Atsede

I am so lonely. I did nothing but cry for years and years so my eyes have become weak. I wish I could leave, run away and try to find a cave. I just want to go and find another community somewhere else where nobody knows me. When they light a match in your head, it burns your body and that is what I cannot handle. I want to change my door of my house so it is at the back of the house rather than at the front. I need to sneak around. I long for peace. I need peace.

An idea comes to my mind sometimes: should I write it down and keep it aside for the future? If I were an artist, I would have recorded these things and displayed them as if they really happened, as fact. I used to go to the roadside, with people who lived on the streets. I would make fires with them, I would spend nights with them. It used to be my way to escape. I am not afraid of death, just of dying in the midst of such people. They have tried to kill me so many times, I can't even count. I would do anything, within my limited power, to hide myself in peace before I die.
In the world we live, with all the violence we inherit and the violence we ourselves trigger, we desperately need art to hold us accountable, to show us our underside selves and not the innocence we prop up and cling to. The (self)revelation that art affords—be it in the form of an image, a word, a gesture, a cry—can have a radical power to yank us off of our mooring of indifference, fear, and cruelty. It can force us to confront the norms that curtail human freedom and complexity, transgress the limits of power and propriety, and reclaim what is deemed aberrant and shameful. It is armed with these elements that a powerful body of art has reckoned with the AIDS catastrophe—powerful not only as a work of art with aesthetic merits, but also a work of politics with explicit aims of combatting the spread and stigma of the disease. Aesthetics and politics fold into a singular undertaking, one feeding the other in the same act of commitment. That act is not in display in Eric Gottesman’s series of photographs, If I Could See Your Face, I Would Not Need Food, the first of its kind to portray Ethiopians living with HIV/AIDS. These portraits capture the specter of AIDS when it first became a crisis in Ethiopia in the mid-to-late 1990s: a time of compounding loss, mounting deaths exacerbated by deep fear, dehumanizing silence, and widespread malfeasance; when people living with HIV/AIDS were harmed with impunity, subject to arbitrary evictions, firings, beatings, imprisonment, and disenrollment. Amid this climate, people rarely disclosed their illness privately or publicly, since the consequences of disclosure were immediate and severe. Even for the AIDS dead, disclosure could exact a price and exclude them from burial rites, leaving the dead and the surviving kin in disgrace. If I Could See Your Face, I Would Not Need Food conjures up this period not by trumpeting AIDS in Africa (or the Western idea of Africa, for that matter) as an object of sensationalism and charity; but instead by evoking the interior lives of those living with the disease, and the agency to be had in facing the camera’s gaze. The one feature that distinguishes these photos as a group is the anonymity that the subjects chose to maintain. The portraits bear a face that is partially or fully disguised by hands, a shawl, a painting, or some artifact; or the person is altogether turned away from the camera, or the image overexposed to make the face indiscernible. The fear encapsulated in these gestures of anonymity hails the people photographed inasmuch as it betrays the society that forced them to face the public eye half-veiled. Still, fear is not the only feeling featured in these pictures. However overt or tacit, by virtue of being photographed, the men and women in these portraits also dare to embody AIDS publicly, imbuing these images with a heightened sense of agency and self-representation. Gottesman’s photographs opened new ways of seeing HIV/AIDS in Ethiopia. They signaled that people living with the disease could use portraiture as a forum for confronting fear, stigma, and loss, as well as a medium for self-expression and corroboration, and that photography can play a critical role in exposing what power and taboo render invisible. The key to these portraits is their ethics of collaboration whereby photographer and photographed together create the image. The shared enterprise becomes an act of mutual commitment and transformation, not only thwarting the tropes of spectacle and pity that often figure in AIDS in Africa, but also breaking down the barrier between the observer and the observed, the invisibility of HIV-positive people and the visible forces of social stigma, art and politics, and other binary oppositions that presuppose a fixed hierarchy. That shared gaze also has a reflexive effect on viewers, demanding us to dare face our fears and strive to see ourselves in these portraits. Gottesman’s work is a powerful reminder that, ultimately, the image of “the other” is a reflection of the self that must be embraced and not estranged. Only then will we achieve a more just world. Dagmawi Woubshet Dagmawi Woubshet is associate professor of English at Cornell University. He is the author most recently of The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in the Early Era of AIDS (The Johns Hopkins University Press, fall 2014). — Eric Gottesman lives in Washington, DC, and completed his residency at Light Work in September 2013. www.ericgottesman.net Eric Gottesman: If I Could See Your Face, I Would Not Need Food (Ka Fitfitu Feetu) March 20 – July 27, 2017 Light Work Hallway Gallery Reception: Friday, April 14, 5-7pm Light Work is pleased to present Eric Gottesman: If I Could See Your Face, I Would Not Need Food (Ka Fitfitu Feetu), on view in the Light Work Hallway Gallery from March 20 through July 27, 2017. A reception in conjunction with George Awde: Scale Without Measure will take place on Friday, April 14 from 5-7pm. Refreshments will be served; the event is free and open to the public. In 1999, artist Eric Gottesman began making portraits in Ethiopia of people with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). Because great stigma surrounds this disease, subjects did not allow him to photograph their faces. Over the next five years, Gottesman made these portraits of people with HIV anonymous by hiding and obscuring their faces and changing each sitter’s name to protect their identity. A transcribed text from each sitter describing life with HIV in Ethiopia accompanies each image. In 2004, a woman with HIV allowed him to photograph her face for the first time and he knew the project was completed.