

ROTIMI FANI-KAYODE

Sarah Lookofsky, *Every Moment Counts: Feelings of AIDS*, Artforum, May 2022

Rotimi Fani-Kayode, *Every Moment Counts (Ecstatic Antibodies)*, 1989, C-type archival print, 121.9 x 121.9 cm

How to tell the story of how art has been touched by a global epidemic? “Every Moment Counts: Feelings of AIDS” takes on the immense task of charting the impact of a disease that has lasted four decades and claimed more than thirty-six million lives worldwide. The show’s title—itsself borrowed from a group of works by Rotimi Fani-Kayode (1955–1989), who has received belated acclaim for staged photographs that combine Black bodies with objects that reference intersectional identity, desire, and spirituality—calls forth the urgency with which many artists in the exhibition made work while facing a deadly illness. Youthful artistic culminations coincided with

imminent death, making the show feel haunted by mature bodies of work that never were.

Pinned to the fiftieth anniversary of the decriminalization of homosexuality in Norway, the exhibition also offers a follow-up to the 1993 survey “Tema: AIDS” (Subject: AIDS) at the same institution and includes several works on view then. In contrast to its predecessor, which included ephemera from public-health campaigns and activist movements alongside artworks, the current exhibition focuses on art and less on didactic output and aims to provide a more global view. But global surveys are prone

to pitfalls: Time lines peg some as forerunners while condemning others to belatedness, while a geographic organization obscures cosmopolitan exchanges. Instead, the exhibition's curators, Ana María Bresciani and Tommaso Speretta, chose an open-ended structure that eschews narrative, chronology, and geographical groupings in favor of affective affinities between artists and works that might not have crossed paths in real life, their methodology suggesting queer theory's practice of sparking encounters across temporal and disciplinary separations. This curatorial approach is further charged by many works addressing touch: sexual contact, caresses, and parts of the body in abstracted reflections. *Untitled*, 1982, by Brazilian artist Hudinilson Jr., is a powerful wall-size collage made up of enlarged Xeroxes of hair, skin, and other ambiguous surfaces that telegraph both bodily proximity and technological remove.

By downplaying chronology and geographical specificity, the curators have to some extent given up an authorial position that allows for argument, historical revisionism (such as the foregrounding of the role of people of color and women in movements where white men have previously been framed as the protagonists), and the addressing of systemic disparities that continue to characterize the AIDS epidemic. Access to health care remains concentrated in affluent populations and in the Global North. But this critique is forcefully embedded in many individual works. Photographs by Liliana Maresca feature the artist's naked body sprawled against the backdrop of blown-up portraits of heads of state. Sunil Gupta's diptychs juxtapose photographs of men in amorous embrace with Indian mythological imagery and quotes by an Indian public-health official known for ignorant statements underestimating the threat of AIDS. *Lutte contre le sida (Fight Against AIDS)*, 1992, a painting by Sim Simaro, who is based in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, shows the anthropomorphized disease in a boxing match against continental adversaries (Africa, Europe, etc.).

The exhibition opened in February as Norwegians were starting to speak of the Covid-19 pandemic in the past tense, even as thousands continued to die elsewhere, proving that the global spread of a disease does not necessarily cause international solidarity. The AIDS crisis reminds us that, despite global distances, epidemic diseases are constituted by chains of proximity. In the moving video from Pepe Espaliú's "Carrying" series, 1992, pairs of people take turns carrying the sick artist through public spaces, suggesting care as the required corollary of an illness that is necessarily a public affair. In another wry nod to the inevitability of interrelation, the exhibition's benches, by Piotr Nathan, are made of doors from public restrooms in Berlin, replete with glory holes and telephone numbers, covered in smooth neon Plexiglas. To sit on a bench to publicly watch a video that addresses AIDS, then, is to literally sit with and engaging others' intimacies and encounters, even without directly taking part.