Hunter Reynolds: Documentation as a Practice of Survival

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Marc Arthur, head of Research and Archives at Performa, considers Hunter Reynolds' exhibition Survival AIDS Medication Reminder at P.P.O.W. Gallery below.

Please join Visual AIDS, Hunter Reynolds, Eric Rhein and Emily Colucci on Saturday, October 3, for a guided tour of Hunter's exhibition Survival AIDS Medication Reminder, as well as Eric Rhein: Ordained and Barton Benes: Museology. The event begins at 3 p.m. at Pavel Zoubok Gallery and continues to P.P.O.W. Gallery. Further event information here.

I first learned about the artist Hunter Reynolds from a photograph taken of him at the "Stop The Church" ACT UP demonstration in 1989. The picture shows Reynolds restrained by four police officers on a cleared-out Fifth Avenue just moments after he lifted a barricade holding back thousands of protesters. He was attempting to reach the ACT UP die-in in at St. Patrick's Cathedral. Though Reynolds's attempt has clearly been blocked, his eyes gaze forward, brimming with rage and with hope, made more powerful by the fact that he had received an HIV-positive diagnosis just days before the picture was taken. Throughout his oeuvre Reynolds maintains the fierce agency captured in this image as a mode of artistic production; since the '80s, this has allowed him to explore the relation between performance and direct action while creating images that problematize established representations of HIV-positive subjects in the United States.

In his latest exhibition, Survival AIDS Medication Reminder, at P.P.O.W. Gallery, Reynolds has combined newspapers from his personal archive from the early years of the AIDS crisis with images from his own artistic output in large format c-prints. Enlargements of mainstream and community-based newspapers fill the walls of the first gallery, taking the viewer on a journey back to the unpredictable and sometimes sensational narratives and images that scrambled to account for the emergence of HIV/AIDS. Large images from the artist's body of work are superimposed onto sections of these documents including his splattered blood series, documentation from his recent Mummification performances, and his Memorial Dress performances. A grid pattern has been woven with thread into each one of these works, which further inscribes the artist's hand into these archival materials.

In the catalog that accompanies the exhibition, an interview between Reynolds and the critic Jason Foumberg reveals that Reynolds is an obsessive collector and archivist of his work and the

ephemera that surrounds and informs it. For Reynolds, archiving constitutes a major part of his practice and life--which began, in part, from witnessing the material contents of people's lives being dumped onto the street after they died from AIDS in the '80s, '90s and beyond. By not letting go of the paper traces of violence, trauma, and indigence, and through Reynolds's re-imagining them merged with the archive of his artwork, these newspapers are pushed outside the dominating purview of history. They become, instead, a form of performance documentation that Reynolds reconfigures as part of his own response to the intolerance of that period.

Also on view in the exhibition is a video titled Medication Reminder, which Reynolds has created from daily calls and interviews with his close friend and artist Kathleen White, who recently passed away. The video, which is an homage to White and to their friendship, features as its soundtrack voicemails from and conversations with White that the artist recorded over the span of three years when he was struggling to take a twice-daily regimen of HIV-medication. Routine and comforting reminder messages from White, the sound of a phone ringing to voicemail, and conversations that reflect on the ups and downs of being an artist play over Reynolds's rich, kaleidoscopic and queerly decadent visual language. Opulent imagery such as fake pearls and beads dropping between Reynolds's glitter-drenched hands fill the screen and can be understood as constructing a mythology and otherworldly beauty around the very real conditions of having to remember to take a daily dose of life-saving medication. It's also possible to understand the artist's visual language through what scholar and curator Paul B. Preciado terms the "Pramacopornographic," in which the compounds that pharmaceutical companies produce are "new microprosthetic mechanisms of control of subjectivity by means of biomolecular and multimedia technical protocols."[1] Indeed, when a large bin filled with empty HIV-medication bottles appears in the background of a shot, or when medications are interspersed with extravagant and colorful beads, the life-saving pills take on fake, prosthetic and plastic qualities.

Adherence is the clinical term that describes the challenges many patients face taking HIV antiretroviral drugs on a daily schedule. If a patient misses a dose, the virus in their body could develop a resistance to the medication and spiral out of control. Adherence is conceptually related to the artist's process of archiving in the way that both practices rely on memory as a means of survival. Meticulously keeping newspapers and other materials gives permanence to the experiences and existence of those who died from AIDS, as it was not clear if they would be remembered. Because collecting provides cultural and social validation to the precariousness of HIV-positive subjectivity, the artist's stubborn refusal to let go of anything can be understood as a politics of survival in the same way that remembering to take antiretroviral drugs is a stubborn refusal to let HIV obliterate his body.

Laced with the traces of original events, ephemera become essential records when the survival of one's representation is at stake. Reynolds shows us that the process of collecting these records is a performance in and of itself, a daily performance of survival like taking antiretroviral drugs. In the catalog he offers "as desperate as life can be, the process of living is always a beautiful thing." The material index of loss and indignation that Reynolds has accumulated throughout his life can be viewed in this exhibition as new and mythical images that exist outside of established history

but inform the present of the ongoing crisis.

[1]Paul B. Preciado. Testo Junkie. New York: Feminist, 2013. 33.

Marc Arthur is an artist, writer and current doctoral candidate in the department of Performance Studies at New York University. He is also the head of research and archives at Performa and is co-editor of the Performa Magazine.

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