Unleash the Queen

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Still from Lyle Ashton Harris's "Selections from the Ektachrome Archive, 1986-1996"

To honor the 25th year of Day With(out) Art on December 1, 2014, Visual AIDS commissioned seven artists/collectives--Rhys Ernst, Glen Fogel, Lyle Ashton Harris, Hi Tiger, Tom Kalin, My Barbarian, and Julie Tolentino/Abigail Severance--to create provocative new short videos that reflect and respond to the ongoing AIDS pandemic for a program titled ALTERNATE ENDINGS.

Here, Rickey Laurentiis considers Lyle Ashton Harris's contribution to the video program, "Selections from the Ektachrome Archive, 1986-1996."

Lyle Ashton Harris, "Selections from the Ektachrome Archive" (2014) from Visual AIDS on Vimeo.

So there's this new communication in your blood that means something. Don't know it at first.

How to know it? Then are told. Then know it. Then deny it. Deny it. Hate it. Hate yourself. Come to accept it. Have to. But can you ever love it? Can you enjoy it? Is this voice in the blood a new permission? Has it affirmed something deep in yourself you were hot and so desperate, so desperate not to face?

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What photography does is put us unequivocally in the face of something. I don't mean to be anthropomorphic. It's not always a "human" face--but it is a surface that, because we are human, we endow with meaning, with import. A photo faces. This arrangement of light and its superior, the dark, becomes, for us, evidence of a narrative, an argument, a fragment.

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I imagine how it enters the body is fragmentally. Coming through the semen (the milk) and passing into the bloodstream (a mouth), it is only a piece of itself and yet it attaches. It joins to the body, the DNA and it multiplies. Funny how multiplication here means change--demands that body, once it recognizes this new agent, won't ever be able to know itself as "just" a body again.

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Don't you think a photo works like this--any visual art? What it does, I see, is take a "moment" and forces you to recognize it as that very thing: a moment. It's not a game of so much freezing time, but of vividly animating it--of making one's body realize that they are inside this moving thing, cell by cell, constancy. And, yes, even that Pollock or that Basquiat or whoever for you is the epitome of the "non-realist"--yes, even that forces the same realization, is still, after all, a "moment." The frame is the evidence.

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Watching this video by Lyle Ashton Harris I come to believe he is a master at what he does, at facing. No one asked me to say that, but I believe it. For there is something unyielding about this insistence of photos--some portraiture, some suggestions--that recall, for me at least, a history I wish I knew. Or maybe it's a history that now, so eloquently, peals in my blood, a kind of constructed nostalgia? Or maybe it's a history I'm ashamed I've forgotten? It is not easy, I'm saying, to look upon the photo of Marlon Riggs--whether as a black gay person, whether as a poet--prideful in his "Unleash the Queen" T-shirt; it is not so easy to see this photo, if briefly, and not locate in it a meaning. What was the cost of such unleashing? (Why ever be leashed?) What were the ramifications--its products? Did it make something today more possible, someone like--me?

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Last summer I took photos of myself, naked, as if to reclaim myself, claim myself, my former body, as if reclamation were ever possible, as if colonialism were a moral goal--but it was a failure,

exquisite failure that I hold in the mind and cherish.

What I mean to say is that I struggled with my body--what lay discursive in its blood--and so struggled just as much to capture it, to give it its moment.

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There is a power, I see here, in the archive. It announces an argument: that these texts, photos, people--that any of them are worthy to be remembered and, in that remembering, will inevitably shape the futures they couldn't exactly anticipate. It is an archive of joy and pleasure and sex and death and shadow and hurt and hate, and it's everything we need. At base, what's being unleashed here may be a queen of secret kind--not only Marlon himself, Essex himself and the others (I say their first names, for they're my brothers): but kinship, that shady queen; a way of overwriting the supposed permanency of death, of erasing erasure; a way of connecting me to where I've already been and where I am now facing.

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There is a communication in my blood that's mean. But wasn't this always what I wanted? To conquer loneliness? For my body to be joined to some any thing, permanently, with meaning? Don't unleash me. Don't let me

let me go.//

Rickey Laurentiis was born in New Orleans. He is the recipient of a Ruth Lilly Fellowship from the Poetry Foundation and a Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as fellowships from the Civitella Ranieri Foundation in Italy and a Chancellor's Fellowship from Washington University in St. Louis, where he received his MFA. His first book of poems, Boy with Thorn, was selected by Terrance Hayes for the 2014 Cave Canem Poetry Prize and is forthcoming from University of Pittsburgh Press in fall of 2015.

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