AIDSplotation or Art?

This is one of those photos deemed too shocking for the International AIDS Conference. You decide.

October 1, 2000 By Daniel Vaillancourt

A picture may be worth a thousand words, but some things are better left unsaid. That was the message sent by organizers of the 13th International AIDS Conference when the selection committee of the event's Cultural Program banned award-winning Dutch photographer Geert van Kesteren from exhibiting his images of people in Zambia living with -- and dying of -- AIDS.

"*Banned* is not the appropriate word," said Fakazile Myeza, communications coordinator for the conference, adding that the powers-that-be had strict criteria for images to be associated with the conference, themed "Breaking the Silence." "Visuals that have got death and gloom -- scare tactics -- we don't believe in," Myeza said. "People don't respond to scaring. They shut off." Even similar images used by the Department of Health weren't acceptable, and the conference refused to allow its logo on any banners with images it considered inappropriate.

According to van Kesteren, only three of the 36 images he submitted to the committee depicted the dying. Other subjects included a hospital with a leaking roof and cracking walls and a sparsely attended Zambian AIDS memorial service. "They could have said, 'Listen, this is what we don't want to show," van Kesteren, 34, told *POZ*. In an e-mail informing him that his work would not be used -- just weeks before the conference began -- organizers were similarly unspecific. "They just said, 'It doesn't fit the ethos of the community program.' Period," he said.

To van Kesteren, the fact that the conference nixed his photographs smacks of a desire to keep the truth about AIDS in Africa hidden. "My work *is* about 'breaking the silence' -- about AIDS being a complete taboo in Zambia," he said.

Considering that this event was meant to herald a new truth-telling about the African epidemic, some are crying censorship. But shock's value is in the eye of the beholder, and others say that conference chiefs were justified in their verdict. While leading art theorist, activist and HIVer Douglas Crimp will not comment on the photographs in question because he hasn't seen them, he has long been a critic of such "victimizing" art as the late '80s photographs of PWAs by Nicholas Nixon, which he said convey only the horrors of disease and death. "The idea is that you look at something terrifying and you want to make it better," Crimp said. "One example would be photographs of liberated concentration camps. Do we need to *know* that? Yes. Do we learn about it through these images? I'm not sure."

Van Kesteren is anything but undecided. “It’s not about ’shocking’ photography,” he said. “It’s about what AIDS is doing to Zambia.” The photographer takes solace in the fact that 10 of his images were printed in a *Newsweek* last January, illustrating a cover story on Africa’s 10 million AIDS orphans. “The photographs were a powerful body of work that spoke to the horrors of the issue,” said the newsmagazine’s director of communications, Roy Brunett. “We found them to be compelling and newsworthy.”

Crimp isn’t surprised that Newsweek chose to give global exposure to van Kesteren. “Mainstream journalists have always published these kinds of photographs,” he said. “In fact, they win Pulitzers.”

But the rush of worldwide news organizations toward the ravages of AIDS in Africa is relatively new. “There were almost no media running to Africa, even two years ago, when I started,” said van Kesteren. “That’s what made me do it.”

Maybe all it will take for the photographer’s work to be welcome at the next conference is a little 20/20 hindsight. “When I first saw Nixon’s work, I thought it was gloom and doom when there were no images of happy, smiling PWAs,” said Robert Atkins, editor of the online magazine *Artery: The AIDS-Art Forum*. “But now I think they’re tragic, deeply felt and brutally realistic.”

In the meantime, van Kesteren is releasing *Mwendanjangula: AIDS in Zambia*, written with journalist Arthur van Amerongen, which gathers together all 76 of his controversial images. Unswayed by the recent brouhaha, he is still on assignment in Durban, capturing the faces of AIDS there for the German magazine *Stern*. He’s just trying to convey the story from his side of the lens. Simply put, “It’s about real life.”

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