1946), the Beast of Disney is a tremendously anguished character forced to live in a body that he barely recognizes.¹⁰⁴ The Beast's struggles with his physical body since the very beginning of the movie when the viewer is given the opportunity to see his human form. In the middle of a prologue that provides key information on the Beast's curse, a portrait of a beautiful young man with long blond hair, and blue eyes is revealed. The painting is visible for less than a second; as the narrator's voice proceeds, the music becomes grave, and giant beastly paws appear to lacerate the canvas, dramatically introducing the audience to the Beast [Fig. 15]. "Ashamed of his monstrous form", the Beast tries to hide his face from the extraneous gaze, from the spectator's gaze, from my gaze.¹⁰⁵ It is just a moment. I am soon distracted by the magical rose to which his destiny is

Continuum, 1994); Dan Rather, "The AIDS Metaphor in the 'Beauty and the Beast'," *Los Angeles Times*, March 22, 1992, accessed December 15, 2015, http://articles.latimes.com/1992-03-22/entertainment/ca-7396_1_aids-metaphor; Cynthia Erb, "Another World or the World of an Other? The Space of Romance in Recent Versions of 'Beauty and the Beast'," *Cinema Journal* 34, no.4 (1995): 50-70.

¹⁰⁰ Erb, "Another World or the World of an Other?," 59-60.

¹⁰¹ See: Rather, "The AIDS Metaphor in the 'Beauty and the Beast';" and Erb, "Another World or the World of an Other?"

¹⁰² Baker, *The Art of AIDS*, 32.

¹⁰³ Rather, "The AIDS Metaphor in the 'Beauty and the Beast'".

¹⁰⁴ Erb, "Another World or the World of an Other?," 53; Baker, *The Art of AIDS*, 32.

¹⁰⁵ "Scene 1", *Beauty and the Beast*, directed by Gary Trousdale, and Kirk Wise, (Buena Vista Picture, 1991), DVD.

linked.¹⁰⁶ Shining right next to the Beast, protected in a glass case, the rose is the embodiment of a nostalgic beauty in decay: in it I, as the young spectator to whom this movie is addressed, witness a death in “slow motion” [Fig.16].¹⁰⁷

Wounded body, dying rose, till the last petal fell, beauty keeps having a central role in *The Beauty and The Beast*. Beautiful is the enchantress who cursed the Prince, beautiful is Belle who overcomes the Beast’s monstrous feature, and beautiful is the Beast’s soul. In this celebration of beauty, the Beast is antagonised by Gaston, an “all-muscles- no-brain” individual similar to the heroes of Reagan [Fig.17]. The Disneyfied body-builder Gaston incites the villagers against the Beast in a musical monologue, often read as the centre of the AIDS metaphor.¹⁰⁸ It is time for *The Mob Song*. The bad guy moment plays on the co-existence of opposing and opposite bodies. Gaston uses the monstrous features of the Beast to initiate a sense of fear and suspicion in the Village.¹⁰⁹

It is late at night but everyone in Belle’s little town seems to be awake. Gaston reveals the existence of a Beast in a remote part of the kingdom [Fig.18]. Desolate and hopeless the image of the Beast displayed in a magic mirror contrasts with Gaston’s words and gestures, highlighting the absurdity of his plan, and the monstrosity of his character.¹¹⁰ In a Lacanian construction, the magic mirror does not show a direct reflection of the one who is looking, but an imago, an *imago* that, in the case of Gaston, anticipates his true nature. Holding the object, Gaston unconsciously lives his future “through anticipation and the past through retroaction”:

¹⁰⁶ Erb, "Another World or the World of an Other? The Space of Romance in Recent Versions of 'Beauty and the Beast'," 60.

¹⁰⁷ The term “slow motion” refers to Simon Watney definition of the 1980s and 1990s epidemic. See: Simon Watney, *Imagine Hope: AIDS and Gay Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 221.

¹⁰⁸ Griffin, *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens*, 134-35; Erb, "Another World or the World of an Other? The Space of Romance in Recent Versions of 'Beauty and the Beast'," 65.

¹⁰⁹ Griffin, *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens*, 134-35; Erb, "Another World or the World of an Other?," 66.

¹¹⁰ Erb, "Another World or the World of an Other?," 66.

he is experiencing “a moment of self-delusion, of captivation by an illusory image”.¹¹¹ His Beast-ification, prepared by Belle’s words (“He’s no monster Gaston, you are!”) becomes obvious in Gaston’s exaggerated bodily features [Fig.19].¹¹² At this point, he embodies “the violence and animosity directed by straight men against gay men”.¹¹³ Admitting the possibility of an over-reading of Gaston’s analogy, it is curious to notice that his extremely masculine features, used initially as a comic device, are negatively empowered through the magical mirror, right before the transformation of the Beast in a beautiful, and I would add, equally muscular Prince.

The Disney version of *The Beauty and the Beast* ends with the death and rebirth of its main character. As Gaston and the angry villagers approach the castle, the Beast accepts passively the imminent death: the rose is drying out, and so is he. Reinvigorated by the arrival of Belle, the Beast finally responds to the attack. During the animated fight that ends with Gaston’s death, the Beast is stabbed to death. The touching scene that follows, records the last dialogue between the Beauty and the Beast, and their mutual declaration of love just “by the time the last petal fell”.¹¹⁴ The curse is broken: the Beast returns to a human form that appropriates Gaston’s muscular body and turns it into an idealised depiction of male beauty vaguely like Michelangelo’s *David* [Fig.20-21]. The harmonic and balanced musculature of Michelangelo’s sculpture adapts the Reagan hero to its subverted alter ego [Fig.22]. The prince’s second birth into a gentle muscular physicality is the Disney way of defeating a disaeseophobic reading of the sick body. In a visual swing of opposing, interfering dialectics, abstract ideas are applied to a physical reality imagerly understood.

1996. Andrew Sullivan writes:

¹¹¹ Jane Gallop, “Lacan’s “Mirror Stage”: Where to Begin,” *Substance* 11/12, no.4/1, issue 37-38 (1982/1983): 121.

¹¹² “Scene 16”, *Beauty and the Beast*; Erb, "Another World or the World of an Other?," 66.

¹¹³ Erb, "Another World or the World of an Other?," 64.

¹¹⁴ “Scene 1”, *Beauty and the Beast*.

When people feared that the ebbing of AIDS would lead to a new burst of promiscuity, to a return to the 1970s in some joyous celebration of old times, they were, it turns out, only half right. Although some bathhouses have revived, their centrality to gay life has all but disappeared. What has replaced sex is the idea of sex; what has replaced promiscuity is the idea of promiscuity, masked in the increasing numbers of circuit parties around the country, by the ecstatic drug-enhanced high dance music.¹¹⁵

Highly criticized by Crimp for his questionable take on the epidemic, Sullivan diagnoses an abstraction of sex.¹¹⁶ The intellectual exercise that, as Crimp points out, risks detaching the reader from the reality of the epidemic, and its bodily effects, enables me to understand the prominent presence of beautifully sexualized male bodies during the crisis. Political, revolutionary, young and healthy, beauty succeeds in promoting a fantasised sex that appropriates visual codes secretly adopted since the 1930s. Keeping alive the spirit of the pre-AIDS sexual revolution, the body beautiful of the AIDS epidemic confronts fear and establishes in a visible present an almost invisible reality, suspended in time. A mid-sentence in a much longer visual narrative, the *imagos* of the AIDS epidemic superimpose, substitute, revisit the bodies of multiple times and spaces. The queer timeline of the homoerotic bodies of desire has begun.

1.2 “How do you like your Larry?”: A Short Story of the American Physique

“How do you like your Larry?” Reading the words above the photograph of physique model Larry Scott, my expression shifts from confused to amused.¹¹⁷ The article dedicated to the “favourite bodybuilder of almost everyone,” appears in a magazine that once belonged to

¹¹⁵ Andrew Sullivan, “When Plagues End: Notes on the Twilight of an Epidemic,” *The New York Times Magazine* (November 10, 1996), 55. Series I: Subject Files; Sub-series I: Correspondence, Research Notes, and Contracts, Box 36, Folder 7, AIDS Education Collection D.500, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservations, River Campus Library, University of Rochester, Rochester, New York.

¹¹⁶ Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, MA; London: The MIT Press, 2002), 7.

¹¹⁷ I am not able to produce images for this case study. The analysis was conducted on site at the Getty Research Institute Special Collections. The images can be found in: *Muscleboy: Incorporating Demi-Gods* 2, no.3, December-January 1964-1965, 31, Series VIII, collection and miscellaneous items, circa 1980-1989, undated, Box 227, Folder 2, Ephemera, Robert Mapplethorpe papers and photographs circa 1850-2011, bulk 1970-1989, The Getty Research Institute Special Collections, Los Angeles, California.

Robert Mapplethorpe. It is the third number of *Muscleboy: Incorporating Demi-Gods* (1964-1965). A satellite of the much older *Physique Pictorial*, *Muscleboy* conforms to precise guidelines: it presents black and white photographs of young muscular men engaging in various activities and adds some information on their supposedly real lives. Portrayed outside and inside the photographic studio, the men of *Muscleboy* either wear the traditional bodybuilder's straps or play Cowboys, Sailors, Bikers, Police Men using the appropriate clothing. Each photograph is introduced by an evocative title and a brief description. The models are not just physique inspirations: they incarnate ideal boyfriend prototypes.

Take Larry. Objectified by a title that clarifies the ultimate goal of beefcake photography, he is offered to the viewer's eyes naked. Due to censorship, Larry does not face the camera, but his pose, does not fail to forward a deep sense of desire. An unconventional reader, I approach the request to choose (and of course admire) one of the Larry(s) with a smile. I can pick between the 17 year old boy, who possesses a "spectacular" physique (1961); the much more mature man, whose body is harmonically sculpted (1962); the newly crowned winner of *Mr America*; and the future competitor of *Mr Universe*. Leaving aside my personal considerations, I propose to use these images, diverse in composition and intention, to exemplify 1960s physique photography. Larry no.1 is portrayed by Milo. The photographer uses light carefully, highlighting the sculptural perfection of the model's body. The pose is not complex, but it is effective: it invites the viewer's gaze to caress the arms and the tights of the young man photographed, lingering on his physicality. Versions no.2, 3, 4 show me a more mature and muscular man. Larry no.2 is captured outside: he is standing in front of a massive rock, reinforcing his already tensed, and evident muscularity.¹¹⁸ The picture is taken from the front: the model, this time, is wearing speedos. Larry no.3 is resting on the right knee; his arms lifted and tensed: he is the new *Mr America*, and he is ready to announce his kingdom. Larry

¹¹⁸ *Muscleboy: Incorporating Demi-Gods* 2, no.3, December-January 1964-1965, 31.

no.4, candidate for *Mr Universe*, stands on a rock in a jungle/semi-god attire: he is wearing seemingly old boots and a leopard-patterned speedo. The American favourite bodybuilder holds a bow with no arrows. Larry is a fantasy: he is the Hercules of modernity, a man able to show a brutal force while displaying a beautiful body.¹¹⁹

Larry is a living product of Bob Mizer's legacy. A rebel from Los Angeles, Mizer established with his magazine one of the most successful male beauty prototypes of the American gay culture. Inspired by the increasing popularity of bodybuilding, *Physique Pictorial* starts off as an experiment at the borders of artistic physique photography and masked gay pornography:

While most of the other physique magazines edit their magazines almost exclusively with the bodybuilder in mind, *Pictorial* is planned primarily as an art reference book, and is widely used in colleges and private art schools throughout the country.¹²⁰

An artbook, a pornographic journal, a physique magazine, the product Mizer introduces to the market cannot be defined in a clear objective way. *Physique Pictorial* offers in a small format (easy to hide) a space for "wannabe" models to make some money, and a refuge for closeted men yet to come out.¹²¹ Armed by a camera, and the desire to build on paper the perfect boyfriend, Mizer begins his bodily adventure in 1945. As a public distributor of homoerotic fantasies, he photographs his men in repetitive settings and costumes: there is the cowboy, the policeman, the biker, and the guy in the shower. Codifying a vocabulary of desire, later reinforced by Andy Warhol and Kenneth Anger's underground films, Mizer's categories of desire participate in the definition of a mainstream mass culture to some extent still existing.¹²²

¹¹⁹ *Muscleboy: Incorporating Demi-Gods* 2, no.3, December-January 1964-1965, 31.

¹²⁰ Bob Mizer, "Physique Pictorial" 4, no.3, Fall 1954, 2, Bob Mizer Foundation, San Francisco, California.

¹²¹ F. Valentine Hooven III, *Tom of Finland: His Life and Times* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1993), 83; I use the term "wannabe" since most of the photographs Mizer took did not involve professional models but convicts, criminals, drug addicts etc.

¹²² On the 1960s underground cinema culture see: Juan A. Suárez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996).

As *Physique Pictorial* became increasingly popular, Mizer starts producing “physique” movies.¹²³ Masking sexualized actions behind vaguely historic plots, he is bringing to life the fantasies he could just hint at on paper. The success is immediate.

March 1966. *The Young Physique* uses the article “So What’s New in Home Muscle Movies?” to disclose the latest masterpiece of Mizer: a beefcake movie on an “AZTEC SACRIFICE,” with “Teen-age American Aztecs, of course!”¹²⁴ Set in front of seemingly Doric columns, the still shows a young man, extremely muscular, and almost naked, sitting on a pedestal. His hands and feet are about to be tied with satin ribbons by other extremely muscular and almost naked young men. It is not clear where the human sacrifice is being tied onto, neither if he is actually afraid of what is going to happen - he seems to be rather enjoying the moment. *Does the plot have any importance? Does Mizer really care about historical precision and good acting?* Not really, no. Mizer ultimate goal is to satisfy erotic fantasies without running into censorship issues. The Aztecs are just one of the numerous themes appropriated and manipulated by the photographer. From the Go-Go Sailor to the naughty student, Mizer’s movies, as his photographs, present those secret sex scenarios and beautiful physicalities that would fix the pre-AIDS imagery of desire and shape the most popular fantasies of the AIDS epidemic.¹²⁵

Looking at the culture of imagination, sex and beauty Mizer created, I realize how *Physique Pictorial* is, in fact, responsible for the development of that visual code shaping the

¹²³ See: Jack Stevenson, “From the Bedroom to the Bijou: A Secret History of American Gay Sex Cinema,” *Film Quarterly* 51, no.1 (Autumn 1997): 24-31.

¹²⁴ *The Young Physique* 7, no.2, March-April 1966, 24-25, Series VIII, collection and miscellaneous items, circa 1980-1989, undated, Box 227, Folder 2, Ephemera, Robert Mapplethorpe papers and photographs circa 1850-2011, bulk 1970-1989, The Getty Research Institute Special Collections, Los Angeles, California. I am not able to produce images for this case study. The analysis was conducted on site at the Getty Research Institute Special Collections.

¹²⁵ For Mizer’s physique movies see the DVD included in Dian Hanson, *Bob’s World: The Life and the Boys of AMG’s Bob Mizer* (Köln: Taschen, 2009).

social understanding of healthy and sick bodies. With Mizer, the performative nature of bodybuilding is taken to a whole new expression.

Valentine Hooven III writes:

What was new [and I add revolutionary] about the work in Mizer's magazine was not something he was doing but something he was not doing. Men had been photographed since the invention of the camera, but unlike female nudes, a man was never allowed to be naked simply to please the eyes.¹²⁶

As a space to exercise for the pleasurable gaze, Mizer's creation let the muscular body become a space of sensual exploration and exploitation beyond its physical condition.

February 1963. The third issue of the 13th volume of *Physique Pictorial* is out.¹²⁷ The glorious image of the bodybuilder Lynn Lyman in a swimsuit on the magazine cover is meant to capture my attention. The cover, quite traditional in its approach to physique photography hides a little 'gem' by Tom of Finland. "The Careless Cyclist Series" is a classic example of how the bodybuilding culture enters the gay imagery in the 1950s and 1960s contributing to shape those fantasies that would inform the underground cinema of the 1960s and characterize the years of the epidemic [Fig.23].¹²⁸ Finland's drawing shows two muscular bikers engaging in a sexualized clothes-washing activity. One biker cleans his uniform kneeling completely naked on the floor; his genitals are opportunely covered by his arms. The biker is not very interested in the activity: his head turns to the man standing next to him. The sexual tension between the two is palpable. As usual, Finland's drawing is highly sensualized and sexualized. All of a sudden, my gaze is erotically charged; I am the *voyeur* whose eyes cannot stop from staring at the nude figure doing laundry, and at the absurdly tight pants of the standing biker.

What am I looking at?

¹²⁶ F. Valentine Hooven III, *Beefcake: The Muscle Magazines of America 1950-1970* (Köln: Benedict Taschen Verlag GmbH, 1995), 46.

¹²⁷ The following analysis is based on Bob Mizer, *Physique Pictorial* 13, no.3 (February 1963).

¹²⁸ On the biker figure in the 1960s underground film culture see: Suárez, "Pop, Queer, or Fascist? The Ambiguity of Mass Culture in Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising*," in *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars*, 141-180.

Page four. Jerry Richards, a non-professional bodybuilder, is photographed half-naked in Mizer's bathroom [Fig.24]. Jerry smiles at the camera. Pretending to be caught in the act of coming out of the shower, he covers his penis with a small towel. I remember something I saw more recently scanning through the online archive of a well-known fashion brand.

1991. Marcus Schenkenberg stands under a shower, holding a pair of jeans, barely visible, in front of his penis for the Calvin Klein Jeans advertising campaign [Fig.25]. The advert designed by photographer Bruce Weber elevates Mizer's photographic fantasy to a fashion statement. Weber, who has never acknowledged Mizer's influence, opens *Physique Pictorial's* homoerotic code of representation to a worldwide audience. A visual vocabulary secretly used forty years ago to get the male body of desire published, is now used to shape the 1980s and 1990s language of Calvin Klein [Fig.26]. A shattered temporality, for a shattered imaginary.

What am I looking at?

Jerry's 'innocent' shower storyline continues a few pages later with different models. Mizer is once again playing-pretend with me. The pictures, he says, are aimed to document his photographic practice:

In this shower are cleansed some of the finest bodies in America!" "If you've seen the inside of this shower before it's no coincidence. One action almost all the models share in common is that after posing the way they want to remove posing oil and grime picked up during an arduous session.¹²⁹

Further justifying the physique nature of the magazine, and hiding the potentially pornographic quality of its subjects, the text introduces me to one of the finest themes of "physique" photography: the showering man. Amongst others, Bruce of Los Angeles is a master of the theme.¹³⁰ In his magazine, *The Male Figure*, Bruce of Los Angeles associates beautiful bodies

¹²⁹ Mizer, *Physique Pictorial* 13, 18-19.

¹³⁰ Bob Mizer and Bruce of Los Angeles took numerous photographs of models in the shower. The photographs can be viewed at the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles, California. See the following collections: Athletic Model Guild Physique Photographs 1950s-1960s, coll2014.121, ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, California; Bruce of Los Angeles Photographs circa 1950-1974, coll2017-011, ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, California.

with stylized drawings, creating mini-photo-stories. The photographer winks at the viewer: going through the pages, I accept a staged realm, and I agree to bring it to life. See what you want to see; pretend not to see the fiction, accept to see a reality. *Visible, invisible, present and absent, what am I looking at?*

1960. The 18th volume of *The Male Figure* presents me with the everyday life of a sailor [Fig.27]. The man, spotted in Memphis, was apparently so handsome that the camera just “went to work”.¹³¹ Three pictures in, and I am getting to know the attractive sailor at full knots. The young man smiles at the camera, he is wearing a white uniform. A page in and the sailor has already taken off his shirt: he is muscular, healthy, and young, a real “beefcake” to adopt the proper terminology. The sailor plays around the harbour; he pretends to mop the floor of his boat, and walk around the shops in town [Fig.28]. *What am I looking at?* At the end of a fine journey into his daily life, I leave the sailor, now fully dressed, taking a nap: after all the fun he is pretty tired. I am not allowed to know the name of the “sailor,” not till the next page at least: the man is called Bob Koklick [Fig.29].¹³² Freed from the sailor’s fantasy, Bob poses in the photographic studio. As a proper physique model, he is now wearing only the strap of a bodybuilder. Bob poses with an intention invisible to his action. *What am I looking at?*

Studios, showers, and kitchens: the domestic is another approved set for homoerotic physique explorations. Playing with roles, props, and fantasies, Mizer and Bruce of Los Angeles work towards the development of the very bodily language that would later be used against the PWA’s body image. In the middle of the 1950s, Bruce of Los Angeles starts to go beyond the physique illusion: he breaks the play-pretend mechanism, bringing his camera in the bedroom. Playing with his models while experimenting with the camera, Bruce takes close-ups of their genitals, setting the prototype for pictures destined to shape, during the epidemic,

¹³¹ Bruce of Los Angeles, *The Male Figure* 18, (1960), 10.

¹³² Bruce of Los Angeles, *The Male Figure* 18, (1960), 15.

the representative key to the sexualized body.¹³³ As I write, I realize that Bruce of Los Angeles' and Mizer's work is not ground-breaking: with this subsection, I do not want to argue the originality of their work, I intend rather to reveal the existence of a queer timeline of the body of desire beyond its historical narrative. Archetypes of Bruce of Los Angeles, and Mizer's physique magazines trace back to the 1930s and even before.

2017. San Francisco, Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender Historical Society. In front of me is *Modern Classics*, a small book designed, written and published by Anthony J. Sansone, in 1932 [Fig.30].¹³⁴ In the first page is a dedication to: "artists, art lovers and body culturists" in the hope to provide "some source of inspiration towards the attainment of Physical Beauty and the realization of artistic endeavour".¹³⁵ Masked, once again, behind artistic reasons the male body of desire is presented in a well-lit environment. The models, as expected, do not show their genitals to the camera, but rather move in poses that enhance the muscular quality of their physicality in a subtly sexual way. A week later, I am in Indiana, at the Kinsey Institute, investigating the present and past imagery of the male body of desire. I find my way to George Platt Lynes's work. Ten years before Mizer and Bruce of Los Angeles; ten years before secret photoshoots in the bedroom, and the masked physique pornography, Platt Lynes' explored the homoerotic body in a collection of photographs later bought by Dr Alfred C. Kinsey. As Weber recalls, Platt Lynes destroyed most of the negatives in the fear to be arrested.¹³⁶ Absent presence along this project, the work of Platt Lynes appears to be the perfect visual tool for an introductory class on the imagery of the pre-AIDS era and the post-AIDS discovery

¹³³ I cannot provide good quality images for this section. For further reference, please see: Bruce of Los Angeles. Bruce of Los Angeles Photographs circa 1950-1974, coll2017-011, ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, California.

¹³⁴ Anthony J. Sansone, *Modern Classics* (Brooklyn, NY: Anthony J. Sansone, 1932), 3. Roméo L'Heureux Photographs, Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco, California.

¹³⁵ Anthony J. Sansone, *Modern Classics*, 3.

¹³⁶ Bruce Weber in James Crump ed., *George Platt Lynes: Photographs from the Kinsey Institute* (Boston, MA; New York; Toronto: A Bulfinch Press Book Little, Brown and Company, 1993).

remembrance. Before Mizer, before physique photography, and Bruce of Los Angeles' private studies, Platt Lynes concretizes the homoerotic imagery in a more tangible way.

His production is effortlessly sexy. Platt Lynes does not need to show nudity to convey sex or use pornography to visualize a homoerotic tension: his use of shadows, bodily shape, and even close-ups of his models' faces are enough. In the same years in which Mizer attempted to mask homoerotic images behind physique photographs, and vaguely historic movies, Platt Lynes unravelled the body of desire in a series of revolutionary pictures. September 28th, 1954. Platt Lynes photographs a young man from his shoulder up. A towel is placed around his neck, his eyes are closed, and the mouth semi-opened: the model is clearly experiencing an orgasm [Fig.31]. The online catalogue states "Nude male, towel around his neck, head forward, eyes closed, mouth open".¹³⁷ The caption notes the nudity of the model but does not mention the activity he is engaging in. A spectator of a physical expression, I am free to guess what is happening; I assume the model is masturbating in front of the camera. The subject of the photo does not surprise me particularly. Dr Kinsey was interested in sexuality, and depictions of masturbation were very common in the ONE Archive collection of Bruce of Los Angeles' private studies.¹³⁸ What strikes me are the strategies adopted by the photographers to forward similar censurable narratives. Operating almost two decades later, Bruce of Los Angeles is able to tell his sensual story from a different, more explicit perspective: he displays full nudity, experiments with the camera, and takes close-ups of the models' genitals even if that means giving the image an amateur quality. Showing to hide, hiding to show, or sticking with the terminology of this project, making the visible invisible, and the invisible visible, Platt Lynes

¹³⁷ Description taken from the online catalogue viewed at the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction. For further information see: Roman Johnston, KI-GPL – N1080 Positive, George Platt Lynes (1907-1955), Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, From the Collection of the Kinsey Institute, Indiana University. All rights reserved.

¹³⁸ See: Bruce of Los Angeles. Bruce of Los Angeles Photographs circa 1950-1974, coll2017-011, ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, California.

unconsciously presents future generations of photographers and artists with a key system to represent sex in socially approved terms.

1984. Unable to put on a public billboard a sex scene, Bruce Weber designed the next Calvin Klein Spring/Summer campaign, opting for Platt Lynes' visual strategy. A tanned model sensually contorts on an unmade bed: he is shown from the chest up, his face contorted the opposite side to the camera, as to suggest a sexual act in the making [Fig.32]. I can see the tensed muscularity of the subject but cannot see his apparently orgasmic expression. The evident sexual quality of the picture is explained by a second photograph, advertising Klein's Fragrance for Women [Fig.33]. The scene takes place on the unmade bed of the first image and features the same male model. The man, whose identity is still hidden to me, lays on his stomach, while a woman with a rather androgynous haircut rests on his back. Playing with the viewer and with acceptable social conventions, the advert exemplifies the existence of that queer timeline of the homoerotic body of desire I theorized at the very beginning of this chapter. Intrigued, I look for more examples.

1943. Platt Lynes takes a black and white photograph of a man lying on a portable mattress [Fig.34]. The model, unknown, is portrayed inside the studio. He pretends to be sunbathing. He is bare chest and wearing shorts and socks. The viewer's gaze is invited to linger on the muscular physicality of the subject, apparently relaxing in front of the camera. The image sexualizes the model without showing nudity; the muscles are tensed; the photo evokes a general sense of erotic suspension.

1984. Weber directs the Calvin Klein Underwear campaign taking a photograph of two men and a woman sunbathing on a boat [Fig.35]. The image, shot from an angle different to that adopted by Platt Lynes, is nevertheless constructed around a similar visual code. The models are pretending to ignore the presence of the camera; the erotic quality of the picture lingers in a sexual tension made socially acceptable in the absence of direct interactions

amongst the models. The more I look through the photographs of Platt Lynes, the more I notice similarities and consistent visual appropriations. The queer timeline of the male body is ultimately revealing a realm of pre-AIDS secret representations while disclosing at the same time the origins for the post-AIDS fantasies that will revolutionize ineffective social codes.

Platt Lynes is not the only source to inform Weber's work. On the contrary, Weber addresses a variety of materials, adapting them to an acceptable social imagery. Even though Weber has never mentioned it, the influence of Mizer and Bruce of Los Angeles's fantasies in his work is quite evident. The domestic is re-explored: distanced from the physique context, it can appropriate Platt Lynes' effortless ability to represent sex without losing an artistic, and therefore socially acceptable beauty. A half-naked model stands close to a mirror [Fig.36]. What in the past would have been hidden in the pages of a physique magazine, or maybe not even published is not up on a gallery wall. It is 1991, Bruce Weber is exhibiting his work at the Fahey/Klein Gallery. The subject looks into a mirror wearing nothing more than a fishnet top. His face, shown just in part, is slightly inclined towards the mirror: modern Narcissus, the model is making love with his own reflection. *What am I looking at?*

A master in translating homoerotic depictions into socially acceptable explorations of the male body of desire, Weber studies the image carefully. Nudity is suggested but not completely shown. The picture maintains the intimate quality of Bruce of Los Angeles' home studies under a professional lens. I am sure I saw something similar in one of Mizer/Bruce of Los Angeles photographic folders, and I am also sure I saw something similar once or twice in a fashion magazine. *What am I looking at?*

The classical set of Mizer's movies and photographs is slowly turned into a space of fashion, into a space to display and celebrate the socially approved man. The object to be advertised becomes secondary: forty years after the beginning of *Physique Pictorial*, Mizer's, Bruce of LA's and Platt Lynes' heroic, homoerotic, and vaguely ancient imagery is finally

mainstream. *What does this have to do with the body of the epidemic? Is it possible to trace more precisely the effects that past homoerotic body prototypes have had on the 1980s /1990s tensions determining the coexistence of healthy physicalities and physicalities affected by HIV/AIDS? Do these visual constructions participate in the definition of an aesthetic of illness?*

1.3 Macho, Macho Man, I've Gotta be a Macho Man!

1978. The Village People celebrates the image of the muscular man singing “Macho, macho man (macho man), I've gotta to be a macho man” [Fig.37]. Strengthening the presence in the social panorama of Mizer's Cowboys, Native Americans, Policemen, Bikers, Soldiers, and Construction Workers, the iconic disco group talks about a man in “western shirts and leather,” who “likes to be the leader”, fixing an imagery that has been part of the male body of desire since the 1930s.¹³⁹ Expressed in a prominent physicality this socially accepted body makes its way into movies, TV shows, advertising campaigns and beyond. “Look your best while you wear your least” I read in the advert designed by Jockey in 1976 to sponsor underwear [Fig.38].¹⁴⁰ Addressed to a generalized male audience, the advert proposes eight types of underwear for four types of men: the muscular non-shaved bodies appear along with the muscular but hairless prototype destined to be consecrated in the 1980s by Calvin Klein and Bruce Weber. Later on, Jockey would embrace fully that homoerotic imagery built by physique photography, and consecrated by the Village People, adopting as messengers for the briefs stereotypical images of desirable men (the firemen, the surgeon, etc.) [Fig.39-40].¹⁴¹ *An incarnated fantasy of the American physique culture, a newly sexualized man, who is the real macho man of the Village People?*

¹³⁹ Village People, “Macho Man,” *Macho Man*, Casablanca Records, 1978, Vinyl.

¹⁴⁰ Jockey, *Look your best while you wear you least*, 1976 - Men Underwear Campaign, “Vintage Clothing & Accessory Ads,” Attic Paper, 2010-2014, accessed June 9, 2018, <http://www.atticpaper.com/proddetail.php?prod=1976-mens-jockey-underwear-ad>.

¹⁴¹ On the Village People see: Randy Jones and Mark Bergo, *Macho Man: The Disco Era and Gay America's “Coming Out”* (Westport, CN; London: Praeger Publisher, 2009), 70.

Anticipated by Mizer, Bruce of Los Angeles, and Lynes as a secret object of desire, and celebrated in the fashion industry as a universally understood signifier of sex, the Village People's Macho Man stands as a prototype for what later would be called the gay "clone". A symbol of the 1970s gay culture, a fantasy of the generation who lived through the AIDS crisis, the clone, borrowing Martin Levine's definition:

Had gym-defined body; after hours of rigorous body building, his physique rippled with bulging muscles, looking more like competitive body builders than hairdresser or florists. He wore blue-collar garb – flannel shirts over muscle T-shirts, Levi 501s over work boots, bomber jackets over hooded sweatshirts.¹⁴²

An expression of a precise semiotic, the individual is visually classified by Hal Fisher in the "street fashion uniform" man [Fig.41].¹⁴³ Clone, sex symbol, macho man, street fashion uniform embodiment. *What am I looking at?*

The clone attracts my attention. I start to convince myself that beyond all those labels is the key to understanding the body of the epidemic forwarded by an overly physical aesthetic of illness. The product of a hyper-developed gym culture, the clone is after all, the only man, who being a macho, strong, and attractive individual, can capture the attention of an audience continuously confronted by horrifying images of illness and death. David B. Feinberg once wrote: "A fad is ten minutes, a trend is six months, but a clone is forever".¹⁴⁴ And, in the time of AIDS, he was perhaps right. *Who is the clone then?*


The clone is the masculine man, who can have whatever he wants. He is the man of Tom of Finland's pornographic drawings, and Robert Mapplethorpe and Arthur Tress' photographs. Referring back to a literal definition, the clone belongs to that "hypermasculine" realm "where everybody is muscular, where cheerful macho faces are youthful but moustached,

¹⁴² Martin P. Levine, *Gay Macho: Life and Death of the Homosexual Clone* (New York; London: New York University Press, 1988), 7.

¹⁴³ Hal Fisher, *Gay Semiotics: A Photographic Study of Visual Coding Among Homosexual Men* (San Francisco, CA: NFS Press San Francisco, 1977), 50, plate 23.

¹⁴⁴ David B. Feinberg, *Queering and Loathing: Rants and Raves of a Raging AIDS Clone* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 217.

every penis so phallic that it defies credibility” [Fig.42].¹⁴⁵ “Machine for fucking,” the clone inhabits a “world that we recognize, but without the boundaries on our desires”.¹⁴⁶ Black hair, moustache, muscles, and leather pants so tight that the viewer can see a significantly above average penis, usually erect, the clone, as the man of Mizer’s magazine, adapts to various settings: he can be a marine, a policeman, and even an ancient Roman. For the purpose of this project, I direct my attention to one of the clone’s most successful roles: the biker.

Transformed by Finland into a mythical being, the biker wears leather pants, boots, and a leather jacket with a white t-shirt. Finland’s drawn fantasy, perfected through the years, and brought to fame in the pages of Mizer’s magazine, soon evolves into a two-dimensional source of inspiration for Robert Mapplethorpe, who not surprisingly was in touch with Finland himself. The first trace of correspondence between the two that I find at the Getty Research Institute dates back to May 1, 1978, the following one to 1979. In the letters, Mapplethorpe and Finland exchange pictures, comment on drawings, and plan future meetings, showing a reciprocal admiration, beyond the artistic aspect; in one letter Finland writes: 

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I am not surprise then when in one of Mapplethorpe’s portfolios, I find a picture of a young man on a motorbike [Fig.43].¹⁴⁸ Respecting the prototype strengthened by Finland, the model wears leather pants, boots, and a leather jacket, under it a white t-shirt [Fig.44].¹⁴⁹ The young

¹⁴⁵ Kenneth Mackinnon, *Uneasy Pleasure: The Male as Erotic Object* (London: Cygnus Arts; Madison & Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997), 157.

¹⁴⁶ Nayland Blake, “Tom of Finland: An Appreciation,” in *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian. And Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, ed. Corey K. Creekmur, Alexander Doty (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 1995), 348.

¹⁴⁷ See: Robert Mapplethorpe and Tom of Finland, Series IV.A. Personal and Professional, 1969-1991, undated, 2011.M.20, Box 179, Folder 15, Robert Mapplethorpe papers and photographs, circa 1850-2011, bulk 1970-1989, The Getty Research Institute Special Collections, Los Angeles, California.

¹⁴⁸ Robert Mapplethorpe, Untitled [White Male on Motorcycle], circa 1975., Series I.D. Portfolios, circa 185070-2005, Originals, Portfolio 1, B&W Photographs, Color Photographs, 2011.M.20.Port1.20r.2, Box 113, Robert Mapplethorpe papers and photographs circa 1850-2011, bulk 1970-1989, The Getty Research Institute Special Collections, Los Angeles, California.

¹⁴⁹ World of TOM Gallery, “Motorcycles,” *TOM Works by Theme*, World of TOM Gallery, accessed Jun 12, 2018, <http://www.worldoftomoffinland.com/album3/index.html>.

man has no helmet, he is looking straight into the camera, ready to lit the gas and make a move. The camera is positioned right in front of the bike's wheel. Overall the image forwards a sense of grandness. The biker's sensual boldness intimidates me, but I cannot take my eyes away from him: bike and biker are part of the same sexual machine, subtly phallic, and visually attractive.

The biker's eroticism returns in the work of another photographer influenced by Finland: Arthur Tress. Conceived to "critique a gay subculture that fetishizes the hypermasculine Other – the very type of men who given their profession and demeanour, are most likely to be homophobic," the works of Tress fix on the spaces of secret sexual encounters (e.g. *The Piers in New York*) an imaginary dependent on that same culture.¹⁵⁰ The visual continuity that connects Finland and Tress emerges clearly in the not yet discussed figure of the clone-cowboy. I encounter a perfect example of such being in Finland's online gallery.¹⁵¹ The selected drawing shows two men, one naked – apart from the cowboy hat and the boots - and one fully dressed [Fig.45]. The Cowboys stare intensely at each other. No landscape accompanies the scene. While the naked man sits on a wooden fence, the other cowboy stands in his proximity, visibly excited. The sexual tension between the two, suggested by the prominent erections, is palpable; the sexual intercourse imminent. The staring exercise between the cowboys results in a gaze orgy that involves me, the viewer, enabling a privileged intrusion.

1978. *Urban Cowboy, New York* [Fig.46]. Tress captures a young, muscular, naked man wearing leather boots and a cowboy hat. The urban cowboy stares at the sun. He is sitting on a wooden horse. Slightly moving backwards, he lifts his left arm up exposing the front of his body to the camera: the sun caresses his muscular perfection. I gaze at the model's exposed

¹⁵⁰ Jonathan Weinberg, *Male Desire: The Homoerotic in American Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2004), 149.

¹⁵¹ World of TOM Gallery, "Cowboys," *TOM Works by Theme*, World of TOM Gallery, accessed Jun 12, 2018, <http://www.worldoftomoffinland.com/album3/index.html>.

nudity, without encountering his gaze. Tress invites me to construct and project my own fantasy on him. The photograph is taken on the West Side Piers, an abandoned site in New York where strangers once met to have sex. The erotic quality of the place is kept within the erotic quality of the clone's body. An utopian creature, half human, half fantasy, and for sure hypermasculine, the clone embodies the male beauty prototype inhabiting and enhancing a place of sexual desire. He encapsulates the prohibited fantasies of the 1950s, and 1960s, and adorns them with explicit sadomasochistic attitudes, setting the basis for what David Feinberg first, and Klein-Scholz later, would define the "AIDS clone".¹⁵²

Not just a duplicate of the 1970s clone, the AIDS clone embodies abstract fears of physical origin. Coined by Feinberg, the AIDS clone, in my perspective, is essentially a product of the *diseasephobic aesthetic of illness*. Feinberg presents the AIDS clone as the natural result of the epidemic: he derives from the 1980s New Clone that could be found "at the gym, at ACT UP meetings, at Queer Nation demonstrations, and on Fire Island," and the 1970s Classic Clone, who "was found in gyms, discos, and on Fire Island".¹⁵³ Far detached from his predecessors, the AIDS clone substitutes margaritas with "ddl and orange juice," "Galanos gowns" with "hospital gowns," "loose-fit Levi's Silver Tab jeans," with "baggy clothes".¹⁵⁴ The list goes on and on, touching the physical alteration that AIDS imposes on the body. Embedded in the media phobic imagery of illness, Feinberg's idea presents the reader with a unilateral, and therefore partial picture. Oddly enough, Feinberg distinguished the clone of the beginning of the epidemic with that of the advanced stage of the epidemic. *Is this distinction sustainable?* Looking at the AIDS educational material, and at the continuative visual narrative perpetuated by the work of Mizer, Bruce of Los Angeles, Platt Lynes, Weber, Finland,

¹⁵² Feinberg, *Queering and Loathing*, 217; Christelle Klein-Scholz, "From the Homosexual Clone to the "AIDS clone": The Impact of the AIDS on the Male Body of the Gay Male," *E-rea: Revue d'Etudes Anglophones* 12, no.1 (2014), 26-paragraphs.

¹⁵³ Feinberg, *Queering and Loathing*, 217.

¹⁵⁴ Feinberg, *Queering and Loathing*, 218-219.

Mapplethorpe, and Tress, I am not able to agree: Feinberg seems to be reading an invisible trace for an absence, telling just one of the possible stories, and admitting a tendency towards the male body, without digging into the full narrative.

March 29, 1996. Ed Hatlee, age 37, poses in a boxer attire with his son Christopher for Thomas McGovern [Fig.47]. The photograph will be part of the project *Bearing Witness (to AIDS)*. It is 2016 when I come across the photograph. Ed's body is muscular and masculine, he's been exercising, maybe even before the picture was taken, his abs are prominent, his hair properly styled. With his sculpted, perfect body, Ed meets the "Classic Clone" standards: he is strong, in control, desirable, and healthy. A fit athlete, a modern super-hero, among all the categories in which Ed could be part of, he would have never been inscribed by the PWAs definition. If the spectator knew someone in the picture was HIV positive, based on Feinberg's description, he/she would probably point at the skinny son in the background. "Ed has been HIV+ and asymptomatic for ten years, [...]", the description discloses, "Due to combination drug therapy, HIV is undetectable in his body".¹⁵⁵ Invisible, but not absent, HIV is "undetectable". The presence in absence dialectic is applied to Ed's body in an unconventional way. It is not specifically his body that is either present, absent, present in absence, or absent in presence. On the contrary, it is the virus.

Invisible on the body, visible in the blood test: HIV is depicted here as an entity absent in its presence. The tendency seems to be common. Reflecting on Stephen Greco's article "Strong Bodies, Gay Ways: Creating a New Self-Image", Randall R. Griffey writes:

Body-building provided a way for Greco to distance himself from the disease he feared. He attempted to construct a healthy body, an HIV-negative body, a body that could visually be read as "AIDS-free".¹⁵⁶

Who is the photographic subject then?

¹⁵⁵ Thomas McGovern, *Bearing Witness (to AIDS)* (New York: Visual AIDS; A.R.T Press, 1999).

¹⁵⁶ Randall R. Griffey, "Revisioning Queer Identity: AIDS Discourse and the Impenetrable Subject in Phone Sex Advertising," *The Rutgers Art Review* 16, (1996): 29.

Ed, Ed is the subject, but he is also not. Looking at his undetectable body in a book dedicated to HIV+/PWAs, the viewer will unconsciously try to detect something that seems to be missed: the bodily effect of the virus. Ed's photograph exemplifies an aesthetic of illness dictated by activism. Stepping out of anonymity, he conforms the body to a classic image of beauty able to play with the visible/ invisible and presence/absence dialectics in a powerful way, and to diminish the "AIDS" clone" idea, breaking the aesthetic of fear. *Is it possible then to talk of the AIDS clone? And if so, who is it?*

To answer the question, it is necessary to step back and consider the male imagery that inhabited society during the epidemic.

1.4 Sex Obsessed: Between Calvin Klein and the AIDS Crisis

OBSSESSION. Beginning from the 1980s, Calvin Klein frames his iconic advertising campaign with the word: "obsession". The adverts refer back to that obsessive cult of the body developed since the 1950s, taking it to its full socially accepted development. Transforming classical perfection from the "markedly commonplace", Weber immortalizes the male beauty prototype into a muscular body created to sell sex and shape the ultimate object of desire.¹⁵⁷ Beauty becomes a marketing strategy, an exercise of public eroticism. The artistic production for years marked as homoerotic, and thought for a homosexual public, becomes mainstream. The body beautiful of the models now embodies a sexualized idea of perfection appealing to both straight and gay men:

Usually athletes and working-class men partially unclothed, their public seminudity is excused via accepted cultural modes of male bonding. Free to titillate on the forbidden edge between football's ass-patting and lovers' caresses, these invincible, unattainable

¹⁵⁷ Susan Bordo, *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and Private* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 221; Margaret Walters, *The Nude Male: A New Perspective* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1978), 295; Kenneth Mackinnon, *Uneasy Pleasure: The Male as Erotic Object* (London: Cygnus Arts; Madison & Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997), 64. Speaking about Klein's advertising campaigns of the 1980s Valerie Steele claims: "The models in Klein's advertisements, with their young faces and hard bodies, look as though they "don't just have sex. They are sex"." See: Valerie Steele, "Calvinism Unclothed," *Design Quarterly*, no.157 (Autumn 1992): 33.

members of the master race (always white, often blonde) act as a perfect mannequin, able, even in underwear, to remain fully eroticized and socially clothed.¹⁵⁸

“Fully eroticized,” and yet “socially clothed,” to Tom Kalin the models of Calvin Klein inhabit a neutral, blurred zone.

OBSESSION. The “Klein effect” has the face of Tom Hintinauss [Fig.48].¹⁵⁹ Photographed by Weber in 1982, the Olympic athlete is captured from a lower perspective. Hintinauss’s body appears as an icon of the Eighties.¹⁶⁰ More Greek God than a human being his sculptural figure stands in front of white architecture, in the background a vivid blue sky. The phallic shape of the building accompanies the athlete’s body making the homoerotic quality of the picture explicit. Talking about the shot, Weber recalls:

Tom’s legs spread apart as only a decathlete can do, and Calvin kept moving his waistband down towards his scar. Finally the young girl looked up from her book and said, “Now it’s working – don’t be afraid to show that scar”.¹⁶¹

Hardly visible in the attractive distraction that Hintinauss’ body is, the scar seems to be the reason for the photograph’s success. Echoing the ancient Greeks’ belief that Eros is also pain, Weber’s work leads to some interesting consideration. Positioned right in the pelvic area of the athlete’s prominent body, the barely visible scar reinforces the idea of a sexual desire, eventually deadly.

OBSESSION. Blown up in the streets of New York, the image of Tom, and of his scar, is the reachable manifestation of dangerous sex; the fashion world’s understanding of Lacan’s *jouissance* as a place of pleasure that “makes Being itself languish”.¹⁶² The physical expression

¹⁵⁸ Tom Kalin, “Flesh History,” in *A Leap in the Dark: AIDS, Art & Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Allan Klusaček and Ken Morrison, (Montreal: Véhicule Press, Artexes Edition, 1993), 125.

¹⁵⁹ Bordo, *The Male Body*, 181.

¹⁶⁰ The term explicitly refers to Nancy Hastings’s article “Images for the 80s”, where the author states: “Body Icons for the 80s, Weber’s controversial underwear ads for Klein stopped traffic and changed fashion’s image of men in briefs from boring to downright sexy”. Nancy Hasting, “Images for the 80s,” *Toronto Star*, (September 24, 1987), K1, Nexis, accessed February 12, 2016.

¹⁶¹ Bruce Weber, *Blood Sweat and Tears: Or How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love Fashion* (Düsseldorf: teNeues Book Division, 2005), 30-31.

¹⁶² Jacques Lacan, “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious,” in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, translated by Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg, (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Company,

of an erotic realm grounded in a bittersweet fantasy, Tom's body announces the beginning of the "AIDS era" and the issue of the gaze it accompanies. "The scar," Petra Kuppers writes, "incites the look, invites the narrative, fuels the story, and anchors it back into (some version of) bodies, time, and space".¹⁶³ In Weber's image the scar is an element of attraction, the attention it receives and its placement right next to the advertised product make a beauty statement: scars, muscles, and contradictions, beauty in the time of AIDS acknowledges the violent side of Eros.¹⁶⁴

In the fashion industry fear becomes an erotic tool at the crossroads of divine perfection and human nature. It is the beginning of a game of cover-up and illusions, of presences and absences, of visible and invisible signs. It is the celebration of a world of appearance:

The pumped-up and hairless body that has become so pervasive among male models is undoubtedly a response to the terror of AIDS, a disease that causes wasting sickness and inscribes itself on the skin with sores. Weber and his clients guess that the consumer in the age of AIDS is drawn to a look of pristine health: a body that seems to hide nothing and can be scanned quickly for signs of disease that may not reveal symptoms until late in its progress.¹⁶⁵

Jonathan Weinberg's analysis of Weber's images during the AIDS crisis argues the existence of a narrative necessarily built around what seems and does not seem. Tom Hintinauss' photograph was taken in 1982, at the beginning of the AIDS crisis. By that time, the AIDS discourse was still not at the attention of the media.¹⁶⁶ Ten years after Tom Hintinauss' photograph, and seven years after the shocking case of Rock Hudson, who died of AIDS in

Inc, 2006), 694. More on Lacan's *Jouissance* in: Ch.4 "A Piece of Candy, A Dancing Platform, and a Mirror: Going Back to the Body," Subsection 4.1 "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: The AIDS Crisis in a Candy," 221.

¹⁶³ Petra Kuppers, *Scar of Visibility: Medical Performances and Contemporary Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 1.

¹⁶⁴ Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

¹⁶⁵ Jonathan Weinberg, *Male Desire: The Homoerotic in American Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2004), 182.

¹⁶⁶ For further information see: Jan Zita Grover, "Visible Lesions: Images of the PWA in America," in *Fluid Exchanges: Artists and Critics in the AIDS Crisis*, ed. James Miller, (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 27-29.

1985 – an Italian brand, Benetton, turned a picture of a *Man dying of AIDS* on his deathbed in an advertisement [Fig.49].¹⁶⁷

1990. *Life* magazine publishes a photograph taken by Therese Frare at the Pater Noster House in Columbus [Fig.50].¹⁶⁸ The “Man Dying” is David Kirby, an activist who died of AIDS in 1990. I do not intend to explore here the controversies behind the use of this image as an advertising campaign with the approval of Kirby’s parents, I just want to further stress the contradictions at the base of the representation of the male body during the crisis.¹⁶⁹ The photograph, picked by Oliviero Toscani, at that time director of the Benetton advertising campaigns, aimed to express the involvement of the brand in politics.¹⁷⁰ It is 1992 when the advert begins to populate the streets. Calvin Klein, in the very same year, is promoting his brand with pictures of an almost naked Mark Wahlberg [Fig.51]. Leaving aside ethical considerations, it is easy to argue that Benetton’s strategy was the exact opposite of Klein’s strategy.

“Who were we, where were we, how did we experience these events?”¹⁷¹

Forced between opposing aesthetics, PWAs and HIV+ people are exposed to an unbelievable visual pressure. In 1992, and likely even before, the eroticised male bodies of desire stand side by side with the deathly depiction of “AIDS-affected” bodies: the gay beauty myth is born. Visualized in a collage by artist Lex Middleton the *Gay Beauty Myth* carries within the effects that depictions of beautiful bodies have on gay men, who are, or not HIV

¹⁶⁷ Richard Meyer, “Rock Hudson’s Body,” in *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire*, ed. Deborah Bright, (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), 354.

¹⁶⁸ Ben Cosgrove, “The Photo that Changed the Face of AIDS,” *Time – Life*, November 25, 2014, accessed February 9, 2016, <http://time.com/3503000/behind-the-picture-the-photo-that-changed-the-face-of-aids/>.

¹⁶⁹ Cosgrove, “The Photo that Changed the Face of AIDS”.

¹⁷⁰ Henry A. Giroux, “Consuming Social Change: The “United Colors of Benetton”,” *Cultural Critique*, no.26 (Winter 1993-1994): 9.

¹⁷¹ bell hooks, “Subversive Beauty: New Modes of Contestation,” in *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995), 50.

positive [Fig.52]. Inspired by the campaign Bruce Weber designed for Calvin Klein, Middleton associates photographs of an athlete with images of an ordinary man in briefs, creating a new individual, shattered into bits and pieces.¹⁷² An impossible projection of opposing aesthetics, the *Gay Beauty Myth* translates for the viewers the visual contradictions of the epidemic, bringing their attention on a changing experience of physicality otherwise hardly understandable.

1.5 The *David* was an Activist: From Michelangelo to the AIDS Education Posters

Sex for Sex. Ultimately, the key to defeating a sexual disease is the celebration of sex itself. Or so it seems from an initial analysis of various AIDS educational materials. Activists take advantage of the “Klein effect” and its appropriations to establish a successful visual vocabulary. Adopting frank and effective images that respond to Roland Barthes’ definition of advertisements, they catch the viewer’s attention by transforming different visual vocabularies.¹⁷³ From Italian Renaissance to pornographic images of the 1940s, the overly physical aesthetic activists adopts uses the language of fashion brands along with past representations of masculinity to develop what maybe could be called the “anti-AIDS clone”. Subjected, as the Classic clone, to very specific standards, the “anti-AIDS” clone shapes his beauty on appearance: he is muscular like a Calvin Klein model, but he does not present scars. Simulating a fleshly perfection, the anti-AIDS clone does not escape the violent quality of the contemporary eroticization, but it embraces it fully turning it in his favour.

A mythological creature, this new type of clone goes all the way back to Michelangelo’s *David* [Fig.53]. An iconic figure for the gay community, the *David* is a “signifier of homosexuality”.¹⁷⁴ Used since the 1950s, the masterpiece of Michelangelo has been re-living

¹⁷² Ted Gott, *Don’t Leave Me This Way* (Canberra, ACT: National Gallery of Australia, 1994), 4.

¹⁷³ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 33.

¹⁷⁴ Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosure in the New York Art World, 1948-1963* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2005), 61.

in magazines, small plaster reproduction, and in the poses of Mizer and Bruce of LA's models before, during, and after the advent of AIDS. By the 1960s the statue is the socially accepted substitute for pornographic male nudes [Fig.54].¹⁷⁵ By the 1970s it is so visibly eroticised that

Raymond-Jean Frontain writes:

The image [the David] is now so visible, and its potential gay meaning so widely acknowledged, that the sculpture has been taken down from its pedestal, as it were, and presented in explicitly erotic way.¹⁷⁶

Starting from the 1970s, the *David* steps down from the pedestal and initiates his transformation into the clone, ultimately becoming one of Tom of Finland's men [Fig.55]. The *David's* "clonification" begins as a game of reciprocal imitations: the sculpture is presented as the icon of the classic clone.

The harmony of Michelangelo's *David* is lost. The musculature is pumped up; the shoulders are enlarged; the chest meets the standards of a bodybuilder. Pictured by Finland in a drawn *divertissement*, playing with the idea of having a contemporary clone starting at Michelangelo's sculpture, the David becomes a symbol of inspiration and aspiration. The clone of Finland's drawing looks incredulously at the statue: the David's new penis has literally made him dropped his jaw open [Fig.56].¹⁷⁷ Finland's *David* is now:

the proud possessor of a cock at least quadruple the size of the one Michelangelo gave him. And he made a second alteration to the famous nude. Instead of wearing a frown of determination, Tom's *David* slyly peeks at the viewer as if to say: 'I know what you're looking at!'.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁵ Katherine Sender, "Sex Sells: Sex, Class, and Taste in Commercial Gay and Lesbian Media," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 9, no.3 (June 2003): 351; Butt, *Between you and me*, 62.

¹⁷⁶ Raymond-Jean Frontain, "The Fortune in David's Eyes," *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* 13, no.4 (July-August 2006), accessed February 10, 2016. Gale Cengage Shakespeare Collection Periodicals.

¹⁷⁷ The Tom of Finland Foundation website does not provide a date on the drawings of the David. Looking at the visual summary of Tom's men provided at the beginning of the volume: *Tom of Finland: The Art of Pleasure* I argue that this image was produced in the 1970s. If the 1960s prototype "grows his hair in a fringe", the 1970s man has a "serious haircut", and the 1980s prototype has either a Mohican haircut or a shaved head. See: Micha Ramakers, *Tom of Finland: The Art of Pleasure* (Köln; Lisboa; London; New York; Paris; Tokyo: Taschen, 1998).

¹⁷⁸ F. Valentine Hooven III, *Beefcake: The Muscle Magazines of America 1950-1970* (Köln: Benedict Taschen Verlag GmbH, 1995), 178.

It is not all. In addition to exaggerated physical features, Tom of Finland attributes *David* a fig leaf.

The detail, apparently insignificant, raises some interesting questions. Subtly referring to it, Micha Ramakers states:

Tom specifically mentioned being inspired by artists from the Renaissance and Baroque periods – particularly Michelangelo, whose *David* he would one-day makeover in such a way as to pose a severe challenge to even the most prominent fig leaf.¹⁷⁹

The ironic challenge to a classical pose, the fig leaf is not only reminiscent of the late nineteenth century photographs of Eugen Sandow, suggesting a connection between the first examples of the bodybuilding culture and the contemporary obsession with the gym, but it also mixes the figure of the *David* with that of Adam, enhancing the homoerotic character of the statue [Fig.57]. If Michelangelo's *David* is a young man conscious of his strength, Finland's *David* is a young man conscious of his sexuality. The modern Adam ditches the leaf and re-joys his sexuality, symbolizing the maximal expression of the Classic clone. Michelangelo's sculpture becomes a real man, sexually ready for a physical interaction with the clone who is admiring him. "Beauty," said Nancy Etcoff, "is equal parts flesh and imagination: we imbue it with our dreams, saturate it with our longings", and this is exactly what the *David* represents in the imaginary, and extremely erotic world of Tom of Finland: a living dream perfected in accordance with the contemporary beauty canon.¹⁸⁰

As the 1970s approached, the *David* adapts to an all-leather biker attire [Fig.58]. The transformation, rarely mentioned in academic context, and apparently forgotten by Frontain, happens in a local gay bar of the San Francisco leather scene. I encounter the work for the first time in summer 2017 at the Bob Mizer Foundation. I see the poster hanging on the office wall, and I immediately detect a visual echo. The image of the biker, which I have never seen, looks

¹⁷⁹ Ramakers, *The Art of Pleasure*, 20-21.

¹⁸⁰ Nancy Etcoff, *Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty* (London: Abacus, 1999), 3.

familiar. I ask and learn what follows.¹⁸¹ It is 1966, and in Folsom Street, right in the middle of the San Francisco leather district, a gay bar, Febe's, is about to open. The gay bar, popular in the biker scene, hosts the ultimate reinterpretation of Michelangelo's work: Mike Caffee's *Biker Statue* also known as the *Leather David Statue*. Reproduced in various sizes and materials, used as a logo, taken around the world, and elected as a symbol of the leather community the statue reinvents the *David* by adding clothes and playing with the position of his bodily parts. Caffee takes the elevated arm of the *David*, and turns the forearm down, placing the hand of Michelangelo's masterpiece in the pocket of his new outfit [Fig.59].

"Leather jacket, boots, jeans, and a Harley style cap," Caffee's statue is the vague shadow of Michelangelo's - supposedly-teenage - naked man.¹⁸² As I observe the photographs of Febe's idol, I recall the Italian sculpture as a distant memory: in front of me is a completely new subject. The perfect body of the *David* is hidden behind heavy biker's clothes, the clonification is impressive and extremely effective: the only body part exposed is the muscular chest – Caffee does not need to modify the dimension of *David's* penis like Tom of Finland. The indulgent muscularity of the torso emerging from the opened jacket, the pants slightly lowered to disclose a toned abdomen and pubic lines: Caffee's man is a sexual individual, a fantasy in three dimensions. Febe's logo presents the statue from that same frontal traditional angle that informs my *David's experience*: the photograph works on a strong black and white contrast that enhances the desirability of the *David*, as well as the reality of his physicality. Stepping down from the pedestal, stepping up onto the bar's shelf, the *David/Biker* uses a rediscovered symbolism in the attempt to generate a socially accepted homoerotic sensuality without resorting to pornography.

¹⁸¹ I would like to thank the founder and president of the Bob Mizer Foundation, Dennis Bell for this initial conversation on the statue by Caffee.

¹⁸² Greg Urban, "Culture: In and About the World," *Anthropology Newsletter* 38, no.2 (February 1997), 8, Ephemera Collection Br to C, Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco, California.

Maybe not aware of Caffee's statue, Frontain continues his investigation on the David, jumping from the 1970s to 2004 and cutting out completely the AIDS crisis.¹⁸³ The question emerges spontaneously. *How is it possible that a symbol so important and influential in the gay community throughout the 50s, 60s, and 70s, disappear in the fight against AIDS?* Revealing a gap in the scholarship, Frontain's inattention intrigues me. An initial analysis of AIDS educational material proves my suspicion right. Not only is *David* a recurrent figure in the overly physical aesthetic of illness adopted in the activist world, but he is also one of its more popular icons. Maintaining a 1950s homoerotic sensuality, the *David* takes off the leather jacket and conforms to contemporary advertising strategies, becoming the official "seller" of safe sex practices.

Displayed entirely, or just in part, presented through a black and white filter, revisited in colourful pop perspectives, or simply photographed, the *David* dominates the AIDS educational posters and materials by adapting his beautifully shaped body to the "Klein" effect. Hairless and muscular, the body of the *David*, as the body of a Calvin Klein model, fits perfectly the 1980s and 1990s prototype of male beauty presenting the world with an evolved version of the Reganian post-Vietnam hero. The connection Rambo-David starts to develop in my mind as an interesting possibility: proving it can help me in proving the existence of an overly physical activist aesthetic. I open Google, and type "Rambo – David". I am curious to see if and what the browser will reveal to me. This search is useful: I encounter Ahmed Al-Bahrani's work for the exhibition 'War to War,' (2013) [Fig.60].¹⁸⁴ Adopting a strategy similar to that used by Caffee in the 1970s, Al-Bahrani decides to reflect on violence by projecting Rambo's clothes and attributes onto the Italian sculpture. The David's face is covered with a

¹⁸³ Frontain, "The Fortune in David's Eyes".

¹⁸⁴ Arianna Prothero, "A Gun-Toting Mother Teresa Heralds Art Week in Downtown Miami," *WLRN Miami | South Florida*, December 5, 2013, accessed January 22, 2018, <http://wlrn.org/post/gun-toting-mother-teresa-heralds-art-week-downtown-miami>.

bandana; he has military pants and boots. The sling is substituted by a machine-gun. As Rambo, Michelangelo's masterpiece is a warrior: the muscular hero to his country, who responds perfectly to the beauty prototype of the era he inhabits without losing his masculinity.

Speaking separately of the two heroes, J.A. Mangan highlights the projective nature of the figures using almost identical words. Referring to the *David*, and to the way in which Fascism later appropriated its imagery, he writes:

As part of an outpouring of Renaissance heroic male imagery, Michelangelo's *David*, now hugely admired for its proportioned beauty, 'was a manifestation of accumulated changes of heroic form and significance' and David was a patriotic icon. [...] It appropriated the figure of the powerful hero as a symbol of its own power.¹⁸⁵

Similar sentences inform Rambo's description:

Rambo is an immortal icon – a symbol of security, and he demonstrates powerfully that the transcendental image of the body is a medium through which power is given to the body through its idealization.¹⁸⁶

Powerful, heroic, symbol, icon, the similarities that link Rambo and Michelangelo's *David* prove the effectiveness of an activist aesthetic of illness, highly focused on the body, mining the current interpretation of the rule attributed to the David in the AIDS educational material [Fig.61].

Joan Saab explains the reason behind the use of the *David* in a simple statement. Being a well-known work of art, she argues, Michelangelo's *David* gives activists the possibility to display a naked body without arising censorship issues.¹⁸⁷ The argument returns insistently in Crimp's article "Art Acts Up: A graphic response to AIDS":

The significance of so-called appropriation art, in which the artist forgoes the claim to original creation by appropriating already-existing images and objects, has been to

¹⁸⁵ J.A. Mangan, "The Potent Image and the Permanent Prometheus," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 16, no.2 (1999): 16.

¹⁸⁶ Mangan, "The Potent Image and the Permanent Prometheus," 19.

¹⁸⁷ Joan Saab, interviewed by Hans Villarica, "From Haring to Condom Man: Art as Weapon in the War Against AIDS," *The Atlantic*, December 5, 2011, accessed November 10, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/12/from-haring-to-condom-man-art-as-weapon-in-the-war-against-aids/249229/#slide2>.

show that “the unique individual” is a kind of fiction, that our very selves are socially and historically determined through pre-existing image, discourses, and events.¹⁸⁸

Saab’s affirmation develops from an evident truth; Crimp presents a convincing reason to the posters’ appropriation of famous work of art. And yet, the question Hans Villarica asks Saab in that very interview keeps coming back to me, unresolved: “*As an art historian what did you [I] make of the many appropriations of masterpieces like Michelangelo’s David?*”.¹⁸⁹

Stepping back to move forward, I look for a second reading in the origin of the statue, and its later safer sex manipulation.

Michelangelo realized the *David* between 1501 and 1504.¹⁹⁰ The statue, commissioned by the government of Florence, provided an unconventional portrait of the biblical hero.¹⁹¹ No longer a boy with an uncertain musculature, Michelangelo’s *David* assumes the pose and the shapes of the Greek and Roman statues of Hercules, defining “a new manifestation of masculine strength as the symbol of spiritual strength”.¹⁹² Avoiding the most common representations of the biblical hero, usually portrayed standing victorious on Goliath’s head, Michelangelo decides to focus on the moment before the battle.¹⁹³ Now a gigantic figure, the *David* does not have to prove his victory over Goliath: he is a young man conscious of his body, and of his strength.¹⁹⁴ The David stands on its base showing fiercely a body that, fixed in marble, is eternally protected from death.

A mixture of “athleticism and sexual readiness” Michelangelo’s sculpture enters the AIDS vocabulary with a hard body as perfect as a statue, and as alive as a model of the “Klein

¹⁸⁸ Douglas Crimp, “Art Acts Up: A Graphic Response to AIDS,” *Out Look: National Lesbian & Gay Quarterly*, no.9 (Summer 1990), 28.

¹⁸⁹ Saab, interview.

¹⁹⁰ Howard Hibbard, *Michelangelo* (London: Penguin Group, 1992), 54.

¹⁹¹ Anthony Hughes, *Michelangelo* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1997), 65-66.

¹⁹² Joanne Snow-Smith, “Michelangelo’s Christian neoplatonic aesthetic of beauty in his early *oeuvre*: the *nudists virtualis* image,” in *Concepts of Beauty in Renaissance Art*, ed. Francis Ames-Lewis and Mary Rogers (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1998), 149.

¹⁹³ Hibbard, *Michelangelo*, 61.

¹⁹⁴ The statue was actually appointed as “Il gigante”, which means the giant. See: Hughes, *Michelangelo*, 74.

effect”.¹⁹⁵ Designed in 1994 by the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, the leaflet “Excuses...Unsafe Sex. An Important Message for Gay And Bisexual Men” destroys the most common excuses not to practice safe sex, presenting the *David* in a colourful pop dimension [Fig.62].¹⁹⁶ The musculature is emphasized with a strong black and white contrast that resembles the graphic of comic books. The flyer is printed on both sides, and it does not display the *David* entirely: on one side, the vision is limited to the torso, on the other side of the head.¹⁹⁷ In the attempt to convey an effective message without demonizing sex, the homoerotic component of the statue, here explicated by the muscular torso, is empowered.

The tensed body intrigues the viewer in respect of acceptable standard of representations. Closing the essay “Sex, Class, and Taste in Commercial Gay and Lesbian Media”, Katherine Sender argues:

The stereotype of the hypersexual gay man, the fear of queer sex, the AIDS epidemic, and the associations among explicit sexuality, low moral capital, and sleaze mean that in ad-supported gay and lesbian media, the ban on selling sex desexualizes the audience sold to advertisers as well as the consumer themselves.¹⁹⁸

Sender is implying that sex sells, but not in gay and lesbian magazines. The president of *Out Magazine*, Henry Scott argues that sexualized advertising campaigns appearing in gay and lesbian magazines, have to respect three taste references: they have to be artsy rather than pornographic, they have to hint at homosociality but not at homoeroticism, and finally, they have to make explicit reference to sex only if strictly necessary.¹⁹⁹ Appropriating the image of the torso, rather than that of the genitals, the “anti-AIDS” clone, embedded in the *David* itself,

¹⁹⁵ John Dicarolo, “The Gym and the Heroic Myth,” *The Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide* 8, no.4 (2001):14, accessed February 12, 2016. Gale Cengage Shakespeare Collection Periodicals.

¹⁹⁶ San Francisco AIDS Foundation, *Excuses...Unsafe Sex. An important Message for Gay and Bisexual Men*, 1994, Wellcome Collection, “Images – Search: Excuses...Unsafe Sex,” Wellcome Collection, accessed May 31, 2018, <https://wellcomeimages.org/indexplus/result.html>

¹⁹⁷ San Francisco AIDS Foundation, *Excuses...Unsafe Sex*.

¹⁹⁸ Sender, “Sex. Class, and Taste in Commercial Gay and Lesbian Media,” 359.

¹⁹⁹ Sender, “Sex. Class, and Taste in Commercial Gay and Lesbian Media,” 351-352.

guarantees, as a Calvin Klein model, a representation of male bodies enough artistic to pass the social veto, attract an audience and persuade it.

1989. Calvin Klein launches a new version of “Obsession” [Fig.63]. Weber this time photographs a muscular male torso. Under it, Klein’s slogan goes: “For men. For the Body”. Likewise, the 1994 AIDS flyer, the black and white photograph, similar to a study by Platt Lynes, uses a torso to convey the idea of sex [Fig.64]. Artsy enough to be considered socially acceptable and in no way pornographic, Klein’s strategy changes again in 1991, when Weber produced the famous jeans campaign with a naked Marcus Schenkenberg standing under the shower [Fig.25]. I am brought back to 1964. To Jerry, and his shower after a photo-shoot with Bob Mizer [Fig.24]. To attract interest and attention with his muscles, the body beautiful becomes a product.

Although the model Marcus Schenkenberg is paid to advertise clothing, he is shown without it a remarkable percentage of time. For his multi-page layout for a Calvin Klein advertisement, Shenkenberg was informed by photographer Bruce Weber, “You’re not going to actually wear the pants. Marcus... Maybe you’ll take them off and cover yourself.” Apparently the important thing to convey to potential buyers was not what the pants looked like but what Marcus’s extraordinary body looked like.²⁰⁰

Three years after Schenkenberg’s worldwide appearance, the San Francisco AIDS Foundation would present a similar image using the reassuring and censorship-free figure of the David. *Is this just a coincidence?* No, it is not. Accompanied by various posters by the slogans “JUST IS”, “SEX IS”, or simply “GET IT UNDER COVER”, the David was basically selling (safe) sex [Fig.65].²⁰¹ Bringing the body back to an ideal beauty still traceable, the David contrasts the visual stigmatization of the person with AIDS, and of sex. In a moment in which death is an everyday life experience the David’s beauty becomes the symbol of a male body that, without being relegated to an unattainable past, could still be exalted for its present desirable

²⁰⁰ Etcoff, *Survival of the Prettiest*, 238.

²⁰¹ Boy With Arms Akimbo/ Girl With Arms Akimbo, *Sex is*, 1989, University of Rochester Libraries, “River Campus Libraries, Rare Books and Special Collections, AIDS Education Posters – Search: Michelangelo,” University of Rochester, accessed January 3, 2016, <http://aep.lib.rochester.edu/find?keys=michelangelo>.

physicality, becoming at the same time the emblem of a body that could remain healthy and attractive through safe sex practices.

Eros is expressed in the tension of muscular flesh. It is not necessary to use the image of an erect penis to convey the idea of sex; a tensed abdomen can speak about it in a much more subtle and sensual way.²⁰² Nayland Blake's appreciative writing on Finland comments:

Flesh as it is compacted into springy mass, as it pushes from between fingers, as it is rigid during fucking. Tom's men are massive, and it is this sense of impact of flesh on flesh that provides erotic charge.²⁰³

At odds with an interest in the corporeal beyond the medical, the body, intended as tensed flesh, is a tangible space of erotic survival. Robert Mapplethorpe anticipates this conception in an early study. Made in 1974, *The Slave* shows an open book, displaying two photographs of Michelangelo's sculpture, accompanied by a knife [Fig.66]. Pleasure, beauty, and a sensual violence come together to enact what Richard Marshall has described as "both a still life and a conceptual self-portrait".²⁰⁴ The "anti-AIDS" clone acquires a new dynamic role, as he becomes the signifier of a tensed, and therefore erotic, flesh.

Nothing more, nothing less. Limiting the clone's attire to a tensed, eroticised flesh, I re-discover the "anti-AIDS" clone in the AIDS educational materials, as an improved version of *David's* erotic tension. From comics to posters, flesh is exposed and sensualized. Among the first organizations to turn the *David* "anti-AIDS" fleshly image into an educative visual statement is Gay Men Health Crisis (GMHC).

²⁰² This consideration has emerged from a fruitful conversation with Prof Douglas Crimp at the University of Rochester during my participation in the Worldwide University Network (WUN) Research Mobility program.

²⁰³ Nayland Blake, "Tom of Finland: An Appreciation," in *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian. And Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, ed. Corey K. Creekmur, Alexander Doty (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 1995), 348.

²⁰⁴ Richard Marshall ed. *Robert Mapplethorpe* (London: Secker & Warburgh, 1988), 10

1986. GMHC uses as a slogan for its new poster the line: “Rubbers are Bringing Men Together Again – Condoms. Use Them” [Fig.67].²⁰⁵ The image going along with the above line, establishes the poster narrative around a black and white image of two male torsos close together. The prominent, muscular chests occupy the entire length of the poster. I cannot see either the arms or the penises, but I surely can perceive the imminence of a sexual encounter: the abdomens are tensed, the space between the two torsos is minimal. The light passes through the gap, enhancing the musculature, and making the flesh sculptural. The poster, erotic and informative, uses the “Klein effect” and the “anti-AIDS” clone prototype inspired by the *David* to advance a physical translation of that aesthetic of illness, dictated by activism.

Along with posters and leaflets, in 1986 GMHC produces its first “Safe Sex Comix”.²⁰⁶ A handful of black and white booklets the “Safe Sex Comix” aims to educate the gay community about safe sex practices [Fig.68]. Notwithstanding, having different authors, the comics respond to a similar Finland inspired “anti-AIDS” body fantasy. In accordance to an aesthetic of illness dictated by activism, most of the time the reader does not know if the characters of the comic are HIV+ or not; they use condoms, they are attractive, and they have beautiful muscular bodies, that is all the matters. Comic no.1, text by Greg, drawings by Richard A. White. The comic stages the sexual encounter between a coach and his athlete in the shower of the locker room. The sport is not specified but from the brief dialogue the two muscular men have, it is possible to assume that the sport they are talking about could be wrestling. Putting aside the erotic imagery that has for a long time gone along with that sport, the comic successfully mixes the attitude of Finland’s work to the classical sculptural

²⁰⁵ Gay Men’s Health Crisis, *Rubbers Are Bringing Men Together Again*, 1986, University of Rochester Libraries, “River Campus Libraries. Rare Books and Special Collections, AIDS Education Posters – Search: GMHC,” University of Rochester, accessed May 31, 2018, <https://aep.lib.rochester.edu/node/45546>.

²⁰⁶ Gay Men’s Health Crisis, *Safe Sex Comic #1* (New York: Gay Men’s Health Crisis, 1986), Small Booklets and Pamphlets, Box 48, United States, New York, AIDS Education Collection D.500, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservations, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester, Rochester, New York.

physicality of the *David*. The cover and first page of the comic introduced the two characters after the match.

Just as the Calvin Klein advert for jeans involving Marcus Schenkenberg, the athlete's penis is covered by a small towel, now grabbed by the coach. The sexual tension is high, and well suggested through the tension of every muscle. In a climatic escalation, the genitals of the two men began to appear in the second half of the comic, always along with a detailed representation of a tensed abdomen. In all the scenes of the comic the muscles of the main character so tensed that the water of the shower seems to bounce off their flesh [Fig.69]. The sex scene is articulated along sculptural poses; it is a celebration of an embodied erotic tension that continues even after the sexual intercourse is over, and the men's genitals are covered again with small towels. Classical bodies narrated within a contemporary fantasy, the "anti-AIDS" clone continues to inhabit the activist space throughout the epidemic.

1991. GMHC releases a double language (English and Spanish) informative leaflet with drawings by Rolf Andersen [Fig.70-71].²⁰⁷ The colourful booklet, produced once again to promote safe-sex practices, brings together the classical and the fashion influences that reach the activist community contributing to shaping its aesthetic. The text is enriched by erotic illustrations that, rather than explicate the written account, feed a visual imagery, highly influenced by Tom of Finland. Recalling the photograph that Mapplethorpe took of Charles Bowman's torso in 1980 and the picture of Marcus Schenkenberg by Weber, the pamphlet reminds me of the Farnese Hercules, and the Doryphoros. Classic, muscular, sexy, the "anti-AIDS" clone found its aesthetic of illness in a patchwork of a widely understood, cultural significance. *Why beauty then?*

²⁰⁷ Gay Men's Health Crisis, *Safe Sex Comic #1* (New York: Gay Men's Health Crisis, 1986), Small Booklets and Pamphlets, Box 48, United States, New York, AIDS Education Collection D.500, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservations, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester, New York.

The appearance of the Klein's model, the translation of past body prototypes in sexually accepted representations, the necessity to attract people and confront the spreading of *diseasephobic aesthetic*, as well as the ghostly presence of a lost beauty in those phobic images, speaks to me of a missing visual code. The appropriation of Michelangelo's *David* in the leather bar and AIDS posters proves that beauty, even the pumped, muscular beauty of the Klein's models, and the exaggerated physicality of Finland's men, is an essential element of the body re-codified by AIDS. Aside from any AIDS discourse, Elaine Scarry has written: "beauty is lifesaving".²⁰⁸ She uses as an example the story of Odysseus and Nausicaa: exhausted from years of travel, old, naked, and made ugly by the goddess, Odysseus meets the young, beautiful Nausicaa, on the beach immediately after his ship wrecked. *How is this story relevant to my narrative?*

The 1980s and 1990s idea of male beauty enters the AIDS crisis in the same way in which Nausicaa enters in the life of Odysseus, as a life-saver. An unattainable dream destined to fade, or perfected body carefully trained; fixed in a marble sculpture, or portrayed in sexualized advertising campaigns, used as a way to escape censorship, or as a conveyor of much more complex questions, beauty faces AIDS ultimately proving that some absent presences cannot disappear in the spectacle of time.

"Who were we, where were we, how did we experience these events?"²⁰⁹

I am standing in front of the Mirror, my body merges with the beautiful reflections of the bodies inhabiting the non-absent past of the epidemic. Real and imaginary began to confuse on the surface.

I see a crack in the middle of the Mirror.

My journey has just begun.

²⁰⁸ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (London: Duckworth, 2006), 24.

²⁰⁹ bell hooks, "Subversive Beauty: New Modes of Contestation," in *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995), 50.

2.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF THE FLESH

Beyond the Borders of your Body

*“He has a notebook for jotting things down and a Walkman for listening to music. This way he feels better equipped for his expedition beyond the confines of Thomas’s body”.*¹

1989, Italy. Pier Vittorio Tondelli publishes *Camere Separate*. Articulated in “movements” rather than chapters, the book concretizes the ideas of non-present and non-absent pasts Ewa Domanska presents in the article “The Material Presence of the Past”, making AIDS the ‘notably absent and present’ crack in the Mirror framing this narrative.² In *Camere Separate* (literally ‘Separate Rooms’) the author explores the complicated relationship between the Italian professor Leo and the German musician Thomas, following the characters as they fall in love, separate, and encounter one last time in the hospital room where Thomas would die of a mysterious disease, probably AIDS. Superimposing himself with the figure of Leo, Tondelli develops the story non-chronologically: the non-present past of Leo’s ‘post-Thomas’ life, and the non-absent past of Thomas’ dead body, interchange throughout the book culminating in the final announcement of Leo’s imminent death. Like Leo, Tondelli would die of AIDS in 1991, leaving the Italian literary panorama in the middle of a sentence.³

*“Who were we, where were we, how did we experience these events?”*⁴

¹ Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Separate Rooms*, translated by Simon Pleasance, introduced by Edmund White, (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2004), 44. Original text: “Ha un quaderno per scrivere e un walkman per ascoltare musica. In questo modo si sente meglio attrezzato per la sua spedizione oltre i confini del corpo di Thomas”. See: Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Camere Separate* (Milano: Bompiani, 1989), 58.

² Ewa Domanska, “The Material Presence of the Past,” *History and Theory* 45, no.3 (October 2006): 345. On the presence and absence of AIDS in *Camere Separate*, and on Tondelli’s Mirror-like narrative, see: Gary Cestaro, “Self-Shattering in a Queerer Mirror: Gaze and Gay Selfhood in Pier Vittorio Tondelli,” *MLN* 123, no.1 Italian Issue (January 2008): 99-124.

³ Tondelli died on December 16, 1991 of AIDS in Reggio Emilia. He was 36 years old. See: Cestaro, “Self-Shattering in a Queerer Mirror,” 1

⁴ bell hooks, “Subversive Beauty: New Modes of Contestation,” in *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995), 50.

2015, Venice. I approach *Camere Separate* for the first time, soon realizing that the reading experience asks me for an unconventional level of emotional and cognitive engagement.⁵ 2016, York. Halfway through my PhD I decide to re-read Tondelli's book.

Page 1.

The tale begins in *medias res*. The narrator imposes his presence, dictating, from the first line, my level of involvement in the story. Suddenly, I am on an aeroplane, destination Munich. Next to me sits a man in his thirties, Leo. The man stares blankly at his reflection in the window. From the visibility of the outside to the invisibility of the inside, I am brought into Leo's mind. No longer able to match the reflected image with his own persona, Leo imagines his lover, Thomas, waiting for him at the airport. I am transported to a possible future. I meet Thomas, and I witness his relationship with Leo, just to learn that that future is, in fact, a fantasy. Leo is brought back to "the current state of this dream".⁶

Thomas has been dead for two years.

I do not have the opportunity to process this revelation: the narrator pushes me back and forth in time, guiding me through Leo's memories, and his desperate attempt to "start his journey beyond the confines of Thomas's body".⁷ Linking a present (Leo's) and a disappearing physicality (Thomas') in a shattered temporal construction, the book manages to express that very same alternation of non-present and non-absent pasts at the base of the photographs about to be discussed.

I do not witness Thomas' death. I know it happened sometime during the story, but I have no written/visual proof of his dead body. Thomas simply disappears, existing for me, the reader, either as a past memory or as a dying being. The character is a symbol of the sharpness

⁵ Eugenio Bolongaro, "A Scandalous Intimacy: Author and Reader in Pier Vittorio Tondelli's *Camere Separate*," *Italica* 84, no.4 (Winter 2007): 816.

⁶ Tondelli, *Separate Rooms*, 3.

⁷ Tondelli, *Separate Rooms*, 44.

of an era made of opposing realms: pre-AIDS, post-AIDS; healthy, dying. There is no in between. I do not need to see Thomas' dead body, because his dead body is in the short description of the hospitalized version of the character.

The line is traced.

Domanska's non-present and non-absent pasts are activated, and I, as Leo, am left without closure.⁸ *What happens to Thomas? To his body? How long does he survive? How does he die?*

Pre-AIDS, post-AIDS. Controversial *per se*, this misleading distinction dominates the literature on the AIDS epidemic since the discovery of the virus. Attractive bodies alternate with dying corporealities: there is no in between. In a social code of opposites, a more truthful representation can be found in photo-biographies realised during or immediately after the crisis.⁹ Suspended depictions of lives, the biographical spectacles of Arnie Zane, Tom Bianchi, Samuel Wagstaff, Albert J. Winn, and Richard Sawdon-Smith are here presented as examples of a proto-linguistic narrative at the discovery of the complex visual code, that re-codifying of the body, managing to re-codify society itself. Death, medicine, and time are explored alongside terms already familiar to this project. The present, the past, and the future merge in a system of multi-layered temporalities and corporealities, as I witness, and re-live Zane, Bianchi, Wagstaff, Winn, and Sawdon-Smith's autobiographies of the flesh.

Prophetic of an imminent tragedy, nostalgic for a past splendour the pre and the post-AIDS eras are caught in the middle of a life: movements of an a-temporal performance in the postmodern Mirror of History.¹⁰ I prepare myself to embark on a journey beyond the borders of the photographed bodies.

⁸ On the notions of non-present and non-absent pasts, see: Ewa Domanska, "The Material Presence of the Past," 345. The concepts are also explained in the introduction to this thesis, "Like Chewing Gum on the Sidewalk: An Introduction to the Project," 30.

⁹ With the term photo-biography I mean the artistic practice to construct an autobiography with photographic images.

¹⁰ The use of capital letters aims to bring the readers' attention back to the idea of the Mirror as it appears in Lacan, and of History in its wider universal sense.

As I re-read Tondelli's book, my image reflects onto the laptop screen.¹¹ The body, my body, is confused with words, and pictures, becoming the virtual absence of a tangible presence. From the invisibility of the inside to the visibility of the outside, I proceed in my exploration by looking at the possible bodies of a possible future and the real bodies of a inescapable past. Like Tondelli in *Camere Separate*, I attempt:

to undo the inevitability of a predefined linguistic and sexual grammar by repeatedly returning us to the mirror scene and beyond the underpinnings of imaginary self-hood in the proto-linguistic universe of the infant-not-yet-subject.¹²

From a body before AIDS to a body "after" AIDS. From a body before treatments to a body made strong by new, improved medications. From the pre-diagnosis body to a body medically and socially exposed. The proto-linguistic strategy offered by the photographic medium reveals a missing subject, and his/her shattered self-hood construction.

Questioning the social misconceptions at the base of the media representation of AIDS, I here intend to discuss the effects and the risks that an applied medical gaze can have on the understanding of health and illness. Looking at the intra-textual conversation that emerges from an analysis of the above-mentioned photographers' work, I move in and out of time, further revealing the shattering of an era and its subjects. I use the photographs Arnie Zane took of Pearl Pease in the late 1970s, to discuss the act of ageing and that of dying and inscribe these terms in the context of the AIDS epidemic to question the reasons why the images have been read as a prefiguration of Zane's dying body. From the aged body to the young beautiful bodies of a time before AIDS. The photographic tale continues with a comparison between Tom Bianchi's *Fire Island Pines Polaroids (1975-1983)* and the private collection of photographs

¹¹ When I was writing the thesis, I was reading *Camere Separate* from an e-book on my laptop: Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Camere Separate* (Milano: Tascabili Bompiani, 2008), iBook. The in-text references "Page 1" and "Page 65," refer to that e-book. For clarity all the quotes in the thesis trace back to printed copies. Page 65 in the printed translated edition published by Serpent's Tail is page 44.

¹² Cestaro, "Self-shattering in a Queerer Mirror," 106.

by Samuel Wagstaff that are now preserved at the Getty Research Institute. A socially known *imago* of the epidemic, the photographs reveal lost reflections in the Mirror of history, presenting me once again with an after-history, and a confused subject. *What am I looking at?*

From the pre-AIDS realities told by Zane, Bianchi and Wagstaff, I move onto the post-AIDS world of the medically treated body. The *Band-AIDS* series of Albert J. Winn transports me at the crossroad of the visible and the invisible, leading me to consider in depth how an aesthetic of illness acts on the doctor/patient relationship, how a disease differs from an illness, and how society often unconsciously mixes the two looking for signs that are not there. Moving from Winn's work, Richard Sawdon-Smith takes the invisible and turns it into something that is now absolutely visible: with him I am introduced to a world post-HAART (Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy) finding myself asking one more time *what I am looking at*. Undertaking a journey beyond, and in certain cases within, a body that does not know AIDS, a body that is forced to face AIDS, and a body that is being treated for HIV/AIDS, I argue for the performative quality of the works, and their crucial role in the construction of a shattered selfhood.

Theoretical studies of trauma and medicine are used as a tool to construct visual analysis beyond a pure art historical perspective. Aside from *Camere Separate* the text will refer to Cathy Caruth's *Trauma: Exploration in Memory* (1995), and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed's *If Memory Serves: Gay Men, AIDS, and the Promise of the Queer Past* (2012), and Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield's *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History* (2012). To escape a *diseasephobic aesthetic of illness*, Zane, Bianchi, Wagstaff, Winn, and Sawdon-Smith suspend in the middle of an image the concept of health and sickness going beyond the confines of bodies. Fleshly autobiographies uniquely shattered, their works fixate upon the shadows of the epidemic in a vanishing paper imprint.

2.1 Arnie Zane: Dancing with Pearl Pease

Non-present, and non-absent, the pasts of the post-scripted tales of the epidemic float in a multiplicity of dichotomies: in time/out of time; necessarily physical/ immanently ghostly; healthy/sick; old/young. Accordingly, the years before the advent of AIDS become years of physical excesses and excessive physicalities. They become years of an in-time narrative, and an out-of-time fantasy. The years where life seems to follow its naïve natural course: young people party and have fun; elderly people get old, age and eventually die. The years before the advent of AIDS are the years that would be lost forever to AIDS.

In Time. Out of Time.

2016, The Pride Centre of Staten Island. Lester Blum and Vladimir Rios open “I Still Remember,” an exhibition to remember those who died of AIDS.¹³ The exhibition opens on World AIDS Day, addressing survivors and new generations. I discover the show, almost two years later, looking for articles on the “survivors” of the epidemic. What fascinates me the most about Blum and Rios’s show is the concept behind its creation. Blum and Rios re-create the pre-AIDS era by re-staging a storyline exemplary – according to them - of a time before and immediately after the beginning of the crisis: two men meet at Fire Island; they fall in love; one gets diagnosed with AIDS, and dies, the other deals with his grief [Fig.72].¹⁴ Captured in a series of photographs, the exemplary love story does not have specific subjects: the models are donating their bodies to the camera, and to the lost voices of a non-history. The re-enactment becomes a physical, tangible, and yet oddly distancing experience. Looking at the YouTube version of the exhibition I feel detached: I see a narrative of the epidemic that is forced and too vaguely presented.¹⁵ The imagery is familiar, and yet unconvincing. The

¹³ Visual AIDS, “I Still Remember by Lester Blum,” Past Events, *Visual AIDS*, December 1, 2015, accessed May 7, 2018, <https://www.visualaids.org/events/detail/opening-reception-i-still-remember>.

¹⁴ Trenton Straube, “I Still Remember,” *POZ*, November 10, 2015, accessed June 14, 2018, <https://www.poz.com/article/blum-rios-photography-28003-1099>.

¹⁵ Lester Blum, “I Still Remember,” YouTube video, 6:55, posted by Lester Blum, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XANa8Y4ajE0>.

subjects are lost in repetitive storylines, evidently elevated onto a staged pedestal. In “I Still Remember” the pre-AIDS era is subverted, and eventually shattered: the present becomes absent, the excess becomes restriction. In the post-AIDS era, Blum and Rios are trying to make sense of a future eradicated in the past. A product of time, beyond time, and in time, photography assumes in this process a privileged position. Analysing Gonzalez-Torres’ photo-album project, Nancy Spector writes:

Photography is the most truthful reflection of time’s progression, for it does not change with us, as does the mirror image, which “thoughtfully and treacherously” accompanies us through life, transforming as we do. The snapshot does not lie about the present or the past. It also unnervingly predicts the future.¹⁶

In Time. Out of Time.

“The snapshot does not lie about the present or the past,” and it “unnervingly “predicts the future”.¹⁷ At least so it does for me, a researcher looking at past events in her present. *But how does it work for those who are still alive? What does it imply for the survivors?*

Like Blum and Rios, survivors re-live in an impossible time-lapse. ‘The walking wounded,’ as Finkelstein calls them, sleepwalk in time, struggling to fit into an institutional storytelling.¹⁸ The survivors age biologically, but not chronologically: as the readers of *Camere Separate*, they are suspended in a narrative without closure.

Post-AIDS bodies stuck in pre-AIDS corporealities.

The models selected by Blum and Rios are not young: they are ageing men and women, re-enacting a pre-AIDS narrative in their survived bodies. Blum and Rios are somehow still there: they are still Schulman’s ‘Us’.¹⁹ A generational cohort lost in the middle of a sentence, in the middle of a snapshot.

¹⁶ Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1995), 125.

¹⁷ Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 125.

¹⁸ Avram Finkelstein, *After Silence: A History of AIDS through its Images* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), “Epilogue: Nostalgia”.

¹⁹ Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), “Introduction: Making Record from Memory,” 10.

Ageing is different from dying; however, in the contemporary world, the two terms often superimpose in a network of unstable signifiers. Society equates the aged body to the dead body, subverting the actual meaning of two very different bodily statuses. In the *Taber's Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary* I read:

ageing (āj'ing) **1.** Growing older. Most authorities confine the term to the maturation and physiological changes in organ systems that occur after the 30th year of life. **2.** Maturing **3.** Any physiological, cellular, or biochemical change that occurs over time rather than from injury or disease.²⁰

dying **1.** The end of life and the transition to death. **2.** Degenerating (e.g., “dying back”).²¹

Images of old men and old women make sense of the unspeakable, easing the incomprehensibility of death, but when AIDS enters society destroying social conventions, and dictionary definitions, the easing out strategy loses its function. In the postmodern world, ageing is no longer a substitute for dying. *What am I looking at?*

1975. An Italo-Jewish dancer from New York, Arnie Zane, photographs Pearl Pease, an elderly lady who like to spend her days in the streets of Binghamton, NY wearing a beautiful “girl’s Marie-Antoinette-style pink party dress”.²²

Zane is a talented, eclectic individual: experimental photographer, and alongside Bill T. Jones, the second half of a revolutionary dance duo, Zane is diagnosed with ARC (AIDS-Related Complex) in 1985 [Fig.73].²³ He dies three years later in his house outside New York.²⁴ Jones, his partner at work and in life is at his side. Zane dies thirteenth years after his photographic

²⁰ Donald Venes ed., *Taber's Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary* (Philadelphia: F.A Davis Company, 2013), “Aging,” 65.

²¹ Venes ed., *Taber's Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary*, “Dying,” 742.

²² Bill T. Jones quoted in Jonathan Green, “Continuous Reply,” in *Continuous Replay: The Photographs of Arnie Zane*, ed. Jonathan Green, (Cambridge, MA; London: The MIT Press, 1999), 45.

²³ Green, “Chronology,” in *Continuous Replay: The Photographs of Arnie Zane*, ed. Jonathan Green, (Cambridge, MA; London: The MIT Press, 1999), 197.

²⁴ Bill T. Jones and Peggy Gillespie, *Last Night on Earth* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), 177-178.

encounter with Pease, and the creation of those images that according to Green, stand as his ultimate *imago*, as the prefiguration of his own death [Fig.74-76].²⁵

“A system in collapse in a system moving forward”.²⁶

So far, I have looked at images of beautiful bodies, witnessing their transformation from persons into objects of disease, into images of medical terror. Now I am stepping towards a more conscious representation of disease and illness, facing, in accordance to the visible/invisible and present/absence dialectics, images of something the Mirror is not meant to reflect back: the elderly versions of those who died. The journey beyond the body of the epidemic thus begins with an unconventional and, for this thesis, exceptional parallel. Beyond time, beyond gender, beyond generational classes, the aged, female body of Pearl Pease becomes the scholarly device to make sense of a male body, Zane’s, that was and no longer is; a body that never saw an older age.

1988, 1975.²⁷ A young male dancer, and a “mad” old lady.²⁸ *What am I looking at?*

The single text ever published on Zane’s photographs adopts a “destiny” orientated narrative, defining Pease’s body as a prefiguration of Zane’s dying body.²⁹ The narrative develops on a subject that has both nothing and all to do with its photographer. On Pease’s body a generational story is explicated. Bryan S. Turner writes:

My aging takes place within the context of the cohort of people whom I regard as part of ‘my generation’ and thus in relationship to previous and coming generations. These

²⁵ Green, “Continuous Replay,” in *Continuous Replay*, 45-47.

²⁶ Bill T. Jones quoting Arnie Zane in *Untitled*, 1989. Also quoted in: David Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic: Tracking Choreography in the Age of AIDS* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 130.

²⁷ The dates refer to the death of Arnie Zane (1988) and the moment in which Zane took the photographs of Pearl Pease (1975).

²⁸ Green highlights how the Pease was considered by others than Zane “a mad woman unreasonably holding on to dreams of elegance and lace”. See: Green, “Continuous reply,” 45.

²⁹ Green, “Continuous Replay,” 47. Information on Zane photographic practice can be also found in Deborah Garwood’s review of the exhibition “Arnie Zane Photographs: In celebration of the 20th Anniversary of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company” at The Paula Copper Gallery, New York (January 8 - February 7, 2004): Deborah Garwood, “Arnie Zane and the Lantern of Memory,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 27, no.2 (May 2005): 87-90.

generations develop a collective memory of themselves which, in a sense, is not allowed to grow old, with the result that individuals become labelled (now pejoratively) as ‘a sixties person’.³⁰

At the moment in which he takes the picture, Zane cannot see the older version of his generational cohort: they are all young, and strong. The older generation he has as a reference in that photographic moment, is Pease.

Photographed dressed, and naked, Pease is elevated as a symbol for her ageing body [Fig.74]. She is the foreshadowing device adopted to put a closure on Zane’s interrupted youth.³¹ Rolland Munro and Olga Belova observe:

We situate body as a “register” of the *interruption* of narrative, as much as we see it acting as the medium of its inscription. The interest is therefore less with durations of time in which bodies ‘follow’ knowledge, having fallen in line with one narrative or another, and more with those moments in which bodies appear to step outside of narrative, so to speak.³²

In Pease’s body, I do not see Zane’s future dead body, but I do see the *imago* of what could have been, and never was. Performing an interruption of time in its continuity, Pease’s shared autobiography of the flesh is fragmented and eternally extensible. In her physicality, I face and prefigure a moment that is inevitable:

every visual image of the human body is an image of a person who is aging, of someone who has been captured at a point in their movement through the life course, a process which necessarily entails changes in the visible surface of the body;³³

but does not make sense in the context of the epidemic. Every picture fixates a step toward an aged version of an individual “not-yet-subject”.³⁴ Every picture, a step closer to that person’s

³⁰ Bryan S. Turner, “Aging and Identity. Some reflections on the somatization of the self,” in *Images of Aging: Cultural Representations of Later Life*, ed. Mike Featherstone and Andrew Wernick (London; New York: Routledge, 1995), 254.

³¹ Green, “Continuous Replay,” 47

³² Rolland Munro and Olga Belova, “The Body in Time: Knowing Bodies and the ‘Interruption’ of Narrative,” *Sociological Review* 56, no.2_suppl. (October 2008): 87-88.

³³ Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth, “Images of positive aging. A case study of *Retirement Choice Magazine*,” in *Images of Aging*, 29.

³⁴ Gary Cestaro, “Self-Shattering in a Queerer Mirror: Gaze and Gay Selfhood in Pier Vittorio Tondelli,” *MLN* 123, no.1 Italian Issue (January 2008): 106.

death. The naked, decadent body of Pease is not presented in its entirety; it is fragmented, and destroyed: there is space for an external, personal, projection.

In Pease, a “visual syntax” of inclusions and exclusions is formed.³⁵ Whatever bodily storyline Zane tells through Pease’s body, his proto-linguistic form of expression develops in the full acknowledgement of the centrality physicality occupies in the individual’s life. The attention is brought onto Pease’s torso, a condensed symbol of a universal femininity, and therefore of life [Fig.74-75-76]. Generated from Pease’s no longer fertile body is a multitude of stories that Zane would never experience himself. It is a story delicate and violent at the same time. Pearl’s skeletal body is presented and performed in front of the camera in its honest fleshly appearance. In Zane’s pictures are embodied Merleau-Ponty’s words:

The reversibility that defines the flesh exists in other fields; it is even incomparably more agile there and capable of weaving relations between bodies that this time will not only enlarge, but will pass definitively beyond the circle of the visible.³⁶

From the visible of the outside to the invisible of the inside, Pearl is the Mirror where an interrupted self-hood is expressed.

In her pictures, time is suspended to celebrate a fleeting corporeal stage. The body is teleologically used as a tool of symbolic identification. Jens Brockmeier defines teleology referring back to the epic story of *Odysseus*. He writes:

Just as the here and now of the narrative event follows the narrated events of the past, the (temporary) end of the narrated life tends to appear as the *telos* of one’s life history – as if a sequential order in time becomes a casual or teleological order of events. I shall call this merging of structures of development, narrative and time *retrospective teleology*.³⁷

The confusion of time in the association of merging narratives is visually explicated. Zane uses Pease’s elderly body to create a biographical story of her life, not knowing that that body would

³⁵ Green, “Continuous Replay,” 48.

³⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 144.

³⁷ Jens Brockmeier, “From the End to the Beginning: Retrospective Teleology in Autobiography,” in *Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture*, ed. Jens Brockmeier and Donald Carbaugh (Amsterdam; Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2001), 252.

also become the herald of his retrospective biography. The flesh of Pease goes beyond its phenomenological definition, stepping out of the tangible, the visible, and even the temporal, in a suspended limbo amongst past, present, and future. Pease's body is the exclusive, active storyteller of a corporeal identity developed through movement: movement outside a temporal construction, movement before the camera, movement before the body. I, the onlooker, am the retrospective narrator of an unintended autobiography. Pease's body is the forced autobiographeme of Zane's AIDS reconstructed identity.³⁸

Being a dancer Zane approaches his subject with an extreme attention to inner and almost imperceptible movements. In Pease's scars, and bones, in a body re-shaped by age, the corporeal being is ultimately disclosed. The torso series is to me particularly challenging. Pease's body is presented as a sequence of tensed and relaxed parts somehow working together. The photos become a dance: in the fixed discontinuity of Pease's solo and the unseen movements of the photographer, a secret *pas de deux* is staged in front of the camera. Speaking about this series long after the images were taken, and after Zane's death, Jones asks:

[The photographs] Are very, very hard, harsh. He knew that they were ghastly for us to look at. Or did he, in fact, see the human form? Did he know he was presenting something like a cadaver, something that was frightening to us? He knew he was.³⁹

The afterlife of the images is overlapping its initial, unrecorded status. *Should I look at the collaboration between Pease and Zane as a deathly acknowledgement of a future physical dematerialization?*

In their current interpretations, the photographs of Pease seem to lose their cinematic value, becoming instead instruments of shock. Following a similar detached perspective, Green presents the series as a work at the crossroads of medical sciences and art.⁴⁰ After all, Zane's

³⁸ The word autobiographeme, inspired by Roland Barthes, is articulated later in the chapter, see: Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflection on Photography* (London: Vintage Books, 2000), 30; Ch.2 "Autobiography of the Flesh," Subsection 2.3 "Albert J. Winn: Performing the Past in the Present of a Scar," 137.

³⁹ Green, "Continuous Replay," 62.

⁴⁰ Green, "Continuous Replay," 48.

words seem to satisfy this interpretation. Explaining his interest in picturing torsos, Zane claimed:

I started doing torsos of people of all ages, from bodies that were devastated to the very beautiful. I photographed the person from just beneath the eyes to the groin. This coincided with my developing as a dancer. I wanted the torso to bring the personality out. I wanted to be able to look at an anonymous person, like in a medical photograph, look at their torso and tell all about the persona.⁴¹

A surgeon of the invisible, Zane's "medical approach" is personal, profound, and maintains a deep sense of sensual beauty.⁴² The closeness of the photographer's camera to the subject, as well as the limited frame that could contribute to perpetuating the idea of a medical exam, is instead the proof of a deeper desire to understand. Green's statement does not take into account the invisible.

To Age. To Die.

Pease is not dying: she is ageing. Closer to death than to life, Pease faces the spectator with a physical condition hard to process. *What am I looking at?*

One more time, I wonder what I am supposed to see in her vulnerable body. With her poses and revealed nudity, Pease is fighting the gaze to which she, an old person, is commonly subjected to. Digging into numerous archival materials, I happened to find Yvonne Rainer's personal research on age. In one of the files of her collection is preserved an article by Charles Simmons entitled "The Age of Maturity". The article opens up with a poem by Randall Jarrell:

When I was young and miserable
and pretty
And poor, I'd wish: to have a husband.
A house and children. Now that I'm old my wish
Is womanish:
That the boy putting groceries in my car
See me. It bewilders me that he doesn't see me.⁴³

⁴¹ Elizabeth Zimmer and Susan Quasha ed., *Body against Body: The Dance and other Collaborations of Bill T. Jones & Arnie Zane* (New York: Station Hill Press, 1989), 19.

⁴² On the sensual beauty of medical images see: Henrik Enquist, "Narcissus's New Mirror: Body Images and Meaning," *Crossing: ejournal of Ard and Technology* 5, no.1 (2007).

⁴³ Randall Jarrell quoted in Charles Simmons, "The Age of Maturity," 2006.M.24, "Aging," Box 44, Folder 7, Yvonne Rainer Papers 1871-2013 (bulk 1959-2013). The Getty Research Institute Special Collections. Los Angeles, California.

The photographs of Pease's naked body offer the viewer a womanhood that is not expected, an invisible reality that jeopardizes the scientific flair suggested by Green.

Zane does not look at his subject by adopting a fully committed medical gaze. He makes visible a missing body factored around the person herself with clinical care and precision.

Laura E. Tanner sustains:

In order to render disease visible, the medical gaze must factor out the person with illness; seeing the patient as an embodied subject, then, emerges as not only inconsequential but actually counterproductive. In the examining room, the person with illness becomes the white space in the picture, the absence which allows the illness to be seen.⁴⁴

Far from being the white space that let the illness show, Pease's body is the canvas onto which the individual is revealed in its complexity. The black and white photographs take advantage of the effects of shadows and lights on the flesh, to highlight, explore, and connect with Pease's fragility. Defining within the frame of the picture an intimate space, Zane leads me in the choreography of Pease's lifetime.

“Who were we, where were we, how did we experience these events?”⁴⁵

Moving through bones, flesh, and wounds, light is used to perform the changing physicality of a body that despite everything is still alive. To borrow Munro and Belova's theory, Zane succeeds in translating into a visual language a re-performance of the body stretched through times:

Stories are excited, we suggest, by bodies re-member-ing themselves; by their very *coming into presence*. This is to say, alongside 'effects' being generated by the mass of bodies bumping into each other – in line with David Hume's analogy with billiard balls – bodies may also make *themselves* felt. [...] Far from being 'forgotten', as can happen when the body gets 'in line', the body is literally *re-membered*.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Laura E. Tanner, *Lost Bodies: Inhabiting the Borders of Life and Death* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2006), 21.

⁴⁵ bell hooks, "Subversive Beauty: New Modes of Contestation," in *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995), 50.

⁴⁶ Munro and Belova, "The Body in Time," 95.

Coming into presence rather than fading away, the body re-members itself while embedding in it past and future stories.

Projection of people with AIDS in the 1990s, visualization of Zane's own body, the interpretations of Pease's series miss the point of having within that body a performance of remembrance continuously renewed.⁴⁷ Through the skeletal appearance and tensed flesh of Pease's body, I experience a disordered narrative, a collapsed temporality. I see a missing physicality and an impossible subject-hood. I go back to the Mirror surface, step 1 of an infant-not-yet-[never]-subject.⁴⁸ And I understand. Pease's aged womanhood is, by its very definition, the beginning incorporated into an end. She is the mother-like figure onto which the post-AIDS diagnosis body is easily returned. I recall Tondelli and his way of presenting a dying Thomas. Death and age superimpose with a new consciousness.

Leo never suspected he would find Thomas so worn out. He was obscenely thin, almost shrivelled. His face was sunken, the skin drawn tight over his cheekbones. His lips had almost vanished, reduced to a thin strip of skin barely covering his teeth. Head shaven. Arms and legs like an undernourished child's. And that huge belly, cut through and turned inside out.⁴⁹

I see Pease. I see Arnie.

Like a Mirror.

Their body is a "representation of a representation".⁵⁰

What am I looking at?

⁴⁷ On comparing the photographs of Pease to those of People with HIV/AIDS, see: Green, "Continuous Replay," 46.

⁴⁸ Cestaro, "Self-shattering in a Queerer Mirror," 106.

⁴⁹ Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Separate Rooms*, translated by Simon Pleasance, introduced by Edmund White, (London: Serpent's Tail, 2004), 24. Original text: "Leo non si sarebbe mai aspettato di trovarlo così sfiancato. Dimagrito in modo osceno, quasi mummificato. Il volto scavato, tirato sugli zigomi. Le labbra quasi scomparse, ridotte a un esile filo di pelle che non riesce a ricoprire i denti. I capelli rasati a zero. Le braccia e le gambe simili a quelle di un bambino denutrito. E quel ventre enorme, rivoltato e squartato". See: Tondelli, *Camere Separate*, 35.

⁵⁰ Phrase borrowed by Pierre Legendre, "Introduction to the Theory of the Image: Narcissus and the Other in the Mirror," *Law and Critique* VIII, no.1 (1997): 33.

2.2 Tom Bianchi and Samuel Wagstaff: The Sun was Shining on Fire Island

A blurred photo of the New York cityscape opens Tom Bianchi's photo-book/diary [Fig.77]. Trained as a lawyer, Bianchi starts to take pictures in the 1970s when he is presented with an SX-70 Polaroid Camera.⁵¹ A private album of the pre-AIDS era, *Fire Island Pines: Polaroids 1975-1983* (2013) substitutes the aged body with its much younger version. Bianchi works with beauty and youth. An external narrator way too invested in the plot, the photographer demands the same emotional and cognitive involvement I was asked to adopt reading *Camere Separate*.⁵² Since page 1, I am reminded that the people captured in the snapshots have died of AIDS. There is no room for guessing: in the postmodern world individuals do not age, they just die, entering a visual narrative in time and out of time. All of a sudden, I find myself on Fire Island. "An erotic literary locus, a theological hotspot," the perfect setting for Alexander Goodman's homoerotic novels; the Fire Island, I am transported to, confuses the non-present past of the pre-AIDS era, with the non-absent past of the post-AIDS reality, further reaffirming the shattered nature of the epidemic.⁵³ I see Fire Island and its inhabitants: like a mirror, "a representation of a representation".⁵⁴ I grab my Walkman, and my notes, beginning my journey beyond the bodies of Tom.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Tom Bianchi, *Fire Island Pines: Polaroids 1975-1983* (Bologna: Damiani, 2013), 4.

⁵² See: Eugenio Bolongaro, "A Scandalous Intimacy: Author and Reader in Pier Vittorio Tondelli's *Camere Separate*," *Italica* 84, no.4 (Winter 2007): 816-818.

⁵³ James Miller, "Dante on Fire Island: Reinventing Heaven in the AIDS Elegy," in *Writing AIDS: Gay, Literature, Language, and Analysis*, ed. Timothy F. Murphy and Suzanne Poirier (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 268; Alexander Goodman, *Summer on Fire Island* (Washington, D.C.: Twilight Classics, 1968). In the article "From the Closet to the Beach: A Photographer's view of Gay Life on Fire Island From 1975 to 1983," T.J. Thomson does not read Bianchi's work as a testimony of the pre-AIDS era. The choice is curious. See: T.J. Thomson, "From the Closet to the Beach: A Photographer's View of Gay Life on Fire Island From 1975 to 1983," *Visual Communication Quarterly* 25, no.1 (2018): 3-15.

⁵⁴ Pierre Legendre, "Introduction to the theory of the image: Narcissus and the Other in the Mirror," *Law and Critique* VIII, no.1 (1997): 33.

⁵⁵ Reference to the opening quote for this chapter. See: Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Separate Rooms*, translated by Simon Pleasance, introduced by Edmund White, (London: Serpent's Tail, 2004), 44. Original text: Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Camere Separate* (Milano: Bompiani, 1989), 58

“About the wit, the beauty, the spirit and creative imagination of a generation of social
pioneers largely lost”.⁵⁶

In Time. Out of Time. Turning the pages of Bianchi’s book, I am in my present, and not in the present of the images. And yet, I have a presence right here and now.⁵⁷ I am not in 1975, 1983, and 2018, and at the same time, I am in 1975, 1983, 2018. Beyond the evident differences that separate the contemporary audience from the audience of the 1980s, Bianchi’s photobook suspends me halfway through the surface of the Mirror. Taken between 1975 and 1983, Bianchi’s Polaroids were assembled in a book only in 2013, almost thirty years after the first publication attempt. The temporal phase that structures Bianchi’s, as well as, the viewer’s experience of the book, ranges from the 1970s libertine atmosphere non-present pre-AIDS past to the non-absent past of the post-AIDS years. The thirty years standing between the moment those pictures were taken, and the moment I am typing this text further complicates the instability of the photographic *ensemble*, possibly interpreted as a day, a second, or a year on the islands. “The book itself can be read as a day or as a summer.” – explains Bianchi in an interview with Chris Freeman – “I tried to document it as comprehensively as possible”.⁵⁸ I turn one more page, realizing that my presence here and now is the presence of a witness, of a body re-experiencing lives otherwise forgotten. I am my body, I am those bodies: participant and spectator to a summer in time and out of time.

The situation triggered by Bianchi in his visual re-enactment reprises Tondelli’s book, questioning once again the impossibility of a historical view over the epidemic. The collector of fragmented stories re-performed in a chronologically contradictory sequence, Bianchi

⁵⁶ Bianchi, *Fire Pines Islands*, 7.

⁵⁷ For the distinction between “being present” and “having a presence” see: Josette Féral, “How to Define Presence Effects: The Work of Janet Cardiff,” in *Archaeologies of Presence: Art, performance and the persistence of being*, ed. Gabriella Giannachi, Nick Kaye, Michael Shanks (London; New York: Routledge, 2012), 29. Also explained in the introduction, “Like Chewing Gum on the Sidewalk: An Introduction to the project,” 30.

⁵⁸ Chris Freeman, “Tom Bianchi: Eye on the Pines,” *The Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide* 20, no.6 (November 1, 2013), accessed December 11, 2017. Gale Cengage Shakespeare Collection Periodicals.

fixates on paper what Mark Currie defines the “postmodern style”.⁵⁹ The photographs present me with an “‘accelerated recontextualization’.”⁶⁰ Moving back and forth in Bianchi's recent past, *Fire Island Pines: Polaroids 1975-1983* accesses a fictional time-space reflecting a crisis of the self. When I look at the pictures, I look with my eyes, but I am also assuming Bianchi's past eyes, and his current ways of reinterpreting the pictures. It is a system in collapse that nevertheless does not fail to move forward.⁶¹

“Who were we, where were we, how did we experience these events?”⁶²

A tool of remembrance, an album is a space to treasure images of moments or events that are not meant to be shared publicly. An album is a collection chronologically ordered and addressed to a specific, limited audience. Alexander Koptyn defines both the act of taking pictures and arranging them in albums as a playful activity reflecting a deep sense of order.⁶³ The work of Bianchi fulfils the definition of an album with a twist. His work collects a wide range of moments related to a particular event, and then assembles them as an act of mourning. The appreciation for a clear identification of time within the photographic work is lost for good: the book proposes to cover 8 years, without indicating even once when the pictures were taken: for all I know, I might be looking at an image taken before AIDS and interpreted it as an image taken after AIDS. *Am I looking at an album?*

Yes, and no. *Fire Island Pines: Polaroids 1975-1983* is a book that pretends to be an album. It is the performance of an album taking to the extreme the definition of the word

⁵⁹ Mark Currie, *Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 10.

⁶⁰ Currie, *Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time*, 10.

⁶¹ The sentence refers directly to Arnie Zane quoted by Bill T. Jones in *Untitled*, 1989. Also quoted in: David Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic: Tracking Choreography in the Age of AIDS* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 130

⁶² bell hooks, “Subversive Beauty: New Modes of Contestation,” in *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995), 50.

⁶³ Alexander Kopytin, “Photography and Art Therapy: An Easy Partnership,” *Inescape* 9, no.2 (April 2004): 49.

‘album’ itself. From the Latin, the word ‘album’ indicates a space left white for lists.⁶⁴ The background chosen by Bianchi to re-print the Polaroids, I notice, is white. I start to read the succession of muscular bodies as a list of lost names. Another anomaly captures my attention: the book/performance album does not follow a chronological order, but it does develop a narrative order. The pictures, unequally distributed throughout the album, can be read from the top left corner to the bottom right corner of the pages, just like a book. To borrow the words of Martha Langford, Bianchi is inviting me “to speak the photographic album”.⁶⁵ The book so conceived, detaches itself strongly from the standard conception of an album, in the audience it addresses. No longer private, the collections of snapshots are shared with a public, generally divisible into two categories: those who rediscovered their past in the photographs, and those, like me, who have never lived either the 1970s sexual revolution or the AIDS crisis and are now offered to live the Pines in an a-chronological, problematic, present. Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed write:

The years following the onset of the AIDS epidemic witnessed a discursive operation that instigated a cultural forgetting of the 1960s and 1970s, installing instead a cleaned-up memory that reconstitutes sanctioned identity out of historical violence.⁶⁶

Anticipating the validity of Castiglia and Reed’s thesis, Bianchi’s attempt to build a visual performance of the Pines fails to acknowledge the consequences of the temporal gap that divides the subjects of the pictures and the contemporary audience. I intrude in Bianchi’s photo-album with a permission granted and began to read it with my own voice.

September 2016. New York. I embrace the confusion of Bianchi’s album/non-album and begin my journey into, what ultimately is, his autobiography of the flesh. As in *Camere Separate*, the experience begins in *medias res*, right on the back cover. I am on a boat, direction

⁶⁴ Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* (Montreal: Queen’s University Press, 2001), “The Idea of Album,” 23.

⁶⁵ Langford, *Suspended Conversations*, “Introduction: Show and Tell,” 21.

⁶⁶ Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed, *If Memory Serves: Gay Men, AIDS, and the Promise of the Queer Past* (Minneapolis, MN; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 40.

Fire Island Pines [Fig.77]. From the deck, I see the harbour and its festive inhabitants. They are wearing bright coloured clothes. I begin to discover their houses and the beaches where they used to spend time. Ultimately, I get to know their bodies, intrude on their interactions, and everyday life rituals. As in *Camere Separate*, I assume from page 1 that the majority of the people appearing in the book have died of AIDS. Nostalgic, melancholic, the world I approach is inhabited by lost presences. I realize I am once again embarking a journey “beyond the confines” of the body, this time, however, I am the omniscient narrator, deeply involved in the story.⁶⁷ I am what remains of those bodies’ reflection.

The Polaroids, partially consumed by time, are re-photographed alone, or in groups of three or four. According to Bianchi, when he first tried to publish the book, back in the 1980s, the pictures almost naturally ordered themselves in a narrative sequence. Returning to the project thirty years later, he decided to opt for an autobiographical narrative, a sort of diary.⁶⁸ The pictures were laid out, associated, isolated to present the viewer with a comprehensive, satisfactory panorama of the Pines. The past is re-captured in the present as Bianchi, perhaps unconsciously, reveals the coexistence of contradictory non-present and non-absent pasts. Looking at Bianchi’s photo assemblage I am reminded of Tondelli’s prose. If the author of *Camere Separate* aims with his narrative “to undo the inevitability of a predefined linguistic and sexual grammar by repeatedly returning us to the mirror scene and beyond the underpinning of imaginary selfhood in the proto-linguistic universe of the infant-not-yet-subject,” Bianchi associates the photographs beyond a chronological construction, underpinning the imagined body of the non-absent past in the proto-figurative definition of the imaginary, and symbolic bodies of the AIDS epidemic.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Separate Rooms*, translated by Simon Pleasance, introduced by Edmund White, (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2004), 44.

⁶⁸ Freeman, “Tom Bianchi: Eye on the Pines”.

⁶⁹ Gary Cestaro, “Self-Shattering in a Queerer Mirror: Gaze and Gay Selfhood in Pier Vittorio Tondelli,” *MLN* 123, no. 1, Italian Issue (January 2008): 106.

Bianchi's obsessive attention to the bodies of his subjects explicates the trauma eradicated in the separation of a time before and after AIDS. Conveying the idea of a physical and emotional experience, the bodies of the pictures shape the landscape of the world Bianchi wants to reconstruct in corporeal terms. In her study on the narrative of the Holocaust, Marianne Hirsh claims:

As archival documents that inscribe aspects of the past, photographs give rise to certain bodily acts of looking and certain conventions of seeing and understanding that we have come to take for granted but that shape and seemingly reembody, render material the past that we are seeking to understand and receive.⁷⁰

Taking into account the archival quality of the photographs, as well as their physical implications, Hirsh theorizes the necessity to materialize the past before processing it. In the decision to turn the book into a performative act, however, Bianchi moves towards different temporalities, signifying what Randy Shilts in his well-known book *And the Band Played On*, marks as a time of "innocence and excess, idealism and hubris" that hardly corresponds to the counter-narrative later developed.⁷¹

The colourful successions of speedos and toned bodies turn an ontological absence into a present impossible eternal youth.⁷² A stronger believer in the power and importance of beauty in a time of crisis, Bianchi translates his silent dedication to all who died, in a sequence of beautiful images, circularly related.⁷³ The first character to appear is a young man in a flowery shirt: he poses in front of a colourful painting, half-smiling; his mysterious expression is marked by a lavender stem [Fig.78]. Placed in the foreground, the blurred purple of the flower prefigures the impending disappearance of that body from the book, setting the emotional impact of the picture picked by Bianchi to close the book. The record of muscular toned bodies

⁷⁰ Marianne Hirsh, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29, no.1 (Spring 2008): 117.

⁷¹ Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1987), 12.

⁷² The term "ontological absence" is borrowed from: Castiglia and Reed, *If Memory Serves*, 156.

⁷³ See: Tom Bianchi, *In Defense of Beauty* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995). Also discussed in Ch.1 "Deathly Beautiful," Subsection "Why Beauty?," 49.

and sexual encounters terminates in a bucket full of flowers abandoned on the harbour; sitting on the edge of the deck in the background a semi-naked couple of men are enjoying a picnic [Fig.79].

In the proto-figurative memorialization of his very first subject, Bianchi's Polaroid emerges from the Lacanian Mirror of the crisis as a modern translation of Narcissus' myth. The man of the first Polaroid is revealed in the end to be the modern Narcissus, whose body has ultimately been substituted by a beautiful flower. As the myth goes, so the bucket of flowers in the final Polaroid "is present *in the name of* [*au nom de*] an absent cause. [...] The narcissus as floral memorial does not restore the lost object but instead testifies to its irredeemable loss".⁷⁴ A gravestone in a busy world that keeps moving the flowers establish the performative act of grieving collectively shared in the book "letting the record show" in the spectacle of flesh.⁷⁵ Speaking of narrative constructions, Roland Barthes argues:

The function of narrative is not to 'represent', it is to constitute a spectacle still very enigmatic for us but in any case not of a mimetic order. The 'reality' of a sequence lies not in the 'natural' succession of the actions composing it but in the logic there exposed, risked, and satisfied.⁷⁶

Through extremely sexualized, and lost bodies entrapped in thousands of different stories, Bianchi fills the gap of the historical narrative with a performance of the "if" able to approach the unspeakable drama of AIDS without even mentioning it.

"Who were we, where were we, how did we experience these events?"⁷⁷

1989. René Norman directs *Longtime Companion*, bringing on the big screen his narrative of the first decade of the epidemic. Norman introduces the life of a group of friends, from the sunny days at the Pines to the dramatic weeks at the hospital, deciding to end his

⁷⁴ Legendre, "Introduction to the Theory of the Image," 7.

⁷⁵ The sentence hints at *Let the Record Show*, a work realized by ACT UP in 1987. See: Douglas Crimp, "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/ Cultural Activism," in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp, (Cambridge, MA; London: The MIT Press, 1989), 7.

⁷⁶ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 123-124.

⁷⁷ hooks, "Subversive Beauty," 50.

cinematic story back to where it started, at the Pines. Lisa, Willy, and Fuzzy, the only main characters who survived the epidemic, are walking on the beach, discussing the possibilities of a hypothetical reality where AIDS is over, where a cure is possible [Fig.80]. “I just wanna be there, if they find a cure,” says Willy, and as the three imagine how it would be like, all the friends they had lost during the epidemic reappear.⁷⁸ Suddenly, all the characters are back, smiling, just as they were at the beginning of the movie when AIDS was an unknown presence.

It is a party [Fig.81]. An impossible party happening in an impossible time. In the imaginary, delusional performance of snapshots from the past, Norman lets his characters re-live what they want to remember exactly as they wanted to remember it.⁷⁹ To borrow Catherine Zuromskis’ words on snapshot photography, Lisa, Willy, and Fuzzy use their imagination to “concretize the past – or rather, a version of the past – establishing the emotional need for and response to snapshot image” in their mind.⁸⁰ Beyond the borders of their bodies, Norman’s characters are stuck in an imaginary non-present, and yet non-absent now. Standing in front of the Lacanian Mirror of the epidemic, I see presence as a gazing exercise, as “the condition sine qua non for a performance to happen”.⁸¹ Staring at the impossible coexistence of bodies forwarded by Norman and participating in the impossible journey of images selected by Bianchi, I “make sense of what has been, what is and what might be,” entering in the impossible space of my fictional mirror the impossible time of their narratives.⁸²

Talking to Freeman about the experience of involving his current boyfriend in the process of assembling the book, Bianchi explains what it was like for his partner to participate

⁷⁸ *Longtime Companion*, directed by René Norman, (Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1989), DVD.

⁷⁹ Catherine Zuromskis, *Snapshot Photography: The Lives of Images* (Cambridge, MA; London: The MIT Press, 2013), 33.

⁸⁰ Zuromskis, *Snapshot Photography*, 42.

⁸¹ Erika Fischer-Lichte, “Appearing as Embodied Mind,” in *Archaeologies of Presence: Art, Performance, and the Persistence of Being*, ed. Gabriella Giannachi, Nick Kaye and Michael Shanks (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 106.

⁸² Lauge Boungaard Rasmussen, “The Narrative Aspect of Scenario Building: How Story Telling May Give People a Memory of the Future,” *AI&Society* 19, no.3 (2005): 229.

in the assemblage and visit the Pines afterwards. He says: “when he finally saw it, it was like time travel thirty years in the blink of an eye”.⁸³ Time travelling becomes an experience of the eyes as well of the mind. Writing in an academic context, I cannot escape the flow of History. Yet, in this context, I am asked to. Recording the existence of those beautiful bodies that would be destroyed by AIDS a few years after the pictures were taken, the performance of the “if” designed by Bianchi uses physicality to construct an unstable autobiography of the flesh. Developing her thoughts around a historiography of performance, Eleonora Fabião claims:

In a corporeal sense, the so-called past is neither gone nor actual, it is neither exactly accumulative nor does it simply vanish – the body intertwines imagination, memory, sensorial perception, and actuality in very sophisticated ways. The body itself moves according to these intertwinements while permanently producing new mnemonic, sensorial, actual, and imaginative connections that generate movement. In a corporeal sense the past is a becoming.⁸⁴

Embodying a past that is “neither gone nor actual” the bodies of Bianchi’s friends and lovers are, to borrow André Bazin’s words, “snatched from the flow of time” and brought back to perform their lost beauty and their current absence.⁸⁵ To increase the power of such photographic performance is the intimate and yet anonymous nature of the images: Bianchi did not capture very often the faces of his subjects, who wanted to remain unknown. Cutting out the faces of those amazingly trained bodies, the white frame of the Polaroid let the viewer see the intimate and erotic interactions between Bianchi’s friends.

Entangled together in an erotic knot, the anonymous lovers of Bianchi write an autobiography of the flesh in slow motion. Legs, arms, and hands appear confused in complicated binds re-performing on paper an American experience often forgotten in a wide

⁸³ Freeman, “Tom Bianchi: Eye on the Pines”.

⁸⁴ Eleonara Fabião, “History and Precariousness: In Search of a Performative Historiography,” in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, ed. Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (Chicago, IL: Intellect, the University of Chicago Press, 2012), 124.

⁸⁵ Fabião, “History and Precariousness, 124; André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” *Quarterly* 13, no.4 (Summer 1960): 4.

historical narrative [Fig.82].⁸⁶ At the beginning of his photo essays, in one of the first sections dedicated to beach portraits, Bianchi places a photograph of three individuals caught while exchanging intimate interactions. The camera avoids the faces, focusing exclusively on the bodies of the subjects: standing out from the orange background of the towel, the lower waist and the colourful speedo of one man leads the viewer's gaze towards the hand of a second individual grasping those speedos. Following the curve line of the second man's arm, the viewer then encounters the leg of a third person finally seeing the right side of the second man's naked body. Despite the focus of the picture on the erotic action that is about to happen, the actual centre of the photograph stands at the point of encounter between the three bodies.

The performance re-enacted by Bianchi in selecting these pictures relies on a story exclusively written within the bodies in the attempt to make the viewer witness to a lost history.

Sarah Schulman reflects on the AIDS experience, claiming:

And all along it has puzzled me that the AIDS experience is not recognized as an American experience, while for me it is *the* American experience. How can something be equally *the* and the *not*? Because it belongs to people still considered, even post-mortem, to be second-rate and special interest.⁸⁷

By tricking us with a pre-AIDS narrative, Bianchi is asking a similar question. *But how does his narrative influence the idea of the pre and the post-AIDS world?*

The voyage Samuel Wagstaff activates with his pictures presents fortunate, selected viewers with a possible response. 2017, Los Angeles. Looking for material at the Getty Research Institute, I come across Wagstaff's actual photo-albums, and once again, I am transported to Fire Island.⁸⁸ The idea I have of this place at this point depends exclusively on Bianchi's, Norman's, Millers's and Goodman's perspectives. I do not have a direct, personal,

⁸⁶ Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), "Part I. Understanding the Past".

⁸⁷ Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind*, "Part I. Understanding the Past".

⁸⁸ Full collection reference: Series I. Snapshots, 1969-1983, 2005.M.46, Box 15-21, Fire Island, Samuel Wagstaff papers 1796-1987 (bulk 1952-1986), The Getty Research Institute Special Collections, Los Angeles, California.

experience of the Island; nor do I know what the United States looked like in the 1970s. I am a privileged observer in an artificial setting, having an artificial experience of someone else's past.⁸⁹ I am not a member of Wagstaff's family, and to be completely honest, I did not even know about the existence of this material until I enter the Research Institute. I approach the albums by number, not knowing what to expect, but ready to re-perform in a narrative structure what less than 40 years ago was the symbol of an experience frozen in time.⁹⁰

An art collector, a photography expert, and a curator Wagstaff is often remembered as the mentor and lover of Robert Mapplethorpe.⁹¹ A private history, shared with a selected public, his photos, papers, and journal clippings are presented to me in a small reading room. Accessing the material now feels like an intrusion.

“Who were we, where were we, how did we experience these events?”⁹²

The after-history of Wagstaff is the first stage of Bianchi's secondary revision.⁹³ The time travel action forwarded by the Polaroid persists, but this time we, as viewers, are no longer asked to experience the re-enactment performance implicit in the act of leafing through the pages. Wagstaff's subjects have a face and a name; and most of the time, they are not posing, they are living. The pictures, as big as my palm, are organized in light brown binders, four per page; they are accurately divided in series, named on a yellow piece of paper, and accompanied

⁸⁹ See: Langford, *Suspended Conversations*, “Introduction: Show and Tell,” 5.

⁹⁰ Langford articulates the meaning of private photography in reference to Berger. She writes: “The private photograph in private hands is held up as a model that coalesces materiality and experience in an ideal condition, the last bastion of “timelessness”.’ The situation applies to my experience of viewing Wagstaff's photos as its opposite. I am holding a private photo in a public hand, what are the consequences of my action? See: Langford, *Suspended Conversations*, “The Idea of Album,” 39.

⁹¹ Philip Gfelter, “The Man Who Made Mapplethorpe,” *The New York Times*, April 24, 2007, accessed August 8, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/24/movies/24wags.html>.

⁹² hooks, “Subversive Beauty,” 50.

⁹³ The term secondary revision is here used in its psychoanalytical implication. In the Freudian vocabulary a secondary revision indicates the process following the dream experience, for which the individual transforms the material of the dream and re-inscribe it into a coherent narrative. Although Bianchi's work is based on an actual experience, its re-codification in an artificial narrative enabled the association with the term “secondary revision”. Looking at Bianchi's Polaroids, I am assisting at a secondary revision of his story. On the term “secondary revision” see: Salman Akhtar, “Dream Work,” in *Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac Books Ltd, 2009), 272.

by their negatives. The post-it sections act as guidelines, suggesting an indecisive, and in most of the cases incoherent narrative. Speaking of snapshot photography, Zuromskis writes:

Snapshot photography is a genre at once public and private, personal and cultural, indexical and artificial, historically specific and nostalgically abstract, instinctual and broadly conventional.⁹⁴

And so are Wagstaff's images.

Box 15. Fire Island, August 1973.⁹⁵ The island is, just as Bianchi presents it: sandy, and green, dominated by wooden houses overlooking the beach. But its inhabitants are slightly different: yes, there are the naked (or wearing very tight speedos) attractive men, but there are also kids and women. Wagstaff's photo album is a mixture of conventional holiday pictures and studied compositions. This is not to say that Bianchi's Island disappears completely from Wagstaff's photographs. It is still present in one or two shots. Though he probably was not that interested in remembering that aspect of the trip. His pictures fluctuate in between personal memories and private experiments.

Leaving aside a few family-friendly pictures, Wagstaff displays a photographic obsession towards naked portraits, self-portraits, and countless images of his crotch. Philip Gifter, the author of the only published article about the collection, reads Wagstaff's amatorial work as an attempt to "universalize the male nude".⁹⁶ I do not agree with Gifter. I see the intensions behind some of Wagstaff's photo-assemblages, but overall, the albums are more like experiments rather than examples of attempts of "universalization". The first nudes to appear in the collection are recorded as "Male nudes/Billy" [Fig.83].⁹⁷ The Billy "series" opens up with the photograph of a penis. The penis, as the description suggests, belongs to Billy, a white

⁹⁴ Zuromskis, *Snapshot Photography*, 11.

⁹⁵ Samuel Wagstaff, Series I. Snapshots, 1969-1983, 2005.M.46, Box 15, Fire Island 2936 Items, Samuel Wagstaff Papers 1796-1987 (bulk 1952-1986), The Getty Research Institute Special Collections, Los Angeles, California.

⁹⁶ Philip Gifter, "Sam Wagstaff: The Photographer," *Getty Research Journal*, no.2 (2010): 194.

⁹⁷ Samuel Wagstaff, Untitled [Male nudes/Billy], circa August 1973, Series I. Snapshots, 1969-1983, 2005.M.46, Box 15, Fire Island, Samuel Wagstaff Papers 1796-1987 (bulk 1952-1986), The Getty Research Institute Special Collections, Los Angeles, California.

guy, with an earring on his left ear, and messy brown hair. He is standing on a terrace of one of those wooden houses, a yellow towel on his shoulders. Wagstaff captures Billy in different places, photographing him from the front and from the back. The subject does not seem to be very confident in posing, and the photographer does not seem very expert in capturing the body within the landscape, and light. The photographs resemble Bianchi in his subjects (often in Bianchi we see naked guys standing on a wooden porch) but not in the general feeling they generate. Looking at Billy, a man as anonymous as Bianchi's men, I do not undergo a mourning process; I am not asked to relive a day at the Pines; neither to think about the destiny of many of the people depicted, Mapplethorpe and Wagstaff included.

If Bianchi creates a “performance of the if,” to remember and mourn forgotten autobiographies of the flesh, Wagstaff works spontaneously. His albums were never meant to be seen by strangers, neither they were considered to be curatorial projects. The images follow without temporal clashes and afterthoughts on their arrangements. Wagstaff photographs friends and loved ones. I am the undercover reader of a journal destined to few friends. *Does a pre and post AIDS reading influence my perception of Wagstaff's autobiography of the flesh?* Yes, it does. Probably even more than in Bianchi's.

I find a picture of a young Mapplethorpe [Fig.84].⁹⁸ He sits in front of the camera, wearing nothing but a denim jacket, and orange lens sunglasses. Mapplethorpe lays on the beach, his penis on display. The picture takes me back to Bruce of Los Angeles, and his secret homoerotic collection.⁹⁹ Wagstaff, I imagine, is probably familiar with such images. The photographs are almost identical, with one little difference: I have no idea of the story behind Bruce of Los Angeles' models, but I am well aware of the story behind Wagstaff's subject, as

⁹⁸ Samuel Wagstaff, Untitled [Portrait of Robert Mapplethorpe], circa August 1973, Series I. Snapshots, 1969-1983, 2005.M.46, Box 15, Fire Island, Samuel Wagstaff Papers 1796-1987 (bulk 1952-1986), The Getty Research Institute Special Collections, Los Angeles, California.

⁹⁹ See: Bruce of Los Angeles Photographs circa 1950-1974, coll2017-011, ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, California.

well as of the relationship between the two. Somehow, the way I look at the photographs differs previous knowledge of the model's life. *What am I looking at?*

October 1973, somewhere on Fire Island.¹⁰⁰ Wagstaff's pictures now appear less like the work of an amateur. Geftter talks about a rigorous method, "technical proficiency, and a drive to make sophisticated imagery out of what typically might be categorized as the personal snapshot".¹⁰¹ I suspect the alternation of different photographers, maybe even Mapplethorpe. The photographs respond to a codified image of the male nudes: light is well calibrated, the angle is studied, the dynamic of the picture is extensively thought through. Wagstaff photographs a man standing in the Ocean.¹⁰² The water is at his ankles. The man is holding a white blanket serving as a screen for his body. The photographer plays with the visible and the invisible, with the material and the immaterial, suggesting a ghostly, and therefore rather deathly, approach to the beautiful body in front of him. The wet blanket adheres to the body in a deconstructed materialization that can either be solid or vanishing. In the first image the subject wraps the cloth all around his body, head included, becoming a piece of marble to be sculpted; it is not human, it is not alien; it is a shape in between, a photographic attempt that celebrates the sculptural quality of the human body recalling Mapplethorpe's work.¹⁰³

The second attempt moves away from the material to get closer to the immaterial [Fig.85]. The man keeps the blanket in front of him, enabling the light to pass through, and

¹⁰⁰ Samuel Wagstaff, Untitled, Series I. Snapshots, 1969-1983, 2005.M.46, Box 20, Fire Island, Samuel Wagstaff papers 1796-1987 (bulk 1952-1986), The Getty Research Institute Special Collections, Los Angeles, California.

¹⁰¹ Geftter, "Sam Wagstaff," 194.

¹⁰² The first image described is missing. Images can be found in: Samuel Wagstaff, Untitled, Series I. Snapshots, 1969-1983, 2005.M.46, Box 20, Fire Island, Samuel Wagstaff papers 1796-1987 (bulk 1952-1986), The Getty Research Institute Special Collections, Los Angeles, California.

¹⁰³ In regard to a different photo by Wagstaff, where the model is asked to hold once again a blanket, Geftter compare Wagstaff "Figure with Towel to Mapplethorpe's *Thomas*, 1986. The creative influences among the two is, at this point, clear. See: Geftter, "Sam Wagstaff," 198-199; Philip Geftter, "Flesh and Spirit: Robert Mapplethorpe, Sam Wagstaff, and Gay Sensibility," in *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Photographs*, Paul Martineau and Britt Salvesen ed., (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, Getty Publications, 2016), 250-251.

deconstruct his figure. The result is a ghostly appearance, a scarcely recognizable human figure. The image, resembles a photograph by Platt Lynes, depicting a young man behind a white sheet [Fig.86]. The reflective quality of the water is substituted in Platt Lynes by a reflective floor, and the subject reveals his face; he is naked like in Wagstaff's photograph. His genitals are not shown, but the model's act of gazing down brings the viewer to linger where they are supposed to be. The images part of a visual code shared through time differentiate themselves just in a small detail: Platt Lynes's photograph is not obscured by the shadow of AIDS, and the present in absence dialectic it implies. Roughly ten years after these pictures were taken, Wagstaff died of AIDS.

It is 1987.

The year of Nicholas Nixon; the year of Calvin Klein's Obsession.

Mapplethorpe, young and healthy in the photographs just described, died two years later, in 1989. The year of Tondelli's last novel. The year of Klein's "Obsession: For the Man. For the Body," number 2 [Fig.63]. Addressing snapshot photography, Zuromskis writes:

An absence alone, of a person or a moment in time, is often too painful to address, too easily repressed. Conversely, the present image, the snapshot, without a personally invested sense of absence, is superficial, pointless.¹⁰⁴

Zuromskis' words suggest the impossibility of an experience commonly generated by photographs taken during the epidemic. A similar discourse is applicable for contemporary autobiographical artworks and performances.

The snapshots, visual testimony of a homoerotic code of representation should be "superficial and pointless" to me in order to draw general knowledge from them. I never knew Mapplethorpe, Wagstaff, or Bianchi, and yet my reading is still informed by that ghostly quality proper of the post-AIDS reading. *Am I too invested in Wagstaff's and Bianchi's work?*

¹⁰⁴ Zuromskis, *Snapshot Photography*, 43.

At the light of the passage just quoted, so it seems. *What does “to be invested” imply? Is involvement a problem anyway?*

The voice of Catherine Grant resonates along these lines:

The body of the art historian is considered as a way into the desires and performances that take place in the writing of a history, the body of the text focuses on the materiality and visual nature of words on a page, and the body of the artist is discussed in relation to how art history constructs a narrative around and of an artist and their work.¹⁰⁵

Does my involvement depend on the knowledge of the subject’s life? If so does this constitute an issue in the development of a critical discourse? The images of Bianchi’s autobiography of the flesh are manipulated in a narrative construction and offered to the viewer as a first-person experience; their universalized, crowded narrative, is perfect to illustrate one of the gaps of the American History.

As Jameson approached Philip K Dick’s depiction of the Fifties asking “First of all, did the period see itself that way?” so I ask myself: *Did this “period” see itself this way? Did the pre-AIDS era see itself as the golden age of a physicality soon to be lost?*¹⁰⁶ Probably not. Wagstaff’s private photo-albums speak of a missing history, soon to become an after-history. When Wagstaff took the pictures, he probably did not expect for someone to turn them into the remaining evidences of an invisible story. As AIDS spreads and the techno-masterly reality established by a *diseasephobic aesthetic of illness* becomes increasingly strong, the purposes of a private collection acquired a whole new set of meanings.

Jameson theorizes the impact of the photographic image in postmodernity by revisiting its functions throughout time. Stating the autonomous nature of photographs, Jameson establishes a connection with contemporary painting techniques, arguing:

To speak more psychologically, the attention of the viewer is now engaged by a differential opposition within the image itself, so that he or she has little energy left

¹⁰⁵ Catherine Grant, “A narrative of what wishes what it wishes it to be: An Introduction to ‘Creative Writing and Art History’,” *Art History* 34, no.2 (April 2011): 232.

¹⁰⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London; New York: Verso, 1991), 279.

over for intentness to that older “likeness” or “matching” operation which compares the image to some putative thing outside.¹⁰⁷

The ‘outside’ continues to act on the reception of the photograph and of a painting, writes Jameson; this time, however, the outside “enters consciousness itself in the form of the external realities of collective fantasies and the materials of the Culture Industry”.¹⁰⁸ The outside is nothing more, and nothing less than an extension of the inside: it is no longer expressed in the polished correspondence between object-image, but it is rather researched in an expanding narrative, publicly shared. The process Jameson is trying to describe in his text, has much deeper implications: it manifests what Nancy Spector defines as “the tyranny of time”.¹⁰⁹ Taken in postmodern years, the photographs of Wagstaff and Bianchi activate an unwanted post-scripted postmodern narrative. The outside becomes the signifier of the inside, and once again I am left wondering: *What am I looking at?*

2.3 Albert J. Winn: Performing the Past in the Present of a Scar

The question, unresolved in the pre-AIDS world, lead me to look at the post-AIDS era. I abandon Pearl Pease and forget for a moment about Bianchi’s perfectly tanned bodies, and Wagstaff’s nude studies, getting ready to embark upon a journey beyond the body of the epidemic: a journey into a medicalised era written in invisible scars. My companion in this expedition is Albert J. Winn, a photographer who survived AIDS, and sadly died of cancer in 2014. Winn’s aged body does not belong to the shiny beaches of the Fire Island Pines: it belongs to a post-HAART world. To a world medically perceived and constructed. To a world that has substituted colourful speedos and oversaturated memories with a documentary black

¹⁰⁷ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 179.

¹⁰⁸ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 179.

¹⁰⁹ Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2007), 125.

and white filter. The “medical approach” emerging from Zane’s photographs is taken to the extreme.¹¹⁰ This time the photographer uses his own body to show visible and invisible scars.

The *Dictionary of Medical Terms* defines a scar, properly ‘cicatrix,’ as “a mark left after the healing of a wound”.¹¹¹ Simple, short, and yet cryptic. Three words in that definition, capture my attention:

Mark. Healing. Wound.

A photographic journal at the crossroads of the medical and the artistic, the *Band-AIDS* series criticises society’s idea of what the sick body should look like by turning around a central quality of the Reaganian hard bodies: their wounded nature [Fig.87].¹¹² The experience of AIDS is framed in a detached medical gaze: those parts of the body that have been subjected to medical procedures or have been signed by the disease are isolated, marked with band-aids, fixed in the photographic medium. Posing in front of the camera is a *diseasephobic aesthetic of illness* and its opposing force. Winn sees the society’s need to narrate AIDS exclusively as a disease and twists that very same need around by using the most accessible part of his body: his skin.¹¹³ *What am I looking at?*

Skin. Technically, I am looking at skin, “the largest organ in the body”.¹¹⁴ But actually, I am looking at past wounds beautifully re-enacted. As skin has an outer and an inner layer, so Winn’s photographs have an outer and an inner layer.¹¹⁵ In the post-AIDS era of medical

¹¹⁰ See Ch.2 “Autobiography of the Flesh,” subsection 2.1 “Arnie Zane: Dancing with Pearl Pease,” 111; Green, “Continuous Replay,” in *Continuous Replay: The Photographs of Arnie Zane* (Cambridge, MA; London: The MIT Press, 1999), 48.

¹¹¹ Rebecca Sell, Mikel A. Rothenberg, and Charles F. Chapman ed., *Dictionary of Medical Terms 6th Edition*, Barron’s Educational Series, (2012), accessed 2017.

¹¹² See: Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 50; Ch.1 “Deathly Beautiful,” Subsection 1.1 “AIDS and Beauty: An Improbable Coexistence,” 54.

¹¹³ On the idea of AIDS as a narrated disease, see: James Dawes, “Narrating Disease: AIDS, Consent and the Ethics of Representation,” *Social Text*, no.43 (1995): 28.

¹¹⁴ Madhuri Reddy and Rebecca Cottrill, *Healing Wounds, Healthy Skin: A Practical Guide for Patients with Chronic Wounds* (New Heaven, CN: Yale University Press, 2011), “Part One,” 1.

¹¹⁵ Reddy, Cottrill, *Healing Wounds, Healthy Skin*, “Part One” 1.

treatment, Winn transforms his body into the object of a physical experience contradicting the common narratives of a disease.¹¹⁶ Writing about the time of illness, Kay Toombs observes: “The patient conceives of his illness in terms of lived experience, the physician conceptualizes it as a disease state”.¹¹⁷ In the *Band-AIDS* series, Winn is the patient and the doctor. The experience of an illness becomes that of a disease whilst the expression of a disease is made into that of an illness. The patient becomes the doctor, the doctor takes a step back, looking at the disease, maybe for the first time, as a state of lived experience. The time of the disease is broken, and so it is the time of illness. The post-AIDS body *imago* translates into a corporeal realm. I do not see actual scars in Winn’s pictures. A black and white reflection over the imaginary sick body, the photos act as medicalized versions of an aesthetic of illness reinforcing “the gap between the seemingly rational body by providing physical artefacts of what is within”.¹¹⁸

The reasons behind the *Band-AIDS* series are simple, and immediately comprehensible.

Winn writes:

I soon found myself the recipient of compliments on my appearance and supposed restoration to good health. These compliments were really a form of measurement, a comparison to how I looked before. It occurred to me that I was walking around with invisible scars and determined to make my illness seen. Band-aids were placed as signifiers of illness on those areas of my body where there had once been a manifestation of illness – a lesion, a scar or a place where some medical procedure had been performed.¹¹⁹

Winn’s words enter the vocabulary of AIDS highlighting the dramatic shift of perspective that the body underwent during the crisis. “The body becomes central,” writes Edmund White in relation to the years of the epidemic, “the body that until recently was at once so natural

¹¹⁶On turning the subject into the object through photography, see: Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflection on Photography* (London: Vintage Books, 2000), 13.

¹¹⁷ S. Kay Toombs, “The Temporality of Illness: Four Levels of Experience,” *Theoretical Medicine* 11, no.3 (1990): 228.

¹¹⁸ Henrik Enquist, “Narcissus’s New Mirror: Body Images and Meaning,” *Crossing: E-Journal of Art and Technology* 5, no.1 (2007).

¹¹⁹ Albert J. Winn. “Photographs – Band-Aids,” *Albert J. Winn*, 2013, accessed January 4, 2017, <http://www.albertjwinn.com/index.php?/ongoing/band-aids/>

(athletic, young, casually dressed) and so artificial (pumped up, pierced, ornamented). Now it is feeble, yellowing, infected – or boisterously healthy as a denial of precisely this possibility”.¹²⁰ White’s words seem to accept the media version of the AIDS body comparing it to the written description of the same bodies that populate Bianchi’s world. Fragmenting and depersonalizing his own body, Winn acts against these tendencies and builds a physical archive that denies the notion of the archive itself: he creates out of real wounds a fake, a-temporal, scientific record.

Performed and re-experienced, Winn’s past body re-lives in the present. “Photography,” claims Roland Barthes, “has the same relation to History that the biographeme has to biography,” where with the term ‘biographeme’ Barthes indicates the biographical detail, such as date of birth that contributes in part to shape a biography.¹²¹ As biographemes of Winn’s life, the band-aids stretch the ordinary narrative development in a fluid temporal construction that inscribes the before and after (both post-AIDS and post-medical AIDS) eras into a changeable and evolving definition of corporeality. In the article “Bodies like Rivers: Seeking for a Space for Body Memory in the Discourse of Trauma” Lyda Eleftheriou speaks about bodies as a “canvas onto which past events can be permanently inscribed”.¹²² Recalling traumatic events, Winn’s body shapes an alternative narrative of AIDS, and in more general terms of illness. Illness by its very nature alienates the individual from his/her own body. Recalling his experience of cancer, Arthur W. Frank writes: “A part of the body, has become abnormal and compromises the integrity of the whole”.¹²³ Marking his past scars with band-aids, then, Winn is celebrating the story of a body therapeutically explored.

¹²⁰ Edmund White, “Aesthetic and Loss,” in *Don’t leave me this way*, ed. Ted Gott (Canberra, ACT: National Gallery of Australia, 1994), 135.

¹²¹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 30.

¹²² Lyda Eleftheriou, “Bodies like Rivers: Seeking for a Space for Body Memory in the Discourse of Trauma,” *European Journal of English Studies* 19, no.3 (2015): 326.

¹²³ Arthur W. Frank, “Tricksters and Truth Tellers: Narrating an Illness in an Age of Authenticity and Appropriation,” *Literature and Medicine* 28, no.2 (2009): 44.

It is an unconventional storyline. Jennifer Doyle affirms the specificity of the language used in works that speak about AIDS, claiming:

Work about AIDS and illness shares a common vocabulary in its necessary preoccupation with the process of dying, the moment of death, and the need to politicize the rituals of grief. The work is shadowed by problems of representation: how to make the crisis feel real and urgent to those not directly impacted by it; how to properly grieve for the people you love when they are dying en masse; how to keep in view people who are gone, in a world that disavows the nature of your relationship with that person.¹²⁴

Doyle's generalization around the vocabulary of AIDS does not respond to the work of Winn, neither to those of Zane, Bianchi, and Wagstaff. The motivations that, led to the construction of that 'common vocabulary,' are not just meant to concretize the crisis, and make sense of the lost ones. The codes generated during the AIDS epidemic, I argue, have revolutionized the way in which society understand healthy and sick bodies. Acting within a thoroughly theorized world, AIDS vocabulary articulates a highly complex idea of time, and works around the necessary re-assessment of the physical, material body as it appears inside, outside, in a traditional representation, and in an abstract re-definition of the corporeal and its limits in a moment in which they are no longer clear.¹²⁵

Time is uncatchable, history undefinable and continuously repeated, re-performed, re-enacted. It is the age of no age. The synthesis of a postmodern attempt:

To take the temperature of the age without instruments and in a situation in which we are not sure there is so coherent a thing as an "age," or zeitgeist or system or "system" or "current situation" any longer.¹²⁶

The difficulties Winn, and with him other artists who worked in the 1980s and 1990s, experiences in seeking a historical understanding of the present, often impossible to achieve, challenges my understanding of their work in my present. *How can I establish an art historical*

¹²⁴ Jennifer Doyle, *Hold it Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2013), 133.

¹²⁵ Doyle, *Hold it Against Me*, 133.

¹²⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London; New York: Verso, 1991), xi.

dialogue with a past continuously fragmented? How can I “take the temperature” of a body that was absent, present, visible and invisible?

I, once more, end up going back to the body and to my main question. *What am I looking at?*

A scar is a *mark* subjected to an a-temporal realm. It is out of time, as much as it is in time. It fixes in a permanent signature a physicality that was, that is, and eventually will be. Petra Kuppers argues that scars bring the outside and the inside of a body into a tangible relation to each other:

The core of phenomenological experience comes into the foreground perception: That you are oriented toward the world, pressing and surging toward it from a place, a body, an origin.¹²⁷

A text written over the body, the scar is the signifier of a healing process. Where the mark is, once there was an open wound, a bleeding, and violent point of contact with the world. More or less evident; borrowing the words used by Simon Watney, the scar is a “slow motion” imprint on the body.¹²⁸ Since the opening of the wound – caused by an accident, a disease, or surgery – the flesh that has been abruptly separated works towards its reunion.¹²⁹ The healing process requires care, and attention. In medical practice, this is monitored with what is commonly called “wound photography”.

Wound photography, a form of clinical photography, is a practice used towards keeping the patients’ wounds under control to favour their healing. The IMI National Guidelines to Wound Management defines clinical photography as “one of several visual techniques, e.g. colour measurement, stereophotogrammetry, and thermal imaging used to assess healing”.¹³⁰ Clinical photography respects precise rules and fulfils specific needs. It establishes a history

¹²⁷ Kuppers, *Scar of Visibility*, 1.

¹²⁸ Simon Watney, *Imagine Hope: AIDS and Gay Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 221.

¹²⁹ Madhuri and Cottrill, *Healing Wounds, Healthy Skin*, “How Wounds Heal,” 5.

¹³⁰ Institute of Medical Illustrators, *IMI National Guidelines: Guide to Good Practice, Wound Management: Clinical Photography, Design, and Video in Healthcare*, The IMI National Guidelines for Clinical Photography in Wound Management, September 2012, reviewed September 2015, 1, accessed June 14, 2018, www.imi.org.uk/file/download/4708/Wound_Management_Sep12.pdf.

and fixes the results. Clinical photographs can be taken at home, in hospital, or in a photographic studio, lighting must be appropriate. Special attention must be given to the position of the patient: “it may be easier,” underlines the guide, “to photograph the patient lying down because some wounds (particularly those on the buttocks) distort easily and slight movements such as the flexing of a muscles or a slight change in the patient’s position’s may significantly alter a wound’s appearance”.¹³¹ It is also important, the guide highlights, to take full shots of the body along with close-ups.¹³² With its close-ups of covered up wounds, the *Band-Aids* series stages the clinical photographic record of Winn, baring the truth of health and illness, of appearance and reality.

“Who were we, where were we, how did we experience these events?”¹³³

Winn’s clinical record is both true and false at the same time. It is true to a public misconception of the healthy and the sick body; it is false to the artist’s personal perception. It is true to a retraced medical history, and it is false in its construction. Winn places band-aids where once there were wounds, both surgical and or traumatic.¹³⁴ The band-aids are there not to satisfy their function, but to play with my expectations. It is a medical spectacle, carefully staged: Winn meets me at the theatrical rendition of my idea of what a wound is. Winn stares at his “wounded” body, wears the doctor’s clothes, places himself (the actual subject of the work) in an unstable and interchangeable position. Mark Seltzer has pointed out, we live in a culture where:

The notion of the public sphere has become inseparable from the collective gathering around sites of wounding, trauma, and pathology: sociality and the wound have become inseparable. To the extent that the trauma serves as another name for the subject in wound culture, it holds the place of a sociality premised on the wound.¹³⁵

¹³¹ Institute of Medical Illustrators, *IMI National Guidelines*, 6.

¹³² Institute of Medical Illustrators, *IMI National Guidelines*, 6.

¹³³ bell hooks, “Subversive Beauty,” 50.

¹³⁴ On the difference between surgical and traumatic wounds see: Reddy and Cottrill, *Healing Wounds, Healthy Skin*, “How Wounds Heal,” 5-6.

¹³⁵ Mark Seltzer, “Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere,” *October* 80 (Spring 1997): 24.

Wound photography is a non-exclusive narrative. As a doctor stares at the patient for clinical reasons, the viewer is offered to stare at Winn's body in a space potentially free of judgment.

Winn is inviting his viewer to look at a deconstructed sequence. To adopt the terminology used by Sarah Brophy to structure a critical analysis of few written autobiographical accounts of the epidemic, I would like to argue that he is enabling the spectator to become part of "non-narrative texts" not necessarily dependent on their subject.¹³⁶ Looking at the images I, as potentially any other viewer, am confused. *What am I looking at? How does this invisible vision respond to a broad social misconception of AIDS? What function does it play, if any, in the photographer's experience of AIDS?*

Staring is a questionable exercise. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson assures us, "everybody stares".¹³⁷ Staring, she continues occurs anytime we see something unexpected, something against the social definition of normality. *But is that so, or does the staring exercise also subscribe visual pre-cognition?* The act of staring can be dictated by necessity or curiosity. Medicine makes the act of staring at the patient's body fundamental to understanding the patient pathology. "The invasive stare of the medical experts probes the patient's body and pronounces its fate," Garland-Thomson writes.¹³⁸ Social behavioural norms teach me that staring is not a polite activity, especially when I am confronted with ill/disabled bodies. However, when I am asked to stare, outside of a clinical or normatively accepted situation at a ill/disabled body, the act suddenly acquires a new kind of power.

In the history of media, people with AIDS have often been objects of a pre-conditioned staring. The promoter of a false imaginary, the *Band-AIDS* project invites me to break a social norm. I stare at a sick body and at his true/fake wounds. I stare at bodily memories and witness

¹³⁶ Sarah Brophy, *Witnessing AIDS: Writing, Testimony, and the Work of Mourning* (Toronto; Buffalo, NY; London: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 10-11.

¹³⁷ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How we Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

¹³⁸ Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 29.

the effects that a drug has on the body. David Serotte, curator of *Bloodbrothers*, an online exhibition for Visual AIDS, underlines that *Band-Aids* is, in fact, the most visible results of the HAART on Winn's body.¹³⁹ For Winn, the photographic journal shows the superimposition of bodies he inhabited a certain point of his life with the one he is experiencing now. HAART, Serotte explains, has worked on the photographer's body as a healing power, partially erasing the disease marks:

Captured against a copy stand grid used for documenting artefacts and archival materials, these photographs also invoke the myth that AIDS is now a thing of the past, with Winn's body as evidence to the contrary.¹⁴⁰

Researcher of an archived body no longer representative of the actual body, silent doctor of an already treated body, I am suspended in a limbo of impotence, and uncertainty. We stare because we are curious because we want to face the "not conventional" but in this case, I am staring at a misplaced illusion. *Is Band-AIDS the archive of the ultimate AIDS social fantasy? Is the photographic series of Winn a collection of ideas on what AIDS should look like?*

Yes, and no. The work stands at the crossroad of wound photography and archival documentation; Winn is preserving and confronting a social fantasy in the attempt to signify it. Avram Finkelstein puts it simply in his narrative/history of the AIDS crisis. He writes:

Hardly anyone wanted to talk about any of it, and those who did refuse to use the word AIDS. No one needed to. There were too many euphemisms. "Did you lose weight?" was code for "Are you sick?" and people looked you right in the eye when they asked you. I started eating six meals a day.¹⁴¹

Since his HIV diagnosis in 1989, Winn has been exposed to various experimental treatments, among them AZT and Crixovan.¹⁴² The drugs have left on his body indelible marks, this at least till the introduction of new medicines that have slowly began to take those marks away

¹³⁹ David Serotte, "Curator's statement – Bloodbrothers," *Visual AIDS*, August 2012, accessed June 15, 2017, http://www.thebody.com/visualaids/web_gallery/2012/serotte/statement.html.

¹⁴⁰ David Serotte, "Featured Gallery for August 2012, Bloodbrothers" *Visual AIDS*, August 2012, accessed June 15, 2017, <https://www.visualaids.org/gallery/detail/18>.

¹⁴¹ Avram Finkelstein, *After Silence: A History of AIDS through its Images* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), "Chapter 2: The Political Poster".

¹⁴² David Serotte, "Curator's statement – Bloodbrothers".

from his body. The absent scars are made visible through the introduction of a plaster that reinforces the idea of damage, of a fracture within the perfect bodily structure. It is the celebration of what AIDS is perceived from an external, mass-media, medical world, but it is also and above all the definition of the physical space inhabited by the disease.

The HIV virus, operating on Winn's body, and masked by the HAART effects, is brought up as an evidence. In his classic text *The Birth of the Clinic*, Michel Foucault reflects on the visible/invisible nature of the disease, looking at the patient, and doctor as interferences in the procedure of the disease. He writes:

In the rational space of disease, doctors and patients do not occupy a place as of right: they are tolerated as disturbances that can hardly be avoided: the paradoxical role of medicine consists, above all, in neutralizing them, in maintaining the maximum difference between them, so that, in the void that appears between them, the ideal configuration of the disease becomes a concrete, free form, totalized at last in a motionless, simultaneous picture, lacking both density and secrecy, where recognition opens of itself onto the order of essences.¹⁴³

The disease is presented and archived as what it was, what it is, and what it wanted to be. The *Band-AIDS* series serves the disease letting it reach once again a visible expression. "AIDS is at the same time constructed and constructive," writes Jamie L. Feldman in a study published right before the introduction of HAART.¹⁴⁴ Within Winn's body, the disease acquires a subject-hood, becoming the 'I' of a masterfully constructed AIDS narrative, becoming the illness. The artist returns to be the patient in the moment of the diagnosis, and the doctors in the period following that diagnosis, while the viewer is left in a limbo of identity, a hybrid between a researcher and a doctor.

Winn's series does not aim to satisfy a psychological need, but it surely responds to what Rosy Martin defines as phototherapy. Used in counselling sessions, phototherapy is

¹⁴³ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (London: Routledge, 2003), 9

¹⁴⁴ Jamie L. Feldman, *Plague Doctors: Responding to the AIDS Epidemic in France and America* (Westport, CN; London: Bergin & Garvey, 1995), 131.

defined as a “peer-to-peer counselling technique that uses photography as a vehicle of self-exploration and social change”.¹⁴⁵ Challenging the viewer’s conception of AIDS and playing with simplified medical narratives, Winn is entering into a peer-to-peer group discussion that attempts to change the common narrative of the disease, playing with the ideas of visibility and invisibility. The potential of this strategy, fundamental in approaching a traumatic event, is articulated by Martin in the following terms:

Re-enactment phototherapy is about making visible process, change and transformation, by going to the source of an issue or an old trauma, re-enacting it and making a new ending; a new possibility; a new way of being, visible.¹⁴⁶

The problem concerning the ill body, and specifically the AIDS-affected body, often depends on a socially approved medical gaze.

Laura E. Tanner has analyzed these issues in the text *Lost Bodies: Inhabiting the Borders of Life and Death*. Bringing up questions concerning both the individual and society by proceeding with examples directly related to the AIDS epidemic, Tanner remarks the common imagery of the AIDS-affected body, claiming:

As the marks of critical illness literally overwhelm the features of the person with disease, the gaze often locates the subject in a body that seems to announce its identity as the process of its own destruction. The medical gaze, then, merely extends and exaggerates a dynamic of looking that forces the person with terminal illness to see the self rendered visible only as its impending absence.¹⁴⁷

Taking over the person behind the illness the individual becomes the embodiment of the disease itself.

Scientifically extirpated of any personal characteristics, the body as an entity directed towards death is marked flesh. Challenging this conception, Winn is establishing a counter-narrative of AIDS written in pseudo-scientific terms. A photo-therapeutic essay of interlaced

¹⁴⁵ Stella Bolaki, *Illness as Many Narratives: Arts, Medicine, and Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 27.

¹⁴⁶ Rosy Martin, “Inhabiting the image: Photography, Therapy, and Re-enactment Phototherapy,” *European Journal of Psychotherapy & Counselling* 11, no.1 (March 2009): 41.

¹⁴⁷ Laura E. Tanner, *Lost Bodies: Inhabiting the Borders of Life and Death* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2006), “Terminal Illness and the Gaze,” 22.

narratives, the work of Winn turns the body into the active teller of a story shared by many. The band-aid becomes the marker of a past trauma, no longer visible, but still scripted in the narrative of the body. Winn is staging an absence (the medical procedure) within a presence (the body) in a clinical, distant and a-temporal look. He is creating a surgical negative after-*imago* of the epidemic reflecting to the mirror surface.¹⁴⁸ Wording the feeling of presence and absence she felt losing her father, Tanner quotes Maurice Merleau-Ponty explaining his definition of incorporeality:

There is a circle of the touched and the touching, the touched takes hold of the touching; there is a circle of the visible and the seeing, the seeing is not without visible existence; there is even an inscription of touching in the visible, of seeing in the tangible – and the converse; there is finally a propagation of these exchanges to all the bodies... which I see and touch.¹⁴⁹

“Touching in the visible,” “seeing in the tangible” the photographs address invisibility in the visibility of corporeality, remarking it with the possibility of touch.

I look at the photograph Winn took of his ankle [Fig.88]. Naturally rotated, as to suggest that the picture was taken when the subject was lying down, the ankle is isolated at the centre of a squared background. Two small band-aids mark past scars. I am not told what those band-aids stand for, neither why some of them are small, and some are bigger. I am simply asked to build my own narrative of that body. There is not a right way to look at the picture. One could look at the ankle focusing on the skin, or on the bones, another could follow the lines traced on the squared surface in the background till they encounter Winn’s flesh. Cold and detached the photograph presents itself as “an enigma of survival”.¹⁵⁰ Interrogating the viewer on what it

¹⁴⁸ With the term surgical after-*imago* I am linking the Lacanian definition of *imago* to the medical idea of afterimage. The Taber’s Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary explains an afterimage as: “An image that persists subjectivity after cessation of the stimulus. If colors are the same as those of the object, it is called positive; it is called negative if complementary colors are seen”. The colors are not the same, as the roles they are reversed. See: Venes ed., *Taber’s Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary* (Philadelphia, PA: F.A Davis Company, 2013), “afterimage,” 59.

¹⁴⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 143. Also quoted in Tanner, *Lost Bodies*, 88.

¹⁵⁰ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, MD; London: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 58.

AIDS is supposed to look like, Winn alienates his body pushing forward one of the inner definitions of illness. In “An Anatomy of Illness” David Bird argues: “Illness by its very nature alienates us from our body. A part of the body has become abnormal and compromises the integrity of the whole”.¹⁵¹ The owner of the body is no longer the subject: the illness becomes the owner of a disappearing physicality reducing the body and its identity to wounds. The body loses its private nature, becoming part of a public realm.¹⁵² It is an *imago*, a diagnosis, a case of study. The body loses its sexual connotation, it is the subject of a medical gaze, which is the only gaze acknowledged.

The erotic becomes a distant reality: no matter what the frame of the picture, each part of the body is subjected to the same cold clinical look. I recall Gonzalez-Torres’ “*Untitled*,” (*Bloodworks*), 1989 [Fig.89].¹⁵³ I am looking at a grid and an abstraction directly generated from a fragmented human being. If in Gonzalez-Torres’ “*Untitled*” (*Bloodworks*) the human body is substituted by lines indicating the level of T cells in the blood, here its presence is nevertheless undermined by the detached perspective through which it is presented. I am looking at a partial representation of an individual standing on a infinitely extensible background. I am looking at an artistic and a scientific paradox, at something that being “flattened, geometricized, ordered,” on a grid resembles “the anti-natural, antimimetic, antireal” in the reality of a scientific claim.¹⁵⁴

Amongst the invisible scars Winn decided to expose there is one on his inner thigh [Fig.90]. At the centre of the reticulated surface I can see the photographer’s body from the penis to the knee. The leg is bent to form a 90 degrees angle, in the shape of the letter L. The small plaster, almost invisible, is not the main focus of the image. The line of the background

¹⁵¹ David Bird, “An Anatomy of Illness,” *Journal Medical Humanities* 33 (2012): 44.

¹⁵² On the passage of the patient’s body from private to public see: Havi Carel, *Phenomenology of Illness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 69.

¹⁵³ On Gonzalez-Torres’ *Bloodworks* see: Blocker, *Seeing Witness*, 35; Spector, 120-121.

¹⁵⁴ Rosalind E. Krauss, “Grids,” *October* 9, (Summer 1979): 50.

points to a rather flat portion of the figure: the midline of the inner thigh and its visually prominent veins. Through a complex alternation of dark and bright areas, the viewer's attention is led to Winn's genitalia first, and then consequently to the plaster on the inside of the knee. The visual link established along these lines prevents any sexual objectification. The viewer as the doctor is asked to approach the picture with detachment.

In 1986, Jean Baudrillard records his trip to the States writing:

The omnipresent cult of the body is extraordinary. It is the only object on which everyone is made to concentrate, not as a source of pleasure, but as an object of frantic concern, in the obsessive fear of failure or substandard performance, a sign and an anticipation of death to which no one can any longer give a meaning, but which everyone knows has at all time to be prevented.¹⁵⁵

Baudrillard depicts a reality recently shadowed by AIDS. The cult of the body is celebrated as necessary counterpart to the fear of failure and ultimately of death. Five years into the epidemic, Baudrillard's words set the reasons behind the coexistence of Bianchi and Winn's visual strategies. Contrasting the ways in which Billy Howard and Nicholas Nixon portrayed people with AIDS, Tanner argues that Howard's decision to stage the pictures so to avoid victimized representations could instead lead to the risk of "affirming subjectivity only insofar as it is disembodied".¹⁵⁶ Bianchi and Winn faced the risks mentioned by Tanner, challenging the possibility of disembodiment, respectively in the research of anonymously erotic bodies, and scientifically detached analysis. As a result, their photographic series flow between the pre and the post-AIDS eras, offering the viewer unresolved autobiographies that keep re-performing themselves in lost corporealities entrapped in a photographic frame.

¹⁵⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London; New York: Verso, 1988), 35.

¹⁵⁶ Tanner, *Lost Bodies*, "Haunted Images," 45.

2.4 Inside the body: Outside Testimonies from the Post-AIDS Era

Ultimately, the body is an object: an object of desire, an object of medical interest, a private and public space of encounter. 1988, Daniel M. Fox and Christopher Lawrence close their book on photography and medicine, stating:

In the months before this book went to press several new images of medicine appeared. [...] A picture which appeared in an English newspaper in January 1987 is not like most of other representations of medicine during the last fifty years. The figures are distorted and stand apart, a great deal of space is included, the beds are bare. It is not a close-up. It is not a human interest picture. An imaginary for AIDS is being made.¹⁵⁷

The picture in question, included in the book, consecrates the opening of the department for AIDS patients in a British hospital [Fig.91]. Posing in front of the empty beds are three employees of the hospital; one of them is clearly a doctor. The subjects are serious and distant; the emptiness surrounding them is scary. Nevertheless, Fox and Lawrence take this image, as the image of AIDS. Not a patient, not a public demonstration to fight for the end of AIDS. The disease is identified in a detached medical team, captured in an isolated part of the hospital. It is 1988, and as Fox and Lawrence are making their questionable choice, Nicholas Nixon is making the equally questionable decision to fixate the image of AIDS in an 'other,' abjected body. From Britain to America, AIDS is constructed and constructive: the real subject of a story of non 'I'.¹⁵⁸

1997. 10 years after the AIDS hospital ward is photographed, British photographer Richard Sawdon-Smith visualizes his HIV+ status in the juxtaposition of images of the virus with other bodies. The result, *Symptom* (1997), mocks the media representation of the crisis [Fig.92]. The strange looking bodies of Sawdon-Smith seem to be covered in Kaposi Sarcoma lesions when, in fact, they are just covered with the photos of the virus that could potentially destroy them.

¹⁵⁷ Daniel M. Fox and Christopher Lawrence, *Photographing Medicine: Images and power in Britain and America since 1840* (New York; Westport, CN; London: Greenwood Press, 1988), 263.

¹⁵⁸ On AIDS being constructed and constructive see: Jamie L. Feldman, *Plague Doctors: Responding to the AIDS Epidemic in France and America* (Westport, CN; London: Bergin & Garvey, 1995), 131.

*“Who were we, where were we, how did we experience these events?”*¹⁵⁹

Once again, I am lost in a non-narrative text, autobiographically constructed, of multiple subjects. Sensing a Lacanian influence on the work, I turn my attention to Carlo Bonomi’s psychoanalytical study “Narcissism as Mastered Visibility”.¹⁶⁰ Studying a parallel theme in the project, naming narcissism and visibility, Bonomi writes:

Before knowing that we are visible, we *feel ourselves as visible*, that is we experience ourselves as the object of a gaze that is located outside us, independently from the fact that someone really is looking at us.¹⁶¹

The impossible bodies of Sawdon-Smith narcissistically projected in a self-reflective study, reveal the inside expression the self acquires in the outsider perception of his body. *What is my position in front of those bodies? Do I need to know who the possessors of these bodies are?*

Looking for a possible answer I turn my attention to some texts written by Sawdon-Smith himself. In the essay “Listening to Myself: Politics of AIDS Representation – A Personal Perspective”, the British photographer writes:

Obviously not all images of ill-health signal death, but they are seen as an ‘other,’ not normal way of being in the world. The assumption is that the person will get well and the body will change back to something to be considered as normal, healthy, and good.¹⁶²

In the words of Sawdon-Smith, the abnormal, abject physicalities of *Symptom* aim to have me facing the ill body in an unexpected, twisted way. The identity of the people portrayed is not essential, I am the real subject of the piece, constructing the narrative, enhancing a storyline secluded and inscribed in a fragmented past, irretraceable in the present.

¹⁵⁹ bell hooks, “Subversive Beauty: New Modes of Contestation,” in *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995), 50.

¹⁶⁰ Carlo Bonomi, “Narcissism as Mastered Visibility: The Evil Eye and the Attack of the Disembodied Gaze,” *International Forum of Psychoanalysis* 19, no.2 (June 2010): 110-119.

¹⁶¹ Bonomi, “Narcissism as Mastered Visibility,” 111.

¹⁶² Richard Sawdon-Smith, “Listening to Myself: Politics of AIDS Representation – a Personal Perspective,” in *HIV in World Culture: Three Decades of Representations*, ed. Gustavo Subero (New York; London: Routledge, 2013), 88.

The work acts on the mind and the body as a mirror. Myself, the artist, the model, and the virus enter a narcissistic state of self-reflection. Sawdon-Smith underlines:

The work was dealing with absence of any physical symptoms of illness. The apparently healthy body marginalised once the disease was named: HIV would bring to the ‘mind-eye’ rather than the outward physical appearance, a catastrophe of representations created by living in a culture that is so alienated from the body.¹⁶³

Acting on visual levels slightly different from Albert J. Winn’s *Band-AIDS Series*, the work does not mark the absence of an illness physical signs, but rather stages those sign to fulfil the visual expectations of the audience. What I see is what I expected. I am back to a pre-mirror stage, the ill body is unitary and extraneous, materially absent but socially present.

The staged testimony of an existing social preconception, and of an internal medical condition, the images are presented to the viewer as data to be analyzed. John Stuart Penton Lumley and Pierre-Marc G. Bouloux’s guide to a “clinical examination of the patient” reminds doctors:

Colour photographs are used to demonstrate clinical examination, with emphasis on the anatomy of the normal individual. [...] Disease represents a loss or modification of function and a key feature of the examination is to ask the patient to demonstrate these abnormalities.¹⁶⁴

Published in 1994, and conceived for undergraduate students, the manual approaches photography pragmatically, as an educational tool.

The pictures serve to demonstrate to the students how to examine a patient: from the initial approach to physical examination in order to find signs of illness [Fig.93]. The strong scientific imprint of Sawdon-Smith’s work captivates me asking to transform that very textbook into a guideline to read his artistic productions. I approach the manual, not as a student of medicine, but as an art historian interested in the way in which illness is ultimately

¹⁶³ Richard Sawdon-Smith, “Exiles of Normality: Photography and the Representation of Diseased Bodies,” in *Culture of Exiles: Images of Displacement*, ed. Wendy Everett and Peter Wagstaff (New York: Berghan, 2004), 154.

¹⁶⁴ John Stuart Penton Lumley and Pierre-Marc G. Bouloux, *Clinical Examination of the Patient* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1994), 9.

understood and represented. The images affect the viewer deeply, setting the base for a conventional, and in this part of the globe, westernized understanding of the world, and therefore of its art.

The book is simple, and yet technical. The text is accompanied by a coloured photograph of those areas of the body discussed, and of the way in which the doctor is supposed to approach them. The patient prototype, for the majority of the images, is a white, hairless young man, photographed in his underwear. He is in a hospital room, the bed set against a white wall. As in the photographs by Winn, and in Sawdon-Smith, the image is staged. The fake patient is simulating the symptoms of a health problem, collaborating with the doctor to make educational pictures [Fig.94]. The body taken as the sample is, according to the principles on which the introduction is written, muscular, young, or in other words, healthy; the doctors, male in this manual, are wearing as expected, a white coat, over a formal shirt and tie. The body is presented as an object: there is no shame; there is no mystery.

The medical gaze is free to explore the body at a 360 degree angle. Close-ups make the reader familiar with the body examined on both a visual and a tangible level: the hands of the doctor pressing on the patient's body are our hands. The manual concretizes what Arthur Frank defines as the medicalized body. Standing side by side with the sexual body, the disciplined body, and the talking body, the medicalized body is one of the four social bodies acknowledged by the author.¹⁶⁵ Reviewing a decade of literature on the body, Frank stresses the performative nature of the medicalized body. He writes:

Healthiest society requires the body both to perform, functionally, and to present, visually. The value we attach to the self depends on the body's capacity to do its performing and representing. When it fails, we fail; our bodies, ourselves.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Arthur W. Frank, 'Bringing Bodies Back in: A Decade in Review,' *Theory, Culture & Society* 7, no.1 (1990): 134.

¹⁶⁶ Frank, 'Bringing Bodies Back in,' 141.

The words used by Frank disclose an essential quality of the body as it appears in the artistic production post-AIDS treatment. From a medical text to a work of art, the body is continuously re-performed.

The actor of the book performs the role of the patient. I, an art historian looking through a scientific text, perform the role of an undergraduate medical student learning how to do a physical. The performance is private, and yet publicly and socially accessible. In its immediate simplicity, the trivial basic example emphasises once again the constructed and constructive quality of AIDS, hinting at a fundamental distinction within the bodies involved in the theatricality of the act.¹⁶⁷ Behind my reflection is Jamie L. Feldman's study on the "Doctors of the Plague" and their patients. He writes:

Patients and their bodies are essential elements of the medical community's experience with AIDS, and as such, are often the subject of discourse. Generally, this discourse falls into two categories, those constructing the body of the patient and those constructing the nature of the patient as a person.¹⁶⁸

He then proceeds to ask his readers "Who is an AIDS patient?". The question I notice does not properly inform my, equally performative, investigations.

2006. As part of a collaborative project, Winn and Sawdon-Smith gathered together to produce their version of Lumley and Bouloux's coloured photographs and built a narrative of their clinical experience. Although unrelated to the manual just presented, the works seem nevertheless to mimic it, restaging in a much more dramatic context some of the patient/doctor fantasies that inhabit Mizer's *Physique Pictorial* world.¹⁶⁹ Winn and Sawdon-Smith sit on a white bed, wearing a pair of pants, chests bare; in their hands two stethoscopes: they are listening to one another's heartbeat. The picture is the first photograph of the *Blood Brothers (Triptych)* [Fig.95-96]. Following it, two images of Winn and Sawdon-Smith: photograph no.2

¹⁶⁷ Feldman, *Plague Doctors*, 131.

¹⁶⁸ Feldman, *Plague Doctors*, 132.

¹⁶⁹ For examples of Mizer's patient/doctor physique/pornographic fantasy see: Bob Mizer, *Physique Pictorial* 25, May 1974, 26.

shows them standing tall, their arms united with a red ribbon; photograph no.3 places Sawdon-Smith in the position of the patient, as Winn cleans a wound that we are not allowed to see. Photographs no.1, and no.2 have the artist staring directly at the camera: they look serious, concerned, and focused. Their blood brotherhood, born within a medical environment, marked by an activist purpose, and materialized in blood, is defined in the mutual concern for the health of the other. Both are doctors, both are patients: they are listening to their heart beats, to the blood pumping in their veins, to a body that is living with a HIV positive diagnosis, through a body that is treated, and has been subjected to numerous medical procedures.

17 years after Winn's diagnosis, and 12 years after Sawdon-Smith's, the fight against AIDS is ultimately passed onto the patients themselves. The patient becomes the doctor in the attempt to make sense of his/her own and of others' bodies. The definition of doctor/ patient in the exercise of medical procedures appears in a straightforward work of 2008. *Doctor/Patient I* portrays Sawdon-Smith and Winn standing in front of a white background [Fig.97]. In the left side of the photograph, Winn is listening to Sawdon-Smith's pulse by placing his fingers on his wrist; on the right-side picture the rules are switched. Rather than the act itself, the roles impersonated by the artists are dictated by their clothes. While the left picture responds to our imaginary: Winn, listening to the pulse of Sawdon-Smith, is dressed like a surgeon, Sawdon-Smith is wearing a gown. The right-side of the picture displays the same act switching the clothes, and ultimately confusing the spectator. *Why is a patient measuring the surgeon's pulse?*

Doctor/Patient II maintains the same dynamic having Sawdon-Smith taking Winn's pulse [Fig.98]. The work speaks to the viewers forwarding many layers of interpretations. The photographs are subverting the patient/doctor roles; what is essentially a power relationship becomes a mutual, interchangeable, and an almost mechanical action. Undermining the doctor's position of power upon the patient, and in general the audience, the photograph works

also on an audio-visual level. As the anonymous doctor of the manual, Winn and Sawdon-Smith apply a small pressure on each other's wrists, but instead of looking at their clock, they look towards the camera, towards the viewers, as if times and heart-beats cannot be used together.

The images resonate in my mind evoking the familiar sound of a heart beating. *If the doctor, who is here also a patient, is not counting the pulses, then who is? What kind of time am I witnessing? Is it the time of a medical examination, or a routine control? Is it the time of the disease advancing and defeating the body, or is the time that remarks the victory of the body over the illness?* I am present, and I have a presence. In time and out of time, I participate in Winn and Sawdon-Smith's play, mixing my heartbeat, here and now, to the sound of their heartbeat in the picture.¹⁷⁰ Deprived of any temporal connotation, the photographs remark a concept essential in the experience and understanding of an illness. As Foucault states, "The time of the body does not affect, and still less determines, the time of the disease".¹⁷¹ The photographers embody the time of the body in their own physicality. Winn and Sawdon-Smith represent two different experiences of HIV, two different generations: the one that was diagnosed before an effective treatment was created, and the one diagnosed when the treatment was already available.

Articulated by the silent sound of a heart beating, the a-temporal dimension of the photographs defines the suspended temporality of the disease and of the body, introducing the viewer to the post-AIDS re-codification of corporeality within treatments. Medical procedures

¹⁷⁰ The exercise has been concretized and publicly presented to a vast audience in 2017 with the movie *120 BPM* directed by Robin Campillo. Holding in its title the concept of a heartbeat, the French movie alternates the story of ACT UP Paris in 1991 with scenes shoot in a dance club, where loud electronic music plays. The music, reproduced in the cinema, enhances the heartbeat of the spectators creating a direct link with the main characters of the story. Interestingly, the moments in the clubs, are used to superimpose the images of the activists to that of the HIV virus. See: *120 BPM*, directed by Robin Campillo, (Memento Movies, 2017).

¹⁷¹ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (London: Routledge, 2003), 12.

constitute a well-known reality to the persons diagnosed with HIV first, and AIDS later. Blood tests time the progression of the disease in the patient's body, and the dosage of the drugs used, determining the most tangible, and recordable narrative of the disease. This is the same narrative that questions the body as an active presence in the medical discourse around the disease. In "Exiles of Normality," Sawdon-Smith writes:

It is when the body becomes diseased or damaged that it seizes our attention, and the attention of others, most strongly. The body forces itself into our consciousness of times of dysfunction and that comfortable absence is lost. It dys-appears; i.e. appears in a dysfunctional state.¹⁷²

The ill body undergoes continuous medical procedures; *Observe 1994-2011* is Sawdon-Smith's photographic testimony to this reality [Fig.99-100]. Originally created in the form of handmade book, the work document the artist taking periodic blood tests, and tattooing his body, starting from 1994.¹⁷³ The main subject of the series is the photographer's arm, few needles, blood samples, and the hands of either nurses performing the exam or the tattoo artist. The pictures are similar but not identical: the angle from which they are taken changes, as does the proximity of the camera to Sawdon-Smith's arm. Along with these relatively small details, the images present much more radical distinctions concerning location, actions undertaken on the artist's arm, and skin quality. In the short video, Sawdon Smith produced in 2011, *Observe AVI*, I can follow the post-diagnosis life recorded by *Observe 1994-2011* in a kinetic succession.¹⁷⁴ The video begins with a picture of Sawdon-Smith's arm: a needle is taking the blood out of the artist's vein, a blue strap facilitates the procedure. A few seconds later, the picture disappears letting another two similar images appear. The pictures continue to succeed one another, alternating photos of the arm with images of the sample just collected by the

¹⁷² Sawdon Smith, "Exiles of Normality," 157.

¹⁷³ David Serotte, "Featured Gallery for August 2012, Bloodbrothers" *Visual AIDS*, August 2012, accessed June 15, 2017, <https://www.visualaids.org/gallery/detail/18>.

¹⁷⁴ Richard Sawdon-Smith, "Observe AVI.avi," YouTube video, 6:55, posted by "thedamagednarcissist" August 28, 2011, accessed June 14, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HkZ5O451Ar0>.

nurses. The first photograph to be presented full screen is one of the Sawdon-Smith's blood samples. The image is deprived of any human presence which we could say is condensed in the blood samples presented inside the white box. The body disappears in place of the disease, getting re-materialized in blood samples that contain HIV traces. Different hands act on the arm; slowly it becomes evident that the images appearing and disappearing on the screen are not still. Observing closely, it is possible to detach what normally is undetectable: the movement of the blood pumping in the veins. It is a staged simulation and an extremely effective re-codification of the sick body.

Once again, I am not sure who is the subject of the pictures. *Is it Sawdon-Smith? His blood? The procedure? Or the invisible, unnamed HIV virus?*

The answer is not clear. Approximately two minutes into the video, the artist shows the viewer the stage of this medical spectacle, introducing him/her to pictures of the room. Taken from different angles, and under bad lighting conditions, the images almost seem to be snuck in. It is but a second. The video goes back to the Sawdon-Smith's arm one-man show. Almost unvaried throughout the film, the arm starts to appear different three minutes into the video. At 3 minutes and 44 seconds, the veins become visible, tattooed upon the photographer's skin. The drawing is quite precise; the use of colours makes it even more vivid, as if Sawdon-Smith's arm has been dissected, and turned into a corporeal anatomical manual.

The inside becomes the outside, right within the procedure that requires doctors to open a wound, to take a bodily fluid. The blood sucked into the cannula runs parallel to the blood of the tattooed veins. It is the imagined blood of the blue veins incised in the artist's arm; it is the blood running underneath that tattooed skin. Concluding the series is a photograph of Sawdon-Smith's arm, not yet tattooed, but still marked by a plaster to signify those indelible signs that will always be on the artist' skin underneath the tattoos. The interest in anatomy and the way

in which the human being is presented in medical manuals, translates in Sawdon-Smith's work in an actual bodily impact.

In the *Anatomical Man* (2009), the artist becomes a manual of anatomy by tattooing the cardiovascular system on his body [Fig.101]. The photograph participates in the historical codification of the homoerotic male nude, sharing that same interest in revealing the unseen that George Platt Lynes explored in the 1940s, and Arthur Tress re-invented in the 1960s.

1945. Platt Lynes photographed Jared French, surrounded by Anatomical drawings [Fig.102].¹⁷⁵ Jared stares into the camera, on the table next to him is a book opened vertically with the drawing of a skeleton; in the background are three anatomical drawings of a dissected human body. The image, accurately staged, forward that peculiar sense of physical self-consciousness returning in a more theatrical presentation in Sawdon-Smith's *Anatomical Man* (2009).

1966. Tress brings the scientific drawings to life by giving a material, physical quality to the anatomical man [Fig.103]. The model, captured in a hallway, is arching his spine: the head is slightly reclined towards the back, as to suggest a moment of pleasure. The act is complicated by the superimposition of the real spine and pelvic bones stressing the skeletal movement happening inside the model's body.

Bringing together the works of Platt Lynes and Tress, Sawdon-Smith sits behind a table: in front of him are various medical textbooks, amongst these, the manual of human anatomy is opened to display some plates, and blood samples. Sawdon-Smith's arms are opened; the heart and veins, coloured in blue and red in respect of a universally accepted visual code, are tattooed in the right position. Despite this, the tattoo is not an explicit symbol of Sawdon-Smith's HIV status; it speaks to us in these terms, as we are aware of it. Sawdon-Smith decides to draw on

¹⁷⁵ James Crump ed., *George Platt Lynes: Photographs from the Kinsey Institute* (Boston, MA; New York; Toronto; London: A Bulfinch Press Book, 1993), plate 14.

his body the organ responsible to pump blood around the veins. A blood that is infected, but that still keeps him alive. Speaking of the piece, Sawdon-Smith brings up some of the questions that have previously informed Winn's work. The *Anatomic Man* is a "new persona":

[It] has resulted in me looking at my life as pre and post-tattoo, as it has created a fundamental shift not only in my perception of self – almost as much as the HIV diagnosis – but how others perceive me as well.¹⁷⁶

The words bring us back to the *Band-Aids* series. In this specific situation, however, the artist's decision to mark an invisible presence, does not rely on an external input, it is instead dictated by a personal need.

Sawdon-Smith uses the tattoos to process his own condition, translating his body before HIV into a body before tattoos. In the essay "The Precarious Visibility Politics of Self-Stigmatization: the Case of HIV/AIDS Tattoos," Dan Brouwer argues that the act of having an HIV/AIDS-related tattoo on the body, makes the virus visible, letting it speak in every situation.¹⁷⁷ The tattoo, continues Brouwer, "challenges norms of 'patient' behaviour" and "runs the risk of reducing the wearer's identity to 'disease carrier'".¹⁷⁸ Brouwer inscribes his observations in a critical analysis of the opposing debates around HIV/AIDS tattoos in the late 1980s and early 1990s.¹⁷⁹

1986. Right wing columnist William F. Buckley Jr. advances on *The New York Times* the insane, and discriminatory request that "Everyone detected with AIDS should be tattooed in the upper forearm to protect common-needle users, and on the buttocks to prevent the victimization of other homosexual".¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁶ Sawdon Smith, "Listening to Myself," 86.

¹⁷⁷ Dan Brouwer, "The Precarious Visibility Politics of Self-Stigmatization: The Case of HIV/AIDS tattoos," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 18, no.2 (April, 1998): 116.

¹⁷⁸ Brouwer, "The Precarious Visibility Politics of Self-Stigmatization," 116.

¹⁷⁹ Brouwer, "The Precarious Visibility Politics of Self-Stigmatization," 114-136.

¹⁸⁰ William F. Buckley Jr., "Identify All the Carriers," *The New York Times*, (March 18, 1986), A27. Buckley also quoted in: Brouwer "The Precarious Visibility of Self-Stigmatization," 114; Douglas Crimp, "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/ Cultural Activism," in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp, (Cambridge, MA; London: The MIT Press, 1989), 8.

1994. Matt Fuller advocates the role tattoos reproducing ACT UP slogans and activist symbols could play in the fight against AIDS: “I feel that the time has come to show those around me that the fight against AIDS is not over,” he wrote on *POZ*.¹⁸¹

Using tattoos to turn past debates on the AIDS epidemic around and bring the focus of the viewers back to a unifying, medical perspective, Sawdon-Smith creates in the *Anatomical Man* an alter persona for the viewer and for himself. The artist becomes a scripted manual of medicine, and I, the viewer, am asked to look, and to study: I am asked to be distant and to superimpose a fictional simplification to a real breathing being. Sawdon-Smith’s alter persona is permanent and could eventually lead to a superimposition of the anatomical with real physicality. The exercise enables the artist to accept his HIV diagnoses, placing the spectator in the position of seeing the invisible and touching a medical fantasy. At this point, the questions repeat themselves, surmounting one another. *Who is the subject of this image? Is it Richard? Is it the Anatomical Man? What does the presence of a medical absence performed on a body tell me? What does it tell me about the recodification the body underwent during the crisis?*

Winn sits bare chest in a physician office.

Next to him a table with some gloves and a needle.

Around his neck a red ribbon. On his face various marks.

The image, taken in 2006, is entitled *AIDS Tribal Markings* [Fig.104]. The ribbon, as well as the title, informs its viewers that the photograph is about AIDS. From Serotte’s text, I

¹⁸¹ Matt Fuller, “Trends,” *POZ*, August 1, 1994, accessed July 3, 2018, <https://www.poz.com/article/trends-tatoos-25507-5287>; Brouwer “The Precarious Visibility of Self-Stigmatization,” 114-115. This paragraph does not present the topic fully, for more information I direct my readers to Brouwer’s article.

learn that the pictures were taken in one of the appointments Winn had to take with his surgeon to alleviate the pain in the cranium generated by toxic antiretroviral medications.¹⁸²

*“Who were we, where were we, how did we experience these events?”*¹⁸³

Winn, just as Bianchi, Zane, and Sawdon-Smith, is making the invisible visible in the presence of a tangible physicality. Beyond the body of the 1970s, beyond the body of the gym culture, and that of prefigured in the work of Zane, the body inhabited by Winn and Sawdon-Smith is the treated body of the post-AIDS era. It is the body made undetectable artificially, the new body constructed by science. In the novel/autobiography *Ghosts of St. Vincent's*, Tom Eubanks describes his body post-treatment writing a list:

To remain undetectable, I take four pills once a day: Merck's Isentress, a salmon-colored oval containing 434.4 milligrams of raltegravir potassium, made in Switzerland and formulated in Singapore; Reyataz, a half-maroon, half-blue capsule stuffed with 300 milligrams of atazanavir sulphate created by the Princeton, New Jersey-based Bristol-Mayers Squibb Company; Viread, an oblong sky blue tablet with 300 milligrams of tenofovir disoproxil of Foster City California; and Norvir, a white tablet containing 100 milligrams of ritonavir, produced in Italy for an Abbot Labs spin-off called AbbVie Inc., located to the North of Chicago, a few minutes from where I grew up.¹⁸⁴

The body is turned into an incomprehensible succession of names and numbers. It is translated in pharmaceutical brands, present in a multiplicity of times and yet absent in each of them. It is the body shattered, lost and rediscovered.

In the attempt to analyze how society narrates sickness, Howard Brody states: “Ultimately, the meaning of any story is to be found within the entire set of narratives, not at one narrative level alone”.¹⁸⁵ Projected in the future, anchored in the past, suspended in the present, the body performed and remembered in this work constructs a possible narrative of AIDS, sharing a secret history. It is a narrative made of present and absent scenarios that, going

¹⁸² David Serotte, “Featured Gallery for August 2012, Bloodbrothers”, <https://www.visualaids.org/gallery/detail/18>.

¹⁸³ hooks, “Subversive Beauty,” 50.

¹⁸⁴ Tom Eubanks, *Ghosts of St. Vincent's* (New York: Tomus NYC, 2017), 215.

¹⁸⁵ Howard Brody, *Stories of Sickness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 30.

beyond the corporeal limits of the body, fix in the photographic medium the history of a world before and after AIDS, continuously repeated and forever incised beyond the borders of a body that is out of time.

I “see myself seeing”.¹⁸⁶

I am about to cross the mirror surface.

¹⁸⁶ The sentence refers directly to: Jane Blocker, *Seeing Witness: Visuality and the Ethics of Testimony* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 44.

ACT II
OR WHEN I CROSS THE MIRROR SURFACE

3.

UNTITLED (DANCING YOUR ABSENCE)

Against all odds

“You said, “A system in collapse is a system moving forward”.”¹

A black box.

This is what appears at my sight, as I get ready to look over the Robert Mapplethorpe photographic collection now preserved at the Getty Research Institute.² The photographer, who appears and disappears within the narrative of this thesis, is once again speaking to the project. The box mixes images of the pre and the post-AIDS eras, creating for me a strange a-temporal space of exploration. Among the photos, one taken in 1985 captures my attention. The picture portrays an African American dancer, caught in the act of moving [Fig.105].³ The man is looking down, focusing exclusively on the rhythm of his body. Bare chest, he is just wearing a pair of baggy pants. His body is hit by the artificial light of the studio; his muscles, marked now and then by veins, stand out from the black background, granting the viewer permission to indulge on them. Left arm down, right arm up, the body creates a diagonal line. Left foot on the floor, right foot up, the man moves freely in a harmonic counterbalance. It is not clear whether the dancer is spinning or jumping: it’s a momentum, a second, a blurred instant of materialization over an action that is already disappearing.

Different box, different image.

This time I am looking at a photograph of two male dancers: one black, one white [Fig.106].⁴ The black dancer, that same man who was dancing alone in 1985, sits on the

¹ Bill T. Jones quoting Arnie Zane in *Untitled*, 1989. Also quoted in: David Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic: Tracking Choreography in the Age of AIDS* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 130.

² Robert Mapplethorpe Papers and Photographs, circa 1850-2011, (bulk 1970-1989), 2011.M.20, Series I.C. Non-editioned prints, 1974-1989, Box 72 and Box 87, The Getty Research Institute Special Collections, Los Angeles, California.

³ Robert Mapplethorpe, Bill T. Jones, 1985, Series I.C. Non-editioned prints, 1974-1989, Box 72, 2011.M.20, Robert Mapplethorpe Papers and Photographs, circa 1850-2011, (bulk 1970-1989), The Getty Research Institute Special Collections, Los Angeles, California.

⁴ Robert Mapplethorpe, Bill T. Jones and man, 1986, Series I.C. Non-editioned prints, 1974-1989, Box 72, 2011.M.20, Robert Mapplethorpe Papers and Photographs, circa 1850-2011, (bulk 1970-1989), The Getty Research Institute Special Collections, Los Angeles, California.

shoulder of the white dancer. He is wearing only his underwear, the musculature, accurately illuminated, is indulgently offered to the viewer. The white dancer, definitely smaller than the man he is carrying, is instead fully dressed; one hand holding his partner, one hand solidly placed on the hip. The men are executing a conventional ballet pose in an unconventional pairing, and with a modernist adjustment of the arms. There is no prince and no tutu, but simply the exhibition of a bodily exercise, and the celebration of a sculpted physicality. Posing for Mapplethorpe are Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane, co-founders of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, and partners in life.⁵ The images, taken respectively in 1985 and 1986, capture in the photographic medium the ephemerality of the dance practice, and with it the fragility of the human life.

Two years after the second picture was taken, on the 30th of March 1988, Zane died of AIDS. A year later, on March 9th, 1989 Mapplethorpe followed. As I look at the photograph today, I am no longer looking at the vanishing quality of the dancing body, but I am rather experiencing the present fortification of two absences, that of Zane, and of Mapplethorpe, subconsciously developing a “destiny” orientated narrative.⁶ The muscular presence of Jones, intensified by his nudity, becomes stronger, reinforced by History. To this day, Bill T. Jones continues to be the director, and choreographer of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, without his partner. Present, absent, visible, invisible, the dialectics continue to emerge insistently generating new questions without providing any answers.

Dance is an art that fights time. Roland Barthes sustained that in the light of a photograph are captured the lives of the people who came before, and those who came after.⁷

Dance operates in a very similar space-temporal construction. William A. Erwing uses the

⁵ On Arnie Zane and Bill T. Jones see also: Ch.2 “Autobiography of the Flesh,” Subsection 2.1 Arnie Zane: Dancing with Pearl Pease,” 111.

⁶ On the use of destiny-oriented narrative see: Ch.2 “Autobiography of the Flesh,” Subsection 2.1 Arnie Zane: Dancing with Pearl Pease,” 111.

⁷ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflection on Photography* (London: Vintage Books, 2000), 12-13.

introduction to his book *Dance and Photography* to highlight the differences that separate two art forms, dance and photography, often considered as a pair. He argues:

Dance is the movement of bodies through space and time. Dance is fluidity and continuity. Dance connects, dance unfolds. Dance envelops us; it enters through the eye and the ear. Photography imprisons in two dimensions. Photography flattens and shrinks. Photography tells the ear nothing. It fragments time and fractures space.⁸

Yes, dance is about changing movements, and photography is about catching moments. But dance and photography also respond to a very similar purpose: they run out, in and through time. Pierre Bourdieu has identified the “paradox of photography” in the possibility to fixate what essentially is a disappearing temporality.⁹ A system of un-reproducible realms that collapse on themselves and keep moving forward, dance is the bodily translation of that paradox: it embodies the “what it was” and “what is no longer”, making tangible for a moment that changing corporeality immediately lost in the photographic instant.

Dance is exclusive. The performances that I am going to describe in the chapter are lost in the flow of time; their existence is limited to descriptions, photographic stills, and maybe almost inaccessible videos. I will be talking about works that were composed after the death of Arnie Zane, limiting my focus to pieces produced in the late 1980s and the 1990s. Informed by photographs and in some cases videos, my text will never be able to capture the overall quality of the performances: I was not there, I did not live those events. Collapsing in the impossibility for a fully developed analysis, by moving forward in the attempt to create in these limits its own narrative, the chapter introduces the reader to the concept of *performtext* identifying the way in which the presence in absence dialectic operating in photography contributes in dance to configure an aesthetic of illness of the moving body.¹⁰

⁸ William A. Ewing, *Dance and Photography* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1987), 27.

⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996), 76.

¹⁰The sentence is rephrased on Arnie Zane’s words: “A system in collapse is a system moving forward”. See: Bill T. Jones quoting Arnie Zane in *Untitled*, 1989. Also quoted in: David Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic*, 130.

The chapter is articulated in four sections and considers a total of five works: Neil Greenberg's *Not-About-AIDS-Dance* (1994), and *The Disco Project* (1995), and Bill T. Jones' *Still/Here* (1994), *Untitled* (1989), (2010) and *D-Man in the Waters* (1989). Uniting dance, photography, video art, and text, I use Greenberg and Jones' choreographic works to cross the Mirror surface and enter a space where presences and absences can coexist.

3.1 When words are not enough and movements cannot quite speak: A Comparative Study of Neil Greenberg's *Not-About-AIDS-Dance* and Bill T. Jones' *Still/Here*

In the introduction to *Last Night on Earth*, Bill T. Jones refers to his book as a “performance in text”.¹¹ The definition, quite unique, applies to a text that does not respect a traditional and coherent narrative. The book, as a performance, comes and goes, working as a memory, a sound, or a fleeting experience that the reader will never quite be able to grasp. A landscape of time, *Last Night on Earth* is the tangible expression of what ultimately is Jones' “dandscape”.¹² Not just a physical experience, dance in Jones' choreographic work is a kinetic script made of bodies, voices, sounds, memories, and times. It is a document that enables written and corporeal testimonies to coexist harmonically.¹³ Emblematic in this regard is the choreography *Still/Here*, a work that uses, as its score and inspiration, the recorded voices of terminally ill patients. Far from being a simple sequence of movements, the choreography is the kinetic translation of a written text. Words become an integral part of the performance: they define the story and, maybe, even dictate the gestures of the dancers, guiding and expanding the comprehension tools offered to the viewers. Valuable as a movement, spoken, whispered, or

¹¹ Bill T. Jones and Peggy Gillespie, *Last Night on Earth* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), ix.

¹² The term has been created in reference to the words Bill T. Jones uses in the introduction of *Last Night on Earth*: “In these stories dance became a land to me – an exotic place where my parents were young and sexy”. See: Jones and Gillespie, *Last Night on Earth*, 8.

¹³ Using the word “document” I intend to stress the archival quality of Jones' choreography. Mixing private and public stories in a sequence of movements, Jones succeeds in defining an unconventional, disappearing document for a public, staged archive.

suspended, the text echoes on the stage along with the sound of the dancing bodies, transporting the viewers beyond the Mirror surface.

Dance becomes a performtext.

Text in performance, and a performance in the text, the choreography does not necessarily reflect what the general public might understand as dance: it is a written score on which the bodies act.

Movements and words do not have to match each other; they are independent tools of expression cooperating towards the development of a new kind of narrative. To borrow the words Carol Mavor uses reflecting on Roland Barthes, the performtext is shaped on the necessity to make the choreographic work “writerly,” which is to say scriptable and to a certain extent reproducible, and “readerly,” or visible.¹⁴ Introducing his argument on “singularities” and choreographies produced at the beginning of the twenty-first century, André Lepecki explores the concept of performance not as a happening, or a dance, but as “a whole new political condition of power that is co-extensive, and yet has totally different goals, to the political-aesthetic promises embedded in the artistic practices we usually identify as performance”.¹⁵ Political, the performance is to Lepecki an intratextual system of complex layers of meaning strictly dependent on the surrounding world. Movements are no longer sufficient, music is not the chosen medium: dancers are asked to take the score further and bring their lives on the scene. Freed of pre-defined schemes, the performtext enters the AIDS epidemic by extending the possibilities of the autobiographical narrative to a physical realm.

From Bill T. Jones to Neil Greenberg, the newly developed performative form brings the presence in absence dialectic to life, challenging the meaning that archival, documentary

¹⁴ Carol Mavor, “The Writerly Artist: Beautiful, Boring, and Blue,” in *Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell Pub, 2006), 271-272.

¹⁵ André Lepecki, *Singularities: Dance in the Age of Performance* (London; New York: Routledge, 2016), 8.

and physical practices have acquired in the AIDS crisis. Greenberg's *Not-About-AIDS-Dance* (1994) and Jones' *Still/Here* (1994) offer a different approach. The choreographers reflect on their personal stories by using the stories of others; they inscribe private losses in public presences and use technology to affirm the absences of their now gone loved ones into writerly and readerly objects.¹⁶ The flickering presences in the mirror, embodied in the bodies of the dancers, become real, leading the audience to experience the performtexts as physical (self)-reflections.

Not-About-AIDS-Dance is a 51-minute long piece for 5 dancers.¹⁷

The *performtext* begins in the dark.

I, the spectator, hear some steps on the floor: someone is running into the stage. I do not see the person: I simply feel his or her bodily presence, visualizing the moving corporeality in the space of a sound. From its very beginning, the piece is making the invisible, visible, asking me to engage on multiple perceptive levels. As the lights turn on, the identity of the body is revealed. Contrarily to what the sound suggested, two people appear on the stage, one of them, a woman, has just arrived, the other, a man, was already there: for what I know, he has been moving before the piece has even begun, alone, in the dark. The dancers are Greenberg and Justine, and they are not dancing the same material. The duo move in a red-lit space without engaging with the viewers: they are looking down, focusing exclusively on their movements [Fig.107].

As the light settles, a line of text appears on the screen.

“This is the first material I made after my brother died”.¹⁸

¹⁶ For the terms “writerly” and “readerly” see: Carol Mavor, “The Writerly Artist,” 271-272.

¹⁷ The performance I am referring to was recorded at The Kitchen on December 15, 1994, by director Steve Brown. For the full video, see: Neil Greenberg, “Not-About-AIDS-Dance – 1994,” Vimeo video, 53:58, posted by “Neil Greenberg”, June 19, 2012, accessed June 14, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/44322468>.

¹⁸ Neil Greenberg, “‘Text: for Not-About-AIDS-Dance’ as of 4/17/94”. Series II Papers, 1971-2011 (bulk 1971-1999). 2014 M6, The Kitchen, Graffiti Rock – Gwiazda, Box 32, Folder 11, The Kitchen

Greenberg opens the choreographic narrative declaring his brother's loss and then leaves the stage suspending his own words in the moving bodies of his dancers. The performers enter the stage, repeat the same set of moves, and progressively (like Greenberg did before them) leave. The entire sequence lasts for 1 minute and 30 seconds. Then a new line appears on the screen. It is not something I expect to read: Greenberg does not continue to tell the story of his brother, instead he starts writing about the choreography itself. On the screen in the back of the stage, a sentence is revealed: "Jo is dancing that same material again" [Fig.108].¹⁹ Greenberg breaks the fourth wall, suddenly asking for active participation. Learning that another dancer, Ellen, is also "dancing the same material again", I become part of the choreographic process and complicit in its development. It is just a moment. As soon as I realize my position, Greenberg distracts me, diving into some fun facts from his performers' biographies: "Ellen was a big pothead in high school" [Fig.109].²⁰ The audience, for the first time since the beginning of the piece, laughs. Ellen, I notice, is not smiling: she accepts the laughs passively, moving forward.

When Ellen leaves, Jo appropriates the stage. The audience has another chance to laugh: Greenberg reveals that Jo has become a dancer just to make her mother happy. From a later interview I know that those words so funny for the spectators constituted back then a moment of greater shame to Jo, but as a viewer I simply cannot tell.²¹ Brown, the director of the video, has decided not to pause on the performers' faces: he offers a documentary record of the choreography. As if I was sitting amongst the audience, I can only see the dancers' entire figures.

Jo keeps dancing. Not for an audience, but in front of an audience.

videos and records, 1967-2011 (bulk 1971-1999), The Getty Research Institute Special Collections, Los Angeles, California.

¹⁹ Greenberg, "'Text: for Not-About-AIDS-Dance' as of 4/17/94".

²⁰ Greenberg, "'Text: for Not-About-AIDS-Dance' as of 4/17/94".

²¹ Jo McKendry, interviewed by Neil Greenberg, "On 'Not-About-AIDS-Dance' – Jo McKendry, Justine Lynch, Ellen Barnaby, Christopher Batenhorst, Michael Stiller (v2)," Vimeo video, 07:11, posted by "Neil Greenberg," October 23, 2016, accessed July 4, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/188568878>.

She keeps moving, while the text in the back provides the viewers with information on her life: I learn that she is Australian and has worked in Sydney on and off during the creation of the piece. Jo monopolizes the scene till two members of the company enter the stage. According to an unspoken rule in the post-modern dance world, they walk across the stage following the direction dictated by their gaze: they do not interact with her, or with each other. Cold, robotic being in the tale of Jo's life, the performers act as interferences: Jo is invisible to them. It is a signal. Jo finishes the solo and approaches the lined-up dancers waiting for her at the side of the stage. Before going back to be part of an anonymous crowd of stories fleeting in the choreography Jo slows down, and exceptionally looks over at the audience: for now she is saying her goodbye [Fig.110]. Jo will continue to perform on her own soon after the re-creation of a group dynamic, regaining a space, and with it an individual definition.

A product of postmodernity, Greenberg's piece breaks the notions of inside and outside, on the stage and down the stage, letting the spectator's body transcend itself into a confused succession of times and bodies. In Greenberg's *NAAD*, I experience what Vivian Sobchack describes as a common effect of movies. Sobchack writes:

Thus, in its most heightened state as at the movies, our sense of transcendence in immanence not only relocates us "beyond" the *presentness* of our flesh to dwell in the on-screen world but also refers us reflexively (and without a thought) back to our own fleshly *presence* – this in a mediating structure that, as it vacillates between our intentional relocation "elsewhere" on the screen and our fleshly presence "here" and "now" in the theatre, simultaneously *intensifies* and *diffuses* both our senses and our sensual location.²²

Re-locating the elsewhere of the dancers on the screen, the story they tell with their movements, and the fleshly presence of my own body, I transcend the non-present and non-absent pasts, getting outside of myself, and inside of another individual's physicality.

I begin to cross the Mirror surface.

²² Vivian Sobchack, "Embodying Transcendence: On the Literal, the Material, and the Cinematic Sublime," *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* 4, no.2 (2015): 197.

The separation between the inside and the outside occurs on an emotional, a physical and a visual level. Throughout the piece, I witness the performers' desire to exit the group and act individually. Throughout the piece, I see them being forced back in an outside, anonymous world of movements that keeps repeating itself in a 'continuous replay'.²³ As with the choreography, the text enhances the division: details from the lives of the company members make an appearance just to get lost into the tale of the choreographic structure. The dancers are identified by adjectives more or less accurate, national identity (Jo), or aspiration (Justine). The text acts as a Mirror surface: a projection of a label that does not necessarily describe the individual. In it, my body, the spectator's body, can be reflected in the body of generalized figure immediately reachable, the dancer. In it, my body, the spectator's body, can transcend its presence. In it, my body can stand next to the dancers' bodies at the borders of the private and the public, blurring any kind of social codes and restrictions.

For the second time since the beginning of the piece, death is announced in the middle of a movement [Fig.111]. "At this point in making the dance, Ellen's mother died. She had Emphysema. She was 59".²⁴ The inside of Greenberg's creative process is interrupted by a traumatic event. Greenberg does not tell the viewers the name of the mother - Ellen in a later interview would say she found that odd, but understandable; he simply provides the viewers with some information on what happened later, what Ellen did, and how she felt.²⁵ Ellen's performance is not meant to express the pain that this loss caused her. In the solo, she does not imitate death: she simply moves in accordance with the overall style of the choreography.

²³ The term continuous reply is here used in subtle reference to Jonathan Green ed., *Continuous Replay: The Photographs of Arnie Zane* (Cambridge, MA; London: The MIT Press, 1999),

²⁴ Greenberg, "'Text: for Not-About-AIDS-Dance' as of 4/17/94".

²⁵ Christopher Batenhorst, interviewed by Neil Greenberg in Neil Greenberg, "On "Not-About-AIDS-Dance" – Jo McKendry, Justine Lynch, Ellen Barnaby, Christopher Batenhorst, Michael Stiller (v2)," Vimeo video, 07:11, posted by "Neil Greenberg," October 23, 2016, accessed July 4, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/188568878>.

The effect this action has on me is striking. I am participating in an emotional narrative without detecting any emotional reaction in the dancer's movements. The dancer knows what is projected on the screen but does not necessarily see the text. The words are lost in a sequence of movements. I almost forget the impact such death must have had on Ellen's life; I almost forget the emotional attachment Ellen must have felt to this segment of the piece. The outside temporality linking Greenberg's text to Ellen's solo facilitates my experience of the choreography. As Jennifer Doyle argues,

Emotions can make our experience of art harder, but it also makes that experience more interesting. It may make things harder because the work provokes unpleasant or painful feeling.²⁶

Playing at the crossroads of a substantially emotional account and a linear, systematic choreographic work, Greenberg tricks his viewers into an apparently detached narrative, where anything can be considered, including death.

In developing a discourse on death, the story of Ellen's mother as presented in the choreography, is just about bearable: there is no kinetic correspondence, no emotional attachment, no confrontation. I do not have to face the death of the mother. If anything, I am simply asked to empathize with Ellen and to a certain extent, mourn her loss. The third time, death comes to the stage words and movements request me a deeper emotional and cognitive engagement. I am brought back to *Camere Separate*, to Zane, Bianchi, Wagstaff, Winn, and Sawdon-Smith's photobiographies.

The dancers leave the stage. Lights go down.

Greenberg walks towards the front and finds stillness.

Everything is quiet.

I read on the screen:

²⁶ Jennifer Doyle, *Hold it Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2013), 4.

This is what my brother Jon looked like in his coma. He was in a coma 2 days before he died of AIDS. I'm HIV+. But this part of the dance isn't meant to be about me.²⁷

Greenberg stands in the centre of the stage.

He is alone [Fig.112]. No other words are projected. No other words can distract me. And I cannot escape this moment.

Greenberg stands at the centre of the stage.

His eyes are closed, his arms lifted in a cactus-like position. There is no muscular tension in his body. He stands still, slightly twitching his eyebrows, then moving his fingers. In a later interview, Greenberg would say: "In *Not-About-AIDS-Dance*, I enacted my brother's death by showing what he looked like in a coma. By doing so, I implicitly asked the audience to imagine my dying of AIDS".²⁸

The audience in the room is silent.

Time has stopped.

Twenty-three years later, sitting at a desk, watching a video on my computer, I am immobilized. The re-enactment of Jon's dying body reveals a non-absent past and announces a possible future. Death is not something that society aspires to depict honestly: humans do not want to think of it in terms of fate, and the choreographer's quest to imagine his death seems at least unusual.

The presentation of Jon's final moments alive reminds me of a work, made in the very same year: AA Bronson's *Felix Partz, June 5, 1994* (1994/1999) [Fig.113]. Despite the evident difference at the base of the two pieces, Greenberg is miming, staging even, the death of his brother, while Bronson is capturing in the photographic medium the death of an individual, the works, for the ways in which they are presented, acts on me in a similar way. Bronson

²⁷ Greenberg, "Text: for Not-About-AIDS-Dance' as of 4/17/94".

²⁸ Neil Greenberg quoted in David Román, "Not About AIDS," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 6, no.1 (2000): 22.

photographs Felix Partz on the day of his death of AIDS, lying on a bed decorated with colourful patterns. The image hits the viewer for its subject and dimension, leaving him/her literally speechless in front of it. I encounter the work at the exhibition “An Uncomplete History of Protest: Selections from the Whitney’s Collection, 1940-2017” held at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The photograph is blown up to occupy an entire wall of the gallery, placed in a room entirely dedicated to art produced during the 1980s and 1990s AIDS epidemic [Fig.114]. It is a billboard of the dying body: an image of a disappearing physicality. Enlarged to a bigger scale the image is grainy, already dispersed in the light captured by the photographic medium: I cannot perceive the material quality of Felix’s body, but I can definitely feel its presence in front of me. The colours conquer my full attention, and as much as I want to escape, I have to stop in the middle of the gallery and stare.²⁹

The last moments of Felix are frozen in a coloured truth, those of Jon in a choreography involving a multiplicity of lives. The moment re-created by Greenberg acts like a nineteenth-century post-mortem portrait, “as a representation which provide[d] a basis for the narrative reconstruction of the deceased’s life”.³⁰ According to Elizabeth Hallam, Jenny Hockey, and Glennys Howarth, it is in these kinds of representations that the audience distinguish between the real and the imaged body.³¹ Absence is re-embodied in the tangible presence of the living finally discussing the undiscussable.

Asking someone to enact – even just in their mind – the moment of their death, has important consequences. Philosopher Shelly Kegan concludes:

Death is an unpleasant topic, and we try to put it out of our mind. We don’t think about it, even when it is staring at us in the face. How often, for example, have you walked past a cemetery without even noticing it? How often do you stop to think about the fact

²⁹ The Whitney Museum of American Art, “AA Bronson: Felix Partz, June 5, 1994,” accessed September 18, 2017, <http://collection.whitney.org/object/16348>.

³⁰ Elizabeth Hallam, Jenny Hockey and Glennys Howarth, *Beyond the Body: Death and Social Identity* (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), 29.

³¹ Hallam, Hockey and Howarth, *Beyond the Body*, 29-30.

that we are on this Earth for a little while, and then we're not? Most of us just don't like to think about it.³²

The action Greenberg imposes on the audience is provocative, terrifying, and yet extremely acceptable. The choreographer's act of impersonating Jon's death stimulates a discussion on death by generating a direct reaction in the spectator's corporeal reality. It does not matter how uncomfortable he/she, and therefore I, gets. The AIDS epidemic, as the art produced during the crisis, has already forced its spectators to take death into account, to reconsider the sick body, to approach the undiscussable making it discussible, but is now asking for more.

For a second, on that stage, I am the dying body.

Can you imagine the moment of your own death?

As Greenberg proves to me, not only I can. I am. Lori Landay explains that mirror neurons are activated every time the spectator assists to a performance. She writes:

The actions you mirror most strongly are the ones you know best. If one has not performed the specific action, mirror neurons still fire, in a general way related to your experience of balance, or running and jumping, but in a less intense way than the mirror neuron of an expert, and there are specific kinds of mirror neurons that prevent you from actually doing the action you see and that distinguish between actions of the self and actions of the others.³³

I am not a neuroscientist, and this thesis does not propose to work within that field. Yet, as I look at Greenberg standing on that stage quietly, I cannot help but think of what my mirror neurons are doing up there in my brain. They are firing up, without functioning properly.

Can you imagine the moment of your own death?

2017, New York. Tom Eubanks publishes *Ghosts of St. Vincent's*. The text evokes the present absences of the disappeared hospital of St. Vincent, sold in 2010 to build new apartments. Speaking about his experience at the 7th floor of the St. Vincent Hospital of New York, Eubanks writes:

³² Shelly Kagan, *Death* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2012), 362.

³³ Lori Landay, "The Mirror of Performance: Kinaesthetics, Subjectivity, and the Body in Film, Television, and Virtual Worlds," *Cinema Journal* 51, no.3 (Spring 2012): 130-131.

I had one only resolution for 1996: to die quietly in my sleep – and not, if I could help it, on a malfunctioning hospital bed. [...] I have never envisioned my own death. Could I simply waste away? Would the ulceration in my esophagus grow and spread to other parts of my gastrointestinal system? Would the CMV spread to my eyes, and cause me to go blind? How much longer could I survive on intravenous milkshakes?³⁴

The questions advanced by Eubanks, who assisted to the dying of many of his friends, reveal the reflective quality that death acquires at the time of AIDS. Death becomes him. The space inhabited by the dead body, and revealed in the medical world, translates into an imaginary space coexisting with those hard bodies perpetuating in movies and adverts. The projection of a possibly near future death appears on Greenberg's stage as an act of understanding.

Not-About-AIDS-Dance is the first choreography Greenberg made after his brother, Jon Greenberg, died of AIDS on July 12th, 1993. The choreography is mostly executed without music: I am asked to listen to the sound of bodies performing on the stage, to my own breath, and to that of the people surrounding me. The breathable, tangible hymn to life that informs the choreography on an initial level superimposes to the text, projected on the back wall.³⁵ As Susan Kraft points out, the text acts on the audience by turning the dancers into real people.³⁶ Kraft's observation, apparently harmless, reveals one of the main effects the *performtext* might have on the audience. In the *performtext*, I am no longer a stranger watching other strangers dancing: I am their acquaintances; I care about their lives, their secrets, their desires; I want to know more. To a certain extent, I am undergoing the same journey I experience when reading a novel: I am involved in the story and feel a connection with its characters. The performance, as a novel, is readerly but not quite writerly. Greenberg's piece cannot be reproduced outside a specific group of dancers, and a specific moment in time: *NAAD* will always be stuck in 1994.

³⁴ Tom Eubanks, *Ghosts of St. Vincent's* (New York: Tomus NYC, 2017), 148.

³⁵ Neil Greenberg, "On "Not-About-AIDS-Dance" – Jo McKendry, Justine Lynch, Ellen Barnaby, Christopher Batenhorst, Michael Stiller (v2)," Vimeo video, 7:11, posted by "Neil Greenberg," October 23, 2016, accessed June 14, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/188568878>.

³⁶ Neil Greenberg, interviewed by Susan Kraft, "Interview with Neil Greenberg," Oral History Project, Katharine Cornell Guthrie McClinton Special Collections Reading Room, 86, Lincoln Center Library for Performing Arts, New York.

Yet the piece sublimates the notion of time in a quite unusual way, making the writerly dimension of the *performtext* evident.³⁷

Greenberg's text does not follow a linear construction. The script overlaps and mixes different times: the time of the dance, as it was performed in 1994; the time of the solos; the time of the creation of the piece, and of its rehearsals; the time of the dancers' past stories, and that of their present fears and ambitions; the time of Neil's biography, and that of his brother's; the time of the spectators then, and of the spectators now. The performance acts as an *ensemble*: the dancers' movements, like photographic images, "go beyond what is in that representation", exploring the communal narrative of all temporal realms.³⁸ Under and/or beyond the *performtext*, *Not-About-AIDS-Dance* develops a storyline of sketched characters, both present and absent.

Among the immediately present figures are the company members: Jo, Ellen, Justine, Christopher and Neil.³⁹ Among the visibly absent characters: Jon; Ellen's mother; Ed Hartmann and John Falabella, who died while the choreographer was away; Richard Wolcott, who died on Labor Day; David Hagen, whose death was announced to Neil after Richard's funeral; Donald Greenhill, dead a week after Hagen; and finally Danny Jacobs, a friend of the choreographer who died while the dance was still a 'work in progress'.⁴⁰ *Is this list correct? Can I argue for sure that the lost friends and lovers are the absent characters of the choreography, and the company members the only present figures?*

³⁷ The narrative strategy adopted by Greenberg is not new: Yvonne Rainer adopts a similar strategy in the movie *Life of Performers* (1972). Asking the performers to comment on their action, she experiments with a narrative construction that introduce the spectator in a direct contact with the performers. If in Rainer, the movie, presents on screen a variety of characters and voices, in Greenberg, that presentation is limited to a singular perspective, Greenberg's. For the script of *Life of Performers*, see: Yvonne Rainer, *The Films of Yvonne Rainer* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 59-76.

³⁸ Barbara Harrison, "Photographic Visions and Narrative Inquiry," *Narrative Inquiry* 12, no.1 (2002): 104.

³⁹ Greenberg, "'Text: for Not-About-AIDS-Dance' as of 4/17/94".

⁴⁰ Greenberg, "'Text: for Not-About-AIDS-Dance' as of 4/17/94".

The dance brings me back to that very same question of visibility and invisibility that has informed the first two chapters. As for the photograph portraying Ed Hatlee, I am meant to look beyond a healthy, visible corporeality [Fig.47].⁴¹ The choreography is the background for invisible presences to emerge, for invisible bodies to find their image in the text. The people evoked by Greenberg may not be physically present on the stage, but they are present in the projection of their names on the screen. In his study on Narcissism, Pierre Legendre argues that:

The body can only become sayable if it makes itself an image. The basic axis of meaning – the bond between word and thing – is indissociable from the subject’s structure of representation. Once in the grip of the image, the body can be captured by language.⁴²

I do not know much about the individuals of Greenberg’s text: I do not know what they looked like, I do not know how what their voices sounded like, yet in the silent pronouncement of their names, their bodies come to life reflected in their moving presences on stage. The gaps between the kinetic and the written phrases reveal the true nature of the *performtext*. Performance in text, text in performance *NAAD* breaks the linear narrative of healthy and sick bodies to question the traditional perception of the bodily cycle. Time becomes unstable, as the writerly quality of the choreography plays out with living and dead bodies.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8...and repeat. Time in dance does not follow a traditional connotation. It is not recorded in seconds, minutes, or hours; it does not fit the sequence of the calendar, and it does not apply to that cyclical progression proper of the individual’s life. Time in dance reflects the counts on which the movements are built, the rehearsals, and the moment of the actual performance. In *NAAD* the discourse becomes even more complicated. Greenberg opens the choreography with an end: the death of his brother, and then proceeds by moving in the

⁴¹ See Ch.1 “Deathly Beautiful,” Subsection 1.3 “Macho, Macho Man, I’ve Gotta be a Macho Man!,” 82.

⁴² Pierre Legendre, “Introduction to the Theory of the Image: Narcissus and the Other in the Mirror,” *Law and Critique* VIII, no.1 (1997): 4.

non-present and non-absent pasts of his dancers. The superimposition of times and stories impede to define the piece in accordance with a traditional, clear time-sequence. To borrow the words used by Jameson to describe video art in his text on postmodernism, Greenberg's choreography enters postmodern discourse as an "experience of time itself".⁴³ For the length of the performance, I am asked to abandon a structured conception of time, and float in bodily infused worlds. In *NAAD* a multitude of lives reflects in the mirror beyond time, and death loses its fatality. I stand in front of the mirror, looking at the names appearing and disappearing from the screen. I am present in the act of viewing the performance; I am present in the past act of witnessing their death.

Can you imagine the moment of your own death?

In the a-synchronic development of the choreography, in the absence of a coherent temporal sequence, death expands, retracts, and repeats itself in circles. Talking about the piece in an interview with Kraft, Greenberg highlights the centrality loss acquires in the piece:

It's in the dance. Loss is in the dance. Submission to fate is in the dance. But this dance doesn't have an awful lot of trying not to submit to fate. I don't know; just standing up is trying not to submit to fate. [chuckles] In the structure, there's de-accumulation more than there is accumulation.⁴⁴

Death dominates the performance from its beginning to its end. Acting within a space of suspended corporealities, the choreography presents death in a whole new lens.

It is time for me to face the elephant in the room: *What is Death? How do I understand the dead body?*

In the book *Beyond the Body*, Hallam, Hockey, and Howarth manage to make the definition painfully real: "In order to define or describe 'death,' its material features have to be spelt out".⁴⁵ Spelt out, the word 'death' abstracts, and suspends the physical nature of the death itself,

⁴³ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London; New York: Verso, 1991), 74.

⁴⁴ Greenberg, interview, 121.

⁴⁵ Hallam, Hockey, and Howarth, *Beyond the Body*, 53.

without acknowledging the fact that a dead body shifts from state of not being to that of a corpse.

NAAD uses the healthy bodies of the dancers to make death, a state of not being, into a state of being, real on the stage. In his panoramic study of the choreography produced at the times of AIDS, David Gere writes:

Simply put, for bodies and bodiliness in the age of AIDS, dancing is ground zero. This is the place where the meanings of AIDS – the stigmas, the fears, the enduring assumptions, and, contradictorily, the explosive power of life-giving metaphors – are distilled to an elixir.⁴⁶

Made of sweat and physical contact, the elixir Gere is talking about confronts the fears of the epidemic in tangible, real bodies that cannot be masked. Choreographers during the AIDS crisis seem to be re-codifying the body by bringing onto the stage a physical perspective on death. The dead body, once an individual, is re-enacted on the stage.

Kagan synthesizes the position of a physicalist, saying that for him/her “a person is just a body that is functioning in the right way, a body capable of thinking and feeling and communicating, loving and planning, being rational and being self-conscious.”⁴⁷ The position applies in part to *NAAD*. As a dancer, and a choreographer, Greenberg understands and works within a corporeal dimension, but as a human being, he seems to struggle to translate a physicalist notion into movements. In the first half of the piece, Greenberg adopts an abstract narrative of the dead body: he does not describe the corpse of his brother, or of Ellen’s mother, neither he translates the dead bodies and the act of dying in movements. Choreography and text coexist as separate scores. The second time he confronts the death of his own brother, however, Greenberg stops in the middle of the stage and forces me to look at him impersonating death, turning by extension all of us into witnesses of his, and my own death.

⁴⁶ David Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic: Tracking Choreography in the Age of AIDS* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 40.

⁴⁷ Kagan, *Death*, 170.

November 16th, 1993. Bill T. Jones draws on a piece of paper what seems to be an autobiography. The “text,” which I find in the book *Art Performs Life*, is constituted by a simple, black line [Fig.115].⁴⁸ Moving in a circle, the line breaks, generates a few sharp forms, stops now and then, and ultimately revolves around itself. Presented in the form of a spiral cut short, the drawing is accompanied by an explanatory list of eight steps. The list and the line are not linked, yet their co-existence side by side lead me to establish a connection. Moving with no guidance, I develop my personal interpretation of the text, and proceeding from the inside to the outside, I attribute each “step” to a specific part of the drawing.

Step no.1: “What if?”. Jones’ story-time begins in medias res, in the middle of a question. For all that matters, I am not even sure what he wants to express with those words. *What if I was not born? What if I was born somewhere else?*

The line moves on vertically creating a prominent curve. From a graphic point of view not much seems to be going on: the line extends undisturbed, revolving in itself.

Overwhelmed by doubts, I continue reading.

Step no.2: “Sex, extreme sex”. The text, this time clear, mark the first rupture in the drawing: the pen dropdown to raise up.

Step no.3 “Will I make something beautiful?” Jones, I assume, is likely speaking of his college years, his approach to dance, his desire to create.

Step no.4 “Gay identity and [...] view of gay life”; the encounter with Arnie Zane, fundamental in the development of Jones’ artistic personality, is a dot in the diagonal ascension of the line.

No need for a specific name, no need for dramatic alterations.

⁴⁸ Image from: Kathy Halbreich and Philip Vergne ed., *Art Performs Life: Merce Cunningham, Meredith Monk, Bill T. Jones*, (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Centre; New York: Available through Distributed Art Publishers, c.1998).

Step no.5 “Money + Material Success” the line rises up to drop slightly down again; Jones and Zane have begun to collaborate, making history in the dance panorama of the time. It is a rush, a sharp line soon substituted by the curving shape of the beginning.

Step no.6 “My Company”. Harmonious, expanded, the line expresses a new balance in the life of the dancer.

The last two steps are probably the most relevant to our purpose.

Step no.7 “~~Death~~–Illness.” Step no.8 “What has happened?”

The final chapters in Jones’ history are the premises for Greenberg’s *NAAD*.

Up to this point, I have observed the line, and describe its appearance. *But what can I learn if I retrace it?*

Jones’ drawing could constitute one of the exercises the choreographer presented to terminally ill patients during the “Survival Workshops” eventually leading to *Still/Here*. Moved by the desire to get to know what these people learned living with a terminal disease, be it AIDS or cancer, Jones approached *Still/Here* by asking nonprofessional dancers to share their stories in a non-verbal way. The participants were asked to draw a map of their life, move in the space, and translate in few gestures their experiences.⁴⁹ In accordance to this interpretation, the image would represent a map to be walked out in a space. A document of someone’s life, the drawing would, in other words, be a performtext.⁵⁰

Sat at my desk, in a quiet university office, I have just one option: I grab a pen, and I begin to move on a photocopy of the drawing, never leaving the page [Fig. 116]. The line departing from step 1 constricts my wrist and limits its movements. Following, a sequence of broken lines that force my hand to a close set of ups and downs succeeds in conveying a moment of high

⁴⁹ Bill Moyers, “Bill T. Jones: Still/Here with Bill Moyers,” Vimeo video, 56:11 posted by “billmoyers.com”, December 7, 2011, accessed June 14, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/33288787>.

⁵⁰ Ariel Nereson, “Embodying the Undiscussible: Documentary Methodology in Bill T. Jones’ *Still/Here* and the Culture of Wars,” *Studies in Musical Theatre* 5, no.3 (2011): 299.

intensity. The hectic phrases slow down as Jones' approach the graphic translation of his early company years. The line expands, and the hand is free to explore the surrounding space. The full movement permitted by the step no.6 is cut short by the 7th point on the mark "Death Illness". My hand is forced into a quick turn.

I slow down and acquire new speed to then stop.

"What has happened?"

"Who were we, where were we, how did we experience these events?"⁵¹

Experiencing Jones' life with the movement of my hand, I re-discover the power of the temporal deconstruction forwarded by Greenberg in *NAAD*. Re-tracing the map, I experience death as a suspension in the regular flow of time.

Speaking at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2013, Jones mentioned the moment of Zane's death, remembering: "As the neighbourhood seemed to be holding its breath and Arnie was dying upstairs in the bedroom. For me that would always be March".⁵² Time lingers, sometimes it even stops, repeating itself. "Death Illness," the most traumatic moments in the individual's life stands side by side, hesitating. The choreographer does not connect the terms; he does not even use punctuation. In what seems to be an afterthought, Jones crossed through the word death. *Why?* It is not clear if Jones is referring to Zane's death, but it is obvious that he is adopting a narrative *a posteriori*. As with Green's reading of Zane's photographs of Pearl Pease, Jones' exercise sums up the human desire to prefigure History, to create a controlled, linear narrative of death.

⁵¹ bell hooks, "Subversive Beauty: New Modes of Contestation," in *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics*, (New York: New Press, 1995), 50.

⁵² Bill T. Jones, "TEDxMet: Bill T. Jones," Met Media video, 18:53, posted by "Met Media," December 5, 2013, accessed November 8, 2017, <https://www.metmuseum.org/metmedia/video/lectures/tedx-met-bill-t-jones>.

In the ageing body of Pease, critics saw the future decaying of Zane's body.⁵³ But when he took the picture, he could not even suspect the existence of the HIV virus, neither did he know he would die in the epidemic. When Jones begins to rehearse *Still/Here*, he is 41 years old. He has lost his partner and lover, 5 years before, and has known his HIV+ status roughly for the same amount of years. "I want to find out what this point in my life means," Jones says to Moyers in the documentary on the choreography.⁵⁴ In the construction of a piece that is about death, terminal illnesses, and survival, Jones seeks personal clarity and comfort in the experience of others, holding 'Survival Workshops' all over the United States.⁵⁵ Bringing together people affected by terminal illnesses in the same enclosed environment, Jones begins to explore how illness is narrated by asking the participants to translate in movements, their story before and after the diagnosis; asking them to imagine the moment of their own death.⁵⁶ The survivors move, Jones records their actions on video: he later uses the images to build the choreography with his dancers and enrich the piece with visual materials. Kinaesthetic *performtext*, the work of Jones confronts a multitude of possible death within the limits of a movement.

Death can be known on a superficial level: I see the pain, I assist in the progression of different illnesses, maybe I am even conscious of its materiality, but if I am able to describe it, it means that I survived. *How to know the unknown and therefore rationalize death?* The desire to know the unknown brings Jones and Greenberg to explore the possibility of the *performtext*. The dances reflect the difficulties Ruth Dean Grossman highlights, analyzing stories from the AIDS epidemic:

⁵³ Jonathan Green, "Continuous Replay," in *Continuous Replay: The Photographs of Arnie Zane*, (Cambridge, MA; London: The MIT Press, 1999), 45-46; Ch.2 "Autobiography of the Flesh," Subsection 2.1 "Arnie Zane: Dancing with Pearl Pease," 111.

⁵⁴ Bill Moyers, "Bill T. Jones: Still/Here with Bill Moyers," Vimeo video, 56:11 posted by "billmoyers.com", December 7, 2011, accessed June 14, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/33288787>.

⁵⁵ Bill Moyers, "Bill T. Jones: Still/Here with Bill Moyers," Gere, *How to Make a Dance in an Epidemic*, 20.

⁵⁶ Bill Moyers, "Bill T. Jones: Still/Here with Bill Moyers."

Not all experience can be narrated, and many if not all, experiences are expressed incompletely. There are aspects of experience that derive from a preverbal phase of development and are without words.⁵⁷

Death cannot be translated in written words, neither can it be re-enacted truthfully in the physical body. Yet, both Greenberg and Jones work towards the possibility of visualizing that moment in words, movement, stillness, and breathing exercises. Oddly, the choreographies have never been carefully compared together. David Román associates them in his essay “Not About AIDS,” but then moves onto analyzing Greenberg’s lesser-known work.⁵⁸ Originating from similar experiences *Still/Here* and *NAAD* were not perceived in the same ways: whilst Greenberg was praised by the critics, *Still/Here* was defined by Arlene Croce as an example of victim art.⁵⁹ Román explains the discrepancies with the discourse of ‘fame’: Jones was more widely known than Greenberg, therefore his piece inevitably attracted more criticism. Although convincing on a superficial level, Román’s argument does not take into consideration the different use of the performtext.

Greenberg operates on the kinetic and visual level. The text is not read out loud, the dance barely features the use of music. The movements superimpose a script recorded by a single voice. The only constriction in Greenberg’s choreography is the re-enactment of the dying brother. Differently from Greenberg, Jones inscribes the kinetic quality of the dance in the tangibility of sound. Created from the movements that terminally ill patients used to tell their stories in the Survival Workshop, *Still/Here* brings to the stage videos of these individuals. The videos appear on televisions and screens [Fig.117]. The spectator sees the protagonists of the workshops, moving, talking, sharing extremely personal experiences, and associates such

⁵⁷ Ruth Dean Grossman, “Stories of AIDS: The use of narrative as an approach to understanding in an AIDS Support group,” *Clinical Social Work Journal* 23, no.3 (September 1995): 292.

⁵⁸ David Román, “Not About AIDS,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 6, no.1 (2000): 1-28.

⁵⁹ Arlene Croce, “Discussing the Undiscussible,” *The New Yorker* (December 26, 1994), 54; Jennifer Dunning, “Dance/1994,” *Arts & Leisure* (December 23, 1994) in Neil Greenberg, *The Kitchen, Graffiti Rock – Gwiazda*, 2014 M6, Box 32, Folder 11, The Getty Research Institute Special Collections, Los Angeles, California.

images with the dancers' movements. It is not clear whether the people involved in the workshops that led to the choreography did actually survive their disease: they are alive on stage along with the bodies of the performers.

Can you imagine the moment of your own death?

The sick bodies of the patients are re-enacted in the healthy bodies of the dancers. *Still/Here* The dance seems to play on the opposition of the opposing physicality of the performers, and the absences of the participants, but what Jones's work is doing goes further. In the essay "Sacrificial Sex," Arthur Kroker argues:

The body in cyberspace, then, is meat after the fall, a kind of outlaw zone, a deliberately unsupervised playground for technological experimentation, where technology as virus subordinates the body as servomechanism to the threefold biological logic of viral invasion, replication of its genetic code, and cloning.⁶⁰

His words, clearly mediated by a reading of Donna Haraway's cybernetic space, although not completely applicable to Jones' piece, offer an interesting point of discussion around the bodily passages that complete the performances. Kroker talks about a body that is "meat after the fall," and therefore finds its freedom in a cybernetic/virtual space.⁶¹

Violent, truthful, definitely too realistic. The words of Kroker translate in Jones' piece as fragmented sequences showing body parts. It is realistic, it is unexpected, and, to a certain extent, it is even violent. Gere describes the recorded physicality of the Survival Workshops patients talking about "disembodied bodies" that recall "corporeality and mortality" at the same time.⁶² The theme of life and death, so frantically present in Jones' dance, return to Greenberg's work in very different terms. *Not-About-AIDS-Dance* does not use images; it works only on the indirect interactions of the performers with the text behind them. I talk about indirect interactions, because unlike Jones' *Still/Here*, where the choreographer uses the movements

⁶⁰ Arthur Kroker, "Sacrificial Sex," in *Fluid Exchanges: Artists and Critics in the AIDS Crisis*, ed. James Miller, (Toronto; Buffalo, NY; London: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 322.

⁶¹ Kroker, "Sacrificial Sex," in *Fluid Exchanges*, 322

⁶² Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic*, 23.

produced during the workshops to create the piece, Greenberg's work does not rely on a direct link word-movement. In the brother's coma re-enactment, words are not used to describe what Jon looked like. They read: "This is what my brother Jon looked like in his coma. He was in a coma 2 days before he died of AIDS. I'm HIV+. But this part of the dance isn't meant to be about me".⁶³ I am not in the presence of disembodied bodies; I am in presence of an asymptomatic HIV+ body that appears healthy performing a corporeality that is no longer real.

Death acquires the form of a body: the absent body of Jon comes back for few seconds within the body of Neil. Offered onstage is an unconventional type of historical re-enactment. In *Enacting History* Leigh Clemons defines historical re-enactment writing: "Reenactors, view their representation of history not as a performance but an embodiment. Rather than "characters," they refer to their actions and appearance as 'impressions'".⁶⁴ Leigh continues, underling that in the recreation of historical battles, performers do not aim to re-enact a real person, on the contrary, they just aim to re-create the "average person".⁶⁵ Neil's re-enactment is extremely specific and cannot be compared to any historical re-enactment. However, the words used by Leigh are extremely helpful in re-codify Greenberg's dance. That moment on the stage, words leave me with a key to interpret the movements that will follow. *What am I looking at? Am I looking at a performance?* A performance; an embodiment; an experiment. In a series of interviews recorded in 2016 by Greenberg, dancer Christopher Batenhorst recalls:

When we started performing it I never... doubted, it never... any kind of fear about the disclosure was... fixed by how silent the audience was, and I... not..., like gasps the silence like, like "this is what my brother Jon looked like" people, it was more just like... a profound silence as opposed to a shock silence, or an embarrassed silence.⁶⁶

⁶³ Greenberg, "'Text: for Not-About-AIDS-Dance' as of 4/17/94".

⁶⁴ Leigh Clemons, "Present Enacting Past: The Functions of Battle Reenacting in Historical Representation," in *Enacting History*, ed. Scott Magelssen (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2011), 10, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/york-ebooks/detail.action?docID=835618#>.

⁶⁵ Clemons, "Present Enacting Past," 10.

⁶⁶ Christopher Batenhorst, interviewed by Neil Greenberg, "On "Not-About-AIDS-Dance" – Jo McKendry, Justine Lynch, Ellen Barnaby, Christopher Batenhorst, Michael Stiller (v2)," Vimeo video, 8:23, posted by Neil Greenberg, October 13, 2016, accessed January 17, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/188568857>.

Batenhorst's words describe an embodiment rather than a performance. In those silent moments in which the figure of Jon is superimposed to that of Neil, I become the witness of Jon's, and by extension Neil's death.

"It is in this engagement with disappearance and dispersal than I see myself seeing, that I become aware of being an art historical witness".⁶⁷

Can you imagine the moment of your own death?

Margaret Gibson argues that in a society that is technologically mediated, death is no longer a taboo. Gibson uses fictional examples, she writes about TV medical dramas, and not about a choreography inspired by real-life events. However, her ideas present some interesting considerations to answer our question. Looking at visual representations of death on television, Gibson writes:

Through the camera lens, images of death and dying are brought close to the eye and consciousness of the viewer/ audience and yet a relationship to distance is part of the experience. [...] The viewer knows they are experiencing proximity at a distance.⁶⁸

The death experience Gibson describes passes through a variety of media before reaching the audience. This is inaccurate in the case of Greenberg's reenactment of his brother's death, where death just happens in the middle of the dance.

I become the survivor to invisible deaths. In the profound silence following Greenberg's re-enactment of his brother's death I silently accept an active role in the narrative. As Salomé Voegelin argues in her *Listening to Noise and Silence*, sound does not reflect an absence: it rather defines a presence.⁶⁹ In silence, I hear all sounds I am normally unable to distinguish: the body of Greenberg, standing still in front of his audience, unfolds in the melody of breath, and almost unperceivable joint sounds, revealing a hidden presence. Till now I have been

⁶⁷ Jane Blocker, *Seeing Witness: Visuality and the Ethics of Testimony* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 44.

⁶⁸ Margaret Gibson, "Death and Mourning in Technologically Mediated Culture," *Health Sociology Review* 16, no.5 (December 2007): 417.

⁶⁹ Salomé Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound and Art* (London; New Delhi; New York; Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2010), 83.

talking about a presence in absence dialectic as it appears on a mediated visual level. I have defined presence and absence as notion inseparable from that the concept of “being”, and visible and invisible as a direct product of the act of seeing. *But what about sound? Does the presence in absence dialectic act on it? And if so, how does it translate into the performative action?* To Voegelin, “seeing is a dialectical act of comparison and differentiation,” while listening is a “concomitant sensory-motor act of production”.⁷⁰ She continues by inviting the reader to re-define the space of our considerations. *Can an argumentative practice co-exist within a sensorial kinetic act?* Visual, kinetic, and sensorial essences: presence and absence appear to be in a synesthetic relation, rather than a dialectic confrontation.

Listening, seeing, acting within the piece: all these components work together in the recodification process that shapes the sick and healthy bodies of the epidemic. Not about AIDS, the dance is about traumatic losses hard to process. Caruth sustains:

If a life threat to the body and the survival of this threat are experienced as the direct infliction and the healing of a wound, trauma is suffered in the psyche precisely, it would seem, because it is not directly available to experience. The problem of survival, in trauma, thus emerges specifically as the question: What does it mean for *consciousness* to survive?⁷¹

The re-enactment of Neil’s brother’s death is meant to speak to the survivors’ consciousness and respond to their desire to understand death. A similar need is at the base of Jones’ *Still/Here*, with the difference being that the depiction of death here does not relate to a direct confessional construction. The work develops from the confessions of people that the choreographer met in workshops that were previously scheduled. The stories, shared in a friendly, safe, environment, comes to Jones in an artificial setting. The participants have different backgrounds and suffer from different terminal illnesses: outside the Survival Workshop, they probably would have never met. As Jones, and his company members, I

⁷⁰ Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence*, 24.

⁷¹ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, MD; London: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 61.

receive a modified biographical record of the survivors: I do not really know their lives before illness, neither I am the participant of their life-experiences outside the workshops.

“Who were we, where were we, how did we experience these events?”⁷²

Following the instruction of Jones, the individuals translate their stories in simple movements. Sometimes those movements mimic a spoken word, other times they just convey a feeling. It is a proto-linguistic code: gestures substitute words; meaning is made universally available.

They have not said a word to each other yet. There is no question of words being spoken in this shared moment that is so elemental and time-honoured. It is a moment when life summons life from the very depths of the species’ energy. The sophistication of words would merely blur a moment that cannot be expressed by any language of life’s struggle, implanted within the farthest recess of the brain.⁷³

Written to seal the first encounter of Thomas and Leo, *Camere Separate* echoes in the choreographic work of Jones. In pivotal moments of an individual’s life - the beginning of a love story, illness, the loss of a loved-one, birth, death – words are not enough.

Assembled through choreography, their movements become fragments in a quilt of stories patched together. Jones’ work, in contrast to Greenberg’s, does not put me in the position of the witnesses, rather it inscribes death in a fictional, distant, reality that is somehow more acceptable. The protagonists of *Still/Here* might be dead or alive at the moment in which I assist at the performance: no further information on their fates are offered in the choreography. The absent bodies echoed in the movements of Jones’ dancers are entrapped in the temporality of the work, suspended in the staged theatricality of the choreography, and

⁷² hooks, “Subversive Beauty,” 50.

⁷³ Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Separate Rooms*, translated by Simon Pleasance, introduced by Edmund White, (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2004), 14. Original text: “Le parole non sono contemplate in questo momento per entrambi primordiali, arcaico, in cui la vita chiama la vita attraverso la piu’ profonda energia della specie. Le parole, nella loro sofisticatezza biologica, potrebbero solo confondere un momento che non si esprime attraverso alcun linguaggio se non quello, ficcato nel piu’ profondo della corteccia celebrale, della lotta per la vita”. See: Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Camere Separate* (Milano: Bompiani, 1989), 21.

evoked in the unchangeable quality of the videotape. Death is a realistic possibility presented in an unrealistic narrative; thus, the hard critiques, and the difficulties that accompanies the reception of the work that wants to speak about surviving death but does not speak about what death is.

What distinguishes Greenberg and Jones' work ultimately depends on their chosen audiences. *Still/Here* is about the living, and for the living, *Not-About-AIDS-Dance* is about the dead, and for an audience of the dead. *Still/Here* is the result of Jones' experience with death during the late 1980s. The work comes after the choreographer's loss of his lover, and of many of his friend, and develops around movements that terminally ill patients produced in a workshop where they were asked, to think, and talk about their diseases in the attempt to elaborate an understanding, and in some cases even imaginary, of death. While *Not-About-AIDS-Dance* focuses on the story of the performers, avoiding the link word-movement, leaving us with the image of Greenberg's comatose brother dying, *Still/Here* manipulates a compilation of private stories, to give the viewer a brand-new surviving text. According to Ann Cooper Albright, the complex practice Jones brings on the stage responds to a specific characteristic of African-American artists:

*Rewriting, reinscribing, recreating, reenvisioning, reframing, reincorporating, reinterpreting, representing [...]. The act of going back to take up again -returning, reclaiming, repossessing- this is a strategy that is central to contemporary African-American performance.*⁷⁴

Re-written in fragmented scripts, re-envisioned in a series of images, re-created in collapsing movements, *Not-About-AIDS-Dance* and *Still/Here* capture the feeling of an era, making it tangible.

Can you imagine the moment of your own death?

⁷⁴ Ann Cooper Albright, *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 137.

3.2 12 Minutes

12 minutes. 12 minutes to narrate a lifetime. 12 minutes to remember and move forward while going back in time.

March 30th, 1988. Arnie Zane, Bill T. Jones' dance and life partner, dies of AIDS.

June 21st, 1989. Jones performs his grief in a choreography 12 minutes long, staged in collaboration with John Sanborn [Fig.118].⁷⁵ *Untitled* is a piece at the crossroad of dance and technology. My analysis, based on a recording preserved at the New York Public Library, will take into account the double nature of the work, further discussing the ephemeral quality of the *performtext*.⁷⁶

As the video begins, the name of the piece, *Untitled*, appears on the bottom half of the screen. Soon afterwards, the figure of Jones is revealed. He is standing on the left side of the stage in complete silence. Time passes, nothing changes. At 2:08, a voice, Zane's voice, says: "Last night, the 3rd of March;" the camera moves up, slowly leaning on Jones' still body. The voice continues: "First dream that I recall;" the title disappears, substituted by the words "First dream" passing on the bottom of the screen. From this point on, the video will be continuously disturbed by words excerpted from the speech and superimposed onto the video image. The camera reaches Jones' face, just in time for me to hear "I sought refuge in a tent". The camera shifts back and away from Jones, I am now able to see again part of his body. Jones is wearing a black tank top and black pants.

⁷⁵ Images for this performance are not available. The video, now preserved at the Lincoln Center for Performative Art is not accessible to the audience.

⁷⁶ This analysis, quotes included, is based on a video preserved at the Lincoln Centre for Performative Art, New York Public Library. See: Bill T. Jones, John Sanborn and Mary Perillo, "Untitled," in *Untitled; [and] Arms; [and] Relatives [videorecording]*, produced by John Ligon, Alive from Off-Center Series, US: KTCA-TV, 1989, Lincoln Centre for Performative Art, New York Public Library, New York, New York. A complete analysis of the piece with full transcript and images is also available in David Gere's book. My transcript has been cross-checked with Gere's. For Gere's analysis, see: David Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic: Tracking Choreography in the Age of AIDS* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 122-137.

The narration of the dream prompts Jones to start moving: he walks decisively towards the right side of the stage. He has not yet looked at the camera. Jones positions himself just out of the stage centre; he stops and turns his head as if someone is calling. Again, he is not looking at the viewer, he is rather staring at the horizon, slightly lost. The voice continues: “was laying and sleeping by myself, with maybe three other individuals, two on one side of me, and one on the other side of me”.⁷⁷ Jones, now in the middle of the stage, moves his arms in a circle. The gestures abstract Zane’s words. The camera follows the dance, moving back and forth, leaning on Jones’ body, trying to catch his emotions, and fix on film the disappearing movements. While Jones is choreographing the words, Sanborn is choreographing the body, and providing an interpretative reading of the dance and of its verbal content.

The performtext becomes the product of two distinguished efforts: Jones’ and Sanborn’s. Writerly in its audio-visual qualities, readerly in the cinematic edits enriching the choreographer’s pure movements, *Untitled*, 1989 presents me with a primitive and finished example of what will later become a standardized type of performance. The writerly qualities of the work trace back to the use of Zane’s recorded voice, and Sanborn’s filmed product. The audio is the primitive, basic instrument through which Jones theatrically mark Zane’s visible absence on the stage. Without the editorial work of Sanborn, Zane’s voice stands as the direct correspondence of Greenberg’s later attempt to embody the dying body of his brother, and project in that representation his own, and my mortality. At the time Jones performed this piece, the audience was aware of Zane’s death, and the use of his voice for the main record for the movements likely suspended the absence of his figure, right next to Jones’ body. The famous duo of Mapplethorpe’s pictures appears now in a diverse materiality: it is defined by a union of a tangible sound and a physical presence made readerly in the performative act.

⁷⁷ Transcript also available in: Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic*, 128.

Zane's recorded voice acts on us in the same way in which Greenberg's re-enactment does. Analysing the effect of sound in our perception of reality, Salomé Voegelin writes:

Sound invites the body into experience and reciprocally makes the object physical. Listening to sound is where objectivity and subjectivity meet: in the experience of our own generative perception we produce the objectivity from our subjective and particular position of listening, which in its turn is constituted by the objectivity of the object as a prior moment of hearing, subjective and particular.⁷⁸

Voegelin, who earlier describes sounds as ghosts, is arguing for a physical translation of the audio property of the work. By listening to the voice of Zane, and viewing Jones' moving body on the stage, I experience the projection of my identity into the lost presence of Zane. "Sonic beings," the viewers welcome the disappearing sound of a dead person's voice into their body, ultimately contributing to bringing an absent corporeality on stage. As in Greenberg's performance the body of the choreographer translates the body of the dead brother into the factual projection of the material quality of the dead, and of its actual possibilities, in *Untitled*, the viewer is asked to resonate the persona of Zane in his/her own body, but also to project his/her subject self into his subconscious.

Zane's voice recalls a nightmare in which a fireplace moves towards him. As a response, Jones moves his left leg, places it in a lunge, and at the words "suddenly in distance" twists towards the camera, grinding his teeth. The movements are now tensed; the voice is now saying: "I saw what looked like the inside of a fireplace moving toward me, but there were giant, giant logs completely burning, one stacked on the top of the other, four or five high. They were being pushed by a bulldozer at tremendous speed, moving toward the tent".⁷⁹ Jones moves backwards, stands still, and moves his arms up and down energetically. As the intensity of the choreography increases, the movements begin to be accompanied by the physical sound of the body producing them, and by Jones' fast breathing. No other sound accompanies the

⁷⁸ Salomé Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound and Art* (London; New Delhi; New York; Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2010), 14.

⁷⁹ Transcript also available in: Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic*, 128.

movements. The choreography proceeds in the respect of the rhythm of the voice. The camera, as the dancer, follows the pauses and the quality of Zane's voice, so that when he starts describing the terrifying approaching of the burning logs the camera close-up on Bill's face, conveying that same terror, and anxiety.

Can you imagine the moment of your own death?

The narration is coming to an end: Jones twists backwards, moves forward, and gets in another lunge. "I woke up," Zane says.

Jones faces the camera, still. Everything is quiet: there is no sound. He moves towards the camera, decisive, with no second thoughts. For the first time, since the dance has begun, Jones changes the horizontal orientation of the work, moving forward, in silence. He moves close to the camera, looks at us, and finally speaks: "You said a system in collapse is a system moving forward". It is Jones' turn to speak; he keeps staring at the camera, going "Do you remember...?". At this very precise moment, Sanborn's camerawork becomes more invasive: the image of Jones is superimposed to photographs from Bill and Arnie's private life. Like ghosts, the pictures inhabit the choreography space acquiring a new physicality, as Jones proceeds with a list of "Do you remember...?" addressing friends, places, and private memories. The past of the images re-live in the present of the performance, and in the reproducible nature of the video. "You said a system in collapse is a system moving forward. You said [Jones closes his eyes] a system in collapse [Jones opens his eyes] is a system moving forward. You said".

"Who were we, where were we, how did we experience these events?"⁸⁰

Jones' face disappears, now substituted by a picture of Zane. *Is Jones talking to me?*

⁸⁰ bell hooks, "Subversive Beauty: New Modes of Contestation," in *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995), 50.

Not really, no. His face reveals bittersweet memories, alternating smiles with more serious expressions. His last words resonate on the stage, holding a history that is not disclosed to the audience. I cannot remember the people Jones evokes in his speech, I have never met them. Yet Jones says: “You said?” *Who is the you?* According to Cathy Hannabach, that you, is us: “we,” she writes “are interpellated as Arnie Zane, Jones’ lost object, and we are suddenly forced to inhabit death by serving as Zane’s body”.⁸¹ *But is that so?* Sanborn brings the camera back to Jones’ face, he turns his face right, the camera goes back to frame his entire figure. All of a sudden, Zane’s hologram appears on the left side of the stage, and with him, the voice, his voice, is back: “Thing seems as usual”. Arnie starts moving: he is dancing those same movements presented early into the choreography: he is presenting the sequence of the burning logs moving towards him in the dream. Zane moves facing Jones; he is strong, present, this time it is Jones that seems absent: he gravitates around the figure without energy, without purposes. He is not attempting a reunion, he is not aiming for a hug; he is simply walking towards the hologram. Bill takes his tank top down, and bare chest takes Zane’s spot as he disappears, leaving the viewers once again with his voice. Jones starts dancing again.

Can you imagine the moment of your own death?

Zane talks about moving into a new apartment: he is watching from his windows the builders working outside. Jones’ dance, no longer robotic repetition, expressively responds to the story: fluid movements alternate with the early energetic sequence. The camera incorporates the suspended quality of the dance, responding to Jones’ body, accepting the blurriness generating from the rapidity of his movements. The choreography develops in and out of the space previously occupied by Zane’s hologram. Jones is completely lost in the dance. Zane keeps narrating his story: an accident occurs among the builders, leaving one of them

⁸¹ Cathy Hannabach, “Choreographing a Queer Ethics: Between Bill T. Jones and Keith Hennessy,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 23, no.1 (2013): 88.

trapped. The story becomes dramatic, Zane cannot watch, but then he turns, realizing the builder is not badly hurt. Everything is just fine. Jones keeps moving, lost in Zane's voice, he responds to his voice: his body respects the narrative, going at Zane's speed. As with the previous part of the work, the choreography is framed by the passing words spoken by Zane on the bottom of the screen.

Jones jumps, turns, takes over the stage completely. The opera music begins. This time Jones seems to retrace the story of he and Zane's life, responding to the remembrance sequence, giving life to the drawing he was later going to make as part of the *Still/Here* workshops. The first part of this third choreographed story plays on balance, Jones is on his own, completely focused on maintaining the position, devoting his narrative to his body. He moves in a circle, the camera following the body. The video becomes blurred, we see Jones' feet twisting and turning rapidly on the floor. There is pleasure, abandonment, fall, and resignation. Jones ends on the floor in that same spot where Zane previously appeared. Jones is caressing the floor, evocating a presence to move forward and slipping away from it: he is touching a whisper. His body is liquid, the music goes down, the light goes down; the camera closes on Bill's body. The movements resume, Jones is pushed toward a whisper by a whisper: he loses balance, twists, rushes along the stage to finally find stillness.

Can you imagine the moment of your own death?

Jones stands at the centre of the stage. He lifts his hand, and still recovering from the dance, says: "I think we are alone now. It doesn't seem to be [he shakes his head lightly] anyone around". Jones repeats "I think we are alone now". The image of Zane appears again in the form of a photograph, superimposing with Jones' figure. Jones is talking now. "Do you remember Bucharest? ...".⁸² The list begins again, accompanied by various photos, some taken by Zane. I become the voyeur of a lifetime in pictures. "I think we are alone now". Jones

⁸² For full list see: Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic*, 128.

puts on his clothes: first the top, then a scarf, a coat, and a hat. The images continue. “I think we are alone now”. Jones puts on the glasses, Zane’s photograph disappears. He is alone now. Bill makes a fist with his left hand, and begins to beat on his chest reproducing the sound of a heart beating. “I think” - another beat. “I think” – another beat. “Do you remember” the beat goes on again. The gestures and the sound slow down. Jones walks backwards; his hand opens. He stops and looks at the audience. It is the end of the 12th minute. “I think we are alone now”.

3.3 I Think We are Alone Now: Looking for References in *Untitled*, 1989.

Untitled (1989) is a dance full of meaning. An analysis of the piece has been presented by David Gere in the book *How to Make a Dance in an Epidemic*. Gere’s text, enriched by stills from the video, argues that the choreography ends in a suspension, in “a space of inchoate desire and melancholy”.⁸³ I understand the perspective from which Gere conducts his analysis. It’s the perspective that I adopted when I first approached the piece, after reading his book. I expected to watch a choreography that spoke about a relationship, death, survival, and of course AIDS. However, the choreography is not wholly about AIDS: Zane’s cause of death is not mentioned, neither is the word AIDS, which similarly does not occur in my description of the piece.

Gere presents *Untitled* as an example of the “AIDS dance” par excellence. According to Gere, the perfect AIDS choreography is defined by three elements: it has to be about “gayness” and speak of what Gere’s define the “abjection factor”; it has to speak of homosexual desire; and it has to present of a mourning process.⁸⁴ To prove his point Gere describes the reactions of UCLA students that viewed the choreography without any prior information. The students, he writes, were confused about the nature of the work, until one claimed to be sure

⁸³ David Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic: Tracking Choreography in the Age of AIDS* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 135-137.

⁸⁴ Gere, *How to Make a Dance in an Epidemic*, 12.

the piece was about AIDS: “He presumed the narrator and the performer to be gay – because of the reference to the “beautiful” construction worker, a description that a straight American man would never allow himself – and because the “Do you remember” sequence and the succession of black-and-white photographs that accompany it made the student think about loss and death”.⁸⁵

“Who were we, where were we, how did we experience these events?”⁸⁶

Even though I am still using the choreography in a thesis that talks about the AIDS crisis, the connection made by Gere’s student, does not convince me: I would not necessarily link this work to AIDS. My decision to present *Untitled* depends mainly on two reasons: the interest Gere’s analysis raised in me, and the effectiveness of the dance in representing life, death, and survival within a present in absence dialectic. Before beginning my analysis, before I saw the performance, I was aware of Zane’s death of AIDS, and I was invested in researching material on the AIDS crisis. Far from being the manual for the perfect AIDS choreography, the dance is, I argue, a glance in the archival memories of Zane. The signs are numerous: I hear Arnie narrating a nightmare; I assist at the appearance of an archival footage of Zane on the stage in the form of a hologram; I hear the names of the people that crossed his path and encounter them in the photographic records that superimpose Jones’ body. The archival nature of the work is strengthened by the tangibility of Zane’s voice. His tale sets the soundtrack for the choreography, composing a multiplicity of broken narratives that stands in an a-temporal, suspended reality, where Zane can be alive, and mourn at the same time.

Time becomes part of a continuous flow, embedding a feeling both Jones and Zane experienced after Zane’s diagnosis. The interviews Jones and Zane realized respectively for PBS and the New York Public Library Oral History Project reflects the role time acquired in

⁸⁵ Gere, *How to Make a Dance in an Epidemic*, 13.

⁸⁶ bell hooks, “Subversive Beauty: New Modes of Contestation,” in *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995), 50.

their life. When Zane was still alive, Jones explained to Joanna Simon, how he felt knowing Zane's status, saying:

Try to imagine, uh, what it's like to lose some of your most promising, most inspirational energy sources at a time when they're just beginning to realize their potential.⁸⁷

Zane's death, for Jones the premature interruption of a life, results in the interrupted heartbeat of *Untitled* 1989.

The choreography does not fail to convey a feeling that defines for long Zane's perception of his medical condition. In the Oral History Project Zane discloses his perception straightforwardly:

We said to ourselves, you know, "I don't want to" – and this is not a put down to Daniel [Nagrin], but – "I don't want to be old like Daniel. I don't want to be an older body that's falling apart". And here I have a young body which is degenerating. This is a – a bitch (laugh), but you know.... One never knows in life how it's going to go.⁸⁸

And again:

We have a whole – to jump to the very present – and we can talk more at another point – but to jump to the very present... We have, because my health... [tape pause]. About a year ago I'd had to have some surgery and I thought: "Oh. Oh no. Oh no. You don't really have much time left. You have to make your last dance".⁸⁹

The piece remains *Untitled* because it speaks of an interrupted process. Jones' private goodbye to Zane is ritualized and the viewer is forced to witness. In the book *Endings* Michael C. Kearl claims:

Ideally, for the dying, the death should be anticipated, welcomed, nonstigmatizing, and following the completion of one's central social obligations and personal desires or goals. For the surviving, the death should occur neither prematurely nor postmaturely, with the affairs of the deceased all in order, with their (the survivors) status at least remaining intact, and having had the opportunity to stay or do with the deceased all that was desired and without any regrets.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane, interviewed by Joanna Simon, "Interview PBS, NewsHour," (July 1987).

⁸⁸ Arnie Zane, interviewed by Lesley Farlow, "Interview with Arnie Zane 23/12/1987," Lincoln Center Library for Performing Arts Oral History Project, 20, Lincoln Center Library for Performing Arts, New York.

⁸⁹ Zane, interview, 23.

⁹⁰ Michael C. Kearl, *Endings: A Sociology of Death and Dying* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 497.

Zane's archive is incomplete, as it is his legacy. His death happens in the middle of his artistic career, in the middle of a body that was strong, and healthy; in the middle of a photograph.

Untitled is a funeral. Kearl writes, guiding my reflections: "The funeral is the finished picture of a person, providing a ritual occasion when one reflects on the success and shortcomings of a concluded biography".⁹¹ The dance, like a funeral, aims to provide a finished picture of Zane, who is the absent and yet continuously present protagonist of the piece. Jones is just a side presence in the evocation of Zane's persona. Every little detail, from the clothes picked by Jones for the filmed version of the choreography, to the pictures used as additional dancers in the performance, is permeated by Zane.

It might be useful in this regard to re-consider the interview mentioned earlier. Talking to Lesley Farlow, Zane recalled his first meeting with Jones:

I met him at the pub on the campus there was – oh, he was very dashing, very exciting student. Much unlike – very different, visually, than he is now. I remember the first time I met him. He had on a black felt hat which was pulled down – this was a hippy period – and he had on a long green trench coat which must have come from an army surplus store, and very, very tight-blue-and-white striped bell-bottoms without pockets on the pants. He had on I think a black turtleneck and a pair of black thick-rimmed glasses.⁹²

The description, very detailed considering it happened several years before the interview, resembles the outfit picked by Jones for the recorded version of *Untitled*. I acknowledge that the clothes Jones is wearing in the video do not match the initial presentation of the choreography, where Jones danced naked; however, as I stated in the previous subchapter, my analysis is limited to what is available now. Jones is enacting the beginning of his story with Zane while performing the last moments of his lover's heartbeats.

Can you imagine the moment of your own death?

⁹¹ Kearl, *Endings*, 95.

⁹² Zane, interview, 5.

The dance is embedded in a complex temporal construction. Past, present, and future mix together creating a work at the crossroad of fiction and reality. Zane's ghost lingers over dance, in a ritual of memories able to shape a tangible presence. *Untitled* is about loss more than Greenberg's *Not-About-AIDS-Dance* is. It is about the loss of a partner. It is about the loss of a physicality. It is about the loss of a moment, or moments, in time, and about the loss of a medical history, ultimately not necessary. The transition from the living to the dead and back, the piece, as presented in Sanborn and Jones' collaborative project, uses media that challenge the traditional construction of time, make temporality meaningless: dance, the art that disappears while it is performed; photography, the art that tries to stop time, proving instead its inability to be captured; and video art, the practice that filters a time, offering the surrogate of an illusion. The choreographic uses of photography create a parallel artificial reality, in which presences and absences do not really matter. Analysing the effects that photographic records have on her acceptance of cancer, Jackie Stacey writes:

On the one hand, I know that photographs are visual artifacts. Highly artificial constructions, they reveal nothing and tell us only about themselves. On the other hand, I find myself searching these 'frozen moments' for a sign that might shed some light on the bodily deceptions of that time. Photographs never lie: the old myths still catch us out. I continue to be seduced by the promise of visual truth despite my apparent critical distance.⁹³

Frozen moments, the pictures, like Zane's hologram, are an impossible reproduction of a corporeality no longer real.

Zane is entrapped in light, preserved against time, re-explored in its kinetic possibilities on the stage. Zane is the lost performer and the hidden audience. Adaptation to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, *Untitled* is a mirror for Zane's shadow to reflect one more time, and a space for Jones to observe it vanishing once again. Not an accurate representation of Zane, the

⁹³ Jackie Stacey, *Teratologies: A Cultural Study of Cancer* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), 140.

choreography does not give a complete portrait of who Zane really was, like Eurydice he is a ghost appearing from the dark, the voice resonating on the stage. Like Eurydice, Zane is:

a border-runner [*une passeuse*] who nullifies the ocular function of the gaze: [s]he kills the screen-memories of the trauma and inhabits the space of death, from the *halal*, or the act of sacrilege and profanation. [S]he is the interstice between images, a visibility free from all figures.⁹⁴

Zane inhabits the space of death, working as “the interstice between images, a visibility free from all figures”. *Untitled* is his chance for Zane to briefly make his way back from the darkness, and for Jones to let his ghost go; another opportunity to let Zane’s heart-bit resonate in the midst of a borrowed corporeality. “Our culture does not prepare us to cope with our own death or with the deaths of others,” Kaerl writes.⁹⁵ And that is the reason why *Untitled*, a dance that is not about AIDS, is the most effective tool to take a deep look in the Mirror and cross its surface.

3.4 Diving into the Blue: The Story of D-Man

November 6th, 1987. Demian Acquavella, member of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company finds out about his medical condition. He has AIDS. A couple of weeks before he saw a spot on his arm, most likely a KS lesion, and decided to get a biopsy.⁹⁶ Two years later Acquavella would step on the stage for the last time to dance the choreography Jones dedicated

⁹⁴Christine Buci-Glucksmann, “The Eurydice,” *Parallax* 5, no.1 (1999), 100.

⁹⁵ Kaerl, *Endings*, 424.

⁹⁶ See: Demian Acquavella, interviewed by Maya Wallach, “Interview with Demian Acquavella,” Sound Recording, 1989, Lincoln Centre for Performing Arts, New York; Rosalynde LeBlanc, “Can You Bring It: Bill T. Jones and D-Man in the Waters,” Vimeo Video, 15:12, posted by “Roz LeBlanc,” 2016, accessed July 6, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/153392999>. I would like to thank Rosalynde LeBlanc for the informal conversation we had on the phone upon the completion of this piece of writing. Former dancer of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, LeBlanc is now completing a movie on the choreography entitled “Can You Bring it: Bill T. Jones and D-Man in the Waters”. An excerpt of the cut of the film will be presented on July 20, 2018 at the Elinor Bunin Monroe Film Centre, New York. For full movie trailer, please see: Rosalynde LeBlanc, “D-Man” Vimeo Video, 03:56, posted by “Roz LeBlanc,” 2016, accessed July 6, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/162928303>. For information on the movie, see: “About the film,” D-Man, accessed July 6, 2018, <https://www.d-mandocumentary.com/>.

to him: *D-Man in the Waters*.⁹⁷ Initially conceived with the title of *Waters*, the choreography is dedicated to Acquavella at a later stage. With this work, Jones wanted to capture a much more extended feeling: he wanted to talk about an era and its emotional impact. In the book *Last Night on Earth*, he recalls:

I had a daydream, almost a vision, in which I saw Demian and a myriad of friends, living and dead, in a body of water. Perhaps it was a lake as vast as the ocean, a lake emptied by an immense and unforgiving waterfall. This company of people was struggling against the current. Some had already drowned, others were grasping their comrades to save them, still others were swimming confidently, almost enjoying their effort.⁹⁸

A sinking boat. The metaphor Jones advances to fix a decade of losses and death recall a distant past: that of the transatlantic slave trade. The association is not that distant: Jones references African American history often in his work and uses it to make a strong political statement. In this case, the choreographer does not refer to the historical reverberation permeating his description. African slaves were brought to America by boat; the journey across the Atlantic was tragic and resulted in a lot of deaths either by suicide, disease or epidemics.⁹⁹ The choreography, as it turns out, did not end up narrating the history of African American slavery but rather reverberates with it indirectly, as a tool to understand an un-precedent moment of crisis. *What are the effects of such unconscious association? What do they tell us about the code developed in the epidemic to make sense of the bodily effect of AIDS?*

The body is the centre of temporal explorations and tangible abstractions. Jones' re-enactment goes beyond a precise progression of time. And so, does his definition of the body. In his performtexts, the bodies of past and present eras are enabled to coexist. Over the years, Jones has proved to be against a strong categorization of his works: *D-Man in the Waters* is

⁹⁷ This analysis is based on a video preserved at the Lincoln Center for Performative Art, New York Public Library. Please see: "D-Man in the Waters," VHS, 1999, US, MGZIA 4-7799, New York Public Library, Lincoln Center for Performative Art, New York, New York.

⁹⁸ Bill T. Jones and Peggy Gillespie, *Last Night on Earth*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), 194; Rosalynde LeBlanc, "Can You Bring It".

⁹⁹ Genevieve Fabre, "The Slave Ship Dance," Dietrich, in *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*, ed. Maria Gates, Henri Louis and Pedersen Cal, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 35.

not about AIDS, but rather, it is about the feeling of an era, or maybe a multiplicity of eras. Not often mentioned in the choreographer's reading of his work, his African-American background permeates the works in a postmodern loop. Jones permits the biographical to exist in the a-temporal fragmented version of history. To borrow the words of Carl Paris, his dances reflect a combination of "a somatic identity (the body) with autobiographical or social-political commentary (himself as subject)".¹⁰⁰ The bodies drowning in the dream of Jones are abstract projections of a dramatic past into a dramatic present. The bodies of African men and women lost in the transatlantic trade returns abstracted in the absent bodies of the epidemic.

D-Man in the Water begins in medias res. The music by Felix Mendelsohn is strong, powerful, joyful. The sound transports me to a childhood playground. The dancers enter from the right side of the stage running: they form a line and starts taking each other place. *Am I assisting at a race? Or are the dancers simply playing a game?* The entrance pushes the dancers along the space, in a diagonal path. The act of running is soon enriched by another movement: the dancers cross their arms in front of their face, quickly, and for several times. The music is high and energizing. One dancer detaches himself from the line and stands in front of the other dancers, who one at times, leaves the line, repeats the arms gestures to the man as a greeting, and simulates a dive along the stage.

The water dance has begun. The members of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company are jumping, turning, swimming in the lit blue space of the stage. They research circular shapes in a crescendo, where solos, and duos alternate with group choreography harmonically. Running backward, and forward, in and out of the stage: there is no time to rest in this work. Slow and persuasive, strong and energetic the quality of the dance changes throughout the performance. The choreography as a work at the borders of fiction and reality,

¹⁰⁰ Carl Paris, "Will the Real Bill T. Jones Please Stand Up?," *TDR* 49, no.2 (Summer 2005): 67, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4488641>.

stage, and life, moves continuously like the waves. Six minutes into the piece, five dancers enter the stage. Four of them positioned at the corner of an invisible square, one stays in the middle. They are about to initiate a sequence of unstable balances and trust games. Falling into each other's arms, the performers are materializing the abstract idea of a support system, making it universal. The music is still joyful, the dancers are still immersed in a light blue watery abstraction, masking the tragic nature of the performance behind a sustained movement.

After 9 minutes, the upbringing tone of the music slows down, and turns into a much grim melody; the dancers now work in pairs: one acts as an abandoned body, the other sustains the companion. The walk proceeds slowly to the sound of a funeral music; lined in a diagonal, the dancers move from the bottom left corner of the stage toward the upright side, soon substituting the abandoned walk to a standing gait from the back audience left corner, they stand up and start an undulating walk at pace with the music. As the music grows, more dancers appear on the stage: they are swimming heavily on the stage, adding to the music the sound of their bodies. The dance is coming to an end, the light goes down, the stage is black, a man throws himself on the stage, diving. It is the end of the first section of the dance.

The second part of the choreography begins with slow music. The dancers get in, walking on their toes against a blue background. The music is as soft as their movements. I am not looking at a dance, I realize, but I am rather assisting at a procession. It is just a moment, a whisper. The movement changes again, turning that procession into a protest. The music goes down, disappears, and finally come back again stronger than before. The running is back: the dancers seem exhausted, they are screaming, and bumping into each other, yelling names in a circle, one of them detached himself from the group. The dancer prepares himself and jumps in the middle of the circle. The company members throw him into the air: he is diving, flying into the blue. Lights out.

Can you imagine the moment of your own death?

A leap into the dark, *D-Man in the Waters* speaks of the bodily feeling that dominated the AIDS epidemic. The work incorporates the story of Acquavella to the nightmare of Jones, capturing the feeling of an era. The choreography, like water, changes continuously with one exception: throughout the piece the dancers' indicate the forearm, briefly starting at them. They are re-enacting the moment in which Acquavella started suspecting his medical condition, pointing at an invisible a spot on the arm, at an absent and yet present KS lesion. *What am I looking at?*

The water keeps moving, but I am not in the terrifying space of Jones' nightmare. I am approaching the surface of the mirror more closely now, experiencing a non-chronological succession of stories, names, narratives. As the work comes to an end the dancers leave Demian and Jones' storyline, frantically screaming the name of the people they have lost against the sound of the music, against the sound of their body, against the possibility of losing another person in their story. *D-Man in the Waters*, like Gonzalez-Torres' "linguistic portraits," takes specific moments in the life of Acquavella and Jones and mixes them to dates, names, and events of the company members, letting me wonder:

"Who were we, where were we, how did we experience these events?"¹⁰¹

Acquavella took part in the performance till he could do so no longer. Once he was even carried on the stage by Jones causing the outrage of some critics.¹⁰² Acquavella's body is lost in a voice, rediscovered in a leap into the dark, understood in the definition of a secret alphabet that recalls the moment in which he began to understand his status.¹⁰³ During *D-Man in the Waters*, the viewer is asked to look at a corporeality slipping in the water and accept the

¹⁰¹ bell hooks, "Subversive Beauty: New Modes of Contestation," in *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995), 50.

¹⁰² Acquavella, interview.

¹⁰³ Acquavella, interview; Rosalynde LeBlanc, "Can You Bring It: Bill T. Jones and D-Man in the Waters," Vimeo Video, 15:12, posted by "Roz LeBlanc," 2016, accessed July 6, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/153392999>.

impossibility of changing the situation. There is no break, not a moment to stop, think, and face the current. The world as the dancers on stage keeps moving. I am just a spectator. Acquavella jumps into the hands of his fellow company members, elevated into the air, free of any corporeal restrictions; gravity does not have a meaning. Demian is flying [Fig.119]. This would be his last performance, but the piece would continue to be performed after his death echoing his physicality, echoing the physicality of all the losses experienced in the time period in which the dance was composed. The choreography ends in a whisper, in a suspension. I know that Demian's body, or the body of the dancer impersonating Acquavella in the re-creation of the performance, will eventually fall into the arms of the company members, and yet I cannot quite grasp that moment. Life is suspended in a reality at the border of stage and history, light and dark, fictional and reality, past and future. The heart skips a beat.

Lights out.

Can you imagine the moment of your own death?

Dance is ephemeral: it disappears in the exact moment in which it is performed. However, differently, from any other kind of happenings, dance has the power to live once again in time, recreated by other companies, at different times, on different stages. Dance is by its very nature the art of presences and absences. In the article "Choreographing a Queer Ethics," Hannabalch points out:

Choreography is melancholic in its insistence on creating movement that always leaves, but this leaving is not a failure in choreographic ability; it is not as if we try hard enough we will eventually be able to choreograph ourselves into permanence. Instead, it is precisely what we find pleasurable about dance that prevents it from remaining: *it moves*.¹⁰⁴

Dance moves, and so does my body, along with the bodies of the people who have died. They move through life and death, through health and disease. Hannabalch is right, dance is

¹⁰⁴ Cathy Hannabach, "Choreographing a Queer Ethics: Between Bill T. Jones and Keith Hennessy," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 23, no.1 (2013): 87.

pleasurable because it moves, but also because movements can reverberate, find new meaning, trace new steps, and above all inhabit new bodies within their old ones.¹⁰⁵

Absence is fulfilled. Presence is created.

Time keeps moving on.

1995, Neil Greenberg presents *The Disco Project*. This is the last of his pieces in the *NAAD* performance series. The dancers, wearing bright pink dresses, come into the stage one at the time.¹⁰⁶ As in *Not-About-AIDS-Dance*, the work develops in silence: it is so quiet that I can hear the dancers counting the steps. The light talks about a disco of the 1970s, the dance speaks about losing and recovering control over the body. Movements repeat themselves in different combination; the dancers undulate incorporating disco dance elements in the piece. The audience laughs; it is galvanized. The dancers are playing, having fun, showing off. Suddenly a script appears on the screen: “In our last dances, Jo went to Australia and come back;” “Justine turned 23;” “Ellen’s mother died;” “My brother and other eight friends died of AIDS”. *What is this dance about?*

Not about AIDS one might say. As I think this, Greenberg shares with the audience another bit of his life: his partner, Frank has died of AIDS. Slowly the energetic vibe of the dance goes quiet, the room is silent again, on stage the exhausting marathon continues. Movements lose their importance; sequences are repeated. I, as the dancers, am entrapped in an exhausting mechanism. Greenberg is still asymptomatic, but he keeps dancing as the song goes “I’m never going to say goodbye”.

Greenberg and Jones’ works document the AIDS crisis in new physical and temporal performative spaces. Present and absent bodies are brought together as performtexts: present

¹⁰⁵ Hannabach, “Choreographing a Queer Ethics,” 83.

¹⁰⁶ This short analysis is based on the video preserved at the Lincoln Center of Performing Arts, New York. The performance is also available on-line: Neil Greenberg, “The Disco Project – 1995,” Vimeo video 44:48, posted by “Neil Greenberg,” August 20, 2012, accessed July 10, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/47896664>.

in their absence, absent in their presence, the bodies that act in *Still/Here* (1994), *Untitled* (1989), *D-Man in the Water* (1989), *Not-About-AIDS-Dance* (1994), and *The Disco Project* (1995) live in the present, the past, and the future of incomplete narrations that asks for an additional audience. They exist in a synesthetic panorama: the visual appears in the audio, the audio resonates in the visual; the presence participates in an absence; the absence is fulfilled by in the present; the visible is lost in the echoing silence across the stage; the invisible reveals itself in the record of a voice.

As photographs, the choreographies stop time.

As recorded voices, they make it infinite.

The ekphrasis of impossible representations, Greenberg's and Jones' choreographies reflect in the Mirror of the epidemic the tangible impressions of the bodies re-codified by illness, and discovered in a system that collapsing, keeps moving forward.

I cross the Mirror surface.

4.

**A PIECE OF CANDY, A DANCING PLATFORM, AND A MIRROR: GOING BACK
TO THE BODY**

A Question of Bodies

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

“Who were we, where were we, how did we experience these events?”²

The questions that have accompanied me throughout the project resonate in the air. Somehow unresolved. Here on this side of the Mirror the words Ross Laycock used to explain his medical condition in a letter to Carl George acquire a strong visual connotation. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]³ 1983. New York. Ross Laycock, a student and sommelier from Canada, meets Felix Gonzalez-Torres, at a gay bar.⁴ They start dating, and soon become a couple. 1991. Laycock dies of AIDS.⁵ After eight years together, Gonzalez-Torres is left on his own. His world, as his art, is forever changed. Gonzalez-Torres dies five years later in 1996.⁶

In the four years that separates the death of Laycock from the death of Gonzalez-Torres, Laycock is progressively elevated to an imaginary status. The symbol of a modern love story abruptly interrupted, Laycock loses his corporeal definition, entering a world of scholarly abstraction. Like Pease, he becomes a prefiguration of a pivotal moment in one’s life: the experience of illness and death in the body of a loved-one. I myself fall into such trap: speaking

¹ Ross Laycock, Carl George, Private Correspondence, Undated, 1, The Carl George/ Felix Gonzalez-Torres/ Ross Laycock Archive at Visual AIDS. The Visual AIDS Archive Project, New York, NY.

² bell hooks, “Subversive Beauty: New Modes of Contestation,” in *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995), 50.

³ Ross Laycock, Carl George, Private Correspondence, Undated, 1.

⁴ Julie Ault and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Chronology,” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault, (New York; Gottingen: Steidl/Pangloss Publisher, 2006), 365.

⁵ Julie Ault and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Chronology,” 371.

⁶ Julie Ault and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Chronology,” 376.

of Ross in the terms advanced by the scholarship, I do not recall and celebrate the existence of a person; on the contrary I remember the abstraction of an absent presence, eternally re-performed in candies, lightbulbs, and curtains. *Who was Ross Laycock?*

The collections of letters and postcards recently donated by Carl George to Visual AIDS presents me with an answer of sorts. I discover a very complex character. Funny, strong, present, the Ross revealed in the archive lives beyond its scholarly abstraction. Looking at personal letters, and old postcards, I realize the existence of another Ross: the real Ross, the man, lover, and friend whose private identity is protected and kept invisible. The Ross who studied, lived, loved and experienced, I notice, does not match with the romanticized version usually read in the installations of his partner. My perspective over the work shifts. I discover another layer of meaning. The art of Gonzalez-Torres, as the body it represents, does not seem so public anymore.

The biographical acquires a whole new importance. With this, I do not want to suggest that Gonzalez-Torres' work has to be read exclusively in relation to the figure of Laycock, after all the public Laycock has very little in common with the private Laycock implied in the works. I also do not intend to argue that the artist's biography, as it has been presented in the scholarship, is essential to establish a valid reading of Gonzalez-Torres' practice. His art remains open by its very nature: he refused to title his works and did not leave any definitive instructions on how to exhibit the pieces. The works of Gonzalez-Torres prefer an unstable reality to a fixed, and maybe safer, artistic statement. But to be open does not necessarily mean to be public. A year ago, the Carl George collection proved this concept very clearly to me. Looking at the art of Gonzalez-Torres more than twenty years after his death, I am forced to face the existence of a public Ross, and a private Ross; of a practice at the same time shared and kept hidden to the audience. I am forced to step on the other side of the Mirror, to reverse, question, confront my perspective, and see a unified image that is in fact shattered. In the proto-

linguistic vocabulary shaped by Gonzalez-Torres the “infant-not-yet-subject,” as defined in a Lacanian pre-mirror stage reality, is secretly dismantled.⁷ I “see myself seeing” a biographically limited scholarship that desires to maintain an open reading, but on the other side of the surface that unified, universalized perspective is not enough.⁸ I am left with an important decision to make. *Should I exclude any known information on the artist’s life from my analysis? Should I avoid looking at the collection of postcards and letters donated by Carl George to Visual AIDS? Should I adhere to the decision of some of the Galleries representing the artist to avoid using the words HIV/AIDS when displaying Gonzales-Torres’ work?*⁹

Most definitely, I should not. In an article published in 2017, Darren Jones pointed out that “Gonzalez-Torres’ work is not ‘uniquely open.’ It is uniquely located within distinct socio-cultural and political constituencies that such tortured language flagrantly suppresses”.¹⁰ The decision of including the work of Gonzalez-Torres in a thesis about the AIDS epidemic is a clear indicator of my position in the debate. Like Jones, I consider Gonzalez-Torres’ art an open-ended product of an extremely specific social context. Scholars, myself included, should never forget the reality in which Gonzalez-Torres operated. Yes, his art is adaptable to different readings and contexts. Yes, its meaning is open. But it also belongs and responds to very traumatic years, and to very specific stories. As I did for other artists, for Neil Greenberg and for Bill T. Jones, I cannot ignore the people behind the works. I cannot ignore what happened. I cannot ignore that realm that lead Gonzalez-Torres

⁷ Gary Cestaro, “Self-Shattering in a Queerer Mirror: Gaze and Gay Selfhood in Pier Vittorio Tondelli,” *MLN* 123, no. 1, Italian Issue (January 2008): 106.

⁸ Blocker, *Seeing Witness*, 44.

⁹ Darren Jones, “Galleries Representing Felix Gonzalez-Torres are editing HIV/AIDS from his legacy: it needs to stop,” *Artslant Magazine*, May 29, 2017, accessed October 5, 2017, <https://www.artslant.com/ew/articles/show/47997-galleries-representing-felix-gonzalez-torres-are-editing-hiv-aids-from-his-legacy-it-needs-to-stop>.

¹⁰ Jones, “Galleries Representing Felix Gonzalez-Torres are editing HIV/AIDS from his legacy”.

██████████, as I cannot ignore the new Ross I discover in the middle of a postcard, in the middle of a letter.¹¹

Keeping a balance between the narratives set by the artist and the scholarship, and those kept secret, I stand on the other side of the Mirror surface and approach the work of Gonzalez-Torres within a Lacanian framework. Lacan's continuous - not invasive - presence throughout the thesis, returns stronger in this final chapter, guiding me towards a conclusion, or better towards a mid-sentence in the conversation that I hope this project will begin. New to the analysis of Gonzalez-Torres' work, Lacan has been used elsewhere in the AIDS discourse. Tim Dean adopts a Lacanian framework in the book *Beyond Sexuality*, arguing that:

“as AIDS represents a crisis in medical knowledge and treatment of the body, it also concerns a crisis in the body's symbolization, which renders AIDS in part a question of the signifier”.¹²

Dean is interested in the linguistic definition of the body of AIDS: he looks at the language of the AIDS crisis, and at its social impact, but does not push that linguistic reflection forward. In other words, he does not work on a proto-linguistic level, reading Lacan's orders as a way to understand the re-codified corporealities of the epidemic.

The tripartite system of orders used by Lacan to define the subject distinguishes between the imaginary, the real, and the symbolic. Clearly manifested in the Mirror stage, intended by Lacan as a “moment in development” that has also “an exemplary function, because it reveals some of subject's relation to his image, in so far as it is the *Urbild* of the Ego,” the Imaginary represents the virtual mastery of the individual over his body: experiencing his reflection in the mirror, the subject perceives his body as “the principle of every unity he perceives in objects”.¹³ If the Imaginary is explained by Lacan as a necessary moment

¹¹ Ross Laycock, Carl George, Private Correspondence, Undated, 1, The Carl George/ Felix Gonzalez-Torres/ Ross Laycock Archive at Visual AIDS. The Visual AIDS Archive Project, New York, NY.

¹² Tim Dean, *Beyond Sexuality* (Chicago, IL; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 95.

¹³ Jacques Lacan, “The topic of the Imaginary,” in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: 1 Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, translated with notes by John Forrester (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), 74; Jacques Lacan, “The Dream of Irma's Injection,” in

in the definition of the Ego, the symbolic, concretized in speech, is the order responsible, in Lacan's view, to shape the subject's perception of things: "The power of naming the objects structures the perception itself".¹⁴ Pre-existing the imaginary and the symbolic, the real appears in "Introduction to *Entwurf*" as a state of being that is unconfutable, "without fissures," and partially understandable through the mediation of the symbolic.¹⁵ To push forward the contemporary reflection on the healthy and ill bodies of the epidemic, and escape the ineffability of Lacan's real, I adopt Hub Zwart's medical translation of the orders. In the article "Medicine, Symbolization and the "Real" Body – Lacan's understanding of medical science" (1998), the real is concretized by Zwart in the "residu" of the medical attempt to understand the human body beyond the imaginary, and within the symbolic. Zwart writes:

the symbolical body is constituted with the help of a technical nomenclature composed of neologism, foreignisms and abbreviations – a process which aims at eliminating the non-factual, the non-measurable, but which will inevitably produces a residu, a reminder of its own: the traces of the real.¹⁶

Linking Zwart's reading of Lacan's most chaotic concept to Hal Foster's definition of the techno-sublime, here to be intended as the imaginary wholeness the subject experience in the *residu* of a body subjected to the media medical, and therefore symbolical spectacle, I am able to interpret the work of Gonzalez-Torres as an expression of the formless, fragmented reality shaping the homoerotic body of desire during the crisis. Inscribing a Lacanian perspective in a broader framework, I therefore propose with this final chapter to look at the art of Gonzalez-Torres and reflect on the performative role it acquires in the story of the tensions between healthy and ill bodies that continues to re-codify society.

The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: 2 The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Sylvana Tomaselli with notes by John Forrester, (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), 166.

¹⁴ Lacan, "The Dream of Irma's Injection," 169.

¹⁵ Lacan, "Introduction to *Entwurf*," in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: 2 The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Sylvana Tomaselli with notes by John Forrester, 97; Zwart, "Medicine, Symbolization and the "real" body," 113.

¹⁶ Zwart, "Medicine, Symbolization and the "Real" Body," 116.

4.1 Felix Gonzalez-Torres: The AIDS Crisis in a Candy

The work of Gonzalez-Torres has been considered amongst the most ‘representative and important’ of the epidemic.¹⁷ Appreciated by younger generations for its beauty, his artistic production benefits from an apparently a-temporal, and endlessly open meaning.¹⁸ Up to this moment, I have covered central topics of the human experience, placing myself, as well as my reader, in a relatively comfortable position. The narratives presented have not acted directly on the body, but they have rather been developed around and beyond it. In the first chapter, I framed the idea of aesthetic of illness looking at AIDS educational material and advertising campaigns; in the second, I used photography to explore the effects a detached medical gaze can have in the social definition of health and sickness. Finally, in the third chapter, I investigated how a disease/illness translates in movements opportunely staged. *What happens though when the artist turns these distant stories into tangible histories acting on the spectator’s body?*

Candies, curtains, mirrors, light bulbs: the art of Gonzalez-Torres researches the ephemerality of the human life in the materiality of objects able to escape the flow of time. The unspeakable eases its way out in the speakable. Gonzalez-Torres embeds his experience of illness and death in a succession of materialized abstractions, that affecting the viewer’s body, can enter one more time the historical narrative. The line separating me from the body of the epidemic is broken. The body of crisis is demystified and offered to the viewer in its abstracted entirety. In the repetition of a time escaping history, the present of the AIDS crisis comes closer to my present, inscribing its time-out-of-time nature within a contemporary historical narrative.

¹⁷ Douglas Crimp, interviewed by Sarah Schulman, “ACT UP Oral History Project, Interview no. 074,” *ACT UP Oral History Project*, May 16, 2007, accessed July 4, 2018, 45, <http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/crimp.pdf>.

¹⁸ Crimp, interview, 46.

Gonzalez-Torres' work adheres to a Lacanian definition of the body almost perfectly. Creating a space to familiarize with the three-dimensional body, the artist enables me to experience possible interpretations of Lacan's real and imaginary bodies, and assist at their re-codification into countable works. Lacan's definitions benefit here from the introduction of a fourth corporeality, discussed at length by Zwart in his attempt to define the real body: the grotesque body.¹⁹ Incorporating processes such as digestion, Zwart clarifies, the grotesque body defeats the unrealistic abstraction of the imaginary body, displaying materially the inescapable truth of a body practically understood.²⁰

I "see myself seeing".²¹

The invisible is becoming visible.

January 2016. Belfast, The Metropolitan Arts Centre. Like an anatomy student stands in front of a corpse right before performing an autopsy, so I stand right before the candies of Gonzalez-Torres' "Untitled" (*Lover Boys*), 1991, before contributing to its destruction. The work is distributed alongside the gallery wall, on the floor. A colourful line of edible treats [Fig.120]. It is the first time that I see this work in person.

Made of 355 lbs. of peppermint candies the piece translates the physicality of the artist and that of his lover into a measurable value: the weight of the candies is given by the sum of Gonzalez-Torres and Laycock's healthy body weights [Fig.121]. Usually presented in piles, in a corner, or alongside the gallery wall, the installation invites me to cross the invisible line that typically separates me, the viewer, from the artwork. A little plaque on the wall asks me take and eat one or more sweets. *Should I participate in the destruction of the artist and his lover's real bodies, contributing to the ultimate destruction of their imaginary corporealities?*

¹⁹ Hub Zwart, "Medicine, Symbolization and the "Real" Body – Lacan's understanding of Medical Science," *Medicine Health Care and Philosophy* 1, no. 2 (May 1998): 114.

²⁰ Zwart, "Medicine, Symbolization and the "Real" Body", 114.

²¹ Jane Blocker, *Seeing Witness: Visuality and the Ethics of Testimony* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 44.

Detached and involved at the same time, I keep observing the installation from a distance, preparing myself to participate in the defacement of the work and of myself. I am in a difficult position. As with Bianchi and Wagstaff, I am almost too involved to participate.²² I stand in front of the work for few more seconds, observing other viewers gravitating around the piece, taking some sweets, and leaving. I am not sure of what I feel watching the destructive spectacle. I am surprised in seeing the audience adhere to the artist's request. I wonder how much they know about the artist. As I stand there, unsure about my next move, I reflect on the meaning that I learned to read in that work.

As I look at the destruction of the sculpture, I am ultimately acknowledging the impact the disease has on Gonzalez-Torres and Laycock's body. I see the disease in action, I am the disease in action, not the illness but the disease. Detached, cold, I proceed no matter the circumstances, the treatments or the situations.²³ I am breaking my way into the artist's story, shattering it. I am making my way into the artist and his lover's body: a [REDACTED] hard to witness. Greenberg's choreographed definition of the dying body repeats itself in the gallery space, developing in, and because of, my hands: whether an observer, or a destroyer, the work forces me to participate with a deep emotional engagement. I am the disease, but by extensions and figurative superimposition, I am also the body it shatters. In the proto-linguistic dialogue established by the candies, I witness the possibility of my own death, of my own bodily defacement. The atmosphere in the gallery is relaxed. People talk, smile, move around. The dying body, now abstracted, and hidden behind colourful treats, dissolves in between the lines. *What am I looking at?* The collective, unapologetic, and socially approved destruction of Gonzalez-Torres and Laycock's bodies replicates in a publicly accessible environment the

²² See: Ch.2 "Autobiographies of the Flesh," Subsection 2.2 "Tom Bianchi and Samuel Wagstaff: The Sun was Shining on Fire Island," 121.

²³ The concept reprises the reflection of Ch. 2 "Autobiography of the Flesh," with particular reference to Winn's *Band AIDS Series*: Subsection 2.3 "Albert J. Winn: Performing the Past in the Present of a Scar," 137. Like the disease, I participate in the destruction of the work slowly but surely, and no one will ever stop me.

multiplicity of deaths caused by AIDS. Fragmented by its very nature, the candy sculpture sums up the fragmentation of an era, by emphasising the role Foster's techno-sublime came to play within it.²⁴ I take a candy and put it in my pocket. I breathe deeply, and after a while, I walk away. I will never eat that candy. A macabre souvenir, a lucky charm, a constant reminder to the reasons why I am doing this project, the candy still sits on my desk. Beyond the borders of the bodies of Gonzalez-Torres and Laycock, I am still alive.

The position of power over a dead body that is and is not mine I experienced looking at "Untitled" (*Lover Boys*), 1991 is soon substituted by a sense of vulnerability.²⁵ Like a medical student at her first real autopsy, I am unable to find the words. So, I borrow those artist Rachel Allen uses to describe her experience of an autopsy lab:

I am overcome by the smell of formalin, not the stench of decay, but nevertheless I am present and awake to the very materiality of death and the juxtaposition of my presence as a living, breathing, metabolizing body. I feel the aversion – the threat of the 'abject' – and intentionally welcome its presence, hold it close, for it transports me into other areas of consciousness that dwell in the recesses of my living.²⁶

By materializing a corpse in an acceptable medium, and masking it with a mysterious title, Gonzalez-Torres makes death presentable.²⁷ The museum becomes a lab: I approach the piles of sweets with an analytic gaze, ready to perform the destruction of a body made of invisible bodies. If in Greenberg's *NAAD* I am confronted with the external appearance of the dying body, in Gonzalez-Torres' "Untitled" (*Lover Boys*), 1991 I have to make a step forward, and shift my attention from a public outside to a private inside. Elizabeth Klaver recalls the origin

²⁴ Jonathan D. Katz, David C. Ward, *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution, 2010), 55.

²⁵ Rachael Allen, "The Body Beyond the Anatomy Lab: (Re)Addressing Arts Methodologies for the Critical Medical Humanities," in *The Edinburgh Companion to the Critical: Medical Humanities*, ed. Anne Whitehead and Angela Woods (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 194.

²⁶ Allen, "The Body Beyond the Anatomy Lab," 195.

²⁷ Gonzalez-Torres uses his titles to drop cryptic references to his life that only people close to him were supposed to understand. An act of dedication, a tool of remembrance the titles serve the general public as hints of possible interpretation; in this case the words left by the artists in parenthesis addresses clearly two male figures. See: David J. Getsy, "Dan Flavin's Dedication," *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (New Heaven; London: Yale University Press, 2015), 256.

of the term ‘autopsy’ speaking of a deeply complex act of seeing.²⁸ She writes: “The autopsy would be not only a voyeurism of the naked body, but a voyeurism of the *internal* naked body”.²⁹ Like in Winn’s photobiography, the body becomes the site of a voyeuristic activity beyond desire. Discarding the horror of the *diseasephobic aesthetic* and rejecting over-sexualized representations of the male body, Gonzalez-Torres asks me to turn my body into what Hans Belting, talking about how the media has changed our perception of images, defines as a site of resistance.³⁰

So far, in the act of looking at the sick bodies of the epidemic, I have been offered with the opportunity to affirm my healthy techno-mastery, re-consider the nature of my bodily identities, and project myself into a multiplicity of physical situations. Patient, Corpse, and Doctor, and Disease: experiencing the work of Gonzalez-Torres in Belfast I inhabit an uncomfortable position. A voyeur of the staged version of my own death, and a witness to the eternally repeated deaths of Gonzalez-Torres and Laycock, I experience that techno-mastery realm theorized by Foster as a space of opposing tensions; as a space that acts within myself, the subject, and my relationship with the other.³¹

Lacan describes the ego as a “reference to the other”, underlining how it functions as its “correlative”.³² In the AIDS epidemic, such definition has been read in an instinctive and self-destructive desire: *jouissance*.³³ Tim Dean attributes to such *jouissance* the reasons why

²⁸ Elizabeth Klaver, *Sites of Autopsy in Contemporary Culture* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), 2.

²⁹ Klaver, *Sites of Autopsy in Contemporary Culture*, 34.

³⁰ Hans Belting, “Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology,” *Critical Inquiry* 31, no.2 (Winter 2005): 313-314.

³¹ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA; London: The MIT Press, 1996), 222.

³² Jacques Lacan, “The Ego and the Other,” in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: 1 Freud’s Papers on Techniques*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated with notes by John Forrester (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), 50.

³³ Tim Dean, *Beyond Sexuality* (Chicago, IL; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 91; Lacan, “The Ego and the Other,” in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, 50.

safe sex education practices keep failing.³⁴ Dean's argument, prefigured by Leo Bersani in 1987 in the identification of the tension existing between HIV positive people and "those yuppettes agonizing over whether they're going to risk losing a good fuck by taking the "unfeminine" initiative of interrupting the invading male in order to insist that he practice safe sex," is based on the conviction that the AIDS educational campaign eroticizes safe sex practices forgetting to consider the Freudian definition of Eros and Death.³⁵

To Freud, Eros and Death are complementary to each other. The concept appears clear especially when it comes to the sexual act. Using as his example "lower animals" he comments:

these creatures die in the act of reproduction because, after Eros has been eliminated through the process of satisfaction, the death instinct has a free hand for accomplishing its purposes.³⁶

Freud's animalistic discourse applies more widely to the self-centered definition of an ego moved by an extreme desire, as it appears in Lacan. Bersani's "theory of the shattering" develops from Lacan's definition of the subject's ego and of his *jouissance*.³⁷ Correlative to the other, the ego is realized in the comparison with the other, and in its destruction. From this side of the Mirror I see myself seeing a shattered self, the *imago* of the infant-not-yet-subject of the epidemic has left.

June 17th, 1985. Laycock and Gonzalez-Torres send a postcard to Carl George from Nice, France [Fig.122-123].³⁸ On the front the black and white photograph of two fingers badly injured and roughly stitched together, is accompanied by a witty passport-sized photo of Gonzalez-Torres and Laycock. On the reverse the description of the black and white photo,

³⁴ Dean, *Beyond Sexuality*, 136.

³⁵ Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," in *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Others Essays* (Chicago, IL; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 8; Dean, *Beyond Sexuality*, 145.

³⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1962), 37.

³⁷ Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," 3-31.

³⁸ Ross Laycock, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Postcard to Carl George (June 17, 1985), The Carl George/Felix Gonzalez-Torres/ Ross Laycock Archive at Visual AIDS. The Visual AIDS Archive Project, New York, NY.

“Chris I went to the hospital – I think I cut my hand bad,” is barely readable, surrounded by Gonzalez-Torres and Laycock’s message.³⁹ I discover that sentence and image belong to Richard Alpert’s performance *Finger*. Presented in San Francisco in 1975, Alpert’s piece takes place in an enclosed, dark environment organized by rooms. In the first room, the viewer encounters the message for Chris alongside a kitchen knife and some bread. In the second room, he/she sees the photo of the fingers fully illuminated. In the last room, the viewer is asked to listen, and distinguish, without seeing, the presence of a bouncing ball.⁴⁰

I do not know why Gonzalez-Torres and Laycock opted for this postcard, nor why they ultimately decided to decorate it with a snapshot. The message on the back of the postcard has nothing to do with the violence of Alpert’s performance. Gonzalez-Torres and Laycock ask George to focus on the snapshot: [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] ⁴¹ [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] ⁴² *Why am I fixating on this postcard?*

Like the photographs of Pearl Pease, the postcard somehow begins to unfold as the visual testimony of an extremely codified after history. An afterthought to the photo of Alpert’s injured fingers, the passport picture comes to prefigure the injured bodies of the artist and his lover. I try to resist the superimposition of narrative and stories, but as for Bobby Campbell, my instinct ultimately wins.⁴³ I am question the fleeting nature of history, and the echoing presence of AIDS, and I am left wondering one last time: *What am I looking at?*⁴⁴ Simplified

³⁹ Ross Laycock, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Postcard to Carl George.

⁴⁰ Carl E. Loeffler and Darlene Tong ed., *Performance Anthology: Source Book of California Performance* (San Francisco, CA: Last Gasp Press, Contemporary Arts Press, 1989), 197.

⁴¹ Ross Laycock, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Postcard to Carl George.

⁴² Ross Laycock, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Postcard to Carl George.

⁴³ See: Ch.1 “Deathly Beautiful,” Subsection 1.1 “AIDS and Beauty: An Improbable Coexistence,” 54.

⁴⁴ Ross Laycock died in 1991. Despite he did not know his diagnosis in 1985, it is possible that the virus was already in his body. Laycock would be diagnosed couple of years later.

in educational forms, suspended in impossible performances, explained in photographic narratives, and recalled in whispered movements, the body of the epidemic is lost in a fluctuation of stories, and undetectable images. In this crisis of representation, and in a way a crisis of subjecthood, Gonzalez-Torres opts for formless symbols of “implied” bodies, forcing myself to reconsider one more time my understanding of what corporeality is.⁴⁵

The artistic strategy reflects in Hans Belting’s discussion of media, image, and iconology. Belting argues:

We even remember images from the specific mediality in which we first encountered them, and remembering means first disembodiment from their original media and then reembodying them in our brain.⁴⁶

Gonzalez-Torres’ works are based on a process of embodiment, necessarily dependent on a previous disembodiment. Challenging the media’s ability to twist images and representations, the artist presents the human body in a disembodied form suggesting its reembodying in objects that will inevitably be re-elaborated in our brain. Zwart’s Real and Imaginary bodies became the “real and formless bodies” of a fragmented symbolism, built around a complex network of signifiers that refuses the imposed techno-mastery to re-discover the body in its physicality.⁴⁷

Analysing the work of Gonzalez-Torres, I want to operate a strong distinction between the metaphoric and the symbolic. The terms confound themselves in the scholarship almost losing their meaning. Chambers-Letson’s “Contracting Justice: The Viral Strategy of Felix Gonzalez-Torres” is an excellent example. Speaking of the viral nature of Gonzalez-Torres’

⁴⁵ The idea of the “implied body” is borrowed from Nancy Spector, as quoted in Catherine Phillips, “Untitled Moments: Theorizing Incorporeal Knowledge in Social Work Practice,” *Qualitative Social Work* 6, no.4 (December 2007): 456-457. Phillips reports the following quote from Spector: “The implied body...has been most evocatively employed in recent art to represent what is essentially without form, to articulate what is singularly in-expressible – the body in pain, the silence of illness, the isolation of death”. See Phillips, “Untitled Moments,” 456.

⁴⁶ Belting, “Image, Medium, Body,” 304-305.

⁴⁷ Zwart, “Medicine, symbolization and the “real” body”, 109; 113.

artworks, and in particular of his candy sculptures, Chambers-Letson argues the necessity to interpret them as bodily metaphors.⁴⁸ The statement, however intriguing, does not quite match the artist's narrative.

The metaphorical nature of Gonzalez-Torres' work resides in the artistic process rather than in the objects used. The artist recalls:

It's a metaphor... I'm giving you this sugary thing; you put it in your mouth and you suck on someone else's body. And in this way, my work becomes part of so many other people's bodies... For just a few seconds I have put something sweet in someone's mouth and that is very sexy.⁴⁹

The action Gonzalez-Torres requires me to undertake, and the candies composing the work represent two different moments: while the first one expresses a metaphor; the second one embodies a symbol built around a system of material signifiers, endlessly reproducible. These assumptions can be considered valid just under the recognition of the artwork as a whole since the symbolic nature of the candy spills relies on the total weight of the sculpture, and on its disappearance.

Figurative representations of human bodies are almost completely absent in the work of Gonzalez-Torres. With few exceptions, they are the fragmented signifiers of that postmodern reality that Foster in 1996 explained with the following words:

These are only some of the splittings that occur with a new intensity today: a spatiotemporal splitting, the paradox of immediacy produced through mediation; a moral splitting, the paradox of disgust undercut by fascination, or of sympathy undercut by sadism; and a splitting of the body image, the ecstasy of dispersal rescued by armouring; or the fantasy of disembodiment dispelled by abjection.⁵⁰

Dysfunctional, suspended, undecided, the fragmented individuals living through the AIDS epidemic are forced to face the unstable identity of their body in a closed environment. The

⁴⁸ Josh Takano Chambers-Letson, "Contracting Justice: The Viral Strategy of Felix Gonzalez-Torres," *Criticism* 51, no.4 (September 22, 2009): 559-587.

⁴⁹ Rainer Fuchs, "The Authorized Viewer," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (New York; Gottingen: Steidl/Pangolin Publisher, 2006), 112.

⁵⁰ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA; London: The MIT Press, 1996), 222.

product of a multiplicity of splittings, this world reflects Gonzalez-Torres' need to explain Laycock's physical deterioration in a concrete materiality.

The white and blue sweets, decorated with playful bi-coloured spirals of "*Untitled*" (*Lover Boys*), 1991 embody a "fantasy of disembodiment dispelled by abjection" by creating a sparkling mass on the floor of the exhibition space. Enclosed in playful, and colourful objects evoking the lightheartedness of childhood, the candies symbolize a loss:

I was losing the most important thing in my life – Ross, with whom I had the first real home, ever. So why not punish myself even more so that, in a way, the pain would be less? This is how I started letting the work go. Letting it just disappear.⁵¹

Visual and material expressions of a mourning process, the candy spills present the question of corporeality in an unconventional and fairly problematic way: if the candies are direct metaphors of two lovers' bodies, then eating the candies, the viewer is also eating part of those bodies. The process, presented by Storr as "a democratic form of communion", empowers the artwork, turning it into the material manifestation of a re-stored physicality.⁵²

The candies enter the viewer's body, my body, filling the gaps between tangible and abstract corporealities, suspended in different time periods. Comparing the work of the British filmmaker Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993) with that of Gonzalez-Torres, Roger Hallas comments:

As much as *Blue* permits me access to the subjective space of the witness, the acoustic and optical qualities produced by the film's screening in physical space prevent me from either pinning down the other with my eyes and my ears or forgetting my own embodiment. Such witnessing dynamics reveal a resonance between Jarman's film and Felix Gonzalez-Torres's AIDS-themed installation art, which foregrounds corporeality just as it displaces the visual figuration of the body onto metaphor and trace.⁵³

As in Jarman's *Blue* the persistent presence of the colour blue on the screen enables the viewers to lose their physical selves in a withdrawal and then rediscovery of the senses, so in Gonzalez-Torres' art the candies convey in the act of sucking the sweet a way to experience the erotic

⁵¹ Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2007), 156.

⁵² Robert Storr, "When This You See Remember Me," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (New York; Gottingen: Steidl/Pangolin Publisher, 2006), 8; Rainer Fuchs, "The Authorized Viewer," 112.

⁵³ Roger Hallas, *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness, and the Queer Moving Image* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2009), 230.

body.⁵⁴ “*Blue* reverses the visual attention of the spectacle of AIDS from the body with AIDS out *there* back onto the spectator’s own body right *here* before the blue screen”, Hallas stresses in his analysis of Jarman’s *Blue*.⁵⁵ And this is akin to how Gonzalez-Torres’ candy pieces, accepted into the viewer’s bodies, into my body, work.

Eros and Death, Present, and Past, Public, and Private are ultimately destroyed, as the formless body acquires a new, more specific status. The erotic quality of the work, union of the abstracted version of the bodies of the two lovers, appears as the natural evolution of the artistic discourse advanced by minimalist artists, and eradicated in the ancient world.⁵⁶ A passage from Alex Potts’ *The Sculptural Imagination* captures my attention. Speaking of the ancient Greek statuary in relation to Donald Judd’s work, Potts states:

Depending on the disposition of the viewer, the forms of the finer classical Greek nudes can become charged with a certain affect, a certain sexiness, that is usually attributed to the representation of tactile bodily forms. Yet the source of the sexiness, is not entirely to be located in the object viewed. It can also emanate from the internalised body image induced in the viewer by being in the presence of the work.⁵⁷

Favouring a literal internalization of sexiness, rather than its explicit representation, “*Untitled*” (*Lover Boys*), 1991 uses interactive qualities to awake an internalized and experienced image of the body. It is the fulfilment of what David Getsy in his comparative study of Dan Flavin and Gonzalez-Torres defines in terms of personalised attachments ultimately resulting in engendered anthropomorphic perception of the abstracted bodies hinted at in the titles’ parenthesis.⁵⁸

The resulting image, equally distant from both real and imaginary bodies, challenges a definition of the “visual” as a process of verification of the known and the unknown physical

⁵⁴ See: Hallas, *Reframing Bodies*, 218-219; 230-231; Robert Storr, “When This You See Remember Me,” 8.

⁵⁵ Hallas, *Reframing Bodies*, 230.

⁵⁶ Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 156-157.

⁵⁷ Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Heaven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2009), 305.

⁵⁸ David Getsy, “Dan Flavin’s Dedication,” in *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (New Heaven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2015), 258-259.

existences. The formless body does not aim to recreate the imaginary body perceived as a whole within a new figurative language; on the contrary, it aims to rediscover that very same body in the material recognition of the erotic physicality of its audience, generating a new kind of physical awareness. With his candy sculptures, Gonzalez-Torres not only rejects the socially accepted division existing between what is private and what is public, but he also, and above all, reconsiders the concept of desire in the necessary formless encounter between the self and the other, and in its subsequent absence.

The approach, based on a participatory form of art that, according to Claire Bishop, asks for “new ways of analysing art that is no longer linked solely to visibility”, evokes Lacan’s theory of desire, and plays with it.⁵⁹ Recalling Hegel, Lacan argues, that desire depends on the individuals’ recognition of their desire of the other: “the subject originally locates and recognises desire through the intermediary, not only of his own image, but of the body of his fellow being”.⁶⁰ Interpellated to further develop this process of recognition, Lacan states: “The body as fragmented desire seeking itself out, and the body as ideal self, are projected on the side of the subject as fragmented body, while it sees the other as perfect body”.⁶¹ In other words: I experience my fragmented body as the fragmented desire reflected in the need to research the bodily perfection of the other.⁶² A kind of desire that “remains independent of heterosexuality” is built by Gonzalez-Torres on identical candies that repeat themselves, explicating Lacan’s definition of the real.⁶³ Explaining Lacan’s psychoanalytic view, Michael Lewis writes:

⁵⁹ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London; New York: Verso, 2012), 7.

⁶⁰ Lacan, “Zeitlich-Entwicklungsgeschichte,” in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: 1 Freud’s Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, 147.

⁶¹ Lacan, “Zeitlich-Entwicklungsgeschichte,” in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: 1 Freud’s Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, 148.

⁶² Lacan, “Zeitlich-Entwicklungsgeschichte,” in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: 1 Freud’s Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, 148.

⁶³ Dean, *Beyond Sexuality*, 60.

If the symbolic is a differential order, in which entities are individuated solely by their differences from other entities, then *real* entities must be those entities which are not individuated with reference to anything other than themselves. They are substances. They do not require anything else in order to be what they are. Everything real is self-identical: in a word, immediately *present*.⁶⁴

Being self-identical in shape, colour, and taste, and real in their objecthood, Gonzalez-Torres' peppermint candies inscribe a bodily absence into the immediately present world of art permeated with traces that signify an otherwise contradictory symbolical perspective. Interesting to consider in this regard, Rainer Fuchs's arguments on Gonzalez-Torres decision to portray human bodies through material objects. Fuchs explains: "The act of paraphrasing or portraying the body by means of objects that themselves can be consumed by the body, and are able to stimulate feelings and self-perception, refers back to the role of social and cultural reality, the omnipresent ideological corset that co-constructs the actions and identities of the body".⁶⁵ In the context of a reality, constructed via Foster's techno sublime on a self-affirmation in negation (I experience a fragmented desire in the affirmation of my body integrity through the virtual fragmentation of the other), the active act of ingesting a candy contributes to define a symbolic body that leading the viewer in the rediscovery of the self and the other, let him/her also rediscover a bodily participation in social and political contexts.⁶⁶

Materializing the fragmentation of an absent subject and leading the viewers to experience their unitary imaginary bodies in a physical process, digestion, that actually belongs to the real/grotesque body, fragmented by definition, Gonzalez-Torres is twisting Lacan's ideas. In the signification of the real, the formlessness embraces the symbolic, responding to "a process which aims at eliminating the non-factual, the non-measurable, but which inevitably

⁶⁴ Michael Lewis, *Derrida and Lacan: Another Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 156.

⁶⁵ Rainer Fuchs, "The Authorized Viewer," *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault, (New York; Gottingen: Steidl/Pangolin Publisher, 2006), 112.

⁶⁶ On Hal Foster's definition of the techno-sublime see: Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA; London: The MIT Press, 1996), 222.

produces a residual, a reminder of its own: the traces of the real”.⁶⁷ The formless/symbolic body is ultimately expressed by Gonzalez-Torres in the decision to use Laycock’s ideal weight, and his own, as a qualitative element of his work. The body, reconfigured in the sweets, is defined in a no longer existent body weight: “He was 195 pounds,” Gonzalez-Torres recalls in a conversation with Ross Bleckner, “he could build you a house if you asked him to. It’s amazing. I know you’ve seen it the same way I’ve seen it, this beautiful, incredible body, this entity of perfection just physically, thoroughly disappeared right in front of your eyes”.⁶⁸ Right here, in the words of the artist the [REDACTED] Laycock mentions in his letter to Carl George becomes real.

[REDACTED]

When Laycock writes these words, it is probably 1990, a year before his death. His health is rapidly degenerating, and he now seems to be more preoccupied with Felix than with his situation.

The letter is one of the few texts in which Laycock, [REDACTED] [REDACTED], mentions the bodily effect of AIDS.⁷⁰ Gonzalez-Torres would talk about Laycock’s dying only a couple of years after his death, recalling in the interview/dialogue with Bleckner, the slow progression of the disease and the sharpness of the illness. More than the interview, it is the artist’s work that speaks about this traumatic experience: the candy sculptures simplify the materiality of a body that keeps disappearing despite all the treatments. “The body is everywhere present... but

⁶⁷ Zwart, “Medicine, Symbolization and the “Real” Body,” 116.
⁶⁸ Ross Bleckner and Felix Gonzalez Torres, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” *BOMB*, no.51 (Spring 1995): 47, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40425631>.
⁶⁹ Ross Laycock and Carl George, Private Correspondence, Undated, 1, Carl George Archive, Visual AIDS, New York.
⁷⁰ Ross Laycock and Carl George, Private Correspondence, Undated, 1.

it is nowhere to be seen,” Nancy Spector writes in reference to the “implied bodies” artists that have created in the face of traumatic events.⁷¹ Weight becomes the only reliable trace in the visualization of a fragmented and dissolving human body.

A recurrent theme in Gonzalez-Torres’ art, weight is a key element of the codes that re-configuring the body in the epidemic managed to re-codify society. This emerges in the perhaps unlikely comparison between the work of Gonzalez-Torres and the *performtexts* of Jones. As Gonzalez-Torres uses “*Untitled*” (*Lover Boys*), 1991 to visualize the now impossible union of his, and his lover’s weight, Jones explains his experience of AIDS by describing how the disease changes his act of dancing with Zane:

Every night in the “Sacred Cow,” Arnie and I had one final grappling match onstage. As I lifted him onto my back and felt the sharpness of his pelvic bone where once there had been only soft flesh, I would think about Berlin, Hong Kong, London, Manchester, Paris, Los Angeles.⁷²

In the words of Jones, in the candies of Gonzalez-Torres, AIDS is visualized in the changeable body of a partner, into a touch that is no longer soft, into the disappearance of a known corporeality, now preserved exclusively in private memories.

The sharpness experienced by Jones is visualized by Gonzales-Torres in a deconstructive process culminating in the viewer’s digestive act. What is lost in one body is rediscovered in another. The real and the imaginary are merged in a mixture of measurable data and physical experiences, and the viewers are forced to face once and for all the sharpness of a disappearing physicality in the softness of their own bodies. An expression of something desirable, the sweets of Gonzalez-Torres oppose the techno-sublime, theorized by Foster as a moment of self-affirmation in the destruction of the other, with an act of physical communion that uses ingestion to initiate in the individual a process of recognition of the self and the other necessary to escape the fragmented and individualistic perception of the body promoted by the

⁷¹ Spector quoted in Phillips, “Untitled Moments,” 457.

⁷² Bill T. Jones and Peggy Gillespie, *Last Night on Earth* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), 177.

media.⁷³ Embodying the human experience on a material and psychological level, the candy spills become media through which make portraits and understand the experience of death.⁷⁴

“*Untitled*” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*), 1991, turns Laycock into 175 colorful lbs. of Fruit Flasher candies [Fig.124].⁷⁵ Endlessly reproducible, but subjected to the daily actions of the audience, the candy spills challenge the sensibility of the viewer, playing around with the idea of the ephemerality of existence: the weight of the sculpture affirms a material quality of the body, while the viewers’ action enhances the inevitability of death. Laycock’s invisible body is the instrument through which a well-rehearsed medical narrative is disclosed to a larger audience. In the 1980s Sharon R. Kaufman, recognized the act of dying in the American experience as a problematic issue.⁷⁶ She writes: “Death today is medically and politically malleable and open to endless negotiation. This means that death can be timed, and timing has become crux of the matter”.⁷⁷ As traceable signifiers of disappearing bodies, the candy spills cross the medical, and the political discourses introducing into the negotiable space of death a viral dimension.

In 1991 Gonzalez-Torres realizes “*Untitled*” (*Placebo*), a changeable sculpture made of liquorice sweets, wrapped in silver cellophane, usually displayed on the gallery floor to create a carpet [Fig.125].⁷⁸ The installation, which usually involves 1000 lbs of liquorice candies, occupies the exhibition space as a silver form continuously changing. Given the historical moment in which Gonzalez-Torres produces this piece, the reference is to the AIDS

⁷³ Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 222.

⁷⁴ Gonzalez-Torres underlines this process himself by claiming: “If I do a portrait of someone, I use their weight”. See: Robert Nickas, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres: All the Time in the World,” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (New York; Gottingen: Steidl/dangin Publisher, 2006), 49.

⁷⁵ Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 147.

⁷⁶ Sharon R. Kaufman, *...And a Time to Die: How American Hospitals Shape the End of Life* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2005), 2.

⁷⁷ Kaufman, *...And a Time to Die*, 3.

⁷⁸ Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 106. The candy spills, as the majority of Gonzalez-Torres’ works, can be displayed in various ways according to the curator’s decisions.

crisis, and once again to the artist's fear of losing his lover.⁷⁹ Working as a symbol, rather than a metaphor, for the medical tests developed to find a cure for HIV, "*Untitled*" (*Placebo*), 1991, responds to the formless body strategy on at least two levels: it turns the viewers into the patients of a hypothetical control group, and it uses their individual physicality to establish a narrative of the virus.

Each candy is potentially destined to an individual of the audience. The decision to take and eat the sweets overlaps with the decision of the patient to take part or not to a control group, to take a pill and see what happens. Once again, the idea is that of reflecting the body of the PWA into the body of the audience, but this time the association is pushed a little forward: the suggestion, implied in the title, advances the idea of a virus, and consequently of a treatment.

Chamber-Letson claims:

The spectator's body becomes the carrier of contagion, contracting Gonzalez-Torres's ideological virus through the art encounter, and carrying this virus out into the world. Thus, the spectator who did become infected by the artist's viral agenda (and not all would) might move out into the world, spreading the infection throughout the body politic by continuing to reflect upon, engage with, and foment response to political questions posed by the artist.⁸⁰

Ingesting a candy, the spectator is turned into the carrier of an "ideological virus".⁸¹ Through him/her the idea of the virus will be spread inside, and outside the museum, and the gallery spaces.⁸² Taking the candy I, the viewer, am taking part in a process of deconstruction of a work of art ephemeral in its constitution. Taking the candy, I, the viewer, am "eating" an abstract body materialized through a specific weight.

⁷⁹ In an interview with Robert Storr, the artist specified: "I made "*Untitled*" (*Placebo*) because I needed to make it. There was no other consideration involved except that I wanted to make an artwork that could disappear, that never existed, and it was a metaphor for when Ross was dying. So it was a metaphor that I would abandon this work before this work abandon me." Storr, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: être un espion," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (New York; Gottingen: Steidl/dangin Publisher, 2006), 239.

⁸⁰ Takano Chambers-Letson, "Contracting Justice," 562-563.

⁸¹ Takano Chambers-Letson, "Contracting Justice," 562-563.

⁸² Takano Chambers-Letson, "Contracting Justice," 562-563.

Art and artist acquire a viral dimension. Gonzalez-Torres himself becomes the virus. “I want to be like a virus that belongs to the institution, an imposter, an infiltrator, I will always replicate myself together with those institutions”.⁸³ Art enters the museum space, and the viewer’s body duplicating, expanding, ‘infecting’. The possibility of the audience’s involvement in works such as “*Untitled*” (*Placebo*), 1991, questions the idea of participation, and its limits. Interacting with the piece, I collaborate with the artist and take part in a performance of the body. Gonzalez-Torres’ practice intrudes into the private sphere, inscribing me, his audience, in a universal game made by a “*collective*” social body *in construction*.⁸⁴ It is the imaginary body of a society informed of the disease and actively involved in its fight. The candies of “*Untitled*” (*Placebo*), 1991 are hidden to my sight: wrapped in silver cellophane, they are, (and act as) secret gifts.

Re-enacting the procedure behind medical treatments playfully, Gonzalez-Torres confronts the body of *diseasephobic aesthetic of illness* in the most democratic way possible. An act of public participation, the artwork provides us with a tangible insight into that medical experience already pictured by Winn and Sawdon-Smith. The exhibition space becomes the hospital ward, the work is the body subjected to a figurative medical action, and we, half spectator, half performers, are the doctors that approach it. Reflecting on her experience of cancer, Jackie Stacey writes:

Our sense of our bodily interiors is defined by a medical gaze which has not only seen inside the body through surgery and post-mortem pathology, but also through an endless proliferation of simulation and systems of information. Such changes have laid the foundations for an understanding of the body as a visualisable system, an understanding which pervades aspects of alternative/self-health and biomedicine”.⁸⁵

A visible system, the body deconstructed by Gonzalez-Torres is offered to those who do not possess medical knowledge as a way of processing otherwise indecipherable information.

⁸³ Katz and Ward, *Hide/Seek*, 233.

⁸⁴ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 219.

⁸⁵ Jackie Stacey, *Teratologies: A Cultural Study of Cancer* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), 175.

Exhibiting candies as symbols for a diseased body, the artist gives his spectators a way to make sense of a medical diagnosis. The visual strategy uses an outside realm easily simplified to make an inside world of science more accessible. The fragmented corporeality is narrated within a symbolic system that enables me, the spectator, to engage with my bodily realm mentally and physically.

Lacan was convinced that individuals are functioning elements of a universe built on symbols. “They are much more its supports than its agents,” he argued.⁸⁶ Symbols enable the subject to accept and attribute meanings to his/her fragmented depictions; symbols let the subject face the ephemerality of his/her real body. The symbolic system is adopted by Gonzalez-Torres to facilitate the individual in learning about AIDS and accepting the material possibility of a future disappearance. The technique, so well-rehearsed in the candy sculpture appears in a different form in the work of another American artist: Kiki Smith. Through an interest in human anatomy and medical science, Smith visualizes the internal body in an inaccessible materiality. Her work opposes that of Gonzalez-Torres, it reverses its mechanism. In 1996, following the death to AIDS of her own sister, Smith realizes *Red Spill*, a work made of red glass blobs disposed on the exhibition floor [Fig.126].

I encounter *Red Spill* at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, visiting the exhibition *Art AIDS America*. Miming the shape of blood cells, and reproducing them in various dimensions, the glass beads appear as a larger and more easily comprehensible image of what is usually accessible only with a microscope. *Red Spill* does not invite me to participate in the piece: the glass is surrounded by a barrier. I simply stand, observe, and connect an image that I learned in scientific texts, that image deconstructed by Winn and Sawdon-Smith, with its material,

⁸⁶ Lacan, “Zeitlich-Entwicklungsgeschichte,” in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: 1 Freud’s Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, 157.

artistic translation. The exhibition space is once more my lab, and I am nothing more than the analyst of an anonymous blood sample.

4.2 Visualizing a dematerialization: AIDS, Bodies, Light

Summer 1990, Los Angeles. Gonzalez-Torres and Laycock are visiting the Museum of Contemporary Art, when they see for the first time Roni Horn's *Gold Field*, an indoor "landscape" made of a thin, rectangular surface of gold [Fig.127].⁸⁷ The encounter is a revelation for the artist, who would later recall:

In the midst of our private disaster of Ross's imminent death and in the darkness of that particular historical moment, we were given the chance to ponder on the opportunity to regain our breath, and breathe a romantic air only true lovers breathe.⁸⁸

Five years later, Roni Horn creates *Gold Mats, Paired – for Ross and Felix* [Fig.128]. Directly inspired by the piece that touched so deeply the couple, the new work overlaps the single layer of gold, to another foil, of similar shape and dimension.⁸⁹ Gold becomes the symbol of the existing communion of two bodies: light hits the layers, challenging the corporeal by claiming its almost unperceivable dimension. Freed from any materialistic essence, the formless body re-discovers its fragmentary reality in a *gestalt* image constructed through something as uncatchable as light, and as fragile as a 0.008 inch of unprotected layer of gold.⁹⁰

Gonzalez-Torres' fascination with light increases. Described by the artist as a "heroic, gentle and horizontal presence," effective, and synthetic light is the chosen material to talk about fragility.⁹¹

1995. One year before his death, Gonzalez-Torres feels the necessity to go back to

⁸⁷ Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "1990: L.A., "The Gold Field"," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (New York; Gottingen: Steidl/Pangolin Publisher, 2006), 150.

⁸⁸ Gonzalez-Torres, "1990: L.A., "The Gold Field"," 150.

⁸⁹ Gonzalez-Torres, "1990: L.A., "The Gold Field"," 151.

⁹⁰ Gonzalez-Torres, "1990: L.A., "The Gold Field"," 151. On the use of the word *gestalt* (unity): Hub Zwart, "Medicine, Symbolization and the "Real" Body – Lacan's Understanding of Medical Science," *Medicine Health Care and Philosophy* 1, no.2 (May 1998), 107-117.

⁹¹ Gonzalez-Torres, "1990: L.A., "The Gold Field"," 150.

Horn's work and translate her shining horizontal gift into a curtain made of plastic golden beads. Described as "a golden screen" that "provokes the tactile and sensory, inviting the viewer to transform its shape simply by walking through it", "*Untitled*" (*Golden*), 1995, is the final result of a series of works that use light to reflect on the tangibility of the body, and its eventual deconstruction [Fig.129].⁹² Light offers Gonzalez-Torres a place to confront a problematic disappearance. Andrea Rosen writes:

In confronting Ross' death, Felix was also confronting his own, and with it the full extent of his desire for life. Disappearance was not Felix' final goal. Absence became a way of confronting his essence of longevity.⁹³

A way to process a death that already happened and prepare to face a death that might happen, light infiltrates the work of Gonzalez-Torres horizontally, as a gentle but strong presence in the absence of a material object, becoming the subtle storyline in Gonzalez-Torres' late production, invisible and yet so incredibly present.⁹⁴

1991. Gonzalez-Torres creates "*Untitled*" (*March 5th*) #2. Inspired by Wallace Stevens' "The Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour", the piece uses artificial sources of light to remember and celebrate the birth of Laycock in the year of his death [Fig.130].⁹⁵ The installation, preceded by "*Untitled*" (*March 5th*) #1 is the second of a series of two works using respectively mirrors (#1) and lightbulbs (#2). Apart from the evident difference in materials, the pieces share an evident and quite interesting characteristics: they both use light to shape their surrounding reality. While "*Untitled*" (*March 5th*) #1 works on an absence of light resulting in an absence of reflection, "*Untitled*" (*March 5th*) #2 appropriates visual strategies developed by Dan Flavin since the 1960s and uses the power of artificial light to

⁹² Lauren Hinkson, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "*Untitled*" (*Golden*)," *Guggenheim Online Collection*, 2018, accessed August 10, 2016, <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/22508>.

⁹³ Rosen, "Untitled (The Neverending Portrait)," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Catalogue Raisonné, I. Text*, ed. Dietmar Elger, (Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz, 1997), 44.

⁹⁴ With the appropriate distinctions (Greenberg uses his own body, while Gonzalez-Torres resorts to an abstracted translation of the body), this work could be read in comparison to *NAAD* as it serves the artists to process the possibility, and in the case of Gonzalez-Torres the imminent possibility of death.

⁹⁵ Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2007), 183.

annul the materiality of the lightbulbs and of the space surrounding them, further complicating the discourse on the body.⁹⁶

“*Untitled*” (*March 5th*) #2 is about light as much as it is about bodies. With it Gonzalez-Torres questions the opposing dichotomies of the visible/invisible and the present/absent to reframe the body of the epidemic. Mark Pendergrast defines light as an invisible source that, revealing its presence just in the occasional suspension of flickering substances, such as dust, allows us to see.⁹⁷ Operating in a specific moment in history, Gonzalez-Torres stages the apparent contradiction of Pendergrast’s definition in two 40-watt light bulbs that hang from the ceiling through porcelain light sockets and extension cords. Initially strong, the artificial light generated by the lightbulbs obstructs the viewer’s perception of the material constituting the installation.⁹⁸ Corporeal, without ever representing the body, “*Untitled*” (*March 5th*) #2 lets the immaterial invisibility of light to “infiltrate the art context and speak, or whisper, the unspoken”.⁹⁹ Artist of the unseen, Gonzalez-Torres stages a metaphor of life and death that, proceeding circularly, remembers the life of Laycock providing the viewer with a new bodily experience. Looking at “*Untitled*” (*March 5th*) #2 it is important to remember that the lightbulbs are not meant to simply strike the viewers’ sight. On the contrary, they are meant to penetrate their physicality, acquiring themselves a fleshly component.

Commencing her article on the neon pieces of Flavin, Briony Fer argues: “The phenomenological experience of a room of fluorescent light is not to look *at* it but to *be* in it”.¹⁰⁰ Carrying on with the idea to “*be* in the light”, rather than to passively look at it, I analyse

⁹⁶ On Dan Flavin’s use of light and on the comparison with Gonzalez-Torres see: David Getsy, “Dan Flavin’s Dedication,” *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (New Heaven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2015), 209-265.

⁹⁷ Mark Pendergrast, *Mirror Mirror: A History of the Human Love Affair with Reflection* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 54.

⁹⁸ Julie Ault, “Chronology,” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (New York; Gottingen: Steidl/dangin Publisher, 2006), 373; Andrea Rosen, “Untitled (The Neverending Portrait),” 57.

⁹⁹ Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 184.

¹⁰⁰ Briony Fer, “Nocturama: Flavin’s Light Diagrams,” in *Dan Flavin: New Light*, ed. Jeffrey Weiss (New Heaven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2006), 26.

Gonzalez-Torres' light pieces as witnesses of the disappearance of a body, and, in a way, of its transfiguration in the light. Operating with an uncatchable, and yet ordinary material, Gonzalez-Torres creates a comprehensible, public corporeality where the individual can share his/her own body with the body of thousands of other people. The act evolves in time, mixing and merging individuals from different eras, destroying that line separating "Them" from "Us".¹⁰¹ Light as the signifier of a shared corporeality lead me beyond the media definition of healthy and sick bodies, beyond the borders of the body of the epidemic, beyond the borders my body. I "see myself seeing" the lost reflections in the Mirror.¹⁰²

Subverting the experience of techno mastery, Gonzalez-Torres is indirectly confronting those broadcast TV programmes that portrayed PWAs in the shadows as criminals.¹⁰³ In the light, a traditional symbol of life, the artist illuminates those bodies rejected by the social system. In the light the artist let their stories emerge, making the invisible visible. In the light the bodies of the PWAs and those of the viewers lose their private dimension to acquire a new public and equally accepted corporeality. In the light those bodies become one. Gonzalez-Torres realized a total of 24 light-string pieces. These works are for the most part related to a specific place the artist visited alone or with Laycock but they have to be understood as corporeal presences.¹⁰⁴ To Andrea Rosen, the necessity to refer to private moments responds to Gonzalez-Torres' desire to "instil *himself* in the work".¹⁰⁵ Included in titles' parenthesis are dedications eternally valid: the lightbulbs, once consumed, will be replaced, extending the story lived by specific people in specific places.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), "Introduction Making Record From Memory".

¹⁰² Jane Blocker, *Seeing Witness: Visuality and the Ethics of Testimony* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 44.

¹⁰³ Grover comments on fact that TV programme often depicted PWAs as criminals; please see: Grover, "Visible Lesions: Images of the PWA in America," 32.

¹⁰⁴ Rosen "Untitled (The Neverending Portrait)," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Catalogue Raisonné*, 57.

¹⁰⁵ Rosen "Untitled (The Neverending Portrait)," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Catalogue Raisonné*, 57.

¹⁰⁶ Getsy. "Dan Flavin's Dedications," 256-257.

42 lightbulbs for a work. 42 lightbulbs to imprint in memory the name of a street of Los Angeles. 42 lightbulbs to evoke the presence of Ross. 42 lightbulbs are the chosen objects to make “*Untitled*” (*Rossmore*), a work that recalling a trip to Los Angeles, addresses the artist’s need in 1991 for “more Ross” [Fig.131].¹⁰⁷ I approach the work in Belfast. In accordance to its most common display, the piece is hanging from the ceiling: some light bulbs hang vertically, others are clumped on the floor. I visit the exhibition as soon as I arrive, but the piece strikes me on the second and last visit. Right before taking a flight back to England, I stop in front of the lights, and take one of my favourite photos of the work. When I enter the gallery, I am alone. It is a rainy day and the room is quite dark. Up against the wall the lightbulbs acquire a whole new strength. For the first time I find myself sharing a few tears. Standing there in front of the lights I sense the fluctuating presences of Ross and the artist. Standing there in front of the lights I sense the ineffability of a work for which words are not enough. Like in Jones’ *Untitled* 1989, I see the hologram, and witness its disappearance.

The lightbulbs shine, projecting onto the wall an ephemeral sculpture made of striking lights, and absent shadows. I think of bell hooks’ essay, that very essay that brought me here today. She describes the objects of Gonzalez-Torres’ art as shadows “of what was once real, present, concrete”.¹⁰⁸ “Shadows,” she writes, “become the location of our destiny, outlining the shape of past, present, and future possibility”.¹⁰⁹ Shadows as an a-temporal device. Shadows as signifiers of a presence and an absence. Shadows as point of encounter between the barely visible and the truly invisible. As the symbols of a presence, and the metaphors of absence, shadows suggest the existence of a negated immaterial light.

Lights and shadows become part of a bodily landscape at the crossroads of life and

¹⁰⁷ Miwon Kwon, “The Becoming of a Work of Art: FGT and a Possibility of Renewal, a Chance to Share, a Fragile Truce,” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (New York; Gottingen: Steidl/dangin Publisher, 2006), 309.

¹⁰⁸ bell hooks, “Subversive Beauty: New Modes of Contestation,” in *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995), 49.

¹⁰⁹ bell hooks, “Subversive Beauty,” 49.

death. The balance is explored in another, unconventional medium. Among the less studied work of Gonzalez-Torres is *“Untitled”*, 1987, a piece made of 8 China plates decorated with lacquered C-prints of a blurred crowd [Fig.132]. Analysing the scholarship on Gonzalez-Torres, I do not find a critical analysis of the work: there seems to be no academic interest in it. And yet, the translucency of Chinese porcelain along with the visual effect forwarded by the lacquered C-prints, interests me. *Light can be produced by reflection (mirror), or by material (lightbulbs), but what about a light that, maintaining the materiality of the lightbulbs, and the reflective property of a mirror, is not explicitly part of the work?*

“Untitled”, 1987, recalls another work realized in the same year: *“Double Fear”* [Fig.133]. Anticipating in reverse the visual exercise forwarded by Sawdon-Smith in *Symptoms* (1997), *“Double Fear”* uses blurred images of human bodies reminiscent of the microscopic image of the HIV virus to create transfer-rubbings applied on the gallery’s wall. Virally spread across in the exhibition space, the images are meant to make the spectator aware of the irrational fear of contagion accompanying the word AIDS.¹¹⁰ Translated in the fragile materiality of a Chinese plate for *“Untitled”* 1987, the crowd/virus breaks through the translucency of the porcelain, fixing on a lacquered surface a fragmented body of strangers. The formless body, present in its abstract representation, and absent in its abstraction, is transferred on a material that embodies light in the coexistence of crystals, quartz, and mirrors.¹¹¹ The lacquered C-prints reflect the immateriality of a crowd of people that to our knowledge could be alive, or dead, HIV positive, or not, heterosexual, or homosexual. Recalling for the viewer the act of eating, the plates of *“Untitled”* 1987 invite the viewer to an impossible banquet: enclosed in their unconventional frames, now presented vertically, the audience witnesses a body destroyed and carelessly served to a distracted dining table. The

¹¹⁰ Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 129.

¹¹¹ Gilbert Goodman, “Relation of Microstructure to Translucency of Porcelain Bodies,” *Journal of The American Ceramic Society* 33, no.2 (1950): 66.

grotesque body is reaffirmed in a digestive process of cannibalistic implication. On a precious plate is consumed the *diseasephobic aesthetic* of AIDS responsible for turning a nameless crowd of fragmented bodies into translucent light destined to fade in the historical narrative. From sweets to lights, Gonzalez-Torres seem to embrace the “Real,” the “Imaginary,” and the “Symbolic” exclusively on a socially approved bodily *gestalt* that simulating the techno-sublime reaffirms the fragility of human kind and speaks to us in a new universal vocabulary.

1991. Gonzalez-Torres elects a light blue wooden platform to a work of art. The piece, decorated with twelve lightbulbs is completed by the arrival of a dancer in silver underwear and trainers. Known as “*Untitled*” (*Go Go Dancing Platform*), the platform elevates the fleeting presence of a go-go dancer, an embodiment of Mizer’s muscular fantasies, to work of art [Fig.134]. The dancer enters into the gallery space, he steps on the platform, and starts dancing to the music he is listening to on his headphones. The dancer wears a tight silver slip and holds a Walkman in his hand. His presence in the gallery is odd. Appropriating the space on the platform he surprises the viewer, inviting him/her to question once again the act of staring.¹¹² David Román defines the piece as a performance that: “highlights the fact that visual culture is not simply about expanding the range of objects we look at. It is also about reconsidering how it is that we see what we see”.¹¹³ Visible, invisible, present, absent my research is ultimately leading back me back to the body.

The dancer moves for few minutes and then leaves.¹¹⁴ A flickering presence dancing at a sound that is in fact absent to the viewer, the performer of “*Untitled*” (*Go Go Dancing Platform*) is the ultimate expression of the body re-codified by the AIDS crisis: he is healthy;

¹¹² See: Ch.2 “Autobiography of the Flesh,” Subsection 2.3 “Albert J. Winn: Performing the Past in the Present of a Scar,” 137; Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹¹³ David Román, “Editor’s Comment: Theatre and Visual Culture,” *Theatre Journal* 53, no.1 (March 2001): viii.

¹¹⁴ On the Go Go dancing culture of the 1960s see: George Gonos, “Go Go Dancing: A Comparative Frame Analysis,” *Urban Life* 5, no.2 (July 1976): 189-220.

he is sexy; he embodies the homoerotic object of desire of the 1950s and its 1980s socially approved version. He is the symbolic expression of an aesthetic of the body beyond the physical border imposed by Lacan. A representation of nightclub culture, the dancer as a stripper:

must demonstrate not only knowledge of the tropes of a performative self – those behaviors that are easily measured and reproduced – but also must manipulate and construct a deeper self, a self that adds a spark of life to the performance. The constructed self is the most suitable aesthetic element within the dancer's occupation.¹¹⁵

A corporeality stuck in the impossible soundtrack of a time before AIDS was a reality, he is a body that was and no longer is. He is the real tangible body of science; the imaginary projection of desire; the grotesque body of fluids and sweats; and the symbolic space in which the past re-lived. He is the visual acceptance of an aesthetic of illness that is active, is scarred, and above all is socially challenging.

4.3 I Meet You Beyond the Mirror Surface: Gonzalez-Torres' Presence in Absence Bodies

Back to the body. Back to a moving body whose presence affects directly the perception of the space surrounding me. If with candy sculptures and light installations Gonzalez-Torres visualizes real and formless bodies, it is with the mirror installations that I am ultimately forced to face the clash between the imaginary and the real, relating it to the self and the other. With the Mirrors, I go all the way back to that state of “not-yet-subject-hood” preparing for it to be destroyed. Ephemeral art based on the creation, and destruction of symbolic bodies, the art of Gonzalez-Torres is inhabited by that very presence in absence dialectic that has informed along with a dialectic of the visible and the invisible the entire project.¹¹⁶ The idea is not new to the scholarship on the artist. Speaking about the relational aspects of Gonzalez-Torres' art, Miwon Kwon mentions the idea, preferring the terms “intimacy-in-distance and distance-in-intimacy”

¹¹⁵ David M. Boden, “Alienation of Sexuality in Male Erotic Dancing,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 53, no.1/2 (2007): 130.

¹¹⁶ The term symbolic is here used according to a Lacanian reading. To Lacan, a Symbolic body is a body in which the ego becomes the being. See: Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (London: Fontana Press, 1991), 92.

dialectic.¹¹⁷ Kwon is interested in the capacity of Gonzalez-Torres' work to generate an intimate experience in an audience of strangers.¹¹⁸ The substitution of a "presence in absence" dialectic with an "intimacy-in-distance" dialectic is not innocent in the discussion on Gonzalez-Torres' art, especially if a Lacanian perspective, informed by Hans Belting's redefinition of the iconology of the image, is adopted.¹¹⁹ Referring to an "intimacy-in-distance" dialectic, Kwon is basing her analysis on the exclusive dialogue existing between a public of strangers and the artwork, considered here as the artist's spokesman.

The question for Kwon is basically a question of the public: she aims to understand how Gonzalez-Torres succeeds in establishing a sort of intimacy within his artworks that let strangers relate to them. Kwon is referring to an audience that Michael Warner describes as a group of changeable persons reunited in the same social context because of an artefact.¹²⁰ This group of people, distinguished from *the public*, depends exclusively on the artwork, and on its exhibition, appearing as a unitary *body* ready to experience the work.¹²¹ A new body made of different bodies, the public of Kwon's dialogues with Gonzalez-Torres' works operates in an unspoken territory made of past and present relationships rather than present and/or absent bodies. In the adoption of Kwon's perspective, the discourse on the coexistence of formless, symbolic, and real bodies loses its effectiveness, undermining the anthropomorphic nature of Gonzalez-Torres' art. The presence in absence dialectic is operating beyond a sole group of strangers united in a new public body.

It presumes an anachronic bodily presence confronting an existing bodily absence on abstract, and physical levels. As a member of a dance company accesses the stage, I, the viewer

¹¹⁷ Kwon, "The Becoming of a Work of Art," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (New York; Gottingen: Steidl/Pangloss Publisher, 2006), 283.

¹¹⁸ Kwon, "The Becoming of a Work of Art," 293.

¹¹⁹ Hans Belting, "Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology," *Critical Inquiry* 31, no.2 (Winter 2005): 302-319.

¹²⁰ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 68

¹²¹ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 68.

of Gonzalez-Torres' work, access the exhibition space as a performative reality in which temporal and corporeal boundaries are lost in favour of a new bodily unity. Writing about Doris Humphrey's *Water Studies*, Helen Thomas underlines:

The whole in this dance is more than the sum of the individual parts. In order to achieve a unity of expression, the performers are required to listen with their bodies, to be sensitive to their own and to each other's movement, which is forged by the use of breath rhythm.¹²²

Water Studies is a dance of the body. Created in the late 1920s, it relies exclusively on the noises produced by the dancers performing the movements; the performers are asked to listen to their bodies, creating a new bodily unity. Opening their perception to other bodies, the viewers of Gonzalez-Torres' work are asked to embark on an unconventional and quite similar bodily experience. The symbolic quality of their actions will challenge directly the atmosphere of terror and lies produced by the media in the fear of possible bodily exchanges, establishing a new bodily unity.

Gere argues that the AIDS epidemic has introduced a new "bodily syntax".¹²³ This syntax works on an inevitable cycle in which healthy bodies undergo a process of progressive deconstruction culminating in the physical destruction of the body itself, turning from a corpse into ashes, and, finally reconstituted in a ghostly dimension.¹²⁴ From breathing, loving, and living organisms, to corpses, ashes, and eventually ghosts, the suspended presences of the AIDS crisis are entrapped in flickering moments that repeat themselves, blurring the borders between life and death. Gonzalez-Torres translates these suspended moments in the tangible reality of a mirror able to question directly the individual and his/her everyday life experience.

Created in 1991, "*Untitled*" (*Orpheus, Twice*) is constituted of two rectangular mirrors placed vertically side by side so that the viewer can see his/her entire body reflected on the

¹²² Helen Thomas, *The Body, Dance and Cultural Theory* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 114.

¹²³ David Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic: Tracking Choreography in the Age of AIDS* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 199.

¹²⁴ Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic*, 199.

surface [Fig.135]. The mirrors are distanced enough to impede a person to see him/herself in both of them. Playing with the idea of presence and absence of an immediate visual ground, the installation forces the individual to inscribe him/herself in a couple dimension made of absent presences. Interestingly this concept resonates with Hans Belting's attempt to find an innovative approach to iconology:

Images traditionally live from the *body's absence*, which is either temporary (that is, spatial) or, in the case of death, final. This absence does not mean that images revoke absent bodies and make them return. Rather, they replace the body's absence with a different kind of presence. *Iconic presence* still maintains a body's absence and turns it into what must be called *visible absence*. Images live from the paradox that they perform the *presence of an absence* or vice versa.¹²⁵

The paradox formulated by Belting permeates "*Untitled*" (*Orpheus, Twice*), 1991. As in the linguistic portraits, the artist uses the mirrors of "*Untitled*" (*Orpheus, Twice*) bringing up a narrative shaped exclusively around the artist's personal story and the viewer's personal experience.¹²⁶

In my PhD research I encounter "*Untitled*" (*Orpheus, Twice*) twice: once in Belfast, and once in London. In both cases, the work surprises me with its simple impact. Biographically speaking "*Untitled*" (*Orpheus, Twice*) documents the relationship between the artist, and his lover, conveying the sense of loss generated by Laycock's premature death. Created after the separation had already occurred, "*Untitled*" (*Orpheus, Twice*), 1991, turns my attention to a different kind of presence manifested in the mirror. Leaving aside for a moment the dialectic possibly developed by the interactions of multiple bodily reflections, I place myself in front of the mirror and I stare at my own body on one surface. Luckily enough, the first time, I approach the piece no one else is in the room. I soon realized that working on

¹²⁵ Belting, "Image, Medium, Body," 312.

¹²⁶ A favourite form of art use by Gonzalez-Torres, along with the candy sculpture, to portrait his friends, the portrait form used by Gonzalez-Torres in "*Untitled*" (*Portrait of Julie Ault*) is quite interesting in temporal terms. These kinds of portraits are variable through times, the persons portrayed. On the idea of anachronologies, see: Robert Storr, "When This You See Remember Me," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (New York; Gottingen: Steidl/Pangolin Publisher, 2006), 31.

a reflected tangible corporeality, the piece uses the opposition of presence and absence to make the subject confront his/her “imaginary” body, and his/her absent “real body”.¹²⁷

Pushing the discourse a little further, Robert Storr argues that the mirrors:

are shadowed or touched by phantoms whose fleeting aspect reminds one both of unique beings present – the artist and his lover – and of the essentially ephemeral nature of the physical being – the viewer – who *is* present.¹²⁸

The dialogue is no longer between a stranger and the intimate character of Gonzalez-Torres’ art, but it is instead between the *physical presence* of the viewer and the *visible absence* of the other or using Lacanian terms, the *visible desire* of the other. The substitution of the word *absence* with the concept of *desire* is legitimized by Lacan’s theory: since the subject will always find perfection and completion in the desire to reach the other, his/her absence will stress an unsatisfactory reality that will result in the increasing frustration of the subject.

The adoption of Lacan in the reading of this work goes beyond the simple invocation of the theory of desire. The viewer’s experience of the piece, here forced to stand in front of a mirror, recalls Lacan’s well-known mirror theory. Extrapolated from a childhood panorama, and inscribed in a mature public context, the mirror theory behind “*Untitled*” (*Orpheus, Twice*), is twisted by Gonzalez-Torres, so that the “imaginary body” can be turned into a “real body”. *How can this transformation occur?*

In response a letter from Robert Vifian about his portraiture strategies, Gonzalez-Torres refers to Lacan’s mirror theory saying:

When we think of who we are, we usually think of a unified subject. In the present. An immutable entity. This is a mistake that happens, according to Lacan, during our misconception when we at a very tender age discover our image in the mirror. (“the mirror stage”) and think of ourselves as one ahistorical phenomenon. We are *not* what

¹²⁷ On the idea of opposition and relation see: Michael Lewis, *Derrida and Lacan: Another Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 95. According to Lewis, in fact, “Opposition is a *relation*. Rather than simply remaining indifferent to each other, the two halves are defined by mutual exclusion: what the one is, the other is not”.

¹²⁸ Storr, “When This You See Remember Me”, 9.

we think we are, but rather a compilation of texts. A compilation of histories, past, present, and future, always, always, shifting, adding, subtracting, gaining.¹²⁹

A compilation of realities, the artist defines the individual as a flickering being, a multitude of experiences, narratives, persons. The mirrors placed inside the gallery space show the bodies that were, and those that are now. As I stand in front of them I participate in interlaced realities and historical phenomena; I see my present in the present of Gonzalez-Torres' non-present and non-absent pasts.

A contemporary pool, for a modern Narcissus, "*Untitled*" (*Orpheus, Twice*) concretizes opposing bodily realms. One mirror reflects the body as a unitary presence; the other remaining empty, makes the viewer uncomfortably aware of an absence that will never be fulfilled, and of a bodily unity that is absolutely fragile. Jennie Hirsh describes the double quality of the work, resorting to the ancient myth evoked by the artist in his democratic parenthesis:

In looking for Orpheus *twice*, we also confront the two instances of the loss of Eurydice, fatally wounded and whisked away, down to the Underworld and then a second time, when she is pulled away from him just before they reach the portal of the world of living.¹³⁰

Standing in front of the mirror I am Orpheus and Narcissus. I experience the lack of another physicality and the loss of my own bodily presence.

If, as the early Lacan maintained, the real is "a place of presence"; coping with an undeniable absence, the spectator is led to re-consider the imaginary unitary persistence of his/her own corporeality, inscribing it into a real and present reality.¹³¹ Hirsh continues referring to Freud's idea of melancholia; she is relating this work to the artist's personal life, and to the artist's feeling of loss subsequent Laycock's death, but the mirror brings up a much

¹²⁹ Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Selected Correspondence – Letter to Mr. Robert Vifian (December 3, 1994)," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (New York; Gottingen: Steidl/Pangloss Publisher, 2006), 170.

¹³⁰ Jennie Hirsh, "Double-Take, or Theorizing Reflection in Felix Gonzalez-Torres," in *Contemporary Art and Classical Myth*, ed. Isabelle Loring Wallace and Jennie Hirsh (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011), 149.

¹³¹ Lewis, *Derrida and Lacan*, 158.

more complex bodily discourse. Coining his mirror-stage theory Lacan suggests: “The sight alone of the whole form of the human body gives the subject an imaginary mastery over his body, one which is premature in relation to a real mastery”.¹³² In other words, mirrors convey a preliminary definition of the subject’s body, which does not correspond to the actual body of the subject him/herself.

In “*Untitled*” (*Orpheus, Twice*), the subject is forced to perceive a visual absence emphasized through the changeable reflections of other viewers’ bodies walking in the room and unconsciously framed in the rectangular surface. Emphasising a desire of the other, which relies on the identification of perfection in the stranger’s body, the resulting visual comparison places the subject in a disputed position, leading he/she to start questioning his/her own perception. Lacan identifies the end of the mirror stage with the moment in which the *I* become a social *I*.¹³³ In “*Untitled*” (*Orpheus, Twice*), the sense of wholeness is inscribed in a collective, fragmented, and flickering agglomerate of people that collides with the viewer’s *ego*. In the mirror a third kind of representation is executed. As Legendre writes:

In representing the third space of an instituted distance it [the mirror] acquires a status which allows the division of the subject, or the separation from the other than self, to take effect.¹³⁴

Part of a collective formless social group, and of a shattered self, I start to forget my unitary dimension, acknowledging the fragmentary reality of corporeality.

Looking in the mirrors, I see my imaginary self, perceive an indifferent social collective, and experience the presence of an absence conveyed also by a dissatisfaction with the coupled dimension. The desire of the other is negated, and a visual absence is translated in

¹³² Jacques Lacan, “The Topic of the Imaginary,” in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: I Freud’s Papers on Techniques*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, translated with notes by John Forrester, (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), 79.

¹³³ Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function,” in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, translated by Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg, (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2006), 79.

¹³⁴ Pierre Legendre, “Introduction to the Theory of the Image: Narcissus and the Other in the Mirror,” *Law and Critique* VIII, no.1 (1997): 30.

a tangible imposed loss. Once the *ego* produced by the imaginary body is understood through speech, the subject finally finds him/herself to look at his/her own figure and face his/her own corporeality. The recognition acquires a substantial importance in AIDS discourse. The center of scientific, social, and political investigations the body of the epidemic refers back to the mirror in the attempt to acknowledge its appearance, examine the flesh, and discover possible signs of illness.¹³⁵ In the mirror, opposite aesthetics of illness ultimately concretize, re-codifying the bodies of the Epidemic. *What am I looking at?*

October 1987, Tom Moran is photographed by Nicholas Nixon for his *People with AIDS* project [Fig.136]. Moran is staring at himself in the bathroom mirror. He is photographed from the back so that the viewer is able to see his expression and participate in his self-recognition. Probably staged by Nixon, Moran's photograph narrates an everyday life reality well known to the viewer. Thomas Sokolowski opens the introductory essay to Rosalind Solomon's exhibition "Portraits in the Time of AIDS" quoting this passage by George Whitmore: "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 the different side of the fence".¹³⁶ As Crimp has later underlined, the problem with this quote is that it brings up "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".¹³⁷ The mirror expedient, probably used by Nixon as an emphatic tool of intimacy capable of locating the viewer on the same emotional and physical level of the subject, works as an instrument of exploitation.

Mirrors have a great emotional impact on both the individual who is looking at them directly and the observer who is witnessing the reflective actions. Writing about his experience

¹³⁵ On this idea, see: Lee Edelman, "The Mirror and the Tank: "AIDS," Subjectivity, and the Rhetoric of Activism," in *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literature and Cultural Theory* (New York; London: Routledge, 1994), 114.

¹³⁶ Douglas Crimp, "Portraits of People with AIDS," in *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, MA; London: The MIT Press, 2002), 88.

¹³⁷ Crimp, "Portraits of People with AIDS," 88.

in America, Baudrillard asks his reader: “Do we continually have to prove ourselves that we exist? A strange sign of weakness, harbinger of a new fanaticism for a faceless performance, endlessly self-evident”.¹³⁸ Placed in front of a mirror, traditional symbol of vanity, I perceive my body, and its changing physicality, looking beyond a self-evident necessity. Gonzalez-Torres’ use of mirrors in “*Untitled*” (*Orpheus, Twice*) enables an interesting comparison with Jean Cocteau’s *Orpheus* (1949). In the movie, modern interpretation of the myths of Orpheus and Narcissus, Cocteau turns mirrors into portals between the world of the dead and that of the living. In his attempt to bring his wife, Eurydice, back to life, Cocteau’s Orpheus enters the underworld through a mirror.

The double functionality of this device is explained to the poet by Heurtebise, personal chauffeur/angel of *the Death*, personified by Coucteau in the Princess, a mysterious, beautiful woman destined to fall in love with Orpheus himself. Preparing Orpheus to access the underworld, Heurtebise explains: “Mirrors are the doors through which Death comes and goes. Look at yourself in a mirror all your life... and you’ll see death at work like bees in a hive of glass”.¹³⁹ Enabled to enter the mirror by the Princess/Death’s gloves, Orpheus overcomes his physicality, passing through the mirror as if it were water. Establishing a crossover between the myth of Orpheus, and that of Narcissus, the watery surface, rippled only by either a bodily presence (Orpheus), or a bodily absence (Heurtebise), echoes Gonzalez-Torres’ works with reflective materials (both mirrors, and water), giving the dematerialised body a new space of existence. The mirror, a cinematic transition between the living and the dead, becomes the suspended, a-temporal reality where physical and ghostly presences can coexist, where the self is lost in the other, and ultimately recovered; in other words, it becomes the first, silent audience of a self-evident performance in which the alter-body is suggested in its simple existence, and

¹³⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London; New York: Verso, 1988), 21.

¹³⁹ *Orpheus*, directed by Jean Cocteau, (Criterion Collection, 1949), Film.

in its obvious absence.

In this analysis of the importance mirrors acquired in the artistic investigation of the corporeal, I propose to go back for a moment to the performance of dance. In the dance studio, mirrors are essential: they aid in the learning process of choreography and help the dancers improve their performance. The second time I experience Gonzalez-Torres' work I am surrounded by strangers: I cannot really learn or focus on myself; I cannot seek for an empty surface on the mirror; I cannot play with the reflection of a moving physicality. I am not in a rehearsal studio, I am on the stage. As I stand in front of the mirror, going beyond it. I experience what Catherine Botha identifies as the main task of the dancers on a stage. I see and feel myself; I am a passive spectator and active participant. I am shaping the work with my standing presence and destroying it with my departure.¹⁴⁰

The performative qualities my body acquires translates in the definition of a uniform changeable figure. The imaginary bodies given by the sum of my perceived body and those of other spectators are bodies in passage. To quote Rebecca Schneider, these bodies are “engaged in mimesis, or twice-behaved behaviour,” and “retracing a beat, attempting to pass”.¹⁴¹ The body in passage idea, introduced by Schneider while speaking about repetition, acquires a central role in Gonzalez-Torres' poetic. Reinforcing the artist's refusal to stick with a non-traditional and non-corporeal representation of the body, it assures the perpetuation of some kind of physicality just “about to disappear”.¹⁴² After the death of Laycock, Gonzalez-Torres decided to use mirrors in an artwork mentioned earlier: “*Untitled*” (*March 5th*) #1, 1991 [Fig.137]. The installation repeats the scheme of “*Untitled*” (*Orpheus, Twice*) placing side by side two small circular mirrors. Created to commemorate the day on which Laycock was born,

¹⁴⁰ Catherine F. Botha, “Envisioning the Dance: The Audience as Mirror,” *South African Theatre Journal* 28, no.2 (May 2015), 166.

¹⁴¹ Rebecca Schneider, “On Taking the Blind in Hand,” in *The Body in Performance*, ed. Patrick Campbell (London; New York: Routledge Falmer, 2004), 24.

¹⁴² Alison Young, “Into the Blue: The Image Written on Law Symposium: Regarding Legal Events,” *Yale Journal of Law & Humanities* 13, no.1 (2001), 317.

“Untitled” (March 5th) #1 let the body be shown in fragments. The mirror is restrictive eventually forcing the spectator into a close-up, into a fleeting photographic snapshot of his/her ghost.

Mirrors do not work exactly like photographs: they do not fix “eternally” the image on a surface, on the contrary, they provide a reverse, and opposite depiction, subject to continuous mutation. In his attempt to explain Lacan’s Mirror theory, Lewis remarks:

The mirror does not differentiate between its image and real, which is marked solely by the different orientations of reflection and reflected: right becomes left, left becomes right.¹⁴³

Despite this substantial difference, however, mirrors are able to convey the most immediate and accurate portraits of the subject, activating in the case of Gonzalez-Torres’ work, a result similar to that produced by a Polaroid. “In each instance, what is visible is defined by the invisible. Presence, whether of bodies in bed or of art in a gallery, becomes only a mirror of things unseen,” wrote Anne Umland about Gonzalez-Torres’ billboards, and more generally of his art.¹⁴⁴

1991, “Untitled” (Fear) [Fig.138]. Gonzalez-Torres’ work with reflective surfaces continues in a relatively small, rectangular mirror covered by a light blue film. In “Untitled” (Fear) I interrogate myself, questioning my conception of fear, questioning my position, and my filtered approach to the epidemic. The colour blue is associated with the word ‘fear’, partially contradicting the artist’s definition of the colour itself: “For me if a beautiful memory could have a color that color would be light blue. There’s a lot of positive dialectic, you know, in blues”¹⁴⁵. Receptive of a very neglected characteristic of blue, Gonzalez-Torres refers to this color in positive terms. Invested with nostalgic pasts, Gonzalez-Torres’ blue becomes in

¹⁴³ Lewis, *Derrida and Lacan*, 188.

¹⁴⁴ Anne Umland, “Project 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (New York; Gottingen: Steidl/Pangloss Publisher, 2006), 244.

¹⁴⁵ Felix Gonzalez Torres, interviewed by Tim Rollins, in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Rollins, Tim, and Susan Cahan. (New York: Art Resources transfer, Inc. - Distributed Art Publisher, 1993), 15.

“Untitled” (Fear) a visual barrier through which the HIV virus can acquire a physical characterization. Like a watery surface, the reflections in the mirror shift continuously and unexpectedly in the re-collection of human experiences and AIDS narratives.

Stopping in front of the mirror: I see my portrait substituted by other thousands of other portraits. I see my portrait getting destroyed, shattered. I see myself seeing my body being re-written in the bodies of others. The piece shapes a formless body no longer attached to a unitary ego, but now consciously inscribed in a fragmented, ephemeral, techno-mastered reality. The subject is invited to go back to a pre-mirror stage where the body is recognized as an assembly of “bits and pieces”.¹⁴⁶ The regression functions as an ultimate acceptance of loss. If in the desire of the other, the subject finds the perfection of the whole, that same perfection that the child learns to identify in the misleading surface of a mirror, similarly in the loss of the other, I am asked to go back to a state of imperfection, unable to be reconciled with the image reflected in the mirror.

1995. One year before his death from AIDS, Gonzalez-Torres completes the design for *“Untitled” 1992-1995* [Fig.139]. Sketched on paper, the work will be realized post-mortem on occasion of the 52nd International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, *“Untitled” 1992-1995* is a massive sculpture. The installation is constituted of two circular pools full of water, placed right outside the American Pavilion, and surmounted by the light bulb strings of *“Untitled” (America)*, 1994. *“Untitled”*, 1992-1995, was subjected for the entire period of the exhibition to meteorological effects that emphasised the unstable and changeable property of the sculpture.¹⁴⁷ Carved in marble the pools unite the lucidity of the material to the clarity of the water, generating a sparkling effect. According to Adair Rounthwaite, the pools, placed

¹⁴⁶ See: Jane Gallop, “Lacan’s “Mirror Stage”: Where to Begin,” *SubStance* 11/12, Vol.11 no.4, Vol.12 no.1, Issues 37-38: A Special Issue from the Center for Twentieth Century Studies (1982/1983): 121.

¹⁴⁷ Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: America* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2007), 41.

side by side, were described as “two adjoining reflecting pools that form a figure eight, the sign of infinity, as both a silent mirror on our collective culture and a beacon of hope”.¹⁴⁸ Reminding of that same-sex couple theme implicit in “*Untitled*” (*Orpheus, Twice*), the pools stand as solitary islands made of water in which everything reflects and everything disappears.¹⁴⁹

In “*Untitled*” 1992-1995, Gonzalez-Torres uses water as a privileged filter through which a presence and an absence can be detected.¹⁵⁰ The reflective possibility of Gonzalez-Torres’ mirror reminds me of Jones’ *Still/Here*. The piece has been described by the African-American choreographer as “two mirrors reflecting the same object”.¹⁵¹ As in a mirror, the other became, therefore, the main subject, and the subject became his/her reflection so that the other could be incorporated in the ego, and in this way understood. The parallel continues in Jones’ *Untitled* (1989). As Zane’s presence does not depend exclusively on the holograph, but it persists acoustically in his registered voice, so Laycock’s abstracted figure is suspended in the appearance and disappearance of the spectators in front of the mirrors.¹⁵² Jones’ *Untitled*, powerful sensorial translation of the “presence in absence” dialectic, acts as the physical equivalent of Gonzalez-Torres’ mirrors, projecting in actual figures, the unseen and the unspoken that defines Gonzalez-Torres’ works. Mirroring a past presence, and a present absence in non-present and non-absent pasts, Jones and Gonzalez-Torres face AIDS by

¹⁴⁸ Quoted in Adair Rounthwaite, “Split Witness: Metaphorical Extensions of Life in the Art of Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” *Representations* 109, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 50.

¹⁴⁹ It might be interesting to consider that Gonzalez-Torres lived a substantial part of his life on an island. Born in Güaimaro, Cuba, he later moved to Puerto Rico. Water must therefore be a significant element in his life.

¹⁵⁰ Specifically, I am thinking about “*Untitled*” (*Blue Mirror*), 1990, and “*Untitled*” (*Orpheus, Twice*), 1991.

¹⁵¹ Bill T. Jones and Peggy Gillespie, *Last Night on Earth*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), 255.

¹⁵² Steven Bruhm, “Still/Here: Choreography, Temporality, AIDS”, in *Queer Times, Queer Becomings*, eds E.L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011), 315-316.

introducing in public venues powerful absent presences, with whom I, the viewer, am challenged to establish a dialogue.

Back to the body. Heading towards the end of this text, I start to make my way back to reality, crossing one last time the mirror surface. To Legendre:

The mirror intervenes in representation as a representation. In representing the third space of an instituted distance it acquires a status which allows the division of the subject, or the separation from the other than self, to take effect.¹⁵³

A representation within a representation, the image of the mirror has accompanied me throughout this project, allowing me to see how art can subvert a *diseasephobic aesthetic*, and how the epidemic's story can only be told in a long list of whispered presences and evident absences. As beauty disappeared in a phobic view of the PWA and reappeared in the borrowed symbolism of AIDS educational material, so the body participates in the re-definition of visual codes re-locating the patient, the doctor, and the passive viewers within a more flexible understanding of healthy and sick bodies.

I stand in front of the Mirror and look closely at its surface.

I see myself seeing: a representation of a representation.

I see myself as I started the project.

I see myself now.

2016 New York. 1991 Ross dies of AIDS. 1957 Felix is born. 1992 Ilaria.

1981 AIDS. 1984 Bobby. 2017 Rochester and Crimp. 2015 PhD. 1996 Felix.

2018 Lacan's M/mirror.

What am I looking at?

¹⁵³ Legendre, "Introduction to the Theory of the Image," 33.

Standing in front of an AIDS Relic:

Looking for a Conclusion, Hoping for an Introduction.

*“I wake up cold, I who
Prospered through dreams of heat
Wake to their residue,
Sweat, and a clinging sheet.*

*My flesh was its own shield:
Where it was gashed, it healed”.¹*

“Who were we, where were we, how did we experience these events?”²

September 2016, New York. The Bronx Museum of the Arts. It is early in the morning when I enter the exhibition *Art AIDS America*, and I witness for the first time the effects that an almost complete survey of the art produced during the epidemic can have on my body. Works by Keith Haring, David Wojnarowicz, Andres Serrano, Ross Bleckner follow one another in a succession of narratives more or less private. Daniel Goldstein’s *Icarian I Incline* is there as well, hanging on a relatively crowded wall [Fig.140]. On its right side, an acrylic painting by Brian Buczak (*Séance*, 1985), on its left side a photographic collage by Pacjfico Silano (*Pages of a “Blue Boy Magazine,”* 2012) [Fig.141].

Leather, sweat, wood, copper, felt, and Plexiglas. *Icarian I Incline* was made by Daniel Goldstein in 1993 [Fig.142]. The piece, as I experienced it, presents itself in the form of a light brown leather piece on a human scale; it was made using the cover of a workout bench of the Muscle System gym in San Francisco. I later learned that the canvas in front of me is actually part of a series: different benches from the same gym, collected as to elevate as many bodily

¹ Thom Gunn, *The Man With Night Sweats*, (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1992), 57.

² bell hooks, “Subversive Beauty: New Modes of Contestation,” in *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995), 50.

imprints as possible to a work of art.³ Taken off the machine, covered in Plexiglas, and hung on the wall, the cover is elevated as a symbol of a time before AIDS, and of a time after it. The leather is bleached by the imprinted bodily traces left by sweat over time. The vague body shape can be made out by a white superimpositions of signs, signatures of bodies that once lay there to exercise. The imaginary of the gym culture is forever protected on its surface: I can almost perceive the clanging sounds of the machine, the smell of sweaty bodies. I can almost picture a pumped-up man working on his muscles. The silent scream of this canvas/sculpture struck me with its powerful reality.

I stand in front of Goldstein's piece in silence, experiencing the space around me. I turn into Icarus; my body falling from the sky is caught in between Serrano's *Blood and Semen III* (1990) and *Milk/Blood* (1989), and Tony Feher's *Green Window* (2001). Lost in the deep blue sea, I am making my way to my side of the mirror: I have flown too closely to my bodily real and grotesque correlatives. My imaginary wholeness like wax, has found its shape in the grotesque quality of Goldstein and Serrano's work, and the material metaphor of Feher's installation. The room becomes the space for Foster's techno-master sublime, to happen. As Foster I feel that thrill of "techno-mastery" in the "imaginary dispersal" of a body and a subjecthood "affirmed in the destruction of other bodies".⁴ The wax has melted and I can reshape the boundaries of my corporeal identity conscious of the echoes of the AIDS crisis still resonating in me.

The body is understood, dissected, destroyed, and ultimately re-configured in a performative act finalized in the contradiction of the not-present and the not-absent pasts. I am superimposed with the anonymous bodies of Goldstein's workout bench. Tangible, and yet

³ Daniel Goldstein, "Icarian," *Daniel Goldstein Public Commission*, accessed March 13, 2018, <http://www.danielgoldsteinstudio.com/public-commissions>.

⁴ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA; London: The MIT Press, 1996), 222.

abstracted, the fragmentation I experience, summarizes the recodification process I have suggested in the thesis. The Dedalus to a tragic shattered time, Goldstein put together the feathers of anonymous faces, multiple temporalities, and forgotten storylines to see them getting lost in shattered fluidity of an era. The nameless stories of all the Icarus who fell into the sea and did not survive the water are addressed in the bench.

I had a daydream, almost a vision, in which I saw Demian and a myriad of friends, living and dead, in a body of water. Perhaps it was a lake as vast as the ocean, a lake emptied by an immense and unforgiving waterfall. This company of people was struggling against the current. Some had already drowned, others were grasping their comrades to save them, still others were swimming confidently, almost enjoying their effort.⁵

Bill T. Jones wrote these words in 1995 recalling the reasons behind the production of *D-Man in the Waters*. Jones has never related the piece to the myth of *Icarus*, or to any other myth in general. Yet the flying boy now clearly permeates his words, and work. Thrown in the air before the lights go off, Acquavella, as all the others who died in the epidemic, is Icarus. Of him, of them, history preserves a photograph, an object, an idea, and if we are lucky, even a bodily trace.

1984. While Bobby Campbell dies of AIDS, George Didi-Huberman publishes “The Index of the Absent Wound (Monograph on a Stain),” an article about the holy shroud in Turin. A death from AIDS and a symbol of Christianity. The temporal and to a certain extent unsustainable association of Campbell and Didi-Huberman ultimately sets in Goldstein’s piece. A painting with tridimensional flair, *Icarian I Incline* is, in fact, a relic of the AIDS epidemic. Referring to the holy shroud, Didi-Huberman writes:

In that very place where figuration abolishes itself – as in this stain – it also generates itself. This, in a way, amounts to setting forth a transcendental phenomenology of the visible, which would describe with regard to this stain, appearance [...] as the very process of *disfiguration*; it would describe how this stain came *not* to possess a figurative aspect.⁶

⁵ Bill T. Jones and Peggy Gillespie, *Last Night on Earth* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), 194.

⁶ George Didi-Huberman, “The Index of the Absent Wound (Monograph on a Stain),” *October* 29, (Summer 1984): 67.

The imprints of Goldstein's bench cover, like the almost imperceptible image of Christ on the shroud, abolish figuration in the act of regenerating it. This time however, the relic does not connect to a specific body, it is not holy, and does not prefigure a resurrection; it does quite the opposite really. A miscellany of anonymous bodies that regenerates exclusively in a narrative, the AIDS relic remembers a past beauty, letting the viewer imagine an imminent death. Nameless, exposed, rejected, the stretched leather materializes the visibility of an absence beyond its figurative terms. *What am I looking at?*

As I stand in front of *Icarian I Incline* the stories of the epidemic unfold in front of me as bodily fragmentations. I am transported to a faceless time, physically identified. The anonymous individual in dialogue with the equally anonymous shadows imprinted on the bench, I turn to Silano's work looking for an identity. *Could the men of Silano's collage be the ones responsible for the sweat imprints on the workout bench? What were their names? What were their stories?* I do not have an answer to these questions: the works are not contemporary. They were not created to be exhibited together. And yet, in their association, the shapes outlined in sweat signify a historical narrative difficult to shape. A secretion that crosses the border of the body, sweat is the signifier of healthy, fit corporealities and the indicator of sick, feverish bodies. In sweat the rejective attitude of *diseasephobic aesthetic of illness* is explicated; in sweat, beauty is shaped.

The bodily traces stay on the other side of the glass, mixing individuals, times, anonymity and public involvement. I stand on the other side of the glass. I recognize the object in front of me, I adventure beyond its descriptive qualities. I am the spectator suspended in confused times who is not so unconsciously participating in a new bodily construction. Goldstein's relic merges with my body and my present claiming the power of an art that once, and continues to, re-codify the conception of healthy and ill bodies in society. James W. Green has written: "the power of the relic, its charisma, is to vouch for the truth of whatever is

claimed”.⁷ The relic to a collection of lost physicalities *Icarian I Incline* vouches the presences and the absences of the crisis claiming a multiplicity of narratives otherwise lost.

Who was I, where was I, how did I experience these events?

In the very last page of this work, I feel the need to answer these questions. I was, and I am, an art historian with an interest in medical humanities. I was standing in front of a mirror crossed by shattered temporalities and forgotten figures; I crossed the mirror, I saw, and now I am back to reality to tell my story. I experienced the works with respect, involvement, and curiosity. I experienced them both in the first person and in pictures. I sensed them in archives, intruding in private and public worlds re-performed in the act of writing. Responding to the art of the epidemic’s request for an active participation I approached the presences and absences of this story negotiating my presence and absence in the narrative. Standing in front of Goldstein’s work, I concretize that participatory action that has enabled me to develop this project under a personal and yet critical lens. I am separated from Goldstein’s workout bench cover on multiple levels: the piece is covered in Plexiglas, hang at the wall, and exhibited in a gallery space. I cannot make any contact with the piece, but I can be proximal to it. My interaction is limited to the act of standing in front of the work and record the emotions I experience seeing a shadow of my persona merging with the anonymous imprints left on the cover. I am participating in the piece beyond its and mine history: suspended in a reflection, mine, that is already bound to the past, and therefore absent in its presence, I enter a space of relation in distance, validating my voice in the respectful acknowledgement of the tragic events that I did not live.

I am conscious of the gap that separates me from the artists presented in this thesis; I am conscious of the gap that separates me from those who lived through the AIDS epidemic

⁷ James W. Green, *Beyond the Good Death: The Anthropology of Modern Dying* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 85.

and to whom my way of approaching the subject matter could appear at the least problematic. More than once I doubted myself, wondering what the survivors might think of my work, fantasising on how those who died would have responded to my narrative. To a certain extent the idea that my words can possibly be misunderstood or interpreted as ‘overstepping’ the works and the artists considered, still frightens me. In the *I* of this project, in my *I*, I wanted to take on that request implicit in Elizabeth Lebovici’s title *Ce Que la Sida m’a Fait* and in Gonzalez-Torres’ works, without substituting myself to their *m(s)*’. On the contrary, I wanted to stand side by side that *m(s)*’, as an absent presence, and experience in a “time slip” the impact that the art of the epidemic had and continues to have on the viewer’s body, on my body.⁸

In a conversation with Peggy Phelan, Irit Rogoff explains that our decision to work on specific art historical figures or moments in history is the expression of an inner necessity, of a need, sometimes emerging upon completion of the project itself. “Part of our work,” she writes, “is to figure out what we are attracted to, why, and what kind of displacement that attraction affects”.⁹ Standing on the “original” side of the mirror and looking at the picture I took of Goldstein’s piece, I revisit the beginning of this journey. The idea for this project came to me in 2015, following an interest in the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres. I am not sure if I figured out the reasons why I am attracted to some of the stories here discussed, and talking of attraction might not best depict my relationship with them. In the art of the epidemic I found bodies that still speak of the contemporary reality in which I live; I found a dynamic of looking and disclosing, of visibility and invisibility, of presence and absence that is still affecting my world and I felt interpellated to find a presence in my absence from a discourse that somehow was and is part of my story too.

⁸ For the term time slips, see: Jaclyn I. Pryor, *Time Slips: Queer Temporalities, Contemporary Performance, and the Hole of History* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017), 9.

⁹ Peggy Phelan and Irit Rogoff, ““Without”: A Conversation,” *Art Journal* 60, no. 3 (Autumn 2001): 38.

Phelan concludes her dialogue with Rogoff, stating: “in the end, I am more compelled by the possibility of learning something and having that knowing shake up my complacent sense of self, of location, of perspective”.¹⁰ Writing in the first person, placing my absent *I* in the presence of the *m(s)*’ of the epidemic, and recording the effect of their absences in my presence, I reached that stage of personal and critical growth so well summarised in Phelan’s words. The AIDS epidemic is part of a past maybe too recent to historicize, but maybe it is time to look at its shattered narrative with renewed interest. Maybe it is time to look for new meanings; to give the works a new purpose. To go beyond a purely political aspect, and make the art of the epidemic live again, to bring it back to a present tense, to hospitals, doctors, and terminally ill patients. Maybe it is time to rediscover the power of that participatory request and get our “complacent sense of self, of location, of perspective” shaken up.¹¹ Re-codify the body to re-codify society. I place this thesis in a middle of a discourse, in the middle of my present, and of an un-defined history. The mirror is reflecting my image back, asking for a new, personal action, for a more conscious reading, for a forgotten history.

“Icarus, Icarus, where are you? Which way should I be looking, to see you?”¹²

¹⁰ Phelan and Rogoff, ““Without”,”41.

¹¹ Phelan and Rogoff, ““Without”,”41.

¹² Ovid, “Metamorphoses Book VIII,” translated by Anthony S. Kline, *The Ovid Collection*, The University of Virginia Library, 2000, accessed March 13, 2018, <http://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Metamorph8.htm#482327661>.

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