Let My Presence Be the Refusal

The approach for the December web gallery was to intentionally center BIPOC artists from the Visual AIDS Artist registry.

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Observe the rising and falling of your chest. Rise. Fall. Rise. Fall. What is it's rhythm? Is the rising and falling deep and slow or short and shallow? Somewhere in between? No judgment. Simply observe. As the chest continues to rise and fall, is there a detectable density to the quality of the inflow and outflow? Again, no judgment, just observe.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic emerged this year and upended life as we knew it, some of us already struggled with what it means to breathe. George Floyd calling out for his mother as he took his last breaths echoed the last moments of Eric Garner's lament, "I can't breathe." Along came the coronavirus that would once again redefine the pain of breathing with its disproportionate impact on Black and Latinx communities in the United States. The spaces where Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) gather to mourn our dead, share intimate encounters to ease the discomfort of existing in a world hostile to our presence, and the practice of collective experiences of ritual and performance were disrupted by COVID-19. Then came the protests for racial justice erupting from the Black Lives Matter Movement into cities all across the US and around the world.

This Day With(out) Art and World AIDS Day coincides with what will likely be one of the most challenging years in recorded history. December 1st is a time to pause and remember those lost to the AIDS pandemic and acknowledge the indelible cultural production emerging from and through the ongoing AIDS crisis. Shirlene Cooper, HIV activist, housing advocate and founder and project director of the Women's Empowerment Art Therapy Workshops at Visual AIDS and performance artist Rafael Sanchez share their personal experiences and insights regarding the COVID-19 and HIV/AIDS pandemics in the audio interview below.

Visual AIDS · Visual AIDS December 2020 Web Gallery Interview with Shirlene Cooper & Rafael Sanchez

Millions of family members, friends, community leaders, and political organizers crossed over to the ancestral realm whether by COVID-19 or other reasons. Many have lost employment and housing, while others found themselves relocated to other coordinates, towns and cities during this time. Grief, loss and mourning take on different shapes, altitudes, vistas and plateaus within us and our collective human experience.

Although the news was pretty rough, it wasn't all bad. Joy, laughter and pleasure are also present as we shape new ways of connecting to ourselves and each other. For all that we have lost, there has also been time to reclaim the aspects of ourselves we hold most sacred, heal the broken bits and let go of the parts that no longer serve us. The chance for new beginnings lies in every loss, setback, misread or chance encounter. Through it all, there remains a holding if we can pause long enough to let it embrace us.

The danger of being too overly focused on treatments, vaccines and the doomsday news cycles and placing all our hopes and fears on political leaders is that it allows an easy out to escape the trauma, loss and uncertainty of what it means to be living through an actual global pandemic. When pandemics like AIDS touch those already assigned as defective in some way in society, it's much easier to be about what those people were doing that caused them to get sick. Even though COVID-19 impacts some communities disproportionately, it does not conform to the conditions often applied to disease. If everyone can potentially get, spread, become sick from or die due to COVID-19 transmission, we are all the "other." Lockdowns, restrictions of movement, and mandates for the sake of public health can feel like a police state for those who never experienced what the marginalized Black other has always endured. What some describe as encroachment on their civil liberties in response to the current pandemic has an undertone of, "How dare I be Blackened?!"

The approach to the web gallery intentionally centers BIPOC artists from the Visual AIDS Artist registry as we contemplate the narratives that are included and excluded from the archival record. Its vision is to normalize Blackness and Indigeneity as an organizing principle onto itself without Whiteness as its antecedent reference. It may not be possible for the cannon to contain every story, nor should it. Rather, this vision offers a reflection point for BIPOC people to take in the totality of our experience; to grieve and mourn our immense losses on the battlefield; to celebrate our embodiment; to honor the sensuality of our bodies; to remember the cosmologies present in our collective unconscious; to know there are different ways to construct ideas of freedom; and, to acknowledge the ever looming prospect of death while also celebrating our living.

We who have been assigned Black as synonymous with all things bad, grotesque, ominous and unwanted engage in a continual need to reimagine what it means to live inside this flesh. It can be beautiful and real messy. Yet, we do it over and over and over again. The closing poem is inspired by this photograph taken by Ajamu, who always reminds me in our long conversations about the quantum nature of the archive and that Black people deserve joy and pleasure everyday and always.

Black boy on the verge of Suckling Fish-Christ, Ajamu, 2020

Let My Presence Be the Refusal

My body is the archive

Holding space for the past, present, future that resides within me

I sit at the ocean of my neverending becoming

Bathed in the waters of

Mami Wata who sustains me through it all

I hear the low bass sound of the quantum echo

Above the notes of material frequencies

Bringing me back to the centered sacred

Though my flesh be a nightmare to some

For others a tomb with which to bide time

Let my presence be the refusal

My death is not the final word

On my existence

My power is not conditional to the body in which I reside

The archive lives regardless

If I am struck down on the grounds of my fugitivity

I will rejoice

Knowing that I have always and forever will be

Free

Click here to view the full web gallery on the Visual AIDS website.

This web gallery is dedicated in loving memory to Rusti Miller-Hill, Frederick Weston and all the beloved souls that crossed over this past year. We miss you. We honor you. We love you. We know your legacy lives on. Ase.

Katherine “Kat” Cheairs is a filmmaker, educator, curator, activist and community artist. Kat’s areas of interest and research include: HIV & AIDS; visual culture; media arts therapy; community arts; and, critical race theory in art education. Ms. Cheairs is a co-curator of Metanoia: Transformation Through AIDS Archives and Activism, an archival exhibition focusing on the contributions of Black women, transwomen of color, and women of color HIV/AIDS activists from the early 1990s to the present. Ms Cheairs is the producer and director of the documentary, Ending Silence, Shame & Stigma: HIV/AIDS in the African American Family. Kat’s

new project in development, In This House, is a video installation exploring HIV/AIDS narratives through the Black body. Kat has appeared and presented on panels at the Tribeca Film Institute, BAM, Pratt Institute, The New School, New York University, The Studio Museum in Harlem, The Aperture Foundation, and UnionDocs. Ms. Cheairs holds a Master of Fine Art in Film and Television from the Dodge College of Film and Media Arts at Chapman University.

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