Desires to Connect

Richard Renaldi photographs strangers who touch.

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Imagine going about your day-to-day business and then being approached by a guy with a gigantic camera who asks to take a portrait of you and another total stranger together, as if you're longtime friends or lovers. Since 2007, in small towns and cities across the country, photographer Richard Renaldi has been performing this very ritual. The results are published in his new book from Aperture titled Touching Strangers (gallery exhibits are also scheduled nationwide).

His unusual requests elicited a wide range of reactions, "from surprise, to embarrassment, to outright enthusiasm," says Renaldi, who has been living with HIV since 1996 and has been involved with the group Visual AIDS for many years.

Renaldi did not ask the participants for details of their lives, so he doesn't know whether any of them is HIV positive. What's more, he says, "I can't really say how my status would have influenced the project per se, but I do think that my experiences as a gay, HIV-positive man and having grown up a child of divorce have definitely contributed toward my own desire to connect."

He doesn't like to spell out underlying messages in his photographs, preferring instead to let the artwork speak for itself. But Renaldi does offer this insight for viewers: "I think these photographs are alluring because they are a visual expression of our very basic desire to want to connect with other people. [They illustrate] the potential for any stranger or passerby to become our lover, partner or friend—no matter their race, creed, class or HIV status."

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