

# Representing HIV/AIDS in Africa: Pluralist Photography and Local Empowerment

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This essay explores the nature and political consequences of representing HIV/AIDS in Africa, where the disease has taken its greatest toll. We examine how different methods of photography embody different ideologies through which we give meaning to political phenomena. We distinguish three photographic methods of representing HIV/AIDS: naturalist, humanist, and pluralist. Naturalist approaches portray photographs as neutral and value free. Humanist photography, by contrast, hinges on the assumption that images of suffering can invoke compassion in viewers, and that this compassion can become a catalyst for positive change. By examining a widely circulated iconic photograph of a Ugandan woman and her child affected by AIDS-related illnesses, we show that such representations can nevertheless feed into stereotypical portrayals of African people as nameless and passive victims, removed from the everyday realities of the western world. We contrast these practices with pluralist photography. To do so we examine a project in Addis Ababa, which used a methodology that placed cameras into the hands of children affected by HIV/AIDS, giving them the opportunity to actively represent what it means to live with the disease. The result is a form of dialog that opens up spaces for individuals and communities to work more effectively in overcoming problematic stigmas and finding ways of stemming the spread of the disease.

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Over the last decades, HIV/AIDS has grown from a medical mystery to a truly global challenge. In 2000, the UN Security Council declared HIV/AIDS a security threat, stressing the increasingly serious implications of the pandemic's spread, especially in Africa. But despite extensive community efforts to address these implications, and despite significant resources being devoted to prevention and treatment, worldwide infection rates continue to increase. Most experts see only very limited opportunities to reverse this alarming trend (UNAIDS 2003, 2004a, b).

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The difficulties of stemming the spread of HIV/AIDS are in part due to the fact that the disease is not only a medical problem but also a social, cultural, and political challenge. Perhaps more so than any other disease in history, HIV/AIDS has generated countless political debates, scientific publications, donor appeals, public protests, education campaigns, and artistic engagements (see Miller 1992; McNeill 1998; Elwood 1999:3; Ogdon 2001; Crimp 2002). Paula Treichler (1999:1) thus speaks of an “epidemic of signification,” which is to say that the nature and political impact of HIV/AIDS is intrinsically linked to how the disease is represented, and how these representations influence key issues, such as the production of stigma and discrimination.

The purpose of this essay is to examine the nature and political consequences of representing HIV/AIDS. We do so by focusing on how different methods of photography embody different ways of understanding and dealing with HIV/AIDS in Africa, the continent where the disease has taken its greatest toll. Since the early 1980s, some 16.7 million Africans have died from AIDS-related illnesses. In South Africa alone there are 1,600 new infections everyday (Freedman and Poku 2005:665–667). Africa is, of course, far too diverse a continent to be represented in homogeneous ways. That is, in fact, one of the stereotypical representations we critique in this essay. HIV infection rates for people between the ages of 15 and 49, for instance, range from <1% in Mauritania to almost 40% in Botswana and Swaziland. Major differences also exist with regard to key factors influencing HIV/AIDS, such as gender disparity, poverty, mobility, and intravenous drug use. Sub-Saharan Africa is the most affected region, containing 25.8 of the estimated 40.3 million people living with HIV/AIDS worldwide in 2005 (UNAIDS 2005).

We focus on photographs in our essay because they play an important role in shaping private and public understandings of HIV/AIDS. The political dimensions of photographic representations become particularly acute when they enter the realm of mass media. Popular perceptions, policy frameworks, and development priorities are all influenced by the visions that mass media create with respect to a particular issue. Photographs are central to this process. The likelihood of a story making it to print, especially on the cover of a publication, increasingly depends on the quality of the pictures that accompany it. At a time when we are saturated with information stemming from multiple media sources, images are well suited to capture issues in succinct and mesmerizing ways. They serve as visual quotations (Sontag 2003:22, 85; 2004:22). Some of the most influential means of representing HIV/AIDS in Africa have thus been through photography. From iconic photographs in mass media to local artistic engagements, photographic portrayals of HIV/AIDS have created a range of powerful effects, from apathy and fear to empathy and engagement.

We distinguish among three photographic methods of representing HIV/AIDS: naturalist, humanist, and pluralist. Each embodies different forms of representation through which we give meaning to political phenomena. Exploring such sites of representation, we argue, reveals how different ideological assumptions generate different public understandings of—and thus reactions to—the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Naturalist approaches portray photographs as neutral and value free, as reflecting an objective reality captured through the lens (see Hall 1997:98). Photographs are seen as having a truth value, allowing the viewer realistic insight into the events and people they depict. In its pure form, such a position is, we believe, not tenable. Photographs cannot portray the world as it is. A photograph is no different from any other form of representation, even though the seemingly naturalistic reproduction of external realities may deceive us initially. A photograph is taken at a certain time of the day, with a certain focus, and from a certain angle. These choices make up the very essence of the photograph: its esthetic quality. But they result from artistic and inevitably subjective decisions taken by the photographer—

decisions that have nothing to do with the actual object that is photographed. As there is relatively widespread scholarly consensus about these limits to naturalist photography, we do not engage the respective practices—and their underlying assumptions—in detail. Instead, we focus our attention primarily on two alternatives to naturalism: humanism and pluralism.

Humanist photography is the first of two non-naturalist approaches we examine systematically. We do so by focusing on a meanwhile iconic “AIDS photograph” taken by photojournalist Ed Hooper. It depicts a Ugandan mother and her baby, both in the last stages of fatal, AIDS-related illness. We examine the Hooper photograph as a particular type of image that symbolizes broader western practices of representing HIV/AIDS in Africa. Taken in 1986, during the relatively early years of western recognition of the HIV/AIDS epidemic as a major crisis, the Hooper photograph reveals how HIV/AIDS was first visualized in the press, and how such early visualizations of suffering and victimization have had implications that still shape the HIV/AIDS discourse today (Bhattacharya et al. 2005:8). It also symbolizes how very specific, humanist forms of representations continue to influence our understanding of HIV/AIDS in Africa (for a recent example, see Annan, Gordimer and Kennedy 2003). The political assumption behind such humanist approaches is that images of suffering can invoke compassion in viewers, and that this compassion can become a catalyst for positive change. Although accepting the basic premise underlying this position, we inquire further into the values involved in these practices, and the form of change that issues forth from them. We show that humanist photographic engagements, well meant as they are, contain residues of colonial values. They are more likely to invoke pity, rather than compassion. They reflect how western—and thus very often universalized—accounts of HIV/AIDS in Africa are based on very specific assumptions, even stigma, revolving around the portrayal of people affected by HIV/AIDS as passive victims, removed from the everyday realities of the western world.

We then juxtapose humanist practices of photography prevalent in western media sources with different, more local, and more diverse photographic engagements. We term them pluralist photography. They differ from both naturalist and humanist approaches. They share with the latter the belief that photographs can become important catalysts for social change, but actively oppose the humanist focus on iconic photographs and their implicit association with western and often universalized positions. Pluralist photography, by contrast, seeks to validate local photographic practices in an attempt to create multiple sites for representing and understanding the psychological, social, and political issues at stake. To illustrate this form of engagement, we focus on the recent work of photographer Eric Gottesman and the Addis Ababa community of *kebele* (neighborhood) 15. Gottesman worked with local children affected by HIV/AIDS, teaching them how to use photography to represent for themselves what it means to live with HIV/AIDS in a community that has both high-infection rates and high levels of related stigma. We examine the potential—and limits—of such local photography to overcome the stereotypical image of the passive victim. While we advocate the use of pluralist photography, we fully recognize that this tradition is not void of bias either. It cannot give us authentic local knowledge. But by generating multiple and creative ways of representing HIV/AIDS, it helps viewers recognize that the process of representation is inherently incomplete, and thus inevitably political. Such engagements with representation can offer more effective ways of addressing the spread and sociopolitical effects of the disease. This is why, we argue, pluralist photography should be used more widely in attempts to understand and contain the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Before we begin our inquiry, a few words on methodology are in order. The photographs we have chosen for our case studies are obviously not meant to provide a comprehensive account of how the issue of HIV/AIDS in Africa is being

represented. Doing so is not—and cannot be—the purpose of a short essay. Our main empirical focus rests with an iconographic photograph portraying HIV/AIDS in Uganda during the mid-1980s and a series of photographs taken more recently by Ethiopian children affected by AIDS. These photographs are taken two decades apart, at times when HIV/AIDS occupied a very different place in public discourse. They deal with two completely different parts of Africa. We have chosen the photographs in question because they symbolize, in an ideal way, specific kinds of photography. Studying them allows us to understand the sociopolitical dimensions entailed in different representations of HIV/AIDS, which is the main objective of our essay.

A similar disclaimer is in order with regard to the three categorizations we use: naturalist, humanist, and pluralist. These concepts are meant to differentiate between ideal types of photography. We are fully aware that in reality, a photograph and its public use may simultaneously contain elements of multiple approaches—say a combination of humanist and pluralist traits. But by focusing on ideal types of photographs—archetypes, so to speak—we are able to identify more precisely what is at stake in the process of representation. We use our own, relatively ad hoc terms, in part because we wanted to use everyday language, rather than jargon, in part because there are comparatively few relevant conceptual discussions, at least in the literature on international relations. Among the similar studies that do exist, François Debrix and Cynthia Weber distinguish between practices of representation, transformation, and pluralization (Debrix 2003:xxi–xxii). While our approach is influenced by their typology we nevertheless retain our own, slightly different concepts. We do so because Debrix and Weber focus on how an image is being mediated in the process of creating social meaning while our own task is mostly limited to understanding practices of representation themselves.

### **Beyond Naturalism: Representation and Western Media Constructions of Stereotypes**

Photographs deceive. They seem to give us a glimpse of the real. They provide us with the seductive belief that what we see in a photograph is an authentic representation of the world: a slice of life that reveals exactly what was happening at a particular moment. This is the case because a photograph is, as Roland Barthes (1977:17) stresses, “a message without a code.” As opposed to a linguistic representation, or a painting, a photograph is “a perfect analogon.” Indeed, its very nature, as Barthes continues, is defined by this analogical perfection. In the realm of documentary photography, for instance, it was for long commonly assumed that a photographer, observing the world from a distance, is an “objective witness” to political phenomena, providing authentic representations of, say, war or poverty (see Strauss 2003:45). Theoretically, such naturalistic positions hinge on the belief that a photograph can represent its object in a neutral and value-free way, transferring meaning from one site to another without affecting the object’s nature and signification in the process. Debrix (2003:xxiv, xxvii–xxx) stresses that this belief is part of a long western search for transcendental knowledge, be it of a spiritual or secular nature.

While most scholars who work on photography acknowledge that photographs mimic vision in one way or another, few if any claim that such representations, even if they are pictorial simulacra, are authentic representations of the world as it is (see Friday 2000:356–75). We agree. But rather than critiquing naturalist understandings of photography in detail we find it more productive to explore how alternative approaches recognize that photographs are practices of representations and thus of an inherently political nature. Two aspects make such alternatives to naturalism convincing.

First, and as already mentioned, a photographic representation reflects certain esthetic choices. It cannot be neutral because it always is an image chosen and composed by a particular person. It is taken from a particular angle, and then produced and reproduced in a certain manner, thereby excluding a range of alternative ways of capturing the object in question (see, for instance, Barthes 1977:19; Sontag 2003:46).

Second, and more importantly, a photograph cannot speak for itself. It needs to be viewed and interpreted. This is why Barthes (1977:17–19) stresses that there are always two aspects to a photograph. There is the “denoted message,” which is the above-mentioned analogically perfect representation of a visual image. But there is also a “connoted message,” which includes how a photograph is read and interpreted, how it fits into existing practices of knowledge and communication. Some refer to this process more specifically as “secondary image construction,” which takes place when photographs are “selected out from their original ordering and narrative context, to be placed alongside textual information and reports in a publication” (Hall 1997:86). It is not our intention here to engage the complex and rather diverse literature on photography, visual culture, and media representation. Doing so would go far beyond the scope of this essay. But we would like to point out briefly that there is widespread scholarly agreement that a connoted message cannot take the form of an unmediated representation of reality. John Berger (1980:55), for instance, points out that photographs “only preserve instant appearances.” When we look at a photograph we never just look at a photograph alone. We actually look at a complex relationship between a photograph and ourselves (Berger 1977:9). Our viewing experience is thus intertwined not only with previous experiences, such as our memory of other photographs we have seen in the past, but also with the values and visual traditions that are accepted as common sense by established societal norms. Guy Debord (1992:4), likewise, stresses how everything directly lived becomes distanced through representation. It becomes part of a “spectacle,” which he defines as a “social relationship between people that is mediated by images.” For David Levi Strauss (2003:45), the important aspect of this process is that there are always relations of power at stake, that there is always an attempt to tell a story, and that this story is always told from a particular, politically charged angle.

What makes photographs unusually powerful—and at times problematic—is that their analogically perfect representation of a visual image masks the political values that such representations embody. The assumption that photographs are neutral, value free, and evidential is reinforced because photography captures faces and events in memorable ways. For instance, if one looks at an image of a person affected by AIDS-related illnesses, one could easily believe that one actually sees that person as he or she was at that moment. Michael Shapiro (1988:124, 134) writes of a “grammar of face-to-face encounters.” And he stresses that the analogical nature of this encounter makes photographic representations particularly vulnerable to being appropriated by discourses professing authentic knowledge and truth. We may succumb to such a “seductiveness of the real” to the point that we forget, as photojournalist David Pearlmuter (1998:28) warns us, that “the lens is focused by a hand directed by a human eye.” Add to this that the public rarely sees the news media as purveyors of commercially profitable stories and images. Instead, the news is perceived as a reflection of the actual, as a neutral mediator between a subject, and, in the case of most international news, an object usually located in another part of the world.

The fusion of information and entertainment, and the commercial need for recognizable headlines and simple stories, inevitably favors stereotypical representations over more complex ways of representing sociopolitical issues, such as HIV/AIDS. Barthes (1977:22) even goes as far as arguing that a photograph only achieves meaning “because of the existence of a store of stereotyped attitudes which

form ready-made elements of signification.” This tendency is exacerbated when a news item refers to events in the developing world. In such cases, western media sources tend to fall back on the scripts of global news agencies circulated in wire services. Once the parameters of a news story have been set, coverage can lapse into a standard formula. Photography may thus give a pandemic such as HIV/AIDS the meaning of familiar crisis by cueing an audience to formulaic events via particular images. Such practices can, for instance, revolve around a micrograph picture of the virus or an image of a person dying of AIDS-related illnesses. They reinforce static pictures of HIV/AIDS and make it difficult to generate change (Watney 1990). Photographs can thus strengthen the perception that the disease is not part of daily life, but something less real and more remote, something that may resemble what Edith Wyschogrod (1973) once called a “death event” (Wyschogrod 1973).

### HIV/AIDS and Colonial Perceptions of Africa

Portrayals of Africa epitomize how western media sources produce and reproduce stereotypes. Since the early years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, western science and modern media have constructed a concept of “African HIV/AIDS” that is closely linked to the colonial heritage and its mystifications of Africa (see Watts and Boal 1995:105). Part of this Eurocentric perception is the tendency to view Africa as a homogenous continent seen through a “prism of misery” (Kean 1998:2). The Kenyan author and playwright Binyavanga Wainaina (2006) writes of the western tendency to write as if Africa were one country, a place that “is hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving.” Methods of photography that use standardized representational practices reinforce such colonial stereotypes, creating what David Campbell, in a series of innovative and convincing essays, calls an “iconography of anonymous victimhood” (see Campbell 2003a:69, 70–71, 84; 2003b:67; 2004:62, 69).

The result is a fatalistic apathy in the western viewer, leading to the impression that each crisis is simply part of a larger pattern of misery and gloom that is so deeply entrenched that it cannot possibly be reversed. Cindy Patton (1990:83) points out how images of Africans suffering and dying from AIDS-related illnesses perfectly fit into such stereotypical images of “a wasting *continent* peopled by victim-bodies of illness, poverty, famine.” Patton stresses how this pre-conceived image neglects to recognize the many instances where development has actually taken place: moments, for instance, when local communities managed to thrive, when personal and societal achievements prevailed over doom and gloom.

Practices of representation are among the most influential elements in encounters between the North and the South (see Doty 1996:2). This is particularly the case with western representations of Africa, which correspond to what Edward Said (1979:2–3) termed orientalism: a style of thought—and a corresponding mode of governance—that is based not on geographical, political, or cultural facts, but on a series of stereotypical assumptions about the values and behavior of people who inhabit far off and “exotic” places. Central here is a stark division between the orient and the occident. This division is characterized by the juxtaposition of fundamental opposites, which are presented as essential cultural traits. The West is characterized by values such as reason, progress, activity, optimism, and order, while Africa is associated with emotion, stagnation, passivity, pessimism, and chaos (see Mitchell 1998:293; Bancroft 2001:96). The practices of authority and domination that issue from such representations have insinuated themselves into all domains of life, from philosophy, science, history, and tourism to governmental regulations, economic structures, artistic traditions, and scientific methods. Early practices of photography are as much part of these colonial power relations (see Higgins 2001:22–36) as are contemporary perceptions of HIV/AIDS.

Representations of HIV/AIDS do, indeed, fit into established patterns of orientalism. Consider, for instance, how some of the first media accounts of HIV/AIDS revolved around theories that traced the origin of the disease in Africa. One particular theory was based on the assumption that the HIV virus had actually been present in Africans for years but simply remained undiagnosed. That is, until they “passed it out to the world as civilization reached them” (Hilts 1988:2). Another theory stipulated that HIV evolved from a parent virus discovered in wild African green monkeys. The disease was then said to have crossed species barriers and found a human host in Africans, who later passed it on to the rest of the unknowing world. Although debated by the medical community (see McNeill 1998:11–17; Smith 1998:330–333; Bancroft 2001:92–4), theories based on the origins of HIV/AIDS can often lead to a problematic practices of blaming others and generating racist stereotypes (Sabatier 1988). In this particular case, HIV/AIDS is represented as emerging in faraway places, from bodies of “others” that then “contaminate” the rest of the world. The result is an emphasis on questions of origins, rather than an engagement with the underlying causes of infection. It would be far more productive to emphasize how certain behaviors and practices put all people at increased risk for HIV infection. Equally important are efforts to understand factors that contribute to a person’s vulnerability, such as power relations and societal norms that limit women’s choices to protect themselves against infection (see Sarin 2002; DeSantis 2003; Roudi-Fahimi 2003; UNDP 2007).

Stereotypical portrayals of Africa are epitomized by assumptions surrounding the sexual transmission of HIV. Rather than relying on scientific data or pragmatic policy deliberations, western perceptions of HIV/AIDS in Africa have been dominated by moral judgments and prejudices (see Sabatier 1988:1). This is, as Susan Sontag (1988:27) stresses, not necessarily new or surprising. She points out that many diseases that are said to be linked to sexual fault (such as syphilis) tend to “inspire fears of easy contagion and bizarre fantasies of transmission by non-venereal means in public places.” But such tendencies have been particularly pronounced with regard to representations of HIV/AIDS in Africa. Sexual practices have been moralized and demonized by western doctors and other experts. As with previous epidemics, such as cholera, the disease is being interpreted “as a sign of moral laxity or political decline” (Sontag 1988:142). Representative of this practice is an American doctor, who stressed in a press interview that “there is a profound promiscuity in Uganda, and a virus which takes advantage of it” (cited in Hooper 1990:28). The ensuing HIV/AIDS discourse mingles medical and moral assumptions, making it difficult to prevent the production and diffusion of stigmatizing ideas (Patton 1990:105). The result is a public discourse based on an entrenched suspicion about the disease and, more importantly, about the people who live with it.

Prevalent journalistic styles of reporting further reinforce stereotypical images of HIV/AIDS in Africa. This is particularly the case of so-called “parachute reporters,” who are flown into a crisis zone for a short time and then report back to the “rest of the world.” One of many examples: in the years immediately following recognition of the epidemic in Uganda, President Museveni announced an “open door policy,” designed to draw the world’s attention to the impact of the epidemic in Africa (Sabatier 1988:91). In the wake of this policy announcement, western journalists entered the country, flooding hospitals in an attempt to visualize the pandemic through images of African AIDS victims. But such parachute reporters often lack knowledge of the political and cultural context that surround the issues they seek to cover. They are given only limited time and resources to do their work. The ensuing coverage almost inevitably leads to a reinforcement of existing stereotypes.

The reaction of some local African governments to the crisis often exacerbated the effect of the stereotypical images that prevail in the western public discourse. Particularly fateful, Treichler (1999:109) believes, is the combination of “doomsday predictions” by western media sources and categorical denials by governments in

developing countries. The latter not only increases fear, stigmatization, and the spread of the disease, but paradoxically reinforces stereotypes. When western reporters seek to deal with HIV/AIDS in Africa, their representations often clash with the institutionalization of silence imposed by local public policies. Ministries in some African countries have often banned researchers and physicians from talking to the press. Various arguments are presented for such silencing, including fears that representations of HIV/AIDS could damage thriving industries, such as tourism, on which many African countries depend (Sabatier 1988:96; Fleury 2004:1). The result is an entrenchment of the problematic practices described above: foreign reporters rely more heavily on available foreign sources, thus reinforcing pre-existing narratives of Africa and silencing the far more complex and intertwined local stories that characterize the epidemic's spread and sociopolitical consequences. The so-produced dehumanizing images of Africa are not just reflective of media representations, but permeate most western engagements with the continent. Raymond Apthorpe (2001:112), drawing on decades of experience with humanitarian work, emphasizes the deeply entrenched tendency of western development workers and aid agencies to rely on stereotypical, reproducible, recognizable, and self-affirming views of Africa, thus reproducing a virtual reality that contains only "token roots in the actual, domestic reality of the land beneath."

The fact that HIV/AIDS is increasingly seen as a security issue may further add to these stereotypical attitudes. While many commentators welcome new ways of conceptualizing global health issues (see Singer 2002:145–8), others are growing concerned that framing HIV/AIDS through the language and practices of security may further extend monitoring and surveillance traditions that go back to eighteenth-century Europe. This is why Stefan Elbe (2005:403–19) fears that unless the securitization of HIV/AIDS is approached with great caution, the ensuing modes of governance could easily generate new forms of orientalism and racism. Extending the logic of security to health could, for instance, legitimize numerous, rather problematic practices designed to control, and contain parts of the population deemed "unhealthy" and seen as a risk to the vital and thriving core of global society.

### **Confronting Suffering: Humanist Representations of HIV/AIDS**

So far, we have portrayed a fairly grim picture, one that highlights how western stereotypes about Africa render the problem of HIV/AIDS more difficult than it already is. Photography plays an integral part in these neocolonial practices of domination. But this is not the end of the story. Photography can also play an important role in overcoming stereotypes, creating alternative images of HIV/AIDS, and thus new ways of understanding, discussing, and addressing the spread and impact of the disease. We begin our inquiry into these alternatives by focusing on humanist photography.

Humanist photography has a mission: it aims to use photography in the service of a human cause. Such photographic engagements emerged as a direct reaction against early naturalist tendencies to consider photographs as pieces of evidence, as authentic records that reflected a true image of the world. Humanist approaches, by contrast, stress that documentary photography can provide access to both facts and feelings. Lewis Hine (quoted in Beloff 1983:171), one of the early proponents of this position, stressed that he "wanted to show things that had to be corrected." Photography can thus be used as a specific political tool, as a way of rallying public opinion in favor of a particular issue. We term this approach humanist because it contains key traits associated with humanism as it is broadly understood: a modern attempt to "replace God with man," that is, to reject the notion of a divine will in favor of a world where people take charge (Carroll 1993:2). But humanism also created a specific understanding of agency and order, one that revolves around the

search for certitude, one that sees humanity in absolute and often universal terms (see Doty 1996:24, 125; Edkins 2005:379).

Humanist photography is able to live up to many of humanism's key goals, most notably to the idea that human beings are able to shape their social and political environment. Few commentators would question that the reaction of the western world to human suffering in other countries is linked to the influence of key photographs on the formation of public opinion. Pictures of impoverished children, of villages devastated by natural disaster, or of people dying of AIDS-related illnesses are often circulated with the hope that an outpouring of humanitarian support will help those who are in need (Schwartz and Murray 1996:1; Sankore 2005). Humanist photography has become an important aspect of what Michael Ignatieff (1998:10) calls the new "internationalization of conscience."

While the impact of photographs on public discourses is beyond doubt, the exact nature of this influence is far more difficult to assess. We now address this challenge by examining a widely circulated iconic HIV/AIDS photograph, taken in 1986 by Ed Hooper. Reprinted as Figure 1, this picture epitomizes the key ideas behind humanist photography. It depicts a Ugandan woman named Florence and her child, Ssengabi, sitting outside their home in Gwanda, Uganda.

Both Florence and Ssengabi were visibly ill. Taken during the early period of western public awareness about HIV/AIDS, the Hooper photograph provided a "face" that could symbolize the AIDS crisis in Africa. It was published widely in the international media, including *Newsweek* and the *Washington Post*. Florence died four weeks after the photograph was taken. Her baby Ssengabi died four months later. The photograph is very confronting in its direct visualization of illness, suffering, and death. It is part of a long tradition, deeply rooted in Christian art, of



FIG. 1. Florence and Ssengabi. Source: Hooper (1990).

depicting the human body in pain. Some label this practice “demonic curiosity” (Friday 2000:363). Some even compare it with pornography, for images of suffering and death expose in public a person’s most intimate and vulnerable features (Dean 2003:91–3; see also Scarry 1985; Sontag 2003:41–42).

One of the most obvious problems associated with the Hooper photograph is the unequal power relationship between the photographer and his object. Any western photographer, no matter how well meant and sensitive his or her artistic and political engagement is, operates at a certain distance from poverty, conflict, and disaster. And there is, of course, an even greater distance between the viewers of the photographs and the content they convey. Making public a person’s private suffering may well draw attention to the issue of HIV/AIDS, but perhaps only by compromising the dignity of those being photographed. Hooper’s subsequent reflections reveal that he was aware of this dilemma, oscillating between his humanist desire to draw attention to the AIDS crisis and an acute awareness of the privileged position he occupied as a western photographer:

I feel that we were right, that day in Kyebe, to use film and tape to record the brutal realities of Slim [HIV/AIDS]; for Florence had agreed, and in the end permission was surely hers to grant or withhold. Nevertheless, I also know that I participated in something of a media rape. For the next 15 minutes, barely containing . . . excitement . . . I photographed the mother and child from every angle, with every lens. Cameras clicked and whirred, pausing only for the changing of films . . . Some minutes later, we took our leave of Florence and her family . . . and I gave some money . . . On one level it was a simple gesture of assistance to people whom we had met . . . who were in a hopeless situation. On another . . . it was payment for taking the photographs . . . payment to help ease our consciences (Hooper 1990:48–9).

Hooper’s moral agonizing touches upon a range of political and ethical dilemmas. But above all, it underlines one key point: the privileged position of the photographer and the consequences that issue from this position. The photographer controls the action, from staging and framing the photograph to deciding about the appropriate compensation for the so-captured object. Hooper depicts HIV/AIDS not unlike Baudelaire’s famous *flâneur* observed the contradictions and undersides of urban life in the late nineteenth century. Peeking out of his secure bourgeois existence, the *flâneur* voyeuristically strolls through the city’s darker parts, thereby discovering its neglected and suffering population (see Sontag 1977:55–6; Debrix 2003:xxxii–xxxvi). And just as the disturbed *flâneur* uses his gaze in the hope that it might engender social change, Hooper’s photograph too was taken and reproduced largely in the context of a humanist engagement for positive change. But this does not deflect from the fact that the ensuing practices of representation are unequal, perhaps even exploitative. This is the case because the photographer, and the western press in general, have the privilege to frame, and thus politicize, another person’s suffering.

Two main interrelated critiques have been raised against such forms of humanist photography: that it aestheticizes suffering and that it leads to compassion fatigue. The former critique is epitomized through a prominent essay by Ingrid Sischy (1991:92) about Sabastião Salgado’s beautiful and politically engaging photographs. She found them problematic insofar as they “anesthetize” the viewer. “The beautification of tragedy,” she stresses “results in pictures that ultimately reinforce our passivity toward the experiences they reveal.” This passivity, some commentators assert, is reinforced by the very confronting nature of photographs like those by Hooper. Shock can only work for a limited period of time before its mesmerizing capacity loses sway. Even the most horrific image becomes banal when it is repeated ad infinitum. It may end up normalizing suffering, and thus rendering the viewer numb and indifferent (Sontag 1977:19–20; Dean 2003:88). The result, some stress,

is what Susan Moeller (1999) termed “compassion fatigue” or, as it might be called in the case of our specific topic, “AIDS fatigue.”

We believe that both critiques are not warranted, at least not in an unqualified manner. But as the issues at stake are rather complex, and as they touch only marginally upon our main objective, we only draw brief attention here to some of the scholars who have provided counter-arguments. David Campbell (2004:62), for instance, stresses that the compassion fatigue position cannot be sustained in an unqualified manner, not least because there is widespread evidence that the public often reacts generously when charity organizations appeal for help (see also Cohen and Seu 2002:200). At a theoretical level, debates about the effects of estheticized suffering go back at least to Walter Benjamin’s (1977:168) concern that all attempts to “render politics esthetic” end up in war, or Theodor Adorno’s (1955:31) controversial remarks that it is impossible to write poetry after Auschwitz, that even the attempt to do so would be barbaric. But these remarks emerged in a very specific political context, that of fascist Germany. As general statements, they are, we believe, neither tenable nor, for that matter, compatible with Benjamin and Adorno’s overall scholarly positions. Various authors, such as David Levi Strauss (2003:9), have thus questioned the idea that an estheticized image is somehow politically less relevant or that beauty cannot be a call to action. Rather than dismissing esthetics as politically problematic per se, one should try to understand the nature and political consequences that are entailed in particular types of esthetic representations. Doing so is our task here, and we engage it now through a closer reading of the Hooper photograph.

### The Political Consequences of Decontextualizing Suffering

The Hooper photograph gives us a very particular image of suffering. It depicts a dying mother and child, sitting alone in an open doorway somewhere in Africa. No other people are visible, nor are there any features that can be recognized as part of a particular society or culture. Hooper displays Florence and Ssengabi passively, as if they were unable to do anything but wait for death. They are seen in one function only, as sufferers. Indeed, Florence and Ssengabi are entirely defined by their suffering. But this was, of course, not their only identity, even though they were facing immanent death. One could have just as well presented them in different ways, as being integrated in their surroundings, or as pursuing an activity. But the Hooper photograph is an attempt to capture the universal nature of death, stripped free of culture and context. As a result, it shows an image of passive victims, void of agency, history, belonging, or social attachment.

The decontextualized and universalized nature of Hooper’s humanist photograph becomes, not surprisingly, further reinforced by its subsequent usage in western media sources. The photograph was published in leading western media outlets, including *Newsweek* and the *Washington Post Journal of Health*. The former used the picture with a generic caption that read: “Two Victims: Ugandan Barmaid and Son” (Nordland, Wilkinson and Marshall 1986:44). The names of the victims are already lost, having been replaced with more generic terms of “victim” and “Ugandan.” Florence is, furthermore, framed pejoratively as an anonymous barmaid. The *Washington Post* story does mention the names and ages of Florence and Ssengabi. It does so in the caption accompanying the photograph. Given its shocking nature, the photograph stays in the reader’s mind, but the corresponding article never mentions Florence and Ssengabi again. We never hear what Florence has to say about her situation. We only see a snapshot of her suffering and that of her baby, and even this picture is framed by someone, as Hooper (1990:47–50) himself acknowledges, who barely knows her and her family. Further, the *Washington Post* story appeared two years after the *Newsweek* story but used the same photograph, rendering its use even more generic and universal.

As reproduced in the western press, the Hooper photograph was meant to shock readers and draw their attention to the urgency of an issue. It was meant to “hook” them, not only to shocking AIDS images but also to a particular consumer product: a newspaper or magazine that operates according to profit-seeking principles of market economics. That in itself would not necessarily hinder representational sensitivity, but due to the lack of context provided by *Newsweek* and other media sources, the Hooper photograph soon turned into a symbol, an archetype used years after it was first taken. And from there, it is only a short step to stereotypes.

This is, we believe, the most characteristic and also the most problematic aspect of Hooper’s humanist photograph: its attempt to capture a generic image of AIDS, a universalized and decontextualized notion of human suffering. We are left with an increasingly fixed image, frozen in time and place, inevitably feeding into stereotypical images of Africa we have already identified in detail earlier in the essay: a dark and homogenous continent, populated by passive victims stripped of either voice or agency. Although the Hooper photograph is meant precisely to escape from this doomsday scenario, its generic nature paradoxically feeds into the same problematic tradition. It also evokes a long photographic tradition, epitomized by *National Geographic*, which has represented Africa through typical orientalist images of “dark-skinned, bare-breasted women, in their customary dress, looking at the camera without awareness of their impending status as spectacles of adolescent Western eyes” (Grundberg 1990:173). Although corresponding reporting practices have become more sensitive, many of its key features remain intact, as demonstrated by recent issues of *National Geographic* on “Living with AIDS” (September 2005) and *Time* on “Global Health” (November 2005). Even the shocking nature of an AIDS photograph is not enough to break through such stereotypes. Sontag (2004:23) even believes that the opposite may be the case, for “the image as shock and the image as cliché are two aspects of the same presence.”

Several consequences emerge from the decontextualized nature of humanist photography. The basic idea behind this approach, as already stressed, is to generate compassion in viewers, which, in turn, ought to engender social change. But the universal nature of humanist photography is unlikely to generate compassion, at least if we define compassion as Hanna Arendt (1990) does: as sentiments that are directed toward particular individuals. Humanist photography is more likely to inspire what Arendt calls pity, a more abstract and generalized form of politics.

In a compelling application of Arendt’s typology, Luc Boltanski (1999:4) stresses how a politics of pity views the unfortunate collectively, even though it relies on singling out particular misfortunes to inspire pity in the first place. It is evident that the ensuing dynamics entail a fundamental dilemma, one that perhaps cannot be solved. A generalized portrayal of HIV/AIDS as a political problem is unlikely to inspire pity. Statistical data, for instance, cannot do this, no matter how much evidence it provides of the devastating impact of the disease. To arouse pity, Boltanski (1999:11) stresses, “suffering and wretched bodies must be conveyed in such a way as to affect the sensibility of those more fortunate.” That is the function of the Hooper photograph. But problems arise as soon as this image is used to establish and defend a more generic political stance. This is the case, for instance, when the Hooper photograph is being used to draw public awareness in the West about the general problem of HIV/AIDS in Africa. The image of suffering then inevitably becomes detached from both the sufferer and local circumstances.

Manifestations of pity often mask unequal power relations. It was precisely in the seemingly selfless Christian practices of pity that Nietzsche (1991:947) detected a will to power, a thirst for triumph, a desire to subjugate. Pity then becomes linked to several features that fundamentally contradict the original humanist desire for social change. Images of suffering in Africa subconsciously contain a range of moral judgments and sentiments, including resentment and fear (see Sontag 2003:75). They may also remind western audiences of what they are free from. Paradoxically,

the very disturbing nature of the Hooper photograph thus provides a certain feeling of safety and security to some of those viewing it. Death in a distant and dangerous elsewhere can then become a way of affirming life in the safe here and now, giving people a sense of belonging to a particular group that is distinct from others (Biehl 2001:139; Radley 2002:2; see also Nussbaum 2001:297–454 for a more general discussion of pity and its distinctiveness from compassion, sympathy, and empathy).

### **Local Representation through Pluralist Photography**

Despite the humanist aspiration to change the world for the better, we are, then, back to a more pessimistic interpretation of photography and its ability to engage political dilemmas. Or are we? Not necessarily, for photography has the potential to break through stereotypes. It may even be able to engender compassion, rather than mere pity.

To scrutinize this potential, we now examine what we call pluralist photography. Just as humanist approaches do, pluralist ones oppose the naturalist belief that photographs are authentic and value-free representations of the world. Photography is seen in the context of sociopolitical practices. And it is endowed with the explicit mission to shape these practices actively. But as opposed to humanist photography, pluralist approaches do not aim to capture a generic and universal notion of suffering. Photography is, instead, seen as a method to validate multiple local knowledges and practices, thereby disrupting existing hierarchies and power relationships—as for instance the ability of western photographers and media representations to frame the suffering of others. The basic idea behind this approach is to provide people affected by HIV/AIDS with the power to decide for themselves what kind of information and representation is most appropriate to capture the social, political, ethical, and psychological challenges they face. The ideal result of this practice is a form of dialog that opens up spaces for communities to work through the problems that confront them. Photography would then facilitate what Debrix and Weber (Debrix 2003:ix) called a ritual of pluralization: a practice of mediation whereby the represented person takes an active role in the process of inscribing social meaning, but does so without attaching to it an exclusive claim that silences other positions and experiences. Our engagement with such pluralist photographic practices is strongly shaped by and indebted to the work of William Connolly (1995, 2005), even though we refrain from drawing specific linkages to his conceptual elaborations on pluralism.

We examine the potential and limits of pluralist photography by focusing on a project initiated by documentary photographer Eric Gottesman. Between November 2003 and March 2004, Gottesman (2003) worked on a photography project in Ethiopia, collaborating with HIV/AIDS-affected children in a particular neighborhood of Addis Ababa, in kebele 15. Participation in the project, which has continued since then in different forms, was voluntary. It was coordinated through a local NGO, Hope for Children. It took place in a country with the second highest population of HIV/AIDS orphans in the world. Some 720,000 children have been orphaned as a result of HIV/AIDS-related deaths or stigma. About 200,000 of them live with HIV/AIDS, many of them in the streets of Addis Ababa (USAID 2003: 19–23; UNICEF 2004:26).

The objective of the Addis Ababa project was, in part, to place cameras in the hands of children affected by HIV/AIDS, giving them a tool to represent what it means to live with the disease in a community where HIV infection rates and HIV/AIDS-related stigma are high. This practice includes providing a medium and space to share stories and visions, rather than giving this authority away to a professional photographer whose products are then reproduced to fit media priorities and pre-existing narratives of Africa. Gottesman's project is based on a method

pioneered by photographer Wendy Ewald, who worked with children in different contexts, from inner cities in the United States to small towns in Columbia and rural areas in India and Mexico. Ewald's understanding of photography evolved as she worked with students in different places. It began with the idea of sharing the camera with children but then moved into situations where children took charge and created images themselves (Ewald 1998:1-3). These approaches are part of a larger set of development communication methods designed to promote multidimensional and dialogic ways of representing and engaging communities. They are meant to replace centralized, professionalized, and consumer-oriented communication practices, which tend to silence many people, particularly those who live at the margins of society. Pluralist photography is part of an alternative, more democratizing means of representation that seeks to create space for diverse and localized ways of communicating meaning (see Servaes 1986:211-215).

Children involved in the Addis Ababa program were taught how to use the cameras themselves. On some occasions digital cameras were used, but in most cases the technology was as simple as possible, consisting of Polaroid Propack cameras that automatically produced a black and white photograph with negatives attached. Some of the so-taken photographs deteriorated relatively quickly, as is evident with some of the pictures represented here. But the method also has several advantages, including providing the young photographers with control over what was destroyed or kept for further use.

Pluralist local photography begins before any photograph is actually taken. It seeks to facilitate understanding of photographic representations and the type of values and power relations embedded in them. The children who participated in the project met each week with Gottesman, either on a one-to-one basis, or in a group. They were encouraged to develop their own methods of photography, so that they could tell their unique stories from their own, unique angle. Crucial to this process were preliminary discussions about the methods that would be used to represent their lives and those they loved and also lost. This included using photography to document not only the present but also the past. In one class, students were asked to reconstruct the history of their own parents who had died of AIDS—parents who often died before the children could get to know them. Thus, this process required using methods of photography to merge fact, fiction, and feeling into a composition that recovered and represented what had been lost in a parent's untimely death. Gottesman stresses that everyone involved was aware that they took decisions, and that these decisions affected the ways in which photographs represented them and their surroundings. This form of collaboration, he believes, is rather different from traditional photographic portrayals of developing countries as seen in *National Geographic* and other magazines. Both Gottesman and Ewald learned from their work that photographs taken by children are often more complex than the reality that professional representations usually assign to their experiences.

We now focus on the work of Tenanesh Kifyalew, a 12-year-old girl who was living with HIV/AIDS and participated in the Addis Ababa project. Tenanesh means "she is health" in Amharic. She was named by her grandmother who, after her daughter had died of AIDS, refused to believe the doctor when he diagnosed her granddaughter with HIV. Tenanesh agreed to work with Gottesman while living with AIDS-related illnesses that often drained her energy. Like Florence and Sengabi, Tenanesh died shortly after the photographs by and of her were created.

Tenanesh took over a 100 photographs, mostly in her home, where she spent much of her time confined by her illness. She either took the photographs herself or asked others to take photographs of her in particular situations. The impressions that these photographs convey are very different from the ones evoked by Hooper's picture of Florence and Sengabi. Tenanesh's self-portrayal of what it means to live with HIV/AIDS is not nearly as dramatic, not nearly as shocking as Hooper's



FIG. 2. Tenanesh Kifyalew, "Untitled"

representation. When analyzing Tenanesh's photographs, we found two types of pictures, each of them differing markedly from humanist photography. In the first type Tenanesh represented her illness; in the second she portrayed her daily life. Images of the first type, are represented by Figures 2 and 3.

We consciously resist the temptation to overinterpret Tenanesh's photographs. We do so in order to offer a form of commentary that illuminates the issues at stake but then refers authority back to the photographs themselves (see Heidegger 1981:194). It would have been tempting indeed to speculate what the rubber-gloved



FIG. 3. Tenanesh Kifyalew, "Untitled"

hands exactly signify, or how the quasi-cling-wrapped doll may express a sense of suffocation or fear of the outside world. But the death of the photographer—in this case unfortunately not only metaphorical but also real—is as paramount a phenomenon as the much-discussed death of the author. We cannot know what Tenanesh intended to represent when she took the photographs, nor does it matter. She does not retain any control over how viewers subsequently see the photographs.

In order to leave the process of interpretation open to the reader and viewer, we only highlight how Tenanesh captures the nature of living with HIV/AIDS through a conscious process of abstraction. But the nature of Tenanesh's abstraction is fundamentally different from that of Hooper's. The humanist photographs of the latter contained elements of naturalism insofar as they sought to depict an authentic external reality: the "real" face HIV/AIDS as epitomized by a representative single person living with HIV/AIDS. A very particular image is frozen to then produce generalities from it. The process of representation and abstraction is masked by the shocking "reality" of the image. Tenanesh's portrayal of suffering, by contrast, makes representation its central theme. She does not take a photograph that is supposed to resemble some authentic external image of suffering. Her photographs are much more metaphorical. She addresses the psychological and emotional dimensions of living with HIV/AIDS. And she does so by explicitly recognizing that photographs can never give us an authentic representation of the realities in which she lives. We, as viewers of the photographs, are confronted with the process of representation as well: we are asked to imagine what it means for her to face HIV/AIDS. As a result, representation becomes a site of politics, open to interpretation and debate.

The second type of photograph that Tenanesh took is illustrated in Figures 4–6. Here, her pictures do not represent suffering. They place her existence in a larger personal and social context. As opposed to the Hooper photograph, these pictures do not portray a decontextualized world of darkness and gloom. Instead, Tenanesh captures the dailyness of her life, its ups and downs, her determination to lead a



FIG. 4. "My Favorite Things."



FIG. 5. Tenanesh Kifyalew, "Untitled"



FIG. 6. Tenanesh Kifyalew, "Untitled"

relatively normal childhood. Perhaps, she does so precisely because she was confined by her disease, unable to attend school, or go outside for long. We cannot know that from the photographs alone. But we see a certain defiance, a playful defiance, and a way of demonstrating that she has not lost her agency. Tenanesh is not a passive victim in the way Hooper portrays Florence and Ssengabi. She has control of the camera, and with it she shows that she has some control over her surroundings too. As opposed to Florence and Ssengabi, Tenanesh's identity is not reduced to that of a sufferer alone. She is also a child, a Christian, a member of a family, part of a social community. We are inevitably confronted with the life of a single person, rather than an abstract image of a disease.

If Tenanesh's photographs shock, then it is not because we are graphically confronted with the agony of dying from AIDS-related illnesses. The pictures surprise because they portray Tenanesh living a seemingly normal, even vibrant childhood in the face of death. In a sense, her photographs symbolize a shift away from portrayals of people "dying of AIDS," which were particularly dominant in the early days of the pandemic (see Watney 1990:173-192; Nixon and Nixon 1991) toward an attempt to show people "living with AIDS" (see Mendel 2006:42-51). Figures 4 and 5, for instance, depict Tenanesh in her surroundings. In Figure 6, she photographs some of her family members. These pictures do not fit into a preconceived image of what it means to be living with and dying of AIDS in Africa. Western viewers cannot easily create a safe distance from these pictures by reassuring themselves that the life portrayed in them takes place in some far off, dangerous continent. The daily objects Tenanesh chooses as symbols to represent her life are uniquely personal and universal at the same time. From the teddy bear and the television set to pictures of Jesus, they suggest her attachment to "favorite things." They also capture her faith in the divine. Although such images can evoke shared experiences around the world, they do so without generating a generic picture of "AIDS in Africa." Tenanesh's unique environment is presented as an essential element of who she is and what it means to be affected by HIV/AIDS. It is thus much less likely that such context-specific pictures can feed into a pre-existing neo-colonial image of Africa as a dark continent, caught in a web of gloom and doom, populated entirely by helpless victims.

### **Pluralist Photography and Community Dialog**

The practices of displaying pluralist photography are as novel as their composition. Tenanesh's photographs were an integral element of her activism. She used her remaining life to become an outspoken advocate for a movement called People Living with HIV (PLWHA). She advocated the use of life-prolonging drugs, such as antiretrovirals, which were available only to a very small minority of people living with HIV in Ethiopia. Tenanesh spoke to thousands of people at public gatherings and eventually became an Ambassador for UNESCO on behalf of HIV/AIDS-affected children. She wrote letters and postcards in which she made her claims public. They were addressed, among others, to Ethiopians abroad, students at Addis Ababa University, and the President of the United States. In these letters, she described what it meant to live with HIV/AIDS, telling, for instance, how she faced the social stigma that surrounded her. She also advanced specific political demands, such as access to free medical assistance for children affected by HIV/AIDS.

Sixteen of Tenanesh's photographs, together with some of her letters and postcards, were included in an exhibition entitled "I was not a child when I was a child" (translated from Amharic). Tenanesh's original Polaroid photographs were scanned and then printed at a local advertising company that had a large-scale printer. During the month of March 2004, the exhibition, which also featured photographs by 14 other children, traveled to 21 different *kebeles* in Kifle Ketema Subcity, as well

as to City Hall in Addis Ababa (Figure 7). Just as Tenanesh's photographs were created as a result of a dialog, the exhibition too made dialog one of its central themes. As members of a community, viewers were asked to add letters and pictures to Tenanesh's work, thus creating a verbal and visual dialog that became an essential and constantly changing part of the exhibition. The idea that spectators are not just passive consumers but active contributors to the work of art is, of course, not new. It goes back at least to Marcel Duchamp and is practiced today by a range of prominent artists, such as Rirkrit Tiravanija (see Tomkins 2005:82–95). By embracing such an approach, the Addis Ababa exhibition promoted new forms of discussion about what it means to live with HIV/AIDS. It thus provided a creative and safe space for dialog. The idea behind this dialog was to break through some of the silences, taboos, and stigma that characterize HIV/AIDS in a city where almost everyone knows someone who lives with or has died of the illness. The objective was thus very practical: to influence the conditions under which people live with HIV/AIDS and to find more appropriate ways of stemming the spread of the disease and related stigma. This is why, for instance, the Addis Ababa exhibition also provided information about local organizations that are engaged in dealing with the increase in HIV infections and the impact of HIV/AIDS.

The Addis Ababa exhibition told multiple stories about HIV/AIDS in the context of a unique local environment. By refusing to uphold one correct way of portraying the issues at stake, the exhibition drew attention to the political nature of representation. Such communication practices are, of course, rather different from those represented through the iconic images of humanist photography, where the flow of information is controlled, hierarchical, and works in only one direction.

While we believe that pluralist photography has the potential to challenge some of the taboos and stigmas that shroud HIV/AIDS, it is important not to idealize this form of representation. Two particular limitations stand out.

First: just as any other photographic approach, the type of image that pluralist photography projects is neither authentic nor, for that matter, void of power relations. From Tenanesh's photographs alone, we do not know what her life is like, at least not entirely. We still have only snapshots of particular moments and situations.



FIG. 7. Tenanesh Preparing the Exhibition.

Add to this that she was integrated in a photography project that was shaped by western assumptions about representation. Gottesman provided not only the cameras needed for the project but also the know-how. He instructed the children involved in the project about the use of cameras and the different possibilities of capturing images with them. Although Gottesman was careful to teach the children how to make their own representational choices, his esthetic influence cannot be extricated from the project. The same is the case with the subsequent exhibition, which was only possible as a result of Gottesman's know-how and funding from a variety of sources, including UNICEF and the Ethiopian HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Office. Funding does, of course, always come with constraints, either explicit or implicit ones. Gottesman retained some editing authority about the display at the exhibition, even though Tenanesh was actively involved in it from the beginning to the end. Power relations would have been present even had the project been organized without western influence or participation. For better or for worse, taking and displaying photographs is a form of representation, and thus open to a range of political uses and abuses. The Addis Ababa exhibition, for instance, focused exclusively on the fate of Ethiopian children affected by HIV/AIDS. It did so, some would say, to the detriment of drawing attention to the affected adult population, thereby portraying a very particular, politically shaped image of the issues at stake. Many societal groups that are most vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, such as commercial sex workers, intravenous drug users or men who have sex with men, remain marginalized and even criminalized.

Human relations cannot exist outside power. But the nature of pluralist photography minimizes the oppressive effects of these relations by consciously problematizing representation. The collaborative and dialogical nature of pluralist photography can provide ways through which multiple perspectives may be seen and validated. By undermining the authority of professional photographers and commercialized organizations to tell the truth about HIV/AIDS, pluralist photography retains the ability to step out of pre-existing narratives and to surprise the expectation of the viewer/reader.

Second: the sociopolitical impact of pluralist photography can only be partial and gradual. As opposed to iconic humanist photographs, pluralist versions are less likely to be used by global media networks as symbols representing a particular issue. They cannot appeal to the same mass audience. But this does not mean that pluralist photography is void of social impact. The Addis Ababa exhibition may not on its own have transformed the situation in Ethiopia, where stigma, myths, misinformation and silence continue to surround HIV/AIDS and related issues of sexuality and health behavior. But the exhibition is part of a larger, ongoing effort to change the way people think about themselves and their surroundings. It reached some viewers who, in turn, may influence others through their experience. The exhibition was also part of an effort to convince the Ethiopian government of the need to make antiretrovirals available to the population. This has already started to happen, with the introduction of a first, although limited program aimed at supporting some 30,000 affected people (Thibodeaux 2005).

At times pluralist photographs may even have an impact beyond their local setting. The Addis Ababa project, for instance, reached an audience wider than the *kebele*, even though the mechanisms of diffusion were neither instant nor global. Ethiopian national television covered the exhibition in what were the country's first televised pictures of people living with HIV. In a society where one in six people is infected with HIV, this was an important and long-overdue step (see Hope for Children 2003:2). The actual video images were provided by the children who participated in the exhibition. Versions of the exhibition also traveled to the United States and Australia. The exhibit changed as it traveled on, engaging new audiences and retaining its interactive and dialogical nature in an attempt to bring the children of *kebele* 15 in contact with western audiences. Even more opportunities would

and will exist through the Internet, which is not only global, but pluralist itself. It may thus be particularly suited to diffuse pluralist photography.

### Conclusion

In the 20 years since the recognition of HIV/AIDS as a pandemic, the disease has become a global challenge. This challenge is not only of a medical nature but also involves various political, social, and psychological factors. The lives of those who are infected or affected by HIV/AIDS have come to be decisively shaped by how we represent what it means to live with the disease. This is particularly the case in acutely affected African communities, where HIV/AIDS has taken its greatest toll. As in many parts of the world, people here live with a condition that is shrouded in silence, taboos, and stigma. The resulting practices of representation not only marginalize and oppress people affected, but also fuel the spread of the disease.

In this essay, we have examined how photographic representations either contribute to or break with stereotypical portrayals of HIV/AIDS. We began by discussing naturalist positions, which view photographs as authentic representations of external realities. Various problems emerge from such assumptions. When photographs are accepted as unquestioned factual representations, then our eyes become passive instruments, rather than tools for broadening vision and understanding. We forget that the photograph was framed by a particular person, who made a range of esthetic and inherently subjective choices in this process. We have thus explored two approaches that use photography as an active catalyst for social change. Both acknowledge that photographs cannot portray the world as it is, that they always involve both facts and feelings. Humanist engagements seek to use iconic photographs as a way of visualizing the devastating aspects that can be a part of the reality of HIV/AIDS, hoping that the so-generated feeling of shock in western viewers would serve as a catalyst for social and political change. Pluralist photography, by contrast, is more concerned with finding ways through which people can express the multiple and often local manifestations of what it means to live with HIV/AIDS. Such forms of representation can open up possibilities for a democratic and constructive public dialog.

We examined humanist photography by interpreting one of the most influential iconic HIV/AIDS photographs; Ed Hooper's portrayal of a dying Ugandan woman and her child. The process here revolves around a western photographer being in control of virtually all esthetic and political choices involved in the process of representation. The object of the photograph, in this case Florence and her child, Ssengabi, are objects indeed. They are deprived of voice and agency—a loss that is further exacerbated by the manner in which iconic photographs are then used in global mass media. The result is a symbolic representation of HIV/AIDS, one that may shock western viewers and evoke pity in them. But this shock comes at the expense of understanding the complexities of the local and personal situation. A symbolic representation of a person dying of AIDS-related illnesses can easily turn into an archetype, which feeds into deeply entrenched stereotypical images of Africa as a dark and homogenous continent, populated by nameless victims who are helplessly exposed to a never-ending series of crises. Suffering, then, becomes idealized and stigmatized at the same time—a combination that is particularly fateful with regard to a disease like HIV/AIDS, which is already surrounded by a range of prejudices and taboos. Gazing at the suffering of others in far off places may also become no more than a way of affirming the safety of the here and now, thus undermining the very humanist aspirations for social change that have inspired the respective photographic engagements in the first place.

There are alternatives to iconic humanist photography. These alternatives are of a more pluralist nature, consisting of attempts to open up spaces for people living with HIV/AIDS to decide for themselves how they would like to be represented,

and how these representations should be used. Trying to understand the potential and limits of such approaches, we have examined Eric Gottesman's collaborative approach with HIV/AIDS-affected children in a community of Addis Ababa. Here, we see very different images of what it means to live with HIV/AIDS. We do not see victims stripped of voice and representational authority. Instead, each child finds her or his own way of representing life with a stigmatized disease. In the photographs we analyzed, for instance, we saw a 12-year-old girl, Tenanesh, trying to capture her unique struggle and her normal daily routine of living with HIV/AIDS. The Addis Ababa project alone will not change the global image of HIV/AIDS, but it has empowered those who participated in it, giving them the opportunity to express their own visions of what HIV/AIDS means, using collaborative and dialogical means to do so. And, perhaps more importantly, it is part of a broader, long-term, and much-needed process of finding more diverse and appropriate ways of representing what it means to live with HIV/AIDS.

Pluralist approaches offer a viable alternative to naturalist and humanist photography. This is not to say that they are without problems. As any other form of photographic representation, pluralist approaches too are always open to political interpretation and appropriation, for better or worse. But because pluralist photography refuses to universalize suffering it is less likely to lead to stereotypical representations. Particularly when embedded in community projects that promote dialog, pluralist photography—perhaps more so than any other photographic practice—has the potential to challenge some of the deeply entrenched and highly problematic taboos and stigmas that are associated with HIV/AIDS. Or so suggests the type of interpretative research and analysis we have conducted for this essay. Whether or not our results can be confirmed by empirical evidence remains to be seen. Doing so is no easy task, for, as Stanley Cohen and Bruna Seu (2002:188) stress, “far more is known about the space between the pristine object—the tortured body, the massacred corpses, the homeless refugee—and its public representation than the space between the resultant image and its public perception.” The exact impact of pluralist photography on sociopolitical practices remains to be investigated, and it can be done only through carefully designed case studies. But such studies are only possible once we have more systematic insight into the representative practices that characterize our knowledge of and political attitudes toward HIV/AIDS. Contributing to this process has been the main objective of our essay, and we hope that by doing so we have taken a modest step toward dismantling some of the stigma and discrimination that continues to shape the impact of HIV/AIDS.

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