

This essay accompanies the exhibition *Paths That Cross Cross Again* by Eric Gottesman
May 12 to June 11, 2011

Gallery TPW gallerytpw.ca

Paths That Cross Cross Again: A conversation with Eric Gottesman

Eric Gottesman is an American artist and community arts practitioner working primarily in photography and video. For over a decade he has worked with Sudden Flowers, a children's art collective that he co-founded in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The work of Sudden Flowers, and Gottesman's collaborations with them, has exhibited throughout Ethiopia and internationally. The Gallery TPW exhibition, *Paths That Cross Cross Again*, focuses on texts and images produced in the context of one relationship within Sudden Flowers—between Gottesman and then twelve-year-old Tenanesh Kifyalew, who died in 2004. Placed within the context of Gallery TPW's history working with documentary photography, and more recently with work related to the field of engaged social and relational aesthetics, the installation is based on acknowledging the complexities and complicities of working transnationally across difference and privilege. Trying to work through some of the questions elicited by the exhibition, what follows is an exchange between Eric Gottesman and Kim Simon, curator of Gallery TPW.

Kim Simon: Can you tell me a bit about the circumstances or impetus that led you to Ethiopia, and how you started the collective Sudden Flowers? What was the intention of the project when it started and how has it changed over the years? Did you develop sustained relationships with the people involved in the project and is that important to you?

Eric Gottesman: I went to Ethiopia somewhat randomly. I received a fellowship from Duke University in 1999 and there were four options: Guatemala, South Africa, Philadelphia and Ethiopia. I chose the farthest away. Given my interests in politics and how image making connects to a form of political engagement—and Ethiopia's history with photography—it ended up being a good match for me.

When I arrived, I quickly realized I wanted to work with people over time. I did not want to parachute in and out. I have respect for what photojournalists do, and I think they largely believe their pictures will change the world in a positive way, but I often wonder what agenda their pictures ultimately serve.



Photo directed by Tenanesh Kifyalew. *General's Engagement Party*. Inkjet print. 2004.



Photo directed by Tenanesh Kifyalew. *Untitled (Mimi)*. Inkjet print. 2004.

People often ask me why I work collaboratively: it is instinctive and difficult to explain. I feel more comfortable pointing a camera at someone I know than a stranger. Moreover, I want to work in a way that depends upon the vision of others. My friend and mentor, Wendy Ewald, says that photography is like putting on someone else's glasses and seeing how they see. I wanted to change how I was able to see.

In early 2000, I met Yewoinshet Masresha, an Ethiopian activist, and began walking around neighbourhoods with her. For a long time, I watched and listened, not understanding Amharic. I watched people speak without knowing what they were saying, or someone would translate for me. Slowly, I learned the language and the culture. People began to recognize me, and then to trust me.

Sudden Flowers, the photographic collective that I co-founded with a group of six Ethiopian children (which later grew to twenty-four), was not preconceived. It developed slowly. The group existed for five years before it had a name.

At the beginning, Yewoinshet introduced me to six children living together in a home she provided. Previously, they had all undergone various forms of trauma, mostly related to the AIDS epidemic, and most had lived on the streets of Addis Ababa. I asked them if we could produce a local photo exhibit together in 2000 and, after a few days

of deliberating, they agreed. AIDS was highly stigmatized at the time, but we made photographs together about their lives and held the first photographic exhibit in Ethiopia about the impact of HIV/AIDS in 2000.

Our group grew and we held subsequent exhibitions in 2004 (at Addis Ababa City Hall and 21 *kebele* neighbourhood halls) and 2006 (an outdoor public installation based on the Ethiopian coffee ceremony that traveled around towns and villages throughout the country). The 2006 installation, titled *Abul Thona Baraka*, was especially rewarding as we reached tens of thousands of Ethiopians. The members of Sudden Flowers were thrilled. Many kids in the neighbourhood wanted to join.

In 2006, Ethiopian filmmaker Daniel Debebe Negatu joined our group and we started making films. The kids wanted to make Sudden Flowers into an official organization that Danny led. I had lived in Ethiopia for chunks of time (at that point, three years over the previous seven, in segments of four to ten months each) and they had worked independently in my absence. Now they wanted to work on a more regular basis and complete more ambitious projects. I found funding to hire Danny, who is a brilliant creative mind, at an incredibly low salary for one year.

In 2007-2008, Danny and I (but mostly Danny) managed to make over ten films with the kids, including



Eric Gottesman, *Tenaneshe Curating Exhibition in Addis Ababa. 2004.*

ones that won awards from organizations and film festivals in Ethiopia and in Europe. We wanted to repeat the touring exhibition from 2006, this time with the films the kids had made, but we were unable to find the funding to allow that. So we showed them at a gallery and rented cinema halls in Addis Ababa. I also showed them when lecturing about Sudden Flowers at universities in the US. Many of these universities purchased the films to include in their libraries.

Managerially, I could help resolve some of the disputes that inevitably came up within the group. Danny could play the good cop and I, because I had a long history with many of the members, could play the bad cop. We operated on a shoestring budget, but Danny and I worked overtime even when we did not have funding.

Simultaneously, I was trying to reduce my role in the group over time, hoping that the group would survive on its own and continue to produce work. This was successful for some time until things started to fall apart in 2009. There were disputes and cliques among the members. Some members displayed elitism toward others in the community who were not part of the group. Many of the disputes occurred with newer recruits, with whom I did not have as deep a relationship as I had had with the original members, and many of whom were older and more eager to use Sudden Flowers to get a job.

Without going into too many details, the official Sudden Flowers Ethiopian-registered organization (of which Danny was the director, I was a non-voting advisor and the kids comprised the board) was legally mandated to disband. Equipment was stolen. Bank books burned. People arrested. Danny even spent the night in jail and was the subject of erroneous charges against him. I credit these troubles to a combination of bad decisions by a few members (one in particular), fractures among the group due to teenage disputes, and my poor management skills.

I still consider the project ongoing. I will be there for three months later this year. I plan to make films and photographs with some of the members of the group who want to revive Sudden Flowers. They are calling it *The Sequel*.

As well, I am and will be forever deeply involved on a personal level in the lives of many of these people. While I don't consider it to be part of the project's narrative, I am still very much personally, financially and spiritually connected to a lot of these kids. Though there are obvious distances to cross, we are intertwined in important and sometimes scary ways.

KS: Can you say more about your perspective on the history of photography in Ethiopia?



Eric Gottesman, Abul Thona Baraka installation documentation, various towns and villages in Ethiopia, 2006.

EG: There is an interesting history around photography in Ethiopia, going back to British colonial expeditions, to the royal court photographers of Emperor Haile Selassie (who loved photography), and to a more recent history of photography under the Derg government. The Derg was the communist coup that overthrew Haile Selassie in 1974. As part of their rule from 1974-1987 (which was brutal and, according to Human Rights Watch, killed over 500,000 people), they virtually outlawed cameras for fear that their human rights abuses would be exposed to the world. They named the threat as western “imperialists,” even though Ethiopia was the only African country never to have been colonized and even though western empire building in Africa had ceased during the previous decade.

The result of the Derg’s paranoid rules was that Ethiopians could only have photographs made at official government photography studios. There are not many vernacular photographs from that time. When the Derg government fell, cameras were allowed again and people began taking pictures. Now people have cameras on their phones, like anywhere else in the world. Still, there are remnants from this dark period in Ethiopian politics and photography that continue to register in the public

imagination, in personal photographic albums and even in the aesthetic of contemporary Ethiopian (vernacular and professional) photography. Of course the Western image of Ethiopia, born in the media coverage of the famines of the 1980s, also registers significantly for me, though not as strongly as how Ethiopians have imagined photography for themselves.

KS: Tell me how you met Tenanesh Kifyalew and a bit about your relationship, working and otherwise.

EG: Yewoinshet introduced me to Tenanesh, thinking we could make some interesting work together and, as Yewoinshet always is, confident that Tenanesh would find a diversion from her illness in our making photographs together. I am usually less convinced that working with someone will yield them any kind of benefit, though experience says otherwise.

Tenanesh was born with HIV. Her mother died when she was two and she lived with her grandmother, aunt, cousins, brothers and sister in a room. She was twelve when we met and had surpassed all of the doctors’ estimates for how long she would live (when she was born, they predicted



Photo directed by Tenanesh Kifyalew, *If I Had My Own House*. Inkjet print. 2004.

she would die by age five). We worked together for nine months before she died.

As soon as I arrived, she sat me down so we could watch this DVD she had, a bad Hollywood action movie featuring representations of the American military. This was one of many times when I was not sure whether she was doing what she might normally do or whether she was trying to tell me something: “I know who you are,” she might have been saying.

We started making photographs together. We went out from time to time, but mostly we made photographs in her house, partly because she was too sick to move around much. I left her with a Polaroid camera with positive-negative film and a bucket of sodium sulfite in which to wash the negatives. She would pile dozens of the negatives in the bucket before washing them, so the emulsion on many of them started falling apart.

I kept pushing her to make photographs of her disease. What is it like? What does it mean to have HIV and no access to antiretrovirals? She responded by taking pictures of her dolls, or the pictures on her walls, or by making fanciful self-portraits or snapshots of her family. I did not know what she was trying to say, if anything at all.

But one day, as I’ve represented through text and image in this exhibition, I went to her house and she took out a red marker and marked my arms and hands. I left her house thinking we had been playing a game. I got on the bus and the woman next to me looked down at my arms, then inched closer to the window, away from me. I got home and photographed my arms, only later realizing that maybe she was trying to tell me something. Amharic is not as literal as English; indirection and double-entendres are common. She may have been using her own visual language to speak to me. Or maybe not.

In 2004, we had an exhibition at Addis Ababa City Hall and Tenanesh curated a section of the show. It featured her photographs, which were printed on postcards on the backs of which were notes she wrote to different people such as President Bush, Janet Jackson, “medical students of the world,” et cetera. There were also large prints of her and her grandmother carrying medicine.

I left Ethiopia for a few months and while I was at home with my family in New Hampshire I got the call that Tenanesh had died. I was heartbroken and didn’t call her grandmother for a long time because I did not know what to say.



Eric Gottesman, *The Marks Tenanesh Left On Me*. Inkjet print. 2004/2011.

JUNE 8, 2004

Moultonboro,
New Hampshire

I received a message on my voicemail last night. I figured it was a mistake: the time said the message was left at 2:40 a.m. Must be a wrong number. Twenty seconds of silence. I continued to listen to the blank vibrations when all of a sudden I heard a voice. It spoke in Amharic, an operator. Then another voice, again in Amharic. It was Meskerem, Tenanesh's grandmother. She said Tenanesh was very sick, that she had been calling all night and all morning.

I saved the voicemail and called back. I could not explain the delay to Meskerem so we kept talking over each other, almost as though we were speaking at the same time.

MESKEREM: Hallo. Hallo.

ERIC: Hello

MESKEREM: Hello

E: Hello. It is Eric.

MESKEREM: Hello.

E: It is Eric, hello Wizero Meskerem.

MESKEREM: Hello Eric.

E: How are you?

M: How are you?

E: I'm fine, how is everybody?

M: I'm fine, my family is fine. How are you?

E: How is Tenanesh?

M: I'm fine.

E: How is Tenanesh?

M: Tenanesh is very sick.

She is the sickest she has been. She is almost dead. (Here I was confused; did she use the Amharic word for sick or for dead?)

E: Is she there?

M: Wait.

TENANESH: Hello?

E: Tenanesh! It is Eric.

T: Hello...Eric I'm very sick. (I could hear it in her voice)

E: I'm sorry to hear that, Tenanesh. It's going to be okay.

T: You need to send money. \$200. We need a fridge (they needed a refrigerator to keep food and medicine in). You have to send money. (I was listening to Meskerem's voice in the background.)

T: Eric?

E: Yes.

T: Eric?

E: Yes, I am here.

T: Please send money. My grandmother needs money. And I need it so I can get better.

E: Ishi. I will try.

T: Eric?

E: Yes.

T: Eric?

MESKEREM: Eric?

E: Hi Wizero Meskerem.

M: Eric?

E: Yes.

M: Can you send us the money?

E: I will try. I don't have a job right now.

M: Do you know about wisterruyon? Just go there

and send us the money and call me with the number.

E: What? Oh, western union... Ishi. I understand.

M: She is very sick.

E: I know. Have you been to the doctor?

M: Yes, we went to Black Lion hospital. She spent the night. But we didn't have the money for the medicine they prescribed.

More silence.

M: I called and left you a message. We called so many times. Did you know that? We called all night.

E: My phone was not on.

M: Really?

E: Yes. I'm sorry.

M: No problem.

E: Okay, well I hope you are doing all right and I hope Tenanesh gets better.

M: Wait she wants to talk with you again.

E: Okay...

T: Hello?

E: Hello Tena-ye.

T: Eric?

E: Yes.

T: Are you okay?

E: I'm fine. My family is fine.

T: Money.

E: What?

T: Please send money. We need it.

E: Ishi. Listen, rest. You need to get better. I will try to find money to send.

Okay?

T: Okay.

E: I love you Tenanesh.

T: What?

E: I love you.

T: I love you too.

E: Okay, good-bye.

T: (*in English*) Money.

E: Ciao.

T: Ciao.

The Ministry of Health just approved a plan to provide these medicines and it took effect when Tenanesh had already lost a lot of weight. She will have to gain 20 pounds before the doctor allows her to take the antiretroviral medicine. I waited on my end to hear her hang up. I wanted to make sure she made it off the phone. I wanted to stay with her but there was really no place we could go.

T: Eric?!

E: Yes.

T: Okay. Ciao.

This was the last time I spoke with Tenanesh.



Eric Gottesman, *Tenanesh, Eyes Open*. Inkjet print. 2004.

In 2007, an article on our work together was published in an academic journal that compared our photographic project to a photojournalist's coverage of HIV/AIDS.

KS: My interests in showing your work at Gallery TPW are multiple. One of my primary interests, however, is to see what questions arise when bringing a sociopolitical practice into a contemporary art space, in particular an art space whose ideological frame questions and aims to be conscious of how images accrue meaning. In the last few years I've been showing a lot of challenging images at Gallery TPW, which have been created in the context of experiments with social practice. To name a few: Artur Zmijewski, the upcoming screening and discussion of work by Renzo Martens, or when curator Chen Tamir showed work by Meiro Koizumi. That is, I've been interested in engaged aesthetic practices that set up relationships between people in order to examine what happens, for better or for worse. In the field of contemporary art, setting up and documenting relational situations that ultimately highlight power dynamics and prejudices has become a pervasive strategy. I feel such strategies contribute productively to a critical visual literacy, whether this happens through debate or solidarity with an artist's representation.

At the same time I had turned my back on an active field of engaged image making, sometimes abstractly referred to as "community arts," which is a category/label that many dialogue-based contemporary artists reject in favour of the language of collaboration. I know you resist such labels, but for the purposes of this discussion I'm pointing to practices that connect people outside the art market, or the institution of the gallery, in pedagogical or dialogue-based relationships that enable the production of images and/or objects. The rhetoric around such practices, is that the arts have the ability to inspire and transform.



Tenanesh Kifyalew, *The Things That Hang On My Walls*. Inkjet prints. 2004/2011.

Period. This rhetoric has long been debated on numerous fronts. While I do believe in the possibility of experiences with art being potentially transformative, I don't think that that impulse should occlude conversations about the sociopolitical conditions within which images are made and seen, and how they impact making meaning. When I say that I may have turned my back, I mean that as a curator, I failed to see how images coming out of such understandably optimistic practices could enter a contemporary art space and withstand the critical, sociopolitical scrutiny of their construction. This level of scrutiny is an important critique that looks at the distribution of power/knowledge in the complex relationships between artists, institutions and a broader public.

I was looking at these lovely images created by Tenanesh, and then reading some of your self-reflexive texts about specific interactions that came out of your work together. It struck me, as I read the images and text, that your writing inserts an acknowledgement of the complexities of working transnationally, across difference and privilege. Your texts don't pretend that the final images erase the power imbalance in making such work. In fact, you often point directly to moments that arise out of the co-existence of what seems to be an actual personal connection between you and Tenanesh, and all of the politics that come into play working across multiple categories of difference. Not the least of these politics being the assumptions and expectations by others outside of this relationship as to what this relationship should be allowed to be. And of course, presenting the after-image of your relationship with Tenanesh as an exhibition will necessarily invite more of these questions.

Following this thread, I'm interested in the sincere ethical dilemmas around the representation of other's lives. What kinds of relationships can exist within the work of representation—both creating it and consuming it? How can we think through the export of narratives that are culturally and politically specific? In this case, an export into a Western contemporary art space (that being a double bind: export to the West and export to the space of contemporary art).

As a starting place, in relation to your work with Sudden Flowers, my response to these questions is to try to acknowledge them in the work that I do and show, and try to focus on representing a specific relationship rather than showing a community that I would be constructing through my curation (for example, African kids affected by HIV). At the same time, should you and I acknowledge that bringing these images and texts into the space of Gallery TPW displaces the original function of your work with

Tenanesh and her intentions for her images? Or does it? What important specificities are lost or even rewritten? And what are we to make of our responsibility to Tenanesh's interests as this exhibition is presented posthumously?

EG: Good questions. I don't know if bringing the work into Gallery TPW displaces the original function. I don't think Tenanesh would have made a distinction. There is a difference in language, and I feel the need to translate the work a bit. But the distinction is really in the minds of those who define Gallery TPW's function.

I like how you said you are interested in how images accrue meaning. The thing with looking at photography like this is that we tend to believe it, even when we know it is always partly an act. What I am interested in is presenting photographs that look like documentary while exposing, through text, the artifice and theater involved in the process of creating an aesthetics of authenticity.

And yet, images leave a residue. In the same way that you are talking about challenging Gallery TPW's audience to question the lens and the frame, I too am interested in bringing my audience into my pseudo-documentary process and allowing them to judge what they glean from that process and what is left out of the frame.

On the ethics of viewing or how to exhibit these representations, and the attendant consideration of my role as a white, American male photographer working with Ethiopian children affected by HIV: Yes. Totally problematic. There are power imbalances. I have no concrete answers.

My response has been to admit that it is problematic and to conceive of various audiences not in terms of a solitary white cube but instead in various concentric circles. At the innermost circle, there are the participants I am working with, who have the greatest knowledge of the context in which the images are made. They are the first audience, then their community (as they define it), then their city, their country, their region and only after all that, a wider global audience, who have the least context for the original images and who, therefore, need additional context. We, Sudden Flowers, have been moving out through those concentric circles since 1999 and really only lately have we focused on Western audiences at all.

So when these concentric circles reach the white cube, what is productive? Some suggest that work in the cube must speak the language of the cube. Instead, I suggest we take more risks as artists, as viewers and as curators, which carry the possibility of expanding the canon that so narrowly determines what is possible within discourse (art

and otherwise). This, ultimately, is my project: an inclusion of other voices, visions, aesthetics into the conversations of art, history, economics, and politics.

Was that Tenanesh's project? I will never know. Because she died, this is the most challenging section of my work with Sudden Flowers to show in Western galleries. With other kids in Sudden Flowers, I continue to engage the members in every step of the process, including curating and editing, and they initiate the feedback process. For example, I posted a review of our work to my Facebook page the other day and one of the members responded that I got the title of one of her pictures wrong.

In a space like Gallery TPW, I agree it is important to think a lot more about context. For whom the work is being contextualized and who is doing the contextualizing? My dream, one day, is to have an exhibition of the work the kids and I have produced over the last decade, and have them come to co-curate the show, incorporating their knowledge of the process with information we could learn together about the site in which the work is being shown. Local knowledge is always an important element of how we present the work, whether in Ethiopia or elsewhere. But until I can afford 25 round-trip tickets from Ethiopia, I will have to find other ways to do it.

KS: You once sent me a quote by AIDS activist and artist Gregg Bordowitz that really stuck with me: "Intimacy is the Reconciliation of Foreignness and Habit." The quote raises a lot interesting questions for me about representing relationships through images and also creating relationships to images. The categories of foreignness and habit are obviously different from individual perspectives. As a curator, I think of this relationship of foreignness to habit in relation to struggles with the image, and the challenge of seeing



Tenanesh Kifyalew, *The Things That Hang On My Walls*. Inkjet prints. 2004/2011.

beyond ourselves. I like the articulation of a reconciliation within this struggle, that these two concepts of experience, foreignness and habit, might co-exist in some productive dynamic. Reconciliation is not a movement of reduction to the same but rather a movement of agreed upon contact, a contact that Bordowitz might call intimacy. How are you thinking about Bordowitz's notion of reconciliation in your practice?

EG: I'm glad you asked me about this, as it relates to some of what I was interested in for this show. That is to say, connecting the global history of AIDS to what I was doing with Tenanesh.

The quotation comes from what Bordowitz said about his video *Habit*, a sort of documentary he released in 2001 that explores life with HIV. Bordowitz was trying to connect his experience as someone with HIV, and others involved in the first wave of AIDS activism and art, to the experiences of people outside the urban American wave of the pandemic. I share Bordowitz's interest in connecting and comparing these seemingly disparate experiences and think his concept of intimacy is so elegantly spoken.

In my own life, I tend to get close to people all over the world. This is true also in my work: photography allows me to look behind doors that I do not otherwise have

access to. It is a way to ask questions to people I meet. I come to photography through an interest in creating real relationships with people. There are always distances that one needs to cross to create friendship. What I like about photography is that I need to be present with the person I am photographing. I know this is dangerous for me as an artist as it leads to potential minefields of debates around representation. I don't really understand why I want to wade into that territory, but I do, and to do that, I need to spend enough time getting to know someone that I get past being a stranger and become someone trusted or known.

The reconciliation of these things – strangeness and routine, wariness and trust – is a process I am very much interested in engaging. Many of the artists of Bordowitz's age, the generation when AIDS first came to prominence as an epidemic, address issues of identity and intimacy. Some, including notably Robert Mapplethorpe (whose lover's death inspired Patti Smith to write the lyrics that are the title of this show), were interested in exposing photography and representation as an act; identity as a performance. I see this in the medium of photography, in my subjects and in myself. But I want to get past that somehow. Photography for me is a way to get past the stage of acting like someone else and to enter into the process of genuinely getting to know someone.

Eric Gottesman's upcoming exhibition venues include Real Art Ways in Hartford, Conn., and the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, Mass. (with Wendy Ewald). He is the winner of the 2011 Apex Art Franchise Award and numerous grants including support from the Aaron Siskind Foundation, Artadia Award, the Open Society Institute, the Opportunity Fund, and the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University.

Kim Simon is the curator of Gallery TPW.

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