

Abstracts and Biographies

Panel 4: Health/Therapy

Panel Chair: Catherine Spencer

Panel Chair: Catherine Spencer is a Lecturer in the School of Art History at the University of St Andrews, with a particular focus on performance art since the 1960s in Latin America, Europe and the United States. Her essays have appeared in *Art History*, *Tate Papers*, *British Art Studies*, and *Oxford Art Journal*. She is the co-editor with Jo Applin and Amy Tobin of *London Art Worlds: Mobile, Contingent and Ephemeral Networks, 1960–80* (Penn State University Press, 2018).

Surviving the Blitz: Jo Spence and Simon Watney in Conversation

Jackson Davidow

This paper will examine the interlinked cultural politics of breast cancer and HIV/AIDS, with a focus on the photography of Jo Spence and the criticism of Simon Watney. Against the backdrop of 1980s London, a rich dialogue developed between Spence, a socialist-feminist photographer, writer, and the co-originator (with Rosy Martin) of phototherapy, and Watney, an art historian, photo critic, and gay activist. Though the two cultural practitioners had been close friends since the late 1970s, their personal experiences with disease from the early 1980s onward reshaped not only their distinct creative and intellectual projects, but also their interdisciplinary conversations. Diagnosed with breast cancer, Spence was researching holistic approaches to health and grappling with the dehumanizing and sexist medical treatment she received at the local clinic. Meanwhile, Watney, alarmed by the devastating effects of the AIDS pandemic on his gay community, was quickly becoming a leading activist and expert on the disease. Together, they insisted that photography was a powerful vehicle for therapy and health-related activism. In the face of the concurrent biomedical crises of cancer and HIV/AIDS, a crucial reference point for the two of them was the experience of growing up in and in the wake of World War II. As Watney expressed in a public conversation with Spence at the Institute for Contemporary Arts in 1986, 'I'm living through what feels like the Blitz. People are dropping dead all around me, and terrified.' Investigating this potent simile, my paper will elucidate how photography served as a tool of survival during a tumultuous decade of epidemics and political transformation.

Jackson Davidow is an art historian whose work examines the relationship between culture, politics, and health. His scholarship, criticism, and interviews have appeared in *American Art*, *Art in America*, *ASAP/J*, *Boston Review*, *Critical Inquiry Review*, *Thresholds*, *Urban Omnibus*, and *X-TRA Online*, as well as in the book *Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories*. He is writing a book about global AIDS cultural activism.

'An aesthetics of protection': Screening the Queer Body from Harm

Evelyn Whorrall-Campbell

This paper's title is a re-wording of Simon Watney's call for an alternative erotic economy in the face of HIV/AIDS: 'We need to develop a culture which will support the transition to safer sex by establishing the model of an erotics of protection, succour and support within the framework of our pre-Aids sex lives.' (Watney, *Policing Desire*, 1996, p. 131). This is an economy which both includes and surpasses the specific devices and practices of safer sex, to inculcate a more diffuse ethics of risk, protection, and relationality. This paper takes up the instruction to protect, turning it back towards the question of representation which forms Watney's original field of discussion, to trace what I hesitantly term an 'aesthetics of protection.'

This aesthetic practice, emerging out of the demands of the AIDS crisis and debates over censorship, will be traced across Tessa Boffin's *Angelic Rebels: Lesbians and Safer Sex* (1989) and Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* (1989). These angelic images serve as exemplary figures for this paper's reframing of the historiography of AIDS artworks, re-inscribing contemporary debates over the politics of representation, 'positive image' strategies and 'cultural activism' with the risks involved in such erotic imaginaries (Crimp, 'AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism,' *October*, pp. 3-16). Moving through Kaja Silverman's model for a new political cinema, based in an ethical reading of the Lacanian mirror image which 'cloaks' the subject in ideality (Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, p. 37) the paper finds value in the non-essentialism of this sartorial claim. This 'cloaking' leads to a reading where Boffin and Julien's theatrically adorned bodies are protected, 'screened' by their simultaneous display and covering, like the film-barrier of a condom which allows for erotic entanglements without harm.

Evelyn Whorrall-Campbell is a PhD Candidate in Film and Screen Studies at the Centre for Film and Screen, University of Cambridge. Their doctoral research focuses on the work of contemporary queer/trans artists, with an interest in the politics of visibility, risk, and protection. Evelyn's critical and creative writing has been published in various journals, including *Another Gaze*, *FDBN...Publications* and *Cambridge Literary Review*. They also co-convene the Paul Mellon Centre's Doctoral Researchers Network (DRN) for 2020-2021.

Rotimi Fani-Kayode: Yoruba Religion, AIDS, Kinship, and Care in the 1980s

Greg Salter

At the end of the 1980s as the AIDS crisis continued to escalate with no apparent end in sight, the photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode, in collaboration with his partner Alex Hirst, declared that, through his art, 'We aim to produce spiritual antibodies to HIV'. Drawing on 'trans-cultural and trans-historical techniques' that were rooted in the Yoruba religion and culture in which Fani-Kayode was raised in Nigeria, he developed a practice that he described as a 'technique of ecstasy'. A consideration of the references to Yoruba objects, practices, and outlooks has been a consistent feature of scholarship on Fani-Kayode, contributing to readings of his work that have emphasised the ways in which his photographs resist static conceptions of racial and sexual identity and transgress the limits imposed on black queer bodies by viewers, other artists, and institutions.

Building on this work, this paper explores how Fani-Kayode adapted Yoruba practices, through his 'technique of ecstasy', in ways that spoke directly to the context of the AIDS crisis in 1980s Britain and also evoked longer histories of kinship and care. It uncovers how, in photographs like *Sonponnoi*, 1987, the practices and philosophical implications of spirit possession were adapted to counter prevailing assumptions about HIV/AIDS and the marginalisation of gay men in British public consciousness. Additionally, it places Fani-Kayode's tactics in the context of networks of kinship and care work around HIV/AIDS, performed by medical professionals in public hospitals and by expansive queer networks and communities in public and private spaces. As a result, this paper argues that Fani-Kayode's photographs can be read productively as ruminating on the possibilities, limits, and ambivalences of kinship and care from within this late 1980s moment.

Greg Salter is a lecturer in art history at the University of Birmingham. His first book is *Art And Masculinity In Post-War Britain: Reconstructing Home*, published in 2019. His current research project traces the transnational histories of queer art in Britain since the 1960s, with a particular focus on kinship.