

Transcending Beyond the 'Detectable':
Queer Mourning, Memory, and Futurity in Eric Rhein's *Lifelines*

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ABSTRACT

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Turning toward the past while propelled by a desire for futurity, this thesis explores the intersections of art and memory in the artwork of American artist and writer, Eric Rhein (b. 1961). Diagnosed with HIV in 1987 at the age of twenty-seven, Rhein’s survivorship affirms the endurance of queer love as well as the perseverance required to navigate a life-changing diagnosis in both a socially and epidemiologically tumultuous terrain. The first section evaluates the importance of the past through lineages of queer representation, contributing to Rhein’s inclination toward self-documentation while additionally laying the foundational framework for activist forces that later permeated the united confrontational response to the AIDS crisis. The second chapter investigates the transformative powers of queer love enlivened through collective manifestations of mourning and activism, highlighting the significance of vulnerability, social contingency, community, and proximity. Finally, the closing chapter draws upon the speculative potentials of queer world-making, both embodied and ephemeral, emphasizing the (non)linearity of queer temporalities. Converging with the contemporary era of *undetectability*, this thesis critically (re)considers memories versus histories as resistive modalities present in curatorial and institutional settings, permitting the development and bridging the excluded within a utopian architecture saturated with possibility, belonging, and care. Focused centrally on the preservation and celebration of those lost to AIDS-related complications, Rhein’s body of work exists as a living archive, transcending disseminated narratives of loss, proliferating and expanding much like our ever-evolving relationship to HIV and AIDS.

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INTRODUCTION

“My art voices the course of AIDS—speaking names—telling our stories.”¹
— Eric Rhein, *Lifelines* (2019)

Throughout my research, I have been investigating both the epidemiological and social shifts that have impacted how artists, activists, and long-term survivors are working to honour the legacy of the artistic generation lost to AIDS-related complications while experiencing monumental shifts in how HIV and AIDS is understood within contemporary contexts. Societal perception of HIV and AIDS is dependent upon various “intertwining discourses [...] influenc[ing] how it is conceptualized, studied, and treated in medicine and policy, as well as how it is remembered and represented in culture,”² language, and medical memory. Thus, the HIV and AIDS pandemic has garnered various meanings, constructed through the dissemination of information but also through the “practices that conceptualize it, represent it, and respond to it.”³ It is through such cultural and social practices that signification is cultivated,⁴ and through consideration, one must engage with these narratives by having “the imperative to know them, analyze them, and wrest control of them.”⁵ Through social, medical, and artistic convergences, this thesis will investigate the intersections of memory, loss, and the introduction of antiretroviral medications that, for many with access, have helped rupture expected temporal trajectories of the HIV virus.⁶

¹ Eric Rhein, “Notes From My Treehouse,” in *Lifelines* (Lexington: Institute 193 Press, 2019), 100.

² Manon S. Parry, “AIDS and the Medical Museum Gaze: Collecting and Exhibiting Science and Society,” *On Curating* 42 (2019): 220.

³ Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 28.

⁴ Paula A. Treichler, “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification,” *October* 43 (1987): 32.

⁵ Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*, 28.

⁶ While this rupture is indeed pharmaceutically possible, it is essential to note that it is not universally experienced. Those living with HIV or AIDS who belong to BIPOC+ communities, for example, may have difficulty accessing treatment for a variety of reasons including geographic proximity to healthcare resources, social and medical marginalization, or even HIV criminalization. See more on pages 12-13, 33-34, 43.

Although I have admired the work of many artists, activists, and collectives working to dismantle misinformation surrounding the ongoing HIV and AIDS epidemic, I have been particularly drawn to New York-based artist Eric Rhein, born in Kentucky in 1961. Rhein's interdisciplinary artworks, both photographic and sculptural, are concerned with themes of memorialization and memory. Art making and the creative process for Rhein opens "channels to wisdom, communication, and healing,"⁷ and therefore, the history of his own survival and the legacies of those lost to AIDS-related complications are eternalized and expressed in Rhein's body of work. Rhein's photography in particular highlights intimate moments of queer tenderness and love, a stark contrast from images of PLWAs (*People Living With AIDS*) that were distributed widely at the height of the epidemic throughout the 1980s and 1990s in the Global North that reinforced metaphors of contagion, sickness, and death. An inherent problem within this spectacle of visual negativity is that tenderness and care is overlooked entirely, instead fueling visual themes of misinformation, despair, and victimization. Rhein's work consequently seeks to humanize his subjects, including himself, embracing his relational ties to others while emphasizing the importance they carry, simultaneously advocating for the accurate depictions of queer communities while navigating a tumultuous epidemiological *and* social terrain.

Raised between New York state's Hudson Valley and Kentucky's Appalachians, nature has remained a prominent and recurring theme within Rhein's practice for the last three decades. Natural forms are articulated within the artist's photographic images and interdisciplinary studies of organic materials, expressed through various media including wire, paper, and found objects. Rhein positions nature as a symbol of purity: a space where both the mind and spirit are simultaneously free and at ease. The evolutionary state of nature is also inextricably linked to the human condition of one's

⁷ Rhein, "Notes From My Treehouse," 107.

corporeal form, the *body*—at once, both vulnerable and resilient—a symbiotic relationship in a constant state of flux, adaptation, and growth. Although his practice negotiates the ever-present realities of loss and remembrance through immortalizing loved ones who have passed, his artwork is often in dialogue with the natural world, translating the “knowledge[s] of the dead, of who they were and how they lived”⁸ while underlining the importance of transcendence, regeneration, and renewal. Specific geographic locations, and nature as a whole, hold significant spiritual and emotional resonance for Rhein, emphasizing the imbued meanings captured within site-specificity: visual metaphors capable of embodying and referencing queer resilience, the natural world sustaining his ailing, yet persevering, physical body.

Rhein’s artistic practice is contextualized within an era of confrontational street activism spearheaded by gay rights pioneers and various initiatives fighting for social and political recognition in a time where the issues of both death and sex remained largely taboo.⁹ Determined to shatter social apathy surrounding the unfolding public health crisis and driven by collective force, artists and activist collectives such as ACT UP (*AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power*) garnered national attention through their political and social opposition in the form of protest and site-specific interventions, illuminating inequities embedded in both biomedical and political milieus. Many individuals perceived these systemic forms of inaction as direct factors contributing to the mounting toll of casualties. Perry Brass explains,

[the] AIDS [crisis] was shattering: it was a ‘private,’ unspeakable illness brought on for the most part sexually. It was also found almost exclusively among the country’s most marginalized, least honored groups of people: homosexual or bisexual men, women of color, and intravenous drug [users]. These were people who for the most part American political society thought should be invisible and expendable.¹⁰

⁸ bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York City: William Morrow and Company, Inc.; Harper Collins Publishers, 2001), 201.

⁹ David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (New York City: Vintage, 1991), 153.

¹⁰ Perry Brass, “Eric Rhein: AIDS and the Hummingbird’s Warrior,” *HuffPost*, December 17, 2014, accessed February 12, 2022, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/perry-brass-the-manly-pur_b_6334696.

With the cult of illness in the United States having evaporated in the decades preceding the advent of the AIDS crisis,¹¹ many impacted communities were comprised of artists, activists, and intellectuals alike that rallied in unified mourning, facilitating an emerging site of belonging while offering solace in numbers as many confronted the implications of loss and mass devastation.

Art's intersection with activism during these years became a stronghold to those searching for greater collective communion and healing, utilizing and transforming art into a generative conduit capable of changing political discourse. Permeating into the public sphere, art created during this time was informed by the social realities of mourning and dying, allowing an eternal dialogue to transcend the time-bound limitations of a singular life, bridging and informing the living with the narratives and desires of those already departed. Rhein's practice highlights this intermediary and liminal dialogue with his artwork balancing between quiet activism and introspective, existential contemplation, proving "that art can act as both a memorial and a means of activism."¹²

Elegiac and ethereal,¹³ Rhein's work often plays with negative space, organic shadows, and self-portraiture, his body representing a state of growth and connection while simultaneously documenting the aging self within the boundaries of a living and evolving archive. His "work's construction and conception are emblematic of [his] wide material knowledge and ability to layer meaning both densely and poetically."¹⁴ Through the meticulous detailing in his sculptural works,

¹¹ The "cult of illness" was the social compulsion with illness during the late nineteenth century, beginning with metaphors of the plague and tuberculosis and reignited with the emergence of certain cancers in the mid-twentieth century. Saturating the social ethos, this infatuation with illness was propelled by deep psychological fear of contamination and contagion. For more, see Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (London: Picador, 1989). Furthermore, a pertinent excerpt from Perry Brass's "Eric Rhein: AIDS and the Hummingbird's Warrior": "By the time AIDS first appeared in the U.S., the cult of illness was long gone; it was completely counter to twentieth century America, the land of muscular independence and self reliance. It was also the place where having a genuine private life was disappearing as a business life triumphed."

¹² Emily Colucci, "The Course of His Life: Memory and Activism in the art of Eric Rhein," *POZ Magazine*, April/May 2015, accessed January 18, 2022, <https://www.poz.com/article/eric-rhein-27034-7206>.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Paul Michael Brown, "Lifelines," in *Lifelines* (Lexington: Institute 193 Press, 2019), 10.

Rhein utilizes delicate wire to form organic contours of leaves, the intertwining lines occasionally overlapping to form internal structures or spines, the remnants of those who have touched the artist's life symbolically held within the object's ridges. These fine strands of metal may be read visually as a metaphor for veins, coursing with the wisdom of survivorship yet influenced by chronological time, exploring "multiple facets of the ongoing [...] crisis, from personal losses of friends and lovers to the wider decimation of New York's art and LGBT communities."¹⁵ Through this nexus, "Rhein's artwork not only confronts the traumatic history of the crisis, but also opens an essential dialogue about the current and future realities"¹⁶ of HIV and AIDS. Rhein's intricate manipulation of media shows a deep contemplation and reverence for form making. Assigning his own artistic and poetic inclination as a form of spiritual inquiry, Rhein highlights the "interconnections of mind, body, [and] spirit [...] as] alternative belief systems," guiding forces such as "the metaphysical and the mystic"¹⁷ on his quest for healing.

Having been diagnosed as HIV positive in 1987 at the age of twenty-seven,¹⁸ Rhein's artistic career has sought to document his reality alongside friends and loved ones also living with the virus. His unwavering dedication to preserving their legacies emphasizes queer affection's prominence, emphasising that love's presence allows for one to "grieve for the dead as ritual of mourning and as celebration."¹⁹ His depiction of queer tenderness is confirmation of the physical and emotional strength, as well as resolve, required to navigate a life-changing diagnosis in a time of heightened social fear and medical stigmatization.²⁰ Invoking "the dead by allowing [the] wisdom they have

¹⁵ Colucci, "The Course of His Life: Memory and Activism in the art of Eric Rhein."

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Rhein, "Notes From My Treehouse," 99.

¹⁸ Ibid., 97.

¹⁹ hooks, *All About Love*, 201.

²⁰ Chael Needle, "Eric Rhein: Cover Story," *Art & Understanding Magazine*, December 17, 2020, accessed March 16, 2024, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c3cc8a11aef1d1735f564f7/t/6172f5a3124ceb24aa19df06/1634923943264/Eric+Rhein+Cover+Story+A%26U+Magazine.pdf>.

shared to guide [...] present actions,”²¹ Rhein’s work engages in dialogue with the past, present, *and* future, informing the imaginative potential of queer belonging, transformation, and community building through the ongoing intergenerational dialogue between contemporary communities and the artistic generation lost to AIDS-related complications. Alongside sensitivity and care, Rhein’s artwork honours the depth and complexity of the emotions and veracities related to his own survivorship, including the expansive and deeply felt stages of sorrow. Through the documentation and conservation of such legacies, Rhein’s body of work acknowledges that grief in fact may *never leave*; instead, it may be transformed into a commemorative union between the living and the departed, ultimately, a way to “give homage to our dead, [and] to hold them.”²²

Theoretical Inquiry & Research Questions

While considering and deciphering the past and turning backward is indeed imperative to creating a foundational framework essential in building a future that acknowledges, embraces, and encourages the plurality and multiplicity of lived realities, it should be noted that this thesis’ maneuver toward “past for the purpose of critiquing the present, is propelled by a desire for futurity.”²³ Queerness’s form, according to theorist José Esteban Muñoz, is utopian in nature,²⁴ evading definitive definition through its rapidly evolving and expansive boundaries, emerging at a time when the rigid binary between *heterosexual* and *homosexual* was being academically and socially questioned, and thus, deviated from. This thesis considers systemic forms of “universality,” many of which have rendered queer love *impossible*, and the ways in which

²¹ hooks, *All About Love*, 202.

²² *Ibid.*, 203.

²³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York City: New York University Press, 2009), 30. Additionally, this desire for futurity may manifest both conceptually as well as physically. It is through the concept of orientation, and the *queering* of such, that queer bodies occupy and define space. For more, see pages 27-28, 51-53.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

artists have reinforced that it *does* in fact exist, even within exclusionary heteronormative frameworks; in how queer world-making has provided room for the celebration and investment of queer intimacies and self-determined representations such as in literary autobiographies and artwork; in the temporal complexities of memory and queer world-making as it intersects with the contemporary practice and position of undetectability; and finally, the imaginative potentials of queer futurity (namely, conceived of by long-term survivors such as Rhein) as it relates to the current era of HIV and AIDS since the advent of ARVs (antiretroviral medications).

Divided into three major organizational sections, this thesis will evaluate various discourses related to AIDS-related issues, using Rhein's artwork as insight into the lived realities and conditions of queer affect and connection through the artist's vast collection of self-portraits and photographs taken after his HIV diagnosis. Beginning with "I: Turning Backward and the "Impossibilities" of Queer Love," the first section begins by contextualizing medical and societal conditions of the late 1980s, inquiring into both literary and photographic autobiography as methodology, supported with social theories by authors including Heather Love and Sarah Brophy. Rhein's photographic work as a young artist living with a recent HIV diagnosis is introduced, namely through his breadth of work that expands alongside his HIV status, influenced by a familial lineage that informs Rhein's inclination toward self-documentation. The second section, "II: Mourning, Activism, and the Importance of Proximity" investigates the powers and possibilities of queer love, enlivened through collective manifestations of both mourning and activism, underscoring the importance of vulnerability, social contingency, and community. Rhein's proclivity toward tenderness and remembrance in his photographic body, particularly in his "Leaves" series, underscores the importance of preserving legacies and celebrating those lost to AIDS-related illnesses, defending the collective potential of belonging through unified mourning. Theories of "proper" and "normal"

mourning alongside affective pedagogy is considered amid provisions from theorists such as Douglas Crimp, Deborah B. Gould, bell hooks, Sara Ahmed, and Judith Butler. Closing with “III: Survivorship, *U=U*, and the Utopian Future of Queer World-Making,” this concluding section considers the complications and intersections of queer temporalities, memory, and the possibilities of queer futurity since the fracture of the once linear HIV virus, beginning with the emergence and widespread access of ARVs. Informed by his access to treatment, the legacy of survivorship will be introduced through Rhein’s more recent photographic inquiry into the aging self. The rupture of HIV and AIDS’ perceived linearity will also be discussed and challenged, detailing the pervading barriers that remain even amidst increased social recognition and sensitivity. Finally, the inventive potentials of memory as transformative and resistive modalities will be evaluated, detailing the role of belonging, imagination, and collaboration in the development of queer futures and worlds. This chapter will contend with the junctures of these issues and possibilities with support from theorists Christopher Reed and Christopher Castiglia, Ricky Price, Marika Cifor, and José Esteban Muñoz.

While many of these included texts detail the history of oppression and enduring marginalization experienced by queer individuals, namely gay men, throughout the late twentieth century, they have additionally emphasized the importance of revising what is classified and defined as the *norm*, excluding anyone falling outside hegemonic, heteronormative parameters, stressing the need for the renewal and amendment of currently documented histories, both collective and archival. These texts, some more than others, have underlined that queer love, even within structures that sought to diminish its very presence, thrived *and* flourished, underscoring the realities that have been historically disregarded and overlooked amongst various structures in Western contexts (including institutional, legal, medical, social, and educational). My focus will turn toward the nonmaterial, fantastical, and imagined potentials of a *queer future*, speculating on a prospective world informed

by $U=U$ (Undetectable=Untransmittable), or *undetectability*, as both an era and practice—a realm which may offer radical inclusion, self-affirmation, and solidarity to those who have been pushed to the margins of the social, silenced and wrongfully understood for decades. This illusory queer future is influenced and foundationally dependent upon the hurtful legacies of queer shame and visual sensationalism, but optimistic in bridging and creating a utopian future where inclusivity, love, and compassion may be celebrated and practiced, overriding generationally interwoven threads of guilt and sadness. Rhein’s survival, and specifically his focus on wellness rather than illness, greatly contributes to narratives of HIV-survivorship and resilience; therefore, his artwork’s themes of transcendence may be interpreted as a form of investigating and facilitating healing: physiologically, emotionally, and spiritually.

This thesis will accordingly examine how the position and practice of undetectability may inform rituals that were once implicitly expected or practiced during the height of the AIDS crisis, including mourning and activism, within both collective and individual spheres. Considering temporal shifts and complexities is essential in evaluating what potentials the past holds for the future, enabling adaptation while informing the ethos of the new queer generation. Queer theorists Christopher Reed and Christopher Castiglia address the ever-evolving nature of recollections: “[m]emory is a broader category than history, not only because it allows for the archiving of acts, affects, and attitudes often denied the status of historical record but because it is incomplete, fragmented, affect-saturated, and for these reasons continually open to the imaginative processes of rearticulation, reinvention, and adaptation.”²⁵ Subsequently, then, “[w]hat allows memory to continue producing plenitude in the face of fear (of loss, of disbelief, of disappointment) is precisely

²⁵ Christopher Reed and Christopher Castiglia, *If Memory Serves: Gay Men, AIDS, and the Promise of the Queer Past* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 23.

its *pastness*.²⁶ Aware of the complex contexts and factors that inform the contemporary position of the HIV virus, and namely now, in the era of undetectability, these following questions will be considered throughout the evolution of this text's three chapters, informed by Rhein's photographic and sculptural practice as a bridge between the lived experience and the speculative potentials of this current time: Does mourning still hold the generative power it once did, when dismantling forces of anger were transformed into collective unity that demanded social and political transformation? How may undetectability transcend linear notions of temporality linked with HIV, or further, inform contemporary collective memory? How does undetectability help eternalize the legacies of those lost to AIDS-related complications? What promises does undetectability hold for the future, if any? And finally, how may undetectability embrace and encourage the possibility of queer love, both lived *and* remembered?

²⁶ Reed and Castiglia, *If Memory Serves*, 13.

I Turning Backward and the “Impossibilities” of Queer Love

By turning toward the past and evaluating the historical and social consequences of discrimination, shame, and condemnation, while implementing Heather Love’s discussion on the limitations of social recognition impacted by queer negativity, this chapter attempts to expose the layered, multi-generational histories that have linked queerness with loss. The legacy of queer studies, tainted with grievance much like the term *queer* itself, has underlined its interest in negativity, demonstrating its willingness “to investigate the darker aspects of queer representation and experience[s]”²⁷ of homophobia and exclusion rather than the foundational solidarity intrinsic in the sustenance, development, and speculative potential of queer communities.

Although critics often delineate the link between homosexuality and loss, this section instead will acknowledge the past’s crucial role in the contextualization of the contemporary self, informing the way artists transmit and record their legacies. Rhein’s artistic practice for decades has delved into autobiographical accounts and representation, exploring the promises and potentialities of queer love while addressing the deaths of many loved-ones, partners, and friends within his greater communities. Frequently employing his own body as a central figure, Rhein’s photography and literary excerpts seek to rupture the link between homosexuality and desolation through visual accounts of celebration, care, and queer sensitivity. This chapter will consequently evaluate how long-term survivors, including Rhein, are directly confronting and dismantling these dominant, yet inaccurate and outdated narratives of HIV and illness through self-representation, and how they continue to embrace and acclaim the power *and* presence of queer love.

²⁷ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 2.

Systemic and Historical Framing of HIV and AIDS

Ideas of heteronormative superiority, considered by theorists Monica B. Pearl and Sarah Brophy, permeated cultural representations of queerness in media, effectively tainting queer love stories, relationships, and experiences with implicit and *expected* sadness. These accounts deemed queer love an impossible reality, reinforcing the erroneous notion that to choose a gay lifestyle was to accept a position of social inferiority. Autobiographies written as first-hand testimonials by those diagnosed as HIV positive, or living with AIDS, while evaluating themes of mortality and illness, act as testimonies that seek to reclaim agency and accuracy through self-determined representations of those both dying and mourning the losses of their greater communities. While looking backward is necessary in articulating the ongoing legacies of systemic violence, oppression, and disadvantage experienced by queer and other marginalized populations, it is through “[n]ostalgic longing arising from a temporal disorientation in the present [that] was thus central to the emergence of [a] modern homosexual identity.”²⁸

With the careful curation of such histories and archival materials, institutions such as the NIH (National Institutes of Health) and CDC (Centers for Disease Control) maintained the narrative that “helpless minorities [were] stricken with a new disease [...and] saved by a benevolent apolitical public health system.”²⁹ Many contest this history, claiming that safe-sex education was perceived as politically and morally controversial and subsequently repressed to uphold a model of abstinence and piety across the United States. Systemic impediments, additionally, gate-kept those seeking trial treatments from accessing experimental yet potentially lifesaving drugs at the height of the crisis during the late 1980s into the 1990s, including women, IV-drug users, and People of Colour. These

²⁸ Reed and Castiglia, *If Memory Serves*, 19.

²⁹ Ricky Price, “Viral Memories: The Making of Institutional History and Community Memory in the HIV/AIDS Crisis,” *On Curating* 42 (2019): 232.

systems disadvantaged many, cruelly excluding those who fell outside of these constraints of definition through the encouragement and maintenance of the normative *ideal*: the white, heterosexual, upper middle-class individual. Theorist Judith Butler asks: “[w]hose lives are counted,” and furthermore, “[w]hat makes for a grievable life?”³⁰ Historically reinforced and reproduced conceptualizations of impossibility, death, and failure surrounded homosexual unions, as well as the aforementioned communities, only contributing to their very societal subjugation, perpetuating the ill-treatment of these communities within various overarching and authoritative discourses during the height of the epidemic. Such inquiries expose the contemporary need to critically shatter complacent, inaccurate narratives that speak for these populations, and instead, allow them to establish, recount, and articulate their own histories.

Social and cultural narratives surrounding queer loss during the height of the AIDS crisis in the Global North gained momentum through the distribution of visual and print media, fortifying and securing AIDS with representations of suffering, despair, and hopelessness. Investigated at length by both Paula A. Treichler and Simon Watney, the sensationalized AIDS victim played a key role in scaring the masses into social and moral compliance, upholding the American *ideal* while exposing the confusion and fear intrinsically embedded into the newly circulating four letter abbreviation. Treichler underscores that images and language carry “enormous power to generate meanings,”³¹ further dividing populations, misguiding focus, and accentuating the North American agenda entrenched with a fixed motive to condemn and demonize non-normative partnerships, encounters that ultimately fell outside of the categorial heteronormative familial model.

Theorist Gayle Rubin evaluates the longstanding and deeply saturated history linked with sexuality, highlighting that the “realm of sexuality also has its own internal politics, inequities, and

³⁰ Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 20.

³¹ Treichler, “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse,” 32.

modes of oppression.”³² Within this framework, there exists a hierarchy of sexual practices that still bleed into contemporary, mainstream understandings of desire, sexuality, and pleasure, and to be queer within this framework is therefore considered indulgent and deviant. Rubin explains in “Good Sex vs. Bad Sex” that

sexuality that is ‘good’, ‘normal’, and ‘natural’ should ideally be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive [...] and [should] occur at home [...] Any sex that violates these rules is ‘bad’, ‘abnormal’, or ‘unnatural’. Bad sex may be homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative [...] and may take place in ‘public’.³³

Rubin continues that “[m]odern Western societies appraise sex acts according to a hierarchical system of sexual value,”³⁴ and those who fall out of the category of “good” are hence deemed immoral. This categorisation, thus, disregards the very possibility of love being inherent in any of these connections, overlooking the presence of queer affection and attraction altogether while shunning any form of non-committal or non-reproductive encounter, many of which were seminal in establishing the foundations of gay identity and site-specific community building.³⁵

Images at the height of the crisis translated fear through visual spectacle, embodied representations saturated with suffering, compelling mass viewership to “conceive homosexual desire within a medicalized metaphor of contagion,”³⁶ deliberately associating homosexuality with *repercussion*, engraining queer intimacy with consequence.³⁷ Rhein’s photographic practice fundamentally and explicitly challenges these notions by bridging self-representation with the concept of metaphorical *injury* in two self-portraits, functioning side-by-side as a diptych. What is

³² Gayle S. Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 143.

³³ *Ibid.*, 152.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 151.

³⁵ On the intersections of gay male sexuality and site specificity and mobility, see also Robert Sember, “Resurfacing: Race, AIDS, Sexuality, and the Politics of Mourning,” *Transforming Anthropology* 8 no. 1-2 (1999): 54–76; and Andrew Gorman-Murray, “Intimate mobilities: emotional embodiment and queer migration,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 10 no. 4 (2009): 441–460.

³⁶ Simon Watney, “The Spectacle of AIDS,” *October* 43 (1987): 73.

³⁷ Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, 6.

curious, however, is Rhein's choice to focus solely on the physical body, evading the photographic capture of any form of identification or recognition through the deliberate exclusion of the figure's face. Through Rhein's calculated visual anonymity, he implores audiences to question the effects of identification. If the figure's identity *had* been included, and moreover, contextualized alongside the figure's positive serostatus, would the representation illicit the same manifestations of empathy or compassion in audiences?

Working in close visual dialogue with one another, these two images are evidently self-portraits, however, one only can only concur the figure's identity through the title of both images: *Constellation (self-portrait)* [fig. 1] and *Band-Aid (self-portrait)* [fig. 2] respectively. These silver gelatin prints from 1993 highlight Rhein's body in the foreground, showcasing the organic and uniform speckling of beauty marks rippling across the figure's anterior and posterior torso, a dusting of stars imprinted on rolling valleys of muscle and skin. *Band-Aid* particularly references injury in a universally understood way. Adhered centrally to Rhein's chest, a plaster is placed at the base of his sternum, situated slightly below and between both pectoral muscles. Plasters, utilized for surface-level wounds, cover a rupture in the skin that usually requires no additional medical intervention. Healing within mere days, or in more serious cases, weeks, the injury may not even leave a lasting visual impression in the form of an identifiable scar. While HIV and AIDS require significant medical interventions, medications, and other supports, perhaps this is exactly what the plaster's injury and HIV have in *common*—invisibility, and the ability to remain unseen. A simple metaphor for a viral infection not always visually recognizable, rendered, or physically projected, HIV's invisibility for some, even if "by medical intervention be rendered, inactive—the viral enemy would be forever within."³⁸

³⁸ Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, 108.

Self-Representation, Writing, and Intergenerational Knowledge

The ongoing link between negativity and queerness has been deeply rooted within social conceptualizations of queer love, reinforcing the trope of the *melancholic queer* through generational reproduction. This widespread notion has permeated into social and cultural understandings of queerness, contributing to the focus on what Love describes as injury and damage indistinguishably entrenched with the term in both social and academic inquiry. By analyzing both the corporeal and psychic consequences of negativity associated with queer love, and namely the strengthening of this tie only with the advent of the AIDS crisis in the early 1980s, Love claims there exists an overt dichotomy, a union that is “both abject and exalted,”³⁹ stigmatized yet blatantly romanticized because of its fluidity and non-normative positioning.

Love highlights the significance of *looking backward*, a turn toward the past, when evaluating both historic and contemporary examples of same-sex desire; the past is both necessary to bridge a complete picture and is crucial in evaluating an archived lineage of queer feeling and affect. The “ability to bond affectively with the past is particularly important”⁴⁰—addressing hurtful emotions, including shame and guilt, and allowing them to be transformed into generative modes of “alternative politics.”⁴¹ Alternative politics provide insight through unconventional perspectives, occasionally acting as a motivator to understand one’s “shared abjection,”⁴² exposing hierarchies that simply excluded altogether, spoken for, or deliberately silenced queer populations. Love explains that this enforced shame holds the potential to “bring us together, [however] it is also the case that it can, will, and does tear us apart.”⁴³

³⁹ Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, 2-3.

⁴⁰ Reed and Castiglia, *If Memory Serves*, 22.

⁴¹ Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, 13.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Literature and writing act as powerful tools of self-actualization, modalities where belonging, phantasmic conjectures, and lived realities may be recorded, unbridled, and untethered by convention or judgment. Monica B. Pearl examines that gay literature often followed the narrative of the *coming out* story, an account that “chronicle[d] the emergence of the individual into a gay identity,”⁴⁴ bridging those who were isolated geographically, or by fear and repression, within a larger imagined gay community. During the early years of AIDS, however, communities of men were newly threatened with a viral enemy capable of silencing their voices, and consequently, “the transmission of a gay history and identity was even more crucially dependent on cultural production and consumption.”⁴⁵ Underscoring the historically replicated link between loss, grief, and the gay subject, Pearl details the disproportional link between the gay subject and mourning, suggesting that one’s “anger against the self, or self-destructiveness, is [...] what allows, what becomes, the writing.”⁴⁶ Disentangling the perpetrated trope of the *melancholic queer*, she highlights the danger in language of medical pathology and social *normalcy*, noting its systemically unobtainable position for those in same-sex unions. Instead, she states, “‘normalcy’ for gay men has been in many respects an ongoing experience of mourning.”⁴⁷

Pearl examines how writing can become a form of catharsis and self-determination after being left out of various “forms of universality;”⁴⁸ thus, Rhein’s photography subsequently holds a similar capacity to depict, enliven, and empower narratives of the self through visual accounts of his life alongside lovers, documenting and preserving their emotional and relational significances. In Rhein’s 1992 silver gelatin print, *William—Silhouette (William Weichert, Martha’s Vineyard)* [fig.

⁴⁴ Monica B. Pearl, *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity: The Literature of Loss* (London: Routledge, 2013), 7.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 17. Though Pearl details that “normalcy” for gay men is the ongoing experience of mourning, that does not equate their experiences of mourning as being normal; for more on normalcy and “proper mourning,” see pages 25-27.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

3], Rhein deliberately plays with contrast and shadow, centrally situating the named figure, William, in the image while he holds a translucent checkered sheet in front of himself, the fabric flowing languidly in the gentle wind and wrapping around his right calf. The photograph's sharp shadows translate the time of day with a strong light that delicately illuminates the figure's face while emphasizing small hollow craters that translate as footprints left in the soft, white sand. Intentional or not, the photograph captures William's shadow slightly to the viewer's right, juxtaposing the translation of the figure's nude body while capturing and simultaneously censoring his slender frame. Implicit in the photograph and the title, Rhein's photograph eternalizes a tender moment along the waterside, an affectionate meeting under the hot, summer sun. Is the figure laying the sheet upon the beach, or is he, alongside Rhein, packing to leave?

Firsthand testimonials in writing, such as autobiographies and journals, offer alternative perspectives that highlight lived realities, not shaped or as heavily influenced by media or other societal slants and scripts. These authentic texts provide intimate insights on the realities of the virus, encouraging audiences to question and challenge false narratives that were and are constructed with obvious bias. Written accounts of individuals "living with infection and illness and confronting the possibility of death"⁴⁹ are therefore critical of generalizations and sensationalized narratives that aim to contain *all* lived experiences, evaluating that these accounts overlook and gloss over a multitude of actualities as well as social divergences. Such documents "ask themselves difficult questions about the terms on which memories of the dead are preserved and perpetrated [...and] scrutinize how gender, sexuality, geographical location, race, family structure, friendship, and cultural traditions shape the experiences of grief and the practices of remembrance"⁵⁰ and memorialization. Other texts

⁴⁹ Sarah Brophy, *Witnessing AIDS: Writing, Testimony, and the Work of Mourning* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 2004), 4.

⁵⁰ Brophy, *Witnessing AIDS: Writing, Testimony, and the Work of Mourning*, 10.

are “[c]onfrontational, self-reflexive, and poetic,”⁵¹ turning inward while offering a larger picture that is able to consider the depth and breadth of the destructive implications of the epidemic.

Rhein’s familial lineage is long saturated with activists and writers determined to depict and document a loving reality, filled with potential, hope, and queer belonging. Fondly detailed in his photographic memoir *Lifelines* and other interviews, Rhein warmly recalls childhood trips to New York City to visit his uncle, Lige Clark. A foundational member in the Gay Rights Movement during the formative years of collective gay resistance, Clark and his partner, Jack Nichols, fought alongside countless activists for equality across the United States in a social climate that was intolerant and cold toward same-sex couples and gender diverse individuals. Born and raised in Hindman, Kentucky, Clarke became a prominent and widely known figure during the 1960s and 1970s, exceptionally for founding and writing for the “first national newspaper focused on gay issues” in the United States, fittingly “titled *GAY*.”⁵²

Clark’s untimely death in 1975 shook Rhein, but instilled within him a “sense of possibility, and hope for a future ahead”⁵³ after inheriting a reverence for gay activism and visibility. Possibly “stand[ing] at the beginning of Eric’s creative life [...were blessings] from an elder, from the past, conferring the strength and faith that makes the present possible.”⁵⁴ In much of Rhein’s work, the importance of intergenerational knowledge is dually emphasized between himself, a younger, newly diagnosed individual living alongside illness, and later, as an older *survivor*, an individual who has experienced both the privileges and losses of aging and growing older. In dialogue with the non-static, Rhein’s self-portraits speak as a living archive, simultaneously retracting and expanding with age, detailing the bodily and psychic flux of the human condition.

⁵¹ Brophy, *Witnessing AIDS: Writing, Testimony, and the Work of Mourning*, 10.

⁵² Brown, “Lifelines,” 10.

⁵³ Mark Doty, “On Eric Rhein: Maps and Treasures,” in *Lifelines* (Lexington: Institute 193 Press, 2019), 21.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Rhein gestures toward intergenerational exchange in other artworks with direct references to his loved ones, such as in *Uncle Lige's Sword* (1998) [fig. 4]. A delicate sculpture made of wire, paper, and found objects, this artwork calls upon the history of illness, and more specifically, the pathologizing of blood. Highlighting excerpts from medical textbooks referencing white blood cells, these textual components translate medical facts of an immunocompromised status, describing test processes and the compromise of healthy cells, citing words such as *abnormalities* and *toxic*. Thin wire filaments frame these excerpts and various found objects, structuring the work through a systemization of slender lines that cross and elegantly loop, catching the viewer's meandering eye even when there appears a fractured connection or no obvious link between object and negative space. The curves and organic bends of the filaments, while juxtaposing a square analytical organization, are indeed methodical in nature, linking concepts through supportive accessories.⁵⁵ Rhein describes the lineage and history embedded within the artwork that is a part of a greater series, named "Blood Work":

The pages of medical books, with illustrations of blood samples, inspired me to construct wire structures to support the pages and outline the blood references. This is done reverentially, and found objects were added, suspended within the wire framework. [...] The sword brooch, positioned in the middle of *Uncle Lige's Sword*, belonged to my uncle, so it has his guardian energy.⁵⁶

Clark's death left with Rhein a legacy⁵⁷ that he proudly calls upon in his practice, informing his "studio [which] remains a homage to both the aesthetics and attitudes that defined the East Village [of New York City] in the '80s and '90s, and also to [his] deep ancestral roots in Appalachian Kentucky."⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Needle, "Eric Rhein: Cover Story."

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Doty, "On Eric Rhein: Maps and Treasures," 21.

⁵⁸ Brown, "Lifelines," 9.

Imbued with both wisdom and hope from a previous generation, Rhein's photographic artworks act as authentic testimonies into the first-hand experience of living and *loving* with HIV, rupturing narratives of queer loss, impossibility, and despair. Rhein's photographs capture shared moments with many individuals and has varied "relationships to the men pictured,"⁵⁹ some being friends, lovers, or longer-term partners. While he has documented the progression of his life noting the undulating realities of illness, Rhein also has documented the lives and turbulences of *others*, and while some men are indeed HIV positive, others are not.⁶⁰ Portraying those in close proximity to the virus, Rhein's

images posit an alternative that prioritizes resilience, love, and tenderness in the context of extraordinary circumstances. They marvel in intimacy. They undo the myth that AIDS prevents touching and loving. They honor closeness and communion, over isolation, as a means to survive.⁶¹

Rhein explicitly details this communion and support, a symbiotic and ever-flowing relationship between two individuals, but also between the self and one's own changing body. After having been accepted into a study for protease inhibitors, a medical advancement that shaped and later ruptured the binary of HIV negativity and positivity, it was ostensible that Rhein was in fact taking medication and not a placebo.⁶² Rhein's deteriorating health was soon transformed by a protease inhibitor, Crixivan,⁶³ and he experienced a "rapid recovery due to the effectiveness of the combination therapy in lowering [his] viral load to undetectable—revitalizing the course of [his] life."⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Brown, "Lifelines," 17.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Lester Strong, "Eric Rhein Talks to A&U's Lester Strong About Art as a Means of Transcendence - 'Leaves: A Remembrance'," *Art & Understanding Magazine*, December 2005, accessed March 16, 2024, https://ericrhein.com/articles_051200.htm.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Rhein, "Notes From My Treehouse," 106.

Quickly transformed into a “state of bliss and light,”⁶⁵ Rhein captures two photographs in the context of an apartment, with one image depicting himself in a caretaking position after his health began to stabilize once the efficacy of the medications began to be apparent. Sharing his home and bed with a man named Ken Davis,⁶⁶ Rhein documents the two wading through the throws of HIV while supporting each other in sickness, caring for one another both physically and emotionally. Though these images are saturated with both a gentleness and affection, they are somber, infused with a looming reality of a viral threat and decline for Davis. Rhein recalls,

[i]t was the summer that the protease inhibitors were transforming me into health while his health was declining. He was eventually able to get into a study. At that moment in time, I was helping him keep going until we both got on better footing.⁶⁷

Captured during this liminal period,⁶⁸ Rhein is pictured tending to Davis in the photograph *Lifeline (self-portrait with Ken Davis)* (1996) [fig. 5]. Positioned on a single mattress adorned with plush pillows, the wooden frame appears obviously too narrow to comfortably fit two sleeping bodies. Davis appears peacefully reclined, focusing on the same bandage that Rhein is so delicately tending to. Theorist bell hooks explains that even while in the midst of performing quotidian, mundane tasks, one may experience “a quality of concentration and engagement that lifts the spirit [...simultaneously] recogniz[ing] divine spirit everywhere.”⁶⁹ In line with Rhein’s interest in transcendence and memorialization, this is “especially true when [one] face[s] difficulties.”⁷⁰ Observant and concentrated, Rhein extends care by gingerly preparing an intravenous drip hanging on a metal frame in the left foreground of the image. The transparent plastic bag mirrors the two men sitting side by side, inverting and blurring them, stretching and distorting their frames through the

⁶⁵ Colucci, “The Course of His Life: Memory and Activism in the art of Eric Rhein.”

⁶⁶ Rhein, “Notes From My Treehouse,” 106.

⁶⁷ Colucci, “The Course of His Life: Memory and Activism in the art of Eric Rhein.”

⁶⁸ Rhein, “Notes From My Treehouse,” 106.

⁶⁹ hooks, *All About Love*, 80.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

clear liquid. Deliberately unfocused through the camera's shallow depth of field, the winding tube addresses length of the room, the image coming into focus closer to both men as it passes over and accentuates Davis' lean knees. The IV pole upon which Davis' lifeline hangs would normally be seen within medical environments, clashing with the domestic and tranquil atmosphere of the room; though it is not the image's principal focus, these instruments translate the invasiveness of such practices but additionally their importance, with gravity pushing life-sustaining fluids through into the subject facilitated by a ritual of selflessness, and in Rhein's case, familiarity.

Photographed in the aforementioned room, Rhein captures a solitary Davis sleeping upon the bed's white sheets in *Ken—Sleep (Ken Davis)* (1996) [fig. 6]. The perspective of the image centrally asserts Davis as the emphasis, surrounded at once by multiple pillows, their patterns strikingly ubiquitous. This centrality is additionally paralleled in the image's framing; the afternoon light envelops the borders of the photograph, creating a vignette reinforced by the shadows of the bed's undercarriage and the wall to the right of Davis' head. Rhein photographs Davis in a fetal position laying upon his side, a faint light softly illuminating Davis' skin, accentuating his child-like vulnerability. With one hand curling upward to embrace and support his head upon the pillow, Davis' other arm reaches down, pressed between his two thighs extended at its fullest. Featured on Ken's upper arm wrapping slightly around his deltoid is what appears to be a familiar symbol, recurrent in Rhein's artwork, a leaf, emblematic of renewal and growth. In this position, Ken's bandages and white dressings cover the inside of his upper, inner forearm. However, there is no IV to be seen, encouraging audiences to question: is he in a state of uninterrupted sleep, or resting from the toil and exhaustion from medical treatment? hooks suggests that the sleeping body embodies a profound connection between life and death, bridging concepts of love through rest: “[w]hen the

asleep body, numb and deadened to the world of the senses, awakens, it is a resurrection that reveals to us that love is stronger than death.”⁷¹

⁷¹ hooks, *All About Love*, 219.

II Mourning, Activism, and the Importance of Proximity

Through community action, the AIDS crisis bridged together both activism and mourning, unifying populations confronted with a drastic and sudden shift within both their social and relational landscapes. Mourning became a generative, expressive force that allowed communities to reclaim agency and proclaim their intentions, demonstrating collective power through disruptive solidarity. This intersection held the possibility to connect devastated populations united in anger, yet amongst the suffering, the powers of community flourished, offering sites and possibilities of belonging amidst vast loss. Beginning with literature that reflects upon the theorization of mourning, both “normal” and “proper,” this chapter will then proceed to evaluate the pedagogical possibilities of activism and affect, emphasizing the significance of proximity and how it continues to encourage the promise and possibility of belonging, unity, and queer love.

Mourning and *Normalcy*

In direct dialogue with public activism, art historian Douglas Crimp underscores that collective “mourning rituals [...] have their own political force.”⁷² To some, mourning during the AIDS crisis was seen as a solitary ritual that was “indulgent, sentimental, [and] defeatist,”⁷³ neutral and ambivalent in its individualistic form. Alternatively, theorist Judith Butler positions grief and mourning as a practice that holds the potential to expose to one their relational ties, highlighting “fundamental dependenc[ies] and ethical responsibilit[ies]”⁷⁴ within larger communities. These relations reveal how central the self is within greater social contexts, and additionally, how these

⁷² Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*, 132.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 132-133.

⁷⁴ Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, 22.

relationships directly influence and support one another through contact, engagement, and mutual investment.

Crimp and Butler lay foundational psychoanalytic frameworks to initiate their inquiries into mourning's progression, both introducing Freud's psychological positions from *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*. Suggesting that melancholia is the manifestation of a loss not yet fully processed, Freud posits that when one has successfully finished mourning, the grieving individual will return to the state of normalcy—the assumed position before the experienced loss.⁷⁵ Crimp exposes a fundamental problem with this, stating that the definition of normal has always excluded queer individuals as a way to maintain a morally imbued social order and structural hierarchy. Crimp enlivens readers by suggesting that critical questions must be asked to dismantle this system of definition: who, and what, then constitutes normal?⁷⁶

Butler proposes that successful mourning can manifest itself in ways other than *moving on*, problematizing Freud's theory due to its comparative dependency on the *normative*. Rejecting Freud's return to the state of normal, Butler suggests that mourning and its effects may be experienced and mobilized by individuals when they admit and embrace that they will be forever transformed by a loss they were unable to fully predict, calculate, or foresee.⁷⁷ In Crimp's case, mourning can also act as ritualistic practice that seeks to remember, memorialize, and venerate those lost to AIDS-related complications through generative, collaborative, and militant disruption.⁷⁸ Finally, for both Crimp and Butler, mourning thus may function as a self-reflexive introspection that illustrates one's ties to others within political, familial, and cultural contexts.

⁷⁵ Sigmund Freud, *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia* (London: Penguin Publishing, 2005), (original work published 1918).

⁷⁶ Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*, 134.

⁷⁷ Butler, "Violence, Mourning, Politics," 21.

⁷⁸ Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*, 137.

Theorist Sara Ahmed directly contests the dominant positioning of “normal” in *Queer Phenomenology: Objects, Orientations, Others* (2006). Instead of striving for the normative, Ahmed suggests that queer individuals who have been cruelly excluded in facets of society must embrace their oppositional and diverging perspectives, resulting in a new, queer phenomenology. Embracing alternate modes of orientation and positionality allows for the blossoming of alternative or non-normative connections, acknowledging the timing, placement, and ways in which queer individuals connect to others ultimately is what exposes the very displacement and disorientation that seeks to socially subjugate them.⁷⁹ Discrimination, Ahmed highlights, may additionally take the form of both physical and psychic consequences, “restrict[ing] bodily and social mobility.”⁸⁰ Significantly, she highlights that the social scripts of compulsory heteronormativity prohibits one’s body to move freely throughout the world:

[s]exual orientation involves bodies that leak into worlds; it involves a way of orientating the body towards and away from others, which affects how one can enter different kinds of social spaces (which presumes certain bodies, certain directions, certain ways of loving and living), even if it does not lead bodies to the same places. To make a simple but important point: orientations affect what it is that bodies can do.⁸¹

It is therefore evident that these social boundaries are not always noticeable or overt but are indeed highly calculated and deliberate in the restriction of queer bodies, pleasures, and intimacies.

Proximity and Affective Pedagogies

The importance of proximity, then, must be emphasized in the formation of any type of intimacy, sexual or otherwise. Ahmed uses the metaphor of skin when speaking of such social and

⁷⁹ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

⁸⁰ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press; New York: Routledge, 2004), 154.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 145.

emotional *impressions*, a term for external influences that guide and impact an individual through relational contingency. These are the traces of others within us, collected through experience, held closely within us in memory and externalized through gesture, positionality, and orientation. Ahmed states that “[t]he skin of the social might be affected by the comings and goings of different bodies, creating new lines and textures”⁸² with every new encounter. The timing of these connections do matter in the way they may shape or influence someone, and such impressions are “dependent on past histories”⁸³ within a “world made up of others.”⁸⁴ She suggests that this *withness* is directly touched by nearness and immediacy, two key elements that influence “our bodies, our gestures, [and] our turns of phrase.”⁸⁵ In *withness*, one imitates the other through *likeness*, replicating forms of the other through emulation and projection. These connections are, however, temporally limited because of the inevitability of the human condition; they may come and go, evolve and dissolve, but their impressions remain eternal: consequently, others may “exist within me and apart from me at the same time.”⁸⁶

Proximity holds enormous potential to connect individuals with others singularly, but additionally within greater collectives of unified movement or intention. Theorist Deborah B. Gould outlines ACT UP’s activist initiatives focused on educational outreach, generating social momentum to educate the public while simultaneously attempting to address indifference in the United States surrounding the national response to HIV and AIDS. Strategically amassing loyal and committed community involvement through the use of emotion, ACT UP encouraged responses that were natural to one’s personhood, illuminated with social emotions such as compassion.⁸⁷ We are

⁸² Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 9.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸⁴ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 145.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Kathleen Woodward, “Chapter 3: Calculating Compassion,” in *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*, edited by Lauren Berlant (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2004).

therefore relationally connected to a greater group or entity through feelings of care, tenderness, and sympathy, articulated through our ability to perceive and interpret the emotions of others, grounded in themes and experiences of universality—emotions such as loss, love, suffering, and joy. By employing anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s “a vocabulary of sentiment,”⁸⁸ Gould elaborates that emotional aspects such as sentimentality and acts of understanding became disruptive forces of empathy, “mobiliz[ing] affective states [...] that mesh[ed] with [both] the movement’s political objectives and tactics.”⁸⁹

Within the context of this political activism, organizations such as ACT UP as well as offshoots “illuminated, embodied, augmented, and extended the newly emerging emotional habitus”⁹⁰ beyond just *feeling*, explicitly coupling emotions to provocative and militant street activism. This approach, as Gould mentions, was crucial in establishing a frontal force that aimed to disrupt the dissemination of misinformation, fueling the need for AIDS-related research and awareness including comprehensive sexual education. Strengthened by the sheer numbers of involvement, members acknowledged the breadth and depth of the profoundly affective emotional traumas experienced by thousands, recognizing that the cultural and social landscape “was an architecture of a population anticipating impermanence [and] death.”⁹¹ ACT UP called upon this collective anger and grief, converting negative emotions into empowered energies of collective unity that fought to unsettle national narratives surrounding a virus that only perpetrated stigmatizing representations of gay shame.⁹² For many artists, “language itself [became] a weapon, a tool, and a

⁸⁸ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 449.

⁸⁹ Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 213.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁹¹ Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*, 31.

⁹² Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight against AIDS*, 214.

technology and the act of imagination [became] a violent act.”⁹³ The imagined “violence generated by HIV+ bodies” accordingly transformed “the AIDS-stricken body into a symbol”⁹⁴ of agency, postmodern politics, and resistance.

Through what Gould outlines as *affective pedagogy*,⁹⁵ ACT UP was able to marshal “grief, tethered it to anger, and linked both sentiments to confrontational AIDS activism,”⁹⁶ affording immediacy and directly challenging societal and political avoidance. Encouraging an authenticity in their participants, the organization embraced the unbridled expression of *feeling* through generative and therapeutic engagement while acknowledging the plurality of individuals unified within their spheres of activist outreach. Permeating into the public and individual realm, Mark Doty recollects on how emotion work and vulnerability were employed during the height of the crisis, shifting both individual and national responses to the AIDS crisis:

[w]e were offered narratives of abandonment, neglect, sin, and suffering, and we replaced them with support, service, the joy and sorrow of standing together in a deep communal work founded in love. We could not end the suffering, but we could surround it; we could circle our own bodies around the sick and protect them as much as we could.⁹⁷

Allowing genuine passion to illuminate political and social direction, ACT UP and other initiatives thrived due to their “nonstrategic and unpremeditated”⁹⁸ approach; rooted in self-love and respect, these movements helped ease and address social fears of isolation and alienation by forming a collective body amalgamated in purpose and drive through the eliciting of greater passion, allowing

⁹³ Judith Halberstam, “Imagined Violence/Queer Violence: Representation, Rage, and Resistance,” *Social Text*, no. 37 (1993): 193.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight against AIDS*, 215.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁹⁷ Doty, “On Eric Rhein: Maps and Treasures,” 24.

⁹⁸ Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight against AIDS*, 215.

the extension of oneself “to others that [made] healing possible,”⁹⁹ generating communal well-being and strength through numbers.

Remembrance and Queer Belonging

Rhein’s photographic artwork approaches mourning as a *living* entity, one that is ongoing and profoundly personal, able to change and deepen through time and acts of remembrance. In his work, quiet contemplation is a foundational aspect of activism, differing from the combative and confrontational legacies utilized by mourners aforementioned by Crimp.¹⁰⁰ The convergence of mourning and activism is exceptionally present in Rhein’s ongoing series “Leaves,” beginning in 1996. Reciting the conception of the project, Rhein explains that the formation of the series began after protease inhibitors began lowering his viral load, restoring his health and preventing the HIV virus from multiplying.¹⁰¹ Struck by a profound new sense of clarity and health, the series’ fruition occurred while Rhein attended his first artist residency post-ARVs at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire.¹⁰² He reminisces,

One beautiful autumn day I was out walking. The New England foliage in all its fall colors surrounded me, and I was experiencing a sense of rebirth, feeling profoundly grateful for my returning health. As I walked, I started to pick up fallen leaves. I sensed the spirit of friends around me, people who were no longer in their bodies because they hadn’t survived the epidemic. That’s when the inspiration of drawing leaves with wire, each one commemorating a friend who had died of AIDS, came to me. I wasn’t looking for this project—it found me.¹⁰³

Having amassed over three hundred individual portraits,¹⁰⁴ each artwork in Rhein’s “Leaves” series is an example of his interest and dedication to the eternalization of the lost generation, demonstrating

⁹⁹ hooks, *All About Love*, 217.

¹⁰⁰ Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*, 131, 137.

¹⁰¹ Needle, “Eric Rhein: Cover Story.”

¹⁰² Strong, “Eric Rhein Talks to A&U’s Lester Strong About Art as a Means of Transcendence.”

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Needle, “Eric Rhein: Cover Story.”

the significance of commemoration and the transferal of intergenerational knowledge, intent on informing current generations of the toll and danger of misinformation while detailing individual traits of each person he has loved who has died from AIDS-related complications. Tending carefully to the malleability of the wire, Rhein translates the small fragments and turns of the natural forms, rendering and imbuing each leaf with an organic, breathing essence. Wire as the predominant medium came naturally as the defining material for “Leaves,” and since the conception of the series, remains one of Rhein’s primary tools.¹⁰⁵ Pliant in its reactionary and slight form, each portrait is “mounted against plain white paper, so that the real shadow of the leaf becomes part of the effect of the work.”¹⁰⁶ The shadow evolves to represent the suspended depth and spiritual energy surrounding the leaf, capable of trembling at any moment, emphasizing the duality of stillness and reactionary movement that may be created by even the slightest external force. This inference, then, spotlights the legacies’ continued contextualization and placement within contemporary viewership, space, and memory.

Located on a re-forested farm, the MacDowell Colony was surrounded with regeneration and renewal, evidence of the cyclical and symbiotic processes of life alongside decay. In alignment with Rhein’s ethos on spirituality, “Leaves” encourages audiences to consider forms of reincarnation, restoration, and transcendence, informing current generations of the enduring and lasting relationship between the living and the dead. Rhein details that the individuals he has chosen to eternalize physically remain a part of him as he “give[s] form to their continued presence.”¹⁰⁷ Through egalitarian construction, Rhein ensures his portraits within “Leaves” do not emphasize or call

¹⁰⁵ Needle, “Eric Rhein: Cover Story.”

¹⁰⁶ Brass, “Eric Rhein: AIDS and the Hummingbird’s Warrior.”

¹⁰⁷ Needle, “Eric Rhein: Cover Story.”

attention to individuals who were socially prominent or vastly recognized;¹⁰⁸ instead, each leaf depicts the chosen individual equally, free from any visible remnants of class, hierarchy, or societal distinction.

In his silver gelatin print titled *Kinsmen (Self-Portrait, MacDowell Colony)* [fig. 7], Rhein photographs himself in the nude, centrally situated in the foreground of the frame. This image was created in 1996, a year which holds considerable value to Rhein as both the year of the conception of his series “Leaves” as well as his physical rehabilitation. Standing in front of a salon-style collection of wire portraits, Rhein gazes directly at the camera, his body language signaling a legible stability and sureness as he poses alongside several selections from the vast series. If one were to collect and show the hundreds of portraits created since the series’ conception, the grouping would be enormous if “assembled in one place.”¹⁰⁹ Within the groupings, however, there is significant curatorial intention, extending beyond the presumed relational ties between the individual portraits. Paul Michael Brown expands,

[w]hen shown in a large grouping, notions of collective response and mourning as a communal responsibility and action take precedence. Shown in smaller groups or individually, the leaves reference personal histories and relationships between people affected, and emphasize an individual, human narrative over numbers, statistics, and trends. Both perspectives are necessary for addressing the history and current reality of HIV and AIDS. The work is ongoing and emphasizes the massive human cost of the crisis—and the fact that it continues today.¹¹⁰

Included in Rhein’s 2019 retrospective publication and exhibition catalogue, *Lifelines, Frank the Visionkeeper (Frank Moore, 1956-2002)* (2013) [fig. 8] is a wire portrait accentuating the series’ uncompleted and ever-evolving state, noting the individual ties to his own life while honouring the subject’s evolving relational impacts. Rhein acknowledges that even with access to medications and

¹⁰⁸ Colucci, “The Course of His Life: Memory and Activism in the art of Eric Rhein.”

¹⁰⁹ Brown, “Lifelines,” 12.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

pharmaceutical advancements rendering HIV a chronic life-long illness, death is still a very tangible possibility. “Leaves” encourages audiences to reflect on the systemic barriers that contribute to difficult or restricted access, including factors such as medical insurance or coverage, socioeconomic background, race, gender, and location, stressing that treatment options remain limited for certain populations even with epidemiological and pharmaceutical advancements. Through this, Rhein engages audiences to fundamentally question their own understanding of one’s temporal existence, as well as the external conditions which may influence one’s own earthly placement and eventual mortality.

Fragile and delicate, yet determinate and individual, Rhein’s symbolic portraits capture the essence of a fully actualized person, an individual comprised of rich histories and numerous ongoing relations, incarnated through memories and the engagement of those still living. Rhein’s work elegantly and metaphorically reflects upon life and death, and therefore, “[i]t is apparent here we are all like leaves: individual, temporary in existence, worthy of notice, and yet part of a great whole.”¹¹¹ Entwined to community through our vulnerable form, Butler considers the powers of loss and bodily integrity, suggesting a (re)imagining of an inclusive society, stating that this may be achieved through critical frameworks of agency, evaluation, and disruption.¹¹² To begin, one must concede to the complexity, perpetuation, and intersection of the aforementioned barriers that prohibit individuals living with HIV and AIDS from accessing equal social, cultural, and institutional treatment. Engaging with this reality, Rhein deliberately creates work with the power of loss in mind, underscoring that we are “constituted by our relations but dispossessed by them as well.”¹¹³ Discussed in “Notes From My Treehouse” in *Lifelines*, Rhein reveals an predominant drive for his

¹¹¹ Brass, “Eric Rhein: AIDS and the Hummingbird’s Warrior.”

¹¹² Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, 22.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 24.

artwork, explaining that “[i]f the names of those who died of complications from AIDS aren’t spoken, their stories told, they’ll be forgotten.”¹¹⁴ Documenting the shared “overwhelming experience[s] will ensure knowledge that we were here and our struggle mattered,”¹¹⁵ stipulating the transformative powers of loss and the potentials of a collective imagination—one that is informed, grounded, and foundationally structured through a united and resilient queer force.

Through the contextualization of one’s ties to others, grief underscores that it is through these connections that we are bound to the other, consciously or *not*. Butler suggests that mourning “furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties”¹¹⁶ and their surrounding implications. In grief, one considers not only the individual being mourned, but also one’s relationship to their own bodily exposure and individuality; it is through this powerful self-reflexivity that “interrupt[s] the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control.”¹¹⁷ Consequently, it is through the feeling of loss that the notion of “we,” according to Butler, is comprised; we are unified in our grief, mourning, and vulnerability. One’s vulnerability, however, is attached to the fact that we, by virtue of our corporeal bodies, are socially and politically constituted beings.¹¹⁸ As individuals, we are entities within greater social systems, “attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments [...and also] at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure.”¹¹⁹ Loss, finally, enlivens and underscores that while we are autonomous, self-determined individual beings, we are also composed of our

¹¹⁴ Rhein, “Notes From My Treehouse,” 100.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, 22.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

environmental, political, and social ties; Butler ends with a poignant, yet simple reflection: “[I]et’s face it. We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something.”¹²⁰

Social Contingencies and *Queer Feelings*

Developing from Butler’s position on the importance of social contingency, Ahmed considers the convergence of love, desire, and affect in connection with mourning, affirming that loss indeed holds profound interconnected meaning to the evolution, remembrance, and continuation of *life* for those left to remember. Ahmed highlights the significance of mourning for queer communities, stating that the grief that one might carry after a loved one’s passing need not always be ruminating, solitary, or sorrowful. Proposing a queer politics of mourning instead “needs to allow others, those whose losses are not recognized by the nation, to have the space and time to grieve, rather than grieving for those others, or even asking ‘the nation’ to grieve for them.”¹²¹ Furthermore, loss may be a conduit which allows for old impressions to speak or change as they relate to the individual’s current or newly (re)surfacing needs, (re)emerging desires, or (re)imagined recollections.¹²² Ahmed states that impressions continue to have merit and deeply rooted meaning for the individual still living, and

[a]lthough the other may not be alive to create new impressions, the impressions move as I move: the new slant provided by a conversation, when I hear something I did not know; the flickering of an image through the passage of time, as an image that is both your image, and my image of you. To grieve for others is to keep their impressions alive in the midst of their death.¹²³

The ongoing work of mourning and remembering, then, exemplifies that even in death, memory holds the potential and capacity to keep “alive the memories of those who have gone, provide

¹²⁰ Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, 23.

¹²¹ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 161.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 160.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

care for those who are grieving, and allow the impressions of others to touch the surface of queer communities,”¹²⁴ both speculative and lived.

Rhein’s work unequivocally investigates the temporal relationship between life and death, as well as the transitory relationship of undulating health in relation to illness and transformation. In his artwork *Hummingbird 33—Flying East* (2018) [fig. 9], Rhein translates the outline of a hummingbird, rendered delicately as if to preserve all detail of the small bird’s wings, head, and stabilizing tail. Though the representation is in fact stationary due to its adherence to paper, Rhein consciously captures the flight-like essence of the creature, effectively conveying a sense of slight movement, agility, and groundlessness. The hummingbird, as detailed in Rhein’s writing, is a reminder of the intergenerational familial response and compassion he received as a person living with HIV, highlighting that his mother’s hummingbird feeder nurtured “these seemingly delicate yet resilient creatures, as she’s done with [Rhein] throughout [his] history of living with HIV.”¹²⁵ Saturated with “imagery, specifically chosen for [...] rich metaphorical meanings,”¹²⁶ the bird’s body weight of twenty-one grams is noteworthy because it coincides with the same weight that “the human body is believed to lose immediately after death.”¹²⁷ Embedded within its delicate outline, the hummingbird carries substantial allegorical weight, embodying a reminder of one’s temporality while simultaneously acting as a visual metaphor for one’s return to a metaphysical *weightlessness*, a reduction to pure essence through the subsequent disconnect with one’s physical and earth-bound body.

It is in mourning that one may fully conceptualize the vastness and depth of both the human condition and relationality; therefore, intimately linked with mourning must then be the

¹²⁴ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 161.

¹²⁵ Rhein, “Notes From My Treehouse,” 97.

¹²⁶ Colucci, “The Course of His Life: Memory and Activism in the art of Eric Rhein.”

¹²⁷ Ibid.

act of *loving*. Theorist bell hooks evaluates the interdependent relationship between death and loving, highlighting that loss is a necessary component of life, universal in its unavoidable eventuality. hooks details that “grief is a burning of the heart, an intense heat that gives [one] solace and release” and is most “unrelenting when individuals are not reconciled to the reality of loss.”¹²⁸ Emphasizing that love holds enormous potential to unfold and deconstruct internalized layers of guilt, death, therefore, can empower individuals to “live fully and die well.”¹²⁹ hooks explains that love, in its honest form, knows no shame, underscoring that the act of loving requires openness, embracing the fullest spectrum of human existence and emotionality; “[t]o be loving is to be open to grief, to be touched by sorrow, even sorrow that is unending [...and the] way we grieve is informed by whether we know love.”¹³⁰ The act of mourning, then, is an expression of commitment, investment, and mutual connection, a “form of communication and communion”¹³¹ that allows and facilitates transformation and transcendence of the self through virtue of the other.

Rhein investigates the relationship between lovers at the height of a destructive epidemic, surrounded at once by affection and loss. Photographically eternalizing the conditions of empathy and sensitivity shared together in a precarious time, he captures quiet and poignant moments of reflection with those close with him. With life balancing thinly, Rhein’s portraits include intimate scenes with past lovers and close friends captured throughout the mid-1990s. These photographs vary in location, taken in spaces such as private bedrooms or in outdoor locations saturated with significance to both artist and subject, each frame embedded with a tender encounter. *River (Self-Portrait with Russell Sharon, Delaware Water Gap)* (1994) [fig. 10] depicts two men, Russell

¹²⁸ hooks, *All About Love*, 201.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 197.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 200-201.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

Sharon and Rhein himself, wading through waist-high water. The image depicts the two holding hands in the centre of the photograph, bordered by the blurred branches of overgrown foliage, a willow peeking through the boundaries of the frame as seen in the left foreground. Rhein captures a moment of intimacy not only through physical contact but also through an unspoken, yet jovial, exchange: Sharon is pictured laughing as Rhein cautiously treads into the river, likely focusing on his footing in the flowing stream. The onset of the HIV and AIDS epidemic brought with it a fear of contact, often isolating those in close proximity to the virus, “[y]et, human touch is a vital component of existence.”¹³² Taken in 1994, seven years after his HIV diagnosis, Rhein demystifies the HIV positive body by claiming it to be an agent capable of loving and connection, surpassing and challenging disseminated representations of sickness, feebleness, and exposure.

Through the honouring of loss, it becomes evident that the experience of grief intensely relies upon the foundation of love which connects the mourner with the mourned. Ahmed details that “grief is not simply about what is ‘outside’ being ‘taken in’,” and therefore, for “the object to be lost, *it must already have existed within the subject*.”¹³³ It is imperative to identify the importance of queer bonds, acknowledging the subjugation experienced within these relationships but also the significance of solidarity and shared investment present within chosen connections. *Queer feelings*, conscious of the many hurdles and obstacles enforced to restrict various modes of mobility, “embrace a sense of discomfort, a lack of ease with the available scripts for living and loving, along with an excitement in the face of the uncertainty of where the discomfort may take [them].”¹³⁴ Queer communions, Ahmed contends, must be accepted as lives worthy of remembering, and moreover, recognized as lives more generally to be grieved fully.¹³⁵ Loss, concludingly, “implies the

¹³² Malynnda A. Johnson, *HIV on TV: Popular Culture's Epidemic* (Washington: Lexington Books, 2018), 93.

¹³³ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 160.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 156.

acknowledgement of the desirability of what was once had: one may have [had] to love in order to lose.”¹³⁶

Photographing himself and Russell Sharon in *Veil 2 (self-portrait with Russell Sharon, Hudson Valley)* (1994) [fig. 11], Rhein captures a quiet, contemplative moment between himself and Sharon. Rhein’s body faces away from the camera in the center of the photograph, acknowledging the space of the large concrete, bunker-like room. Large slabs line the parameter of the impermeable space, strikingly contrasting the warm softness of the textile-draped bed. A translucent veil, shroud-like in its white, flowing state, cocoons the two figures, offering a net of protection and dividing the otherwise cold, hard interior. Rhein sits upright, his head bowed slightly down toward the ground, his body language translating a pensive moment of reflection as Sharon lays serenely without overt visual discomfort or perhaps even consciousness. Is Rhein meditatively, or preemptively, contemplating the progression of his or Sharon’s physical deterioration? Or, instead, is he simply basking in this quietly shared moment? hooks concludes that the mourning heart shares intimate details of the dead and dying, who they were and who they continue to be in both recollection and memory.¹³⁷ Therefore, one need not contain grief when instead it may be used as a manifestation, meditation, or intensification of one’s love for those who have passed and for those who in fact remain; “[d]eath becomes, then, not an end to life but a part of living.”¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 156.

¹³⁷ hooks, *All About Love*, 201.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 197.

III Survivorship, U=U, and the Utopian Future of Queer World-Making

The introduction of ARVs (antiretroviral therapies) has not only shifted the way HIV and AIDS are understood within medical spheres, but also within the realms of the social, influencing artistic contextualization and creation through this convergence. Turning toward the fantastical and imaginative capacities of a greater, inclusive queer future, this section will evaluate the potentials of U=U, referred to as *undetectability*, as it relates to and may inform queer community building alongside HIV survivorship. Fragmenting the once expected trajectory of HIV and AIDS, ARVs impact the progression, healing, and understanding of oneself within the context of physical longevity, rupturing historical notions of life expectancy that were inextricably linked with premature death. Ruminating on this exact consideration, Rhein details in a passage from *Lifelines*:

AIDS Survival Syndrome, with its physical, emotional, and financial realities, isn't lost on me. A cellular memory of illness and grief accompanies survivorship, along with bandages holding lives together. We've lived through war.¹³⁹

Beginning with the introduction of HIV and AIDS-related archiving and the curatorial positionality of undetectability in Rhein's body of artwork and literary musings, this section will delve into the significance of memory, both individual and collective, and its divergence from institutionally recorded or archived histories, examining the imaginative powers of an informed queer future, utopian in nature through its inventive and vast speculation. The following questions will guide this chapter's theoretical inquiry: How may this pharmaceutical rupture enliven queer belonging and influence HIV survivorship, namely when a once life-threatening virus has now instead been rendered chronic and medically manageable? How may

¹³⁹ Rhein, "Notes From My Treehouse," 99.

undetectability complicate linear notions of temporal progression through the institutional recognition of memories over histories? How may loss be transformed into a generative force of collectivity in the age of undetectability? And finally, how may the power of collective memory, as it intersects with undetectability, provide a foundational template for future communities to build a more resilient, unified, inclusive, and utopian future?

Undetectable = Untransmittable

Theorist Marika Cifor details that undetectability in the ongoing conversation surrounding HIV and AIDS is a relatively new term in the understanding of an individual's serostatus.

Expanding from simply *positive* or *negative*, this intermediate state is achieved when an individual who had previously been diagnosed with HIV gains access to medications that suppress the viral load of HIV in their blood. Through consistent use, viral loads decrease to a point where they lower so significantly that the HIV virus becomes *undetectable*. While undetectable, the individual is also *untransmittable*, meaning the virus is unable to be transferred from individual to individual, and is commonly abbreviated as $U=U$. This “troubles the established binary of HIV-positivity or negativity,”¹⁴⁰ propelling conceptualizations surrounding individuals who are undetectable and framing those who have access to medications as more responsible due to their bodies “hold[ing] the promise of halting the virus.”¹⁴¹ This perspective, however, overlooks and minimizes innumerable realities; Cifor emphasizes the cruciality in acknowledging impediments such as “race, gender, sexuality, and socio-economic disparities curtail[ing] access to undetectability”¹⁴² on both North American and global scales.

¹⁴⁰ Marika Cifor, “Status = Undetectable: Curating for the Present and Future of AIDS,” *On Curating*, no. 42 (2019): 177.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

Rhein additionally acknowledges the social and cultural inequalities within systems of access that prevent many individuals from seeking or gaining treatment, namely within his ancestral state of Kentucky.¹⁴³ Even with such advancements in pharmaceutical medications, factors such as “concentrated poverty, unequal access to care, insufficient federal funding, lack of adequate sex education, HIV criminalization, squeamishness about sexuality, and rampant stigmatization of those with HIV [...] ensure that new infections and preventable deaths will continue.”¹⁴⁴ Aware of these various elements, Rhein details the privilege inherent in pharmaceutical access and hopes his own work as a living archive will enliven the stories of those lost to AIDS-related complications both before and after the introduction of ARVs. He explains,

[t]he part of my art relating to AIDS is my contribution to AIDS activism. It's a way of dealing with loss and continuation, a way of carrying on and continuing an experience with people I've known who are no longer physically present, of carrying on and continuing with myself as a changed person.¹⁴⁵

Attentive to this, Rhein admits the shift in societal behavior toward those living proximate to HIV and AIDS. Meditating upon his own survivorship, Rhein’s practice and body of work challenge the expected temporal linearity of aging, defying odds alongside his physical renewal and artistic development.

Gaining momentum as a curatorial positionality, Cifor suggests that the concept of undetectability has particularly been a recent point of departure for curators, museums, and institutions to further contextualize the historicization of HIV and AIDS-related archives.¹⁴⁶ In considering the erosion of the historically understood trajectory of HIV and AIDS, the practice

¹⁴³ Brown, “Lifelines,” 9.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 13. For more on HIV criminalization, see relevant forthcoming publication: Alexander McClelland, *Criminalized Lives: HIV and Legal Violence* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2024).

¹⁴⁵ Strong, “Eric Rhein Talks to A&U's Lester Strong About Art as a Means of Transcendence.”

¹⁴⁶ Cifor, “Status = Undetectable: Curating for the Present and Future of AIDS,” 177.

of undetectability “shapes current [...] policies, and the politics of HIV as well as engagements with the [...] past.”¹⁴⁷ Not only does this hold significant possibility for the future of HIV and AIDS-related curation, but it also holds the power to dismantle the “temporal progression from past through present into future,”¹⁴⁸ admitting to and embracing the complexities that contemporary biomedical discourses have offered, and in doing so, severing social perceptions of time and *queering* it in the process.¹⁴⁹

Theorist Ricky Price, however, warns that in consuming institutionally projected histories, it is essential to evaluate the relationship between the establishment, the speaker, and ultimately the audience; these associations are never neutral, and “[t]he creation of collective memories requires a shared sense of reality to be received.”¹⁵⁰ Discrepancies or emphases in narratives, institutionalized memories, archived materials, or even historiographic preservations may expose certain agendas or intentions behind their origins. It is through this criticality that Price calls for the consideration of *collective memory* in the ongoing historicization and contextualization of HIV and AIDS. Specifically, Price outlines his concern with biology’s intersection with memory, as well as both *metaphorical* and *literal* virology, with metaphorical virology particularly animating the way individuals and collectives conceptualize, remember, and transmit histories.¹⁵¹

Collective memory focuses on three major categories outlined by Price: repetition, context, and surviving change.¹⁵² These requisites allow the brain’s ability to construct “long-term memories [...] creat[ing] collective memories over generations,”¹⁵³ allowing for cohesive

¹⁴⁷ Cifor, “Status = Undetectable: Curating for the Present and Future of AIDS,” 177.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹⁴⁹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 22.

¹⁵⁰ Price, “Viral Memories,” 233.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 232.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 233.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

and thoughtfully considered narratives to flourish. Consequently, there is great importance in “[o]pening an intergenerational dialogue about [...HIV and AIDS...] between long-term survivors and younger generations of activists, [and] Rhein’s work raises the possibility of art as a living, evolving archive”¹⁵⁴ capable of such. Viewing his body of work as a living entity, Rhein describes:

Art is really the experience of life, and the artwork is an artifact from these experiences. I think of art as an indication of that experience, and I continue layering and creating, [and] re-having a dialogue with it.¹⁵⁵

The sharing of collective histories is therefore made possible by a unified remembering, paving the ground for inclusive and representative narratives that embrace those who have been historically excluded, bringing together communities through the transcendence of both time and geographic place. Transferring memories begins by acknowledging the names of those who have passed, holding sacred days of commemoration, and applauding the legacies of past generations,¹⁵⁶ as well as supporting and amplifying the voices of those who have, live proximate to, and continue to live with HIV and AIDS.

Rhein’s artwork, *Come of Age* (1998) [fig. 12], evaluated in the context of survivorship, considers the impact of undetectability on the progression of his life. Situated centrally in the work is the found object of a butterfly, comprised of swirling clusters that join and form the insect’s fragile and outstretched wings. The structural formation of the object is not dissimilar to Rhein’s own use of wire as seen in his “Leaves” series or in other sculptural works, and could easily be mistaken for a design of his own. Placed upon a yellowed sheet of paper, the page appears torn out of its bindings, emblematic of the evolving and transitional state of the insect. A

¹⁵⁴ Colucci, “The Course of His Life: Memory and Activism in the art of Eric Rhein.”

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Price, “Viral Memories,” 233.

symbol of renewal and self-actualization, the butterfly operates as a motif capable of transformation—the metamorphosis of the self—facilitated by the invention of ARVs and sustained externally by medical, social, and relational supports. Deliberately utilizing the shadow cast from the object as a symbol of groundlessness and suspension, the butterfly directionally faces upward, translating its orientation, and thus, ascension; created in 1998, two years after Rhein’s regenerative experience with ARVs, one cannot help but contextualize this work as Rhein’s second *coming of age*, and consequently, his second chance at life.

Memories versus Histories, Queer World-Making

In the evaluation of collective memory as it coincides with the institutionalized archiving of HIV and AIDS related materials and practices, it is necessary to differentiate between *memories* versus *histories* and the instrumentalization of each. Queer theorists Christopher Reed and Christopher Castiglia clarify this distinction; to value memories over histories offers alternative and marginal narratives to the normative scripts that historically spoke for the ostracized, condemning those who fell outside, neatly, or not, of the *ideal*. Memories make room for the personal rather than reciting a narrow agenda that prioritizes power, privilege, or hegemony. Calling upon the spirit of generative disruption of the Gay Rights Movement of the late 1960s, Reed and Castiglia explain that “the inventive and idealistic operations of memory [...] use recollections of exercises of freedom pioneered by previous gay generations to create a collective connection with the past that enables us as we transform the present.”¹⁵⁷ Both authors reiterate the transformational modality of intergenerational knowledge as it informs, unites, and may inspire current and future generations.

¹⁵⁷ Reed and Castiglia, *If Memory Serves*, 10.

Underscoring the prevalence of memory in relation to current realities as well as the collective production and conception of an imaginative idealistic future, Reed and Castiglia posit that memories offer techniques and perspectives that dismantle the historically perpetuated accounts of loss often imposed upon gay communities before, and during, the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. They state,

[m]emories enable more than survival; they are imaginative ways to disrupt and transform conditions that make survival necessary. Like utopias, memories craft a world that stands as a counterreality to the lacking or painful present, creating narratives of ‘the past’ so as to challenge the inevitability of dominant constructions of ‘reality.’¹⁵⁸

Through these innovative, fantastical visions, memory therefore can provide and guide criticality in the present, allowing individuals to question “conditions and imagine other social arrangements that transform ‘reality’ into a more livable (relation to) time and place.”¹⁵⁹

Memory, then, may become an act of resistance due to its originative and resourceful nature.¹⁶⁰ These conjectures hold the ability to unite populations across vast spaces, both conceptual and physical, through fantastical, idealistic conceptualizations. Notably, however, Reed and Castiglia accentuate that such ephemeral creative endeavors, however, are “not pernicious but rather is the way humans order the world to achieve a sense of coherence and meaning,”¹⁶¹ bridging past and contemporary discourses into a unified dialogue. Castiglia and Reed suggest that collective

[...] memories are not retrievals of an archived past but something more imaginative and more driven by present needs. It’s not that memories have *no* relation to experience—they may, but they may not, or may do so only partially. It is the creative aspect of memory that makes it valuable as a socially transformative medium.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁸ Reed and Castiglia, *If Memory Serves*, 12.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

Rhein's artwork directly investigates the importance of record keeping, archiving, and the organization of memory. Through the accumulation of both photographic and material investigations into personhood, identity, and relationality, Rhein's photographs and written work provide and maintain a bridge between the living and the departed, created with the intention for readers to "recognize themselves and call to their own lives with a sense of connection."¹⁶³ Acknowledging that audiences arrive from vast a plethora of circumstances and subjectivities, those who engage "may already feel a kinship to recordkeeping, activism, and healing—and for others these may be newly affirmed."¹⁶⁴

Rhein's self-portrait titled *Bay (self-portrait, Fire Island)* [fig. 13] is a silver gelatin print created in 2010. Overlooking a vast body of water, a faint line intersects with Rhein's torso, cutting the image in half while offering a horizontal vantage point, signaling stable land a few kilometers away. The sky is an expansive pool of gray, constant and undefined, its overcast shadows diffusing a dispersed light upon the water. Illuminating the artist gently, the photograph's lack of contrast places emphasis on Rhein's back, displaying a body stippled with beauty marks, a language of time. Rhein is looking down toward the water, its rhythms lapping cyclically and fluidly, just as thoughts swirl in contemplative and reflective states. Rhein's strong shoulders bow with a pensive disposition, clearly in a state of recollection. Depicted alone, Rhein's aging body is an example of its durational state, persevering through and within experiences of love, loss, solitude, and companionship. Timestamped with a visual braille, each spot details a story, a lineage, and an imbued history, honouring the aging body and positioning it as an evolving entity, his corporeal form physical evidence of what withstands, challenges, and surpasses fear.

¹⁶³ Needle, "Eric Rhein: Cover Story."

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

While Rhein's practice commemorates and remembers those who were lost to AIDS-related complications, loss is transformed into a powerful tool capable of maintaining and preserving the legacies of individuals while revealing what is *possible* through his own survivorship. Theorists Reed and Castiglia advocate for the dynamic potentials of loss as a powerful motivator and crucial component in the creation of memory.¹⁶⁵ Therefore, considerations of queer idealism and futurity can and must consequently coexist alongside and *within* loss.¹⁶⁶ Highlighting this, Reed and Castiglia explain

[L]oss is not synonymous with silence or absence or defeat; loss can be a starting point, an invocation, an inspiration, a rallying cry. Necessity, it is said, is the mother of invention, and needs are never greater than in times of loss.¹⁶⁷

Positing memory's ability to produce abundance and plenitude while confronted with fear, Reed and Castiglia suggest that past loss provides the foundational potential for opportunity, hope, and queer joy.¹⁶⁸ Though the concept of *pastness* may seem to reinforce chronological streams of time, "memories perform their work by refusing the discrete borders of sequential 'moments' and by collapsing the past and the future into the present,"¹⁶⁹ laying the imaginative scaffolding necessary for an informed and utopian future. Accordingly, memories become generative and resistive through the culmination of both "conjecture and fantasy," fortifying the importance of memory in the "work of imagination."¹⁷⁰

The cultivation of imaginative possibility allows for the potential of a queer utopian world—a site saturated with connection and safety—even if that world remains purely ephemeral or conceptual in nature. Holding the capacity to inform a place of belonging that allows and encourages

¹⁶⁵ Reed and Castiglia, *If Memory Serves*, 26.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

companionship for those who do not fit neatly within the borders or boundaries of the *ideal*, memory becomes a pivotal aspect in queer embodiment and actualization. Authors Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner jointly explore the issue of queer world-making, coining the site of a *counterpublic*, a realm “conscious of its subordinate relation.”¹⁷¹ Comprised of alternative “entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance [...] alternate routes, [and] blockages,”¹⁷² queer communities have long developed sites where non-normative modes of intimacy may be explored, celebrated, and encouraged, defying the dominant narrative that considers queer intimacies as dangerous or “criminal.”¹⁷³ In a world that allows belonging and transformation, these sites “bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation,”¹⁷⁴ validating those who seek these chosen relationships, experiences, or unions. The counterpublic is, as Berlant and Warner outline, inventive, fragile, and ever-evolving, with no comparative matrix or preset parameters aiding its growth or evolution.¹⁷⁵ What the counterpublic does offer, however, is a site where affective and erotic rituals may be openly considered and practiced, accessible and “sustained through collective activity,”¹⁷⁶ providing a glimpse into the prospect of the utopian.¹⁷⁷

Temporally intersecting with the present era of undetectability, queer world-making and community building is sustained through interaction and imaginative creativity, anticipatory and prophetic in nature. Theorists Ahmed and Muñoz elaborate upon the role of collaboration and unity in the development of queer worlds in their respective works on phenomenology and utopias. Essential in the foundation of queer world making is *orientation*; Ahmed describes that *queering* phenomenology requires one to turn toward, both physically and conceptually, objects and spaces

¹⁷¹ Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998), 558.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 562.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 566.

that are less proximate or disregarded entirely—sites or items that may even be considered deviate or deviant.¹⁷⁸ Similarly to Berlant and Warner’s *counterpublic*,¹⁷⁹ the “question of orientation becomes a question not only about how we ‘find our way’ but how we come to ‘feel at home’”¹⁸⁰ in these performed and conceptual modalities.

Negotiating and forming communities of belonging derives from mutual and shared investment,¹⁸¹ informing and creating dimensions saturated with openness and care. What defines these worlds of inclusion is their ability to bolster and encourage opportunities of connection, promoting safety within individual and communal wellbeing. Aligning and positioning oneself within both space and relationality, then, underscores the symbiotic relationship of body and mind; considering this, Ahmed posits that one “only know[s] which way to turn *once we know which way we are facing*,”¹⁸² and situated within a framework of collective solidarity, this positionality therefore may contribute toward the beginnings of a speculative and inclusive queer future.

Queer Futurity and Pleasure

Located within undetectability’s framework, queer worlds and modes of belonging allow for possibilities of physical, sexual, and relational intimacies. These unions, within a futuristic utopian vision, relish in intentionality, permitting connections that proliferate through safety and fulfilment. Ahmed highlights that “[q]ueer politics are also about enjoyment,”¹⁸³ and that pleasure “is expansive.”¹⁸⁴ Rhein’s photographic practice hinges on such representations of pleasure and care, and though these images were captured in the past, within the intersection of undetectability and

¹⁷⁸ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 3.

¹⁷⁹ Berlant and Warner, “Sex in Public,” 558.

¹⁸⁰ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 7.

¹⁸¹ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 155.

¹⁸² Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 7.

¹⁸³ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 162.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 164.

Rhein's own survivorship, maintains an intergenerational dialogue between what did and *continues* to flourish: pleasure, love, and queer joy.

Ahmed stresses that “pleasure involves an opening toward others”¹⁸⁵ both relationally and in specific acts of desire. Seen in Rhein's photograph *Embrace #3 (self-portrait with Jeffery Albanesi)* (1993) [fig. 14], Rhein autographically captures himself and Albanesi in a white, crisp bed, one body laying upon the other as both men hold each other in a state of serenity and rest. The two figures are wrapped in a cloud-like bundle of billowing sheets, covering both subjects from the hips down. The plush duvet appears soft and protective, encasing the two men in legible symbols of domesticity and comfort while shielding viewers from observing the torso of the righthand subject. What is striking at first glance is Rhein's play with negative, blank space. Intentionally centering the two bodies within the lower third of the photograph, Rhein creates a large peripheral frame made up of what is the white wall and the bedding, and through the camera's depth of field, these two components visually blend into one another, creating a large encompassing border. Devoid of significant contrast, the heightened visual emphasis falls upon the heads of the men, with two tufts of lush black hair peeking out through the fingers of the other's grasp. Capturing tenderness during a time of medical uncertainty, Rhein's photograph with Albanesi emphasizes that even amidst fear, love grounds, comforts, and undoubtedly prevails.

Rhein's survivorship permeates his photographic works with a living possibility that remains in dialogue with the past, highlighting the non-linearity of time and memory while emphasizing what continues to resonate through recollection, engagement, and contemporary contextualization. His relational works illuminate the human need for connection, and in doing so, reinforce the healing potentials shared within intimate moments, carrying himself and his

¹⁸⁵ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 165.

subjects into the “affective realm of the present.”¹⁸⁶ Rhein’s photographs are in dialogue directly with Ahmed’s concept of orientation, and through his compositions it is evident that “[p]leasures are about the contact between bodies that are already shaped by past histories.”¹⁸⁷

Rhein’s photograph *Loving (self-portrait with Jeffery Albanesi)* (1993) [fig. 15] is a black and white silver gelatin print, tactfully capturing what Muñoz describes as an instance of “queer relational bliss.”¹⁸⁸ Such encounters inform and shape intimate possibilities, guiding and affirming new opportunities of loving while simultaneously demonstrating queerness’s utopian path as one interested in an “economy of desire and desiring.”¹⁸⁹ In the image, the two men make eye contact while wrapped in each other’s secure embrace. Rhein lays upon Albanesi, grasping tightly at the nape of his neck as Albanesi lays his hand upon the small of Rhein’s back. Seen in the distance is the blurred reflection of them in a vertical mirror, offering a glimpse of the two men from an alternate perspective. Rhein’s smile expresses a playfulness that appears characteristically in the presence of familiarity, and amidst this closeness is both pleasure and warmth. Through embodiment, “pleasure orientates bodies towards other bodies in a way that impresses on the[ir] surface, and creates surface tensions [...] When bodies touch and give pleasure to bodies that have been barred from contact, then those bodies are reshaped”¹⁹⁰ and infused with promises of love, belonging, and possibility.

Undetectability’s convergence with utopian world-making, then, holds potential for the heightening of queer pleasure. Extending this to the lived realities of those existing in close proximity to HIV and AIDS, honouring and animating the past¹⁹¹ is essential to the establishment of

¹⁸⁶ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 23.

¹⁸⁷ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 165.

¹⁸⁸ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 25.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁹⁰ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 165.

¹⁹¹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 28.

a queer future. Complicating the linear notion of time,¹⁹² queerness and undetectability propose a *horizon* within futurity;¹⁹³ queer futurity, therefore, is interested in challenging the present, observing and speculating “beyond the here and now.”¹⁹⁴ Muñoz explains that considering and honouring the past, in all its messiness, is in fact indispensable when contemplating the development of futurity and the sustainment of pleasure:

Queer futurity does not underplay desire. In fact it is all about desire, desire for both larger semiabstractions such as a better world or freedom but also, more immediately, better relations within the social that include better sex and more pleasure.¹⁹⁵

Finally, Muñoz details that critiquing the homosexual present is not an attack on what has been identified as “lesbian or gay”¹⁹⁶ or categorized as oppositional to the *norm*. Rather, Muñoz’s perspective offers “an appraisal of how queerness is still forming, or in many crucial ways formless,”¹⁹⁷ allowing those who fall out of (or, instead, entirely reject) systemic definitions a site of belonging within a future comprised of and sustained through mutual investment, sensitivity, and inclusivity.¹⁹⁸

Diverging from temporal linearity’s structure, “[q]ueerness’s form is utopian”¹⁹⁹ in nature, offering unbound prospects of possibility for those who care to invest in its imaginative construction. It is through these recollections and inventive inferences that one builds upon and creates their own utopian future, filled with “ephemeral traces, [and] flickering illuminations from other times and places.”²⁰⁰ In *Company (self-portrait)* [fig. 16], Rhein intentionally

¹⁹² For more queerness’s influence on what Muñoz describes as an “autonaturalizing temporality,” see his writing on *straight time*; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 22.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 155.

¹⁹⁹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 30.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

configures the square photograph beginning at his hips, revealing himself looking down upon his unclothed torso. The image captures him in an upright, stoic position, juxtaposed by a whimsically diagonal forest, the trees indicating a steep topographical incline. Surrounded by numerous birch trees and fallen foliage, the ground is carpeted in textual decay and fallen leaves. Pinching a leaf at its base speckled with several holes, the sun cascades through the negative spaces, focusing light similarly as though through a pinhole camera, translating a freckled shadow in a random, peppered fashion. Inspecting delicately, Rhein's inquisitive expression can be seen through strands of hair that have fallen in front of his face. Noticeably, however, is his contemplative and reflective gaze; carefully positioning the shadow outline on his torso, the leaf is symbolic of something deeply felt, organ-like in its centrality. Created in 1998, two years after the revitalization of his own health, Rhein is surely not alone in this image. The leaf, instead, represents *many*—an extension to those who have come and gone, those who in fact remain, and those who may still yet be.²⁰¹

²⁰¹ This excerpt conclusively influenced the following passage: “what is yearned for [...] may still therefore be,” written by Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), (original work published 1977), as found and cited in Reed and Castiglia, “If Memory Serves,” 179.

Conclusion

Proliferating as a distinct component of Rhein's work, memory propels contemporary viewers to consider the (non)linearity of HIV and AIDS through the artist's own survivorship. Through the animation of his own body and his photographic subjects, psychological and emotional relationality is extended to the contemporary viewer, suggesting that "memories are answerable to the needs of the present, [and] they are shaped in relation to changed and changing social conditions."²⁰² Through this convergence of imagination and transformative solidarity, memory is able to siphon the historical shame and negativity once linked with queerness. In the process, it transforms into a generative and inventive force that is continually self-reflexive, aware of the intricacies presently embedded within the complex, but necessary, ongoing intergenerational conversation. Perceived as a form of both resistance and resilience, memory, consequently, may be understood as a modality that demands critical evaluation while adapting and simultaneously encouraging the desires, needs, and fantasies of both the present and the imaginative future.

Positioned as a living archive, Rhein's body of work reflects upon the enduring relationship between those who have left their earthly placements and those who remain earth-bound; he details that "[t]he history of [his] survival and the stories of [his] friends who died are embodied in the objects [he] create[s]."²⁰³ Aligning his artistic practice as a memoir, each artwork and literary selection embodies the capacity to "physically, emotionally, and spiritually"²⁰⁴ touch audiences, detailing stories of "record keeping, activism, and healing"²⁰⁵ alongside accounts of "beauty, intimacy, and honesty."²⁰⁶ Functioning as self-actualizing tools capable of translating and candidly representing lived realities of queer pleasure and affection(s), Rhein's body of work enlivens and

²⁰² Reed and Castiglia, "If Memory Serves," 11-12.

²⁰³ Rhein, "Notes From My Treehouse," 107.

²⁰⁴ Needle, "Eric Rhein: Cover Story."

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

affirms the creative beginnings for the work necessary in the imagination of the utopian.²⁰⁷

Honouring the complex historical and concurrent realities while upholding the need for speculative and inclusive possibilities of both embodied *and* ephemeral community, Rhein's practice steps "out of the linearity of straight time[, ... positioning q]ueerness's ecstatic and horizontal temporality [as] a path and a movement to a greater openness [in] the world."²⁰⁸

Finally, Rhein's practice highlights that connection and collaboration continue even amidst loss, and in his survivorship, underscores the following statements to be true: that a utopian future is not possible without the consideration of the past; that futurity's potentials of belonging and inclusivity draw directly upon the foundational frameworks of resistance created by past generations, before and during the AIDS crisis; that mourning, then and now, can be a unified and enlivening experience if practiced and rallied collectively, holding the potential to provide belonging for those whose hearts ache; that vulnerability is a necessary component and should be embraced in modes of reflection, growth, and relationality; and finally, that queer futurity cannot be shaped without the intertwining of intergenerational knowledges, investment,²⁰⁹ or outside of consideration for life's two pervading universal truths: loss *and* love.

Much like art's expansivity, queerness remains a continuous non-linear negotiation in a society that intends to control, limit, and define our expressions, hopes, and desires. Queer worlds have instilled within us frameworks of perseverance that enable adaptation, allowing us to navigate these sites, both physical and ephemeral, with spontaneity and tenderness. Through reconsideration of documented histories and the embrace of collective memory as a modality flush with opportunity, a new a path may become exposed with fewer deviations, encouraging

²⁰⁷ Reed and Castiglia, "If Memory Serves," 3.

²⁰⁸ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 25.

²⁰⁹ Needle, "Eric Rhein: Cover Story."

the potential of untethered dreams and “wild hopes for [...many] future[s].”²¹⁰ Detailing the persisting relationship between the individual and collective, as well as the systemic barriers that presently occur alongside pharmaceutical and medical advancements, Rhein’s “Leaves” series is not finished, and in fact, may *never be*—reflecting society’s persisting and ever-evolving relationship to HIV and AIDS.

²¹⁰ Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, 23.

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FIGURES



Fig. 1. Eric Rhein, *Constellation (self-portrait)*, gelatin silver print, 1993.
Source: Eric Rhein, *Lifelines* (Lexington: Institute 193 Press, 2019), 43.

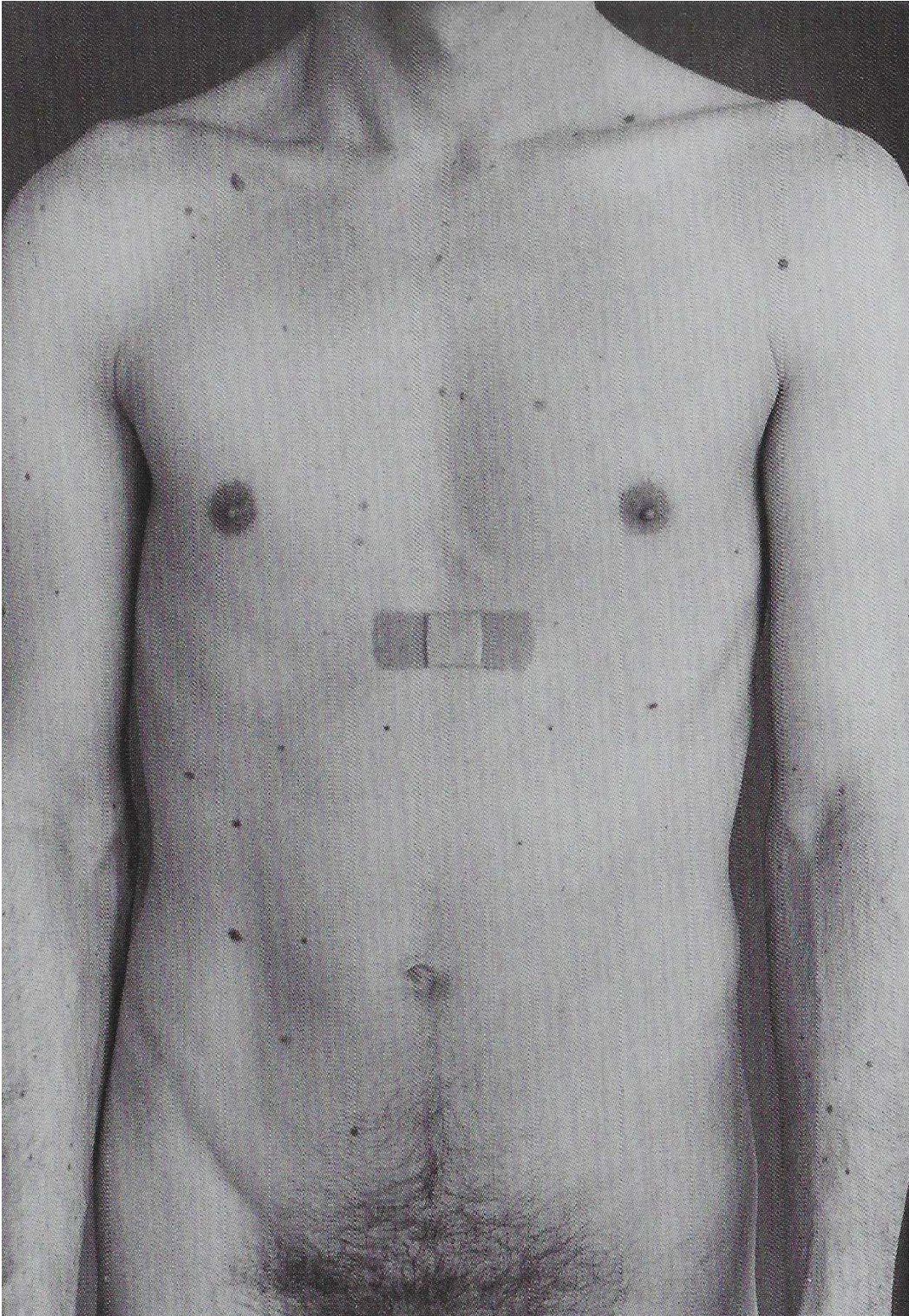


Fig. 2. Eric Rhein, *Band-Aid (self-portrait)*, gelatin silver print, 1993. Source: Eric Rhein, *Lifelines* (Lexington: Institute 193 Press, 2019), 42.



Fig. 3. Eric Rhein, *William—Silhouette (William Weichert, Martha's Vineyard)*, gelatin silver print, 1992. Source: Eric Rhein, *Lifelines* (Lexington: Institute 193 Press, 2019), 41.

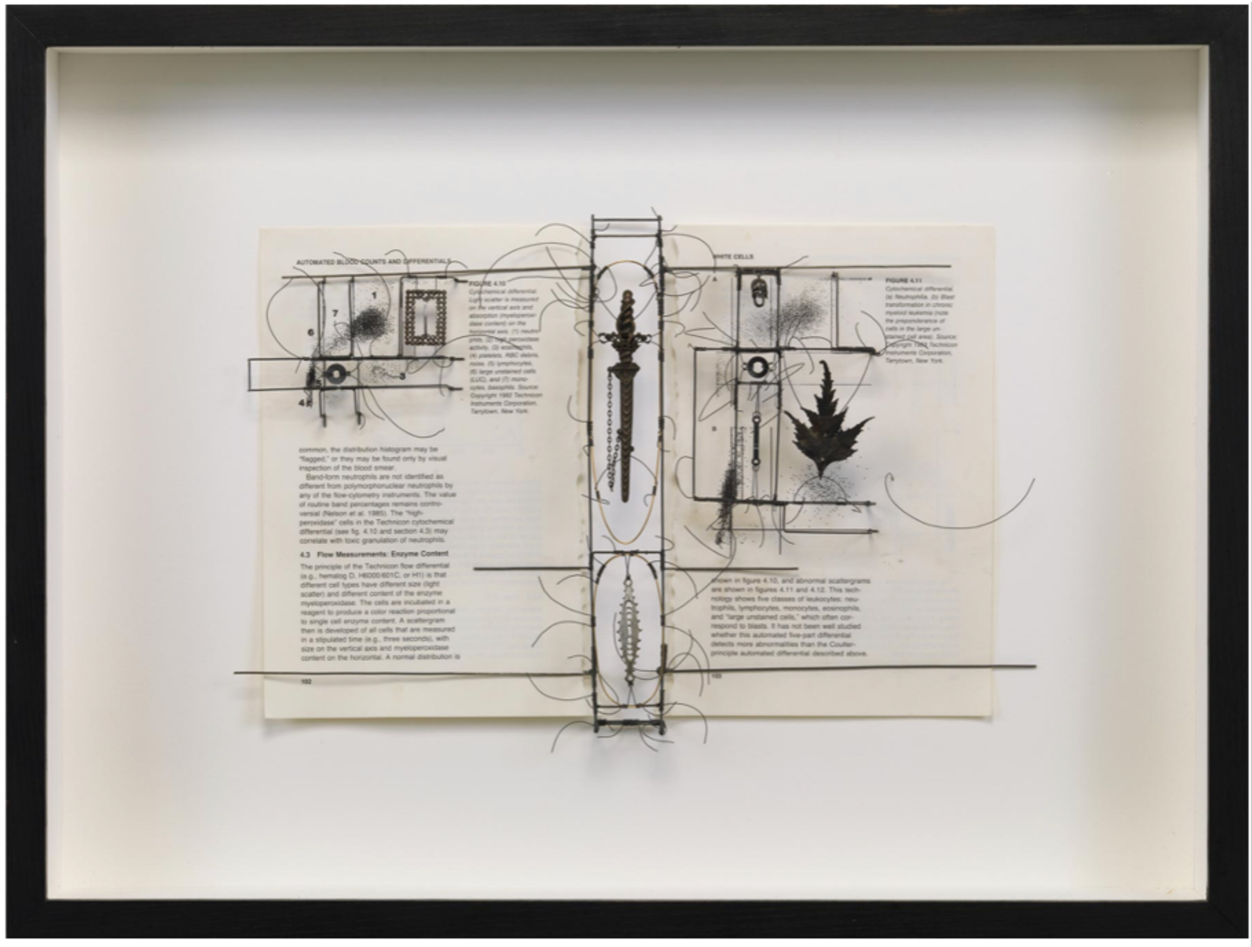


Fig. 4. Eric Rhein, *Uncle Lige's Sword*, "Blood Work Series," wire, paper, found objects, 16 ½ x 22 x 3 inches, 1998. Source: Eric Rhein, *Lifelines* (Lexington: Institute 193 Press, 2019), 11.



Fig. 5. Eric Rhein, *Lifeline* (self-portrait with Ken Davis), gelatin silver print, 1996. Source: Eric Rhein, *Lifelines* (Lexington: Institute 193 Press, 2019), 73.

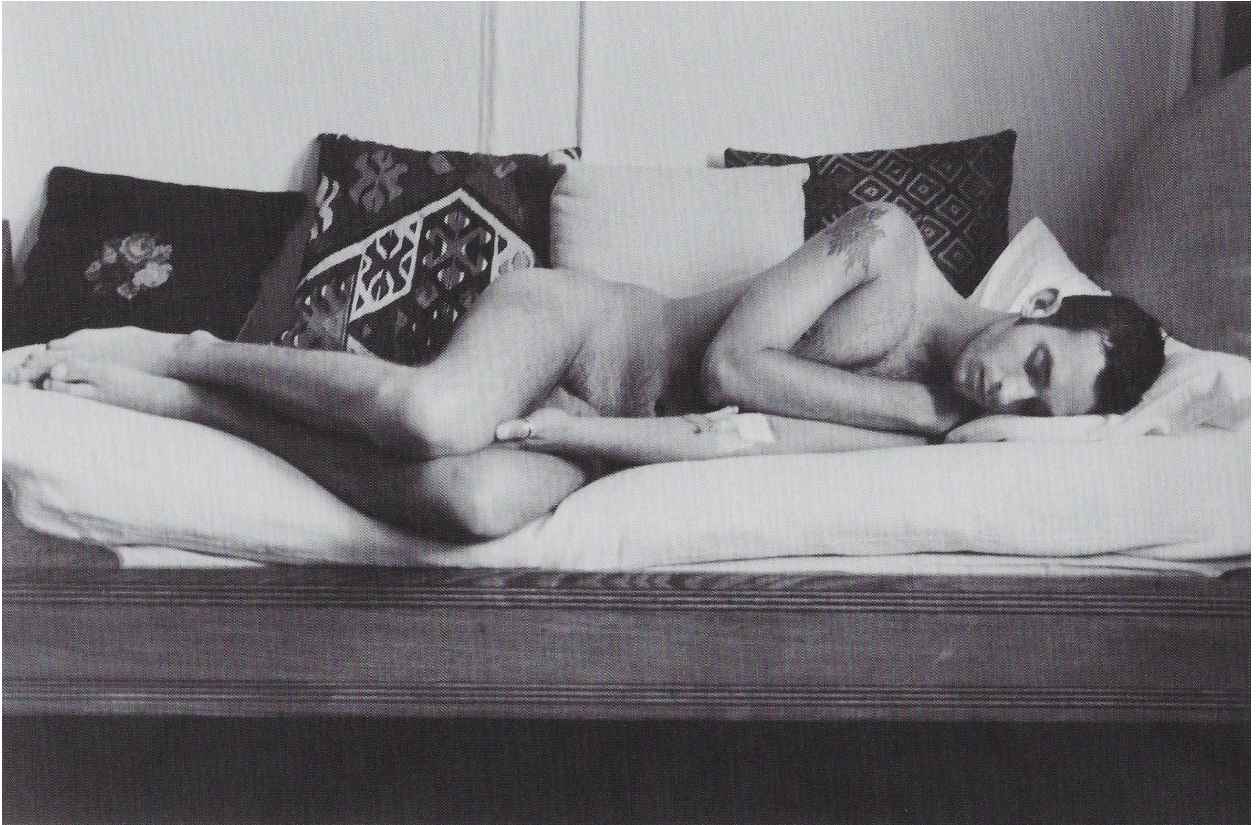


Fig. 6. Eric Rhein, *Ken—Sleep (Ken Davis)*, gelatin silver print, 1996. Source: Eric Rhein, *Lifelines* (Lexington: Institute 193 Press, 2019), 72.

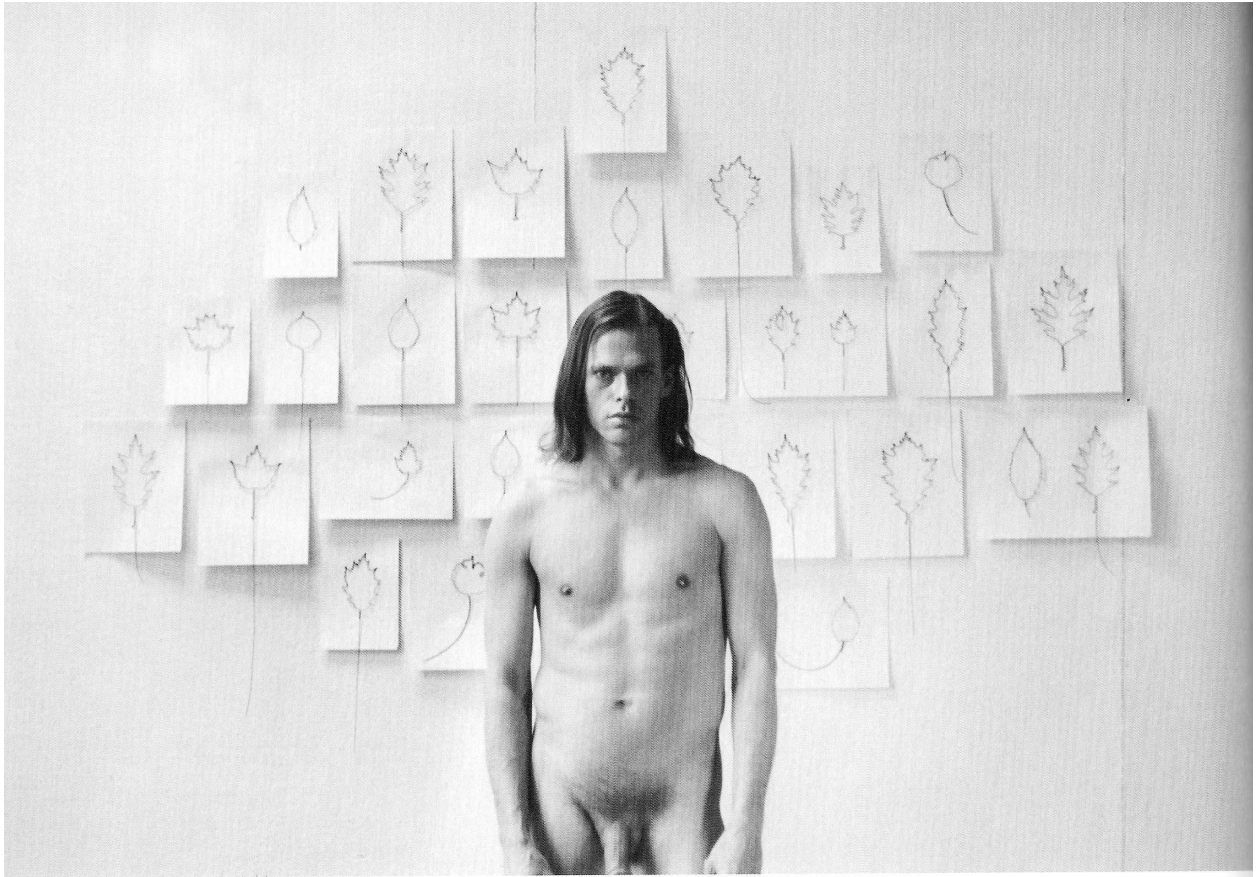


Fig. 7. Eric Rhein, *Kinsmen (self-portrait, the MacDowell Colony)*, gelatin silver print, 1996.
Source: Eric Rhein, *Lifelines* (Lexington: Institute 193 Press, 2019), 76.

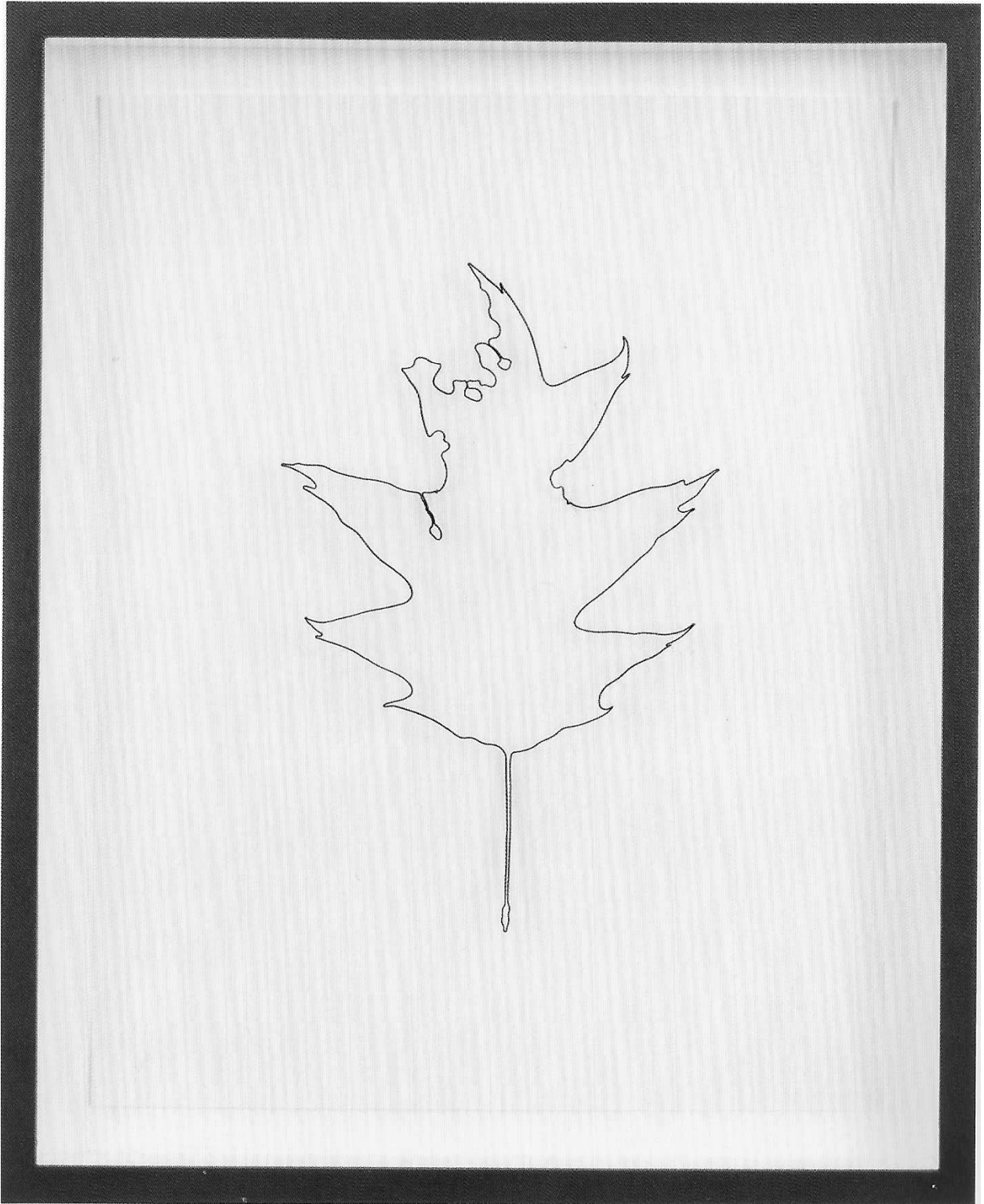


Fig. 8. Eric Rhein, *Frank the Visionkeeper (Frank Moore, 1956-2002)*, from “Leaves,” an AIDS memorial), wire and paper, 2013, 16 x 13 x 2 inches. Source: Eric Rhein, *Lifelines* (Lexington: Institute 193 Press, 2019), 78.



Fig. 9. Eric Rhein, *Hummingbird 33—Flying East*, wire and paper, 2018, 16 x 13 x 1½ inches. Source: Eric Rhein, *Lifelines* (Lexington: Institute 193 Press, 2019), 96.



Fig. 10. Eric Rhein, *River (self-portrait with Russell Sharon, Delaware Water Gap)*, gelatin silver print, 1994. Source: Eric Rhein, *Lifelines* (Lexington: Institute 193 Press, 2019), 25.



Fig. 11. Eric Rhein, *Veil 2 (self-portrait with Russell Sharon, Hudson Valley)*, gelatin silver print, 1994. Source: Eric Rhein, *Lifelines* (Lexington: Institute 193 Press, 2019), 55.

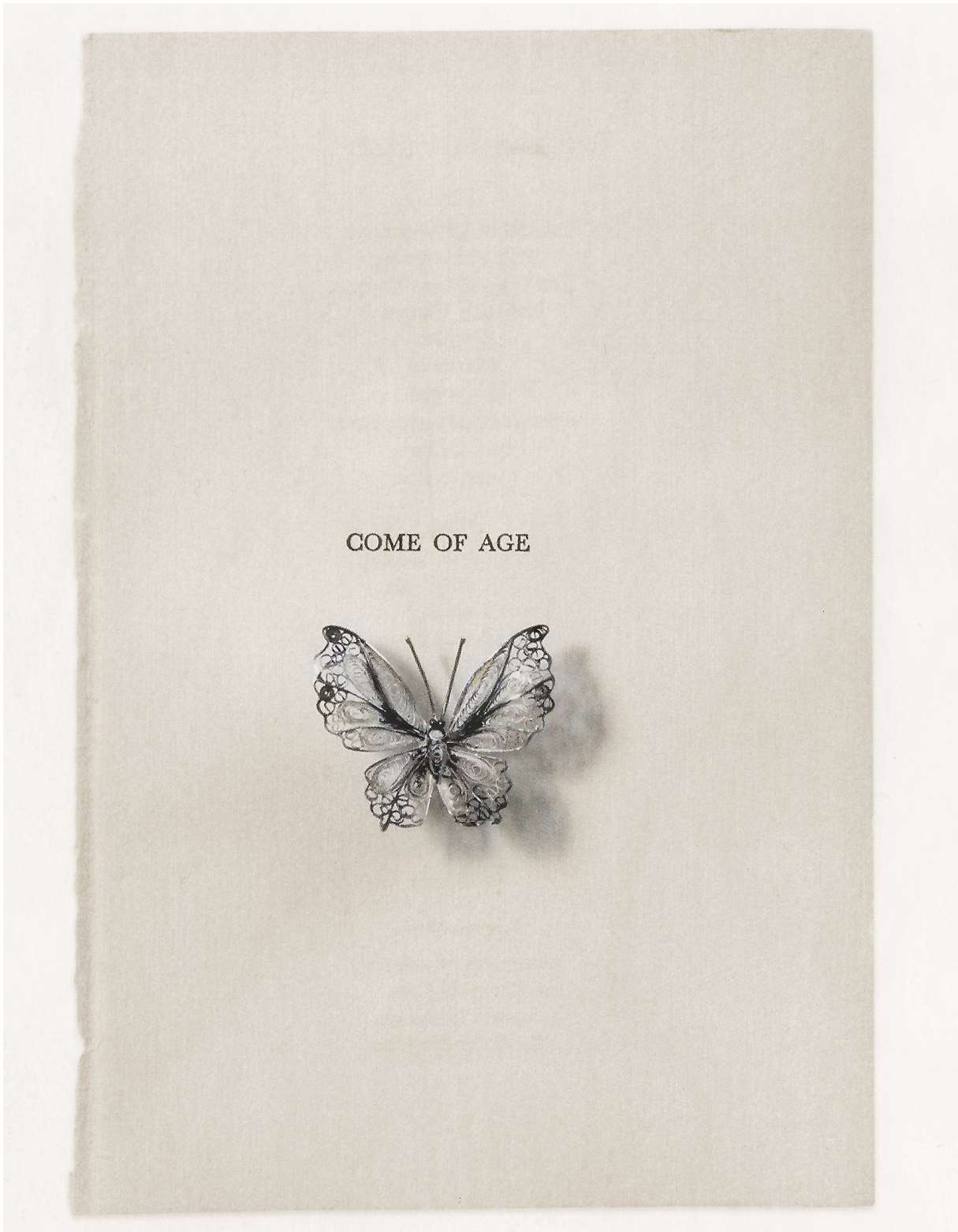


Fig. 12. Eric Rhein, *Come of Age*, paper and found object, 1998, 15 ¼ x 12 x 2 inches.
Source: Eric Rhein, *Lifelines* (Lexington: Institute 193 Press, 2019), 30.



Fig. 13. Eric Rhein, *Bay* (self-portrait, *Fire Island*), silver gelatin print, 2010. Source: Eric Rhein, *Lifelines* (Lexington: Institute 193 Press, 2019), 89.



Fig. 14. Eric Rhein, *Embrace #3 (self-portrait with Jeffery Albanesi)*, gelatin silver print, 1993. Source: Eric Rhein, *Lifelines* (Lexington: Institute 193 Press, 2019), 23.



Fig. 15. Eric Rhein, *Loving* (self-portrait with Jeffery Albanesi), gelatin silver print, 1993.
Source: Eric Rhein, *Lifelines* (Lexington: Institute 193 Press, 2019), 51.



Fig. 16. Eric Rhein, *Company (self-portrait)*, silver gelatin print, 1998. Source: Eric Rhein, *Lifelines* (Lexington: Institute 193 Press, 2019), 16.