

Through Positive Eyes

Fowler Museum at UCLA

September 15, 2019–February 16, 2020

Through Positive Eyes was a large-scale storytelling project created in collaboration with more than 130 people living with HIV/AIDS around the world. The exhibition included photographs and videos by artist-activists from 10 cities—Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, Johannesburg, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., Mumbai, Bangkok, Port-au-Prince, London, and Durban—and a sculpture installation by Los Angeles-based multimedia artist Alison Saar. Combined, these works conjured a broad picture of the epidemic—ranging from everyday imagery to more abstract meditations on joy, grief, solitude, and resilience. Public programs included live storytelling in the gallery performed twice weekly by seven HIV-positive Angelenos known as the Los Angeles Through Positive Eyes Collective. The multitude of perspectives and voices coalesced around one core tenet: a belief that challenging stigma against people living with HIV/AIDS is the most effective method for combating the epidemic.

The exhibition was part of an ongoing project, launched in 2007 and co-directed by South African photographer Gideon Mendel and the UCLA's Art & Global Health Center, to put cameras in the hands of the people most deeply affected by HIV so that they could create personal photo essays. The project provided a platform for HIV-positive people to share their experiences—both ennobling and dispiriting—while coping with this chronic illness.

The common theme was stigma. Even though HIV is now treatable, people living with HIV and AIDS are often still seen as outcasts. In this exhibition, for example, the participants were identified by their first names only, in part to emphasize their individuality, but also to protect those who live in locations where stigma remains dangerous, if not literally life-threatening. These “artivists”—artists and activists at the same time—are seeking to undo irrational stigma, to dissolve distrust and fear, in order to re-enter all spheres of daily life. In line with the early writings of the late art critic Douglas Crimp, *Through Positive Eyes* aspired to intervene directly to stop the epidemic. It formed part of MAKE ART/STOP AIDS, the movement first proposed by the UCLA Art & Global Health Center in 2005 and featured at the Fowler as an exhibition in 2008.

In 1981, UCLA researchers identified five cases of “newly acquired immunodeficiency.” Almost 40 years later, UNAIDS, the United Nations organization dedicated to ending the epidemic, estimated that 75 million people have been infected with HIV around the world; 32 million have died. Given the huge scale of the epidemic, AIDS is not somebody else's problem. It is our collective problem. Banishing the irrational stigma associated with it can be our contribution.

Credits

Through Positive Eyes was organized by the UCLA Art & Global Health Center with the Fowler Museum at UCLA and co-curated by David Gere, director of UCLA Art & Global Health Center, professor of World Arts and Cultures at UCLA, and founder of MAKE ART/STOP AIDS; Carol Brown, independent curator based in Durban; and Stan Pressner, New York theater lighting designer. The exhibition was made possible by major funding from the Herb Ritts Foundation. It was also supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts and a gift from Elizabeth and Graeme Gilfillan in honor of Sarah Gilfillan.

Additional funding for the *Through Positive Eyes* project was provided by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts; Electronic Theatre Controls (ETC); The Ford Foundation; Teiger Foundation; Gere Foundation; U.S. President's Emergency Fund for AIDS Relief; Brazilian Ministry of Health STD/AIDS Prevention Department; International AIDS Society; UNAIDS; University of California Institute for Mexico and the United States (UC MEXUS); City of Los Angeles AIDS Coordinator's Office; Heroes Project; UCLA AIDS Institute; UCLA International Institute; UCLA School of the Arts and Architecture; and UCLA Office of the Chancellor.

Photo Educators: Crispin Hughes with support from Ricardo Funari and Luciana Saldanha (Rio de Janeiro), Mikhael Subotzky (Johannesburg), Parthiv Shah (Mumbai), Vinai Dithajohn and Apichart Sritakae (Bangkok), Marie Arago and Tatiana Mora Liautaud (Port-au-Prince), and Simanga Konstant Zondo (Durban)

Video footage: Gideon Mendel, Mo Stoebe, Katja Kulenkampff, and Jesse Phinney

Video editors: Gideon Mendel, Cut and Cue

Community Organizer: Hanni Ress

Education Consultant: Timothy Kordic

Exhibition Overview

The exhibition opened with a mural-size collage of 130 faces, a composite of portraits taken by Mendel, who was born in Johannesburg, South Africa, and now lives in London. "After many years documenting the HIV/AIDS epidemic myself, I felt that the time had come to hand over the camera to people living with the syndrome. I began this project making a portrait of each participant. Along the way I realized that their self-representations, which fill the rest of this exhibition, were much more interesting to me." Mendel's composite photograph was surrounded by 10 self-portraits, one from each city where workshops have been held.

In the main gallery, visitors encountered 50 intimate portraits of individuals living with HIV, grouped into four contextual themes: "The Burden of Stigma," "Stories My Body Tells," "What Makes Me Laugh," and "Alive and Well." Each portrait was paired with a narrative caption that conveyed the intimacy and agency of self-representation, and the fear and freedom of using the photographic medium. The autobiographical narratives often touched upon the aftermath of going public with their HIV status, revealing how it altered relationships with their families, friends, and their selves.

Following these individual stories, the exhibition spotlighted a sculptural commission by Los Angeles-based artist and HIV-negative ally Alison Saar. In it, a larger than life-size hammered copper female figure anchored the installation, originally part of an AIDS-themed piece, first shown in 1992—at the height of the epidemic in the United States. The figure has been reconceived for a new era, to celebrate survivors and to offer a space for healing and reflection.

The final gallery, dedicated to banishing stigma, featured a central stage for live storytelling by the Los Angeles Through Positive Eyes Collective, a group of seven HIV-positive artist-activists, known as *artivists*. The walls were covered in 10 floor-to-ceiling banners, depicting each of the 10 international workshop cities and 130 project participants. The Los Angeles-based *artivists* took turns performing a scripted monologue on Wednesday evenings and Sunday afternoons. Connecting with audiences through live storytelling about their experiences with HIV, they

engaged with campus and local communities. The experience fostered greater awareness and empathy, two essential steps toward banishing stigma and ending the epidemic.

The Fowler presentation was the first stop of a U.S. tour, and the fourth iteration of the global exhibition that debuted at the Durban Art Gallery in South Africa (2016); traveled to the Adler Museum at Wits University, Johannesburg, South Africa (2016); and was shown at the Iziko Slave Lodge, Cape Town, South Africa (2017).

Through Positive Eyes Workshops

Over the past decade (prior to the exhibition), South African photographer Gideon Mendel and his London associate Crispin Hughes, along with the UCLA Art & Global Health Center, have led *Through Positive Eyes* workshops, in which they shared basic camera techniques and introduced a vivid discussion of photo aesthetics. Building on that foundation, each participant captured as many as 3,000 images over a 10-day span. That selection was edited down to 12 of their best photos to complete a mini-narrative and a three-minute film. This Fowler exhibition featured a sampling of the most resonant images, stories, and films; more are available at ThroughPositiveEyes.org.

Gideon Mendel—Artist Statement

“Since 2007, I have worked with the UCLA Art & Global Health Center to develop *Through Positive Eyes*, a collaborative photo project with HIV-positive people in key cities around the world. This composite photograph puts together, in one visual field, their 130 defiant faces as a shared revolutionary act. All of the individuals pictured here have had distinct experiences when revealing their HIV status publicly. Some have done this many times, while others never before. Initially in the project, I felt it was important for me to express my personal photographic creativity. I travelled to the homes of the activists to make these portraits, so that each and every one would be as personal and unique as possible. However, over time, it became clear that the self-representations made by the activists were so much more compelling and said much more than I ever could. After chronicling HIV for almost three decades, I am ready to hand over the camera to them.”

Alison Saar (b. Los Angeles, CA 1956; lives and works in Los Angeles)

Cool Mama, 2019

Copper, video, found fabric, shells, and miscellaneous objects

Courtesy of the artist and L.A. Louver

In 1992, at the height of the AIDS epidemic—before the invention and availability of antiretroviral treatment—Los Angeles artist Alison Saar created an AIDS-themed installation titled *Slow Boat*. Curated by Thelma Golden for the Whitney Museum at Phillip Morris in New York City, the work was animated by Saar’s personal sense of dread and mourning concerning AIDS. The installation featured a standing female figure made of copper, her body pockmarked with holes evoking the Kaposi’s Sarcoma lesions that were one of the visible symptoms of HIV infection at the time. Accompanying this were images of rippling water, neon light glowing in a suitcase, a pair of wings made out of discarded sneakers, and a carved boat, which gallery visitors were invited to lie inside. Combined, these elements made the female sculpture a mournful goddess, contemplating what Golden called “the processes which mark the movement from one aspect of living to another.” After the exhibition, the constituent parts of the installation were discarded, but Saar reserved the copper figure and placed it in her Lauren Canyon garden.

Now, that same copper figure has been repurposed and reconceived by Saar for a very different time, the AIDS treatment era. Whereas *Slow Boat* addressed fear and mourning, *Cool Mama* now speaks of health and resilience.

Alison Saar—Artist’s Statement

“When I first made *Slow Boat*, some of my friends were HIV-positive or had full-blown AIDS. I was responding as an HIV-negative person, trying to understand and to mourn. In 1992, the situation looked really dismal and hopeless. If you were HIV-positive, it was only a matter of time before you would have AIDS and be gone. Life was finite.

Now, almost 30 years later, I am illuminating that same copper figure to celebrate the survivors. Originally, the holes were like lesions or wounds. Now, I see them as scars, as proof of having survived. I have created a halo around the figure and a wall of trailing fabric behind her, evoking African medicine costumes. Yemaya, the West African goddess, or orisha, associated with water and healing, is alluded to. As an artist, I always hold Yemaya in my mind. I am also making a nod to the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, which commemorates people who have died of AIDS.

Metaphorically speaking, I am inviting you to step inside the skin of someone who is HIV-positive and to look through those eyes.”

Banishing Stigma

A quasi-theatrical environment, envisioned by New York-based designer Stan Pressner, served as the setting for storytelling performances by the Los Angeles *Through Positive Eyes* Collective. Throughout the duration of the exhibition, school groups and members of the public participated in it through the storytellers—identified by their “artist” T-shirts—who came from many different parts of the city and shared their distinct perspectives on what it is like to be HIV-positive in Los Angeles. Ultimately, this room was meant to combine the worlds of gallery and theatre, allowing viewers to become both spectators and actors.

Members of Los Angeles *Through Positive Eyes* Collective:

Thomas Davis

Porchia Dees

Lynnea Garbutt

Kelly Gluckman

Vasilios Papapitsios

Joey Terrill

Amiya Wilson

What Next?

Bringing an end to the stigma associated with HIV and AIDS is not difficult or complicated. All it takes is an openness to share perspectives, as visitors have done by participating in this exhibition, and by recognizing that we are all humans who share the same basic needs for sustenance, love, and support. The facts are simple: HIV is caused by a virus transmitted through unprotected sex, shared needles, or from mother to child in the womb. A person living with HIV or AIDS is able to take anti-retroviral medication that, in many cases, reduces HIV to undetectable levels. Now that effective treatment is available, HIV need no longer be a death sentence. Knowing one’s HIV status can be as easy as taking one’s blood pressure, a regular part

of medical care. If we get tested and treated, we break the cycle of the epidemic. Be safe. Practice prevention. Get tested. Know your status. Seek treatment. End the epidemic.