

## **LUCID, 2001-2006**

*Lucid* uses photography and teaching to engage with and provide a voice for a community in need. The project is a collaboration with members of The Wellness Community, a national organization that provides support to cancer patients, survivors and their families. Since 2001, *Lucid* has been supported by grants from the Department of Cultural Affairs of the City of Los Angeles, the Durfee Foundation and the Delaware Center for Contemporary Art through the NEA, the Andy Warhol Foundation and Astra Zeneca. The project goals are to teach the participants to use pinhole photography for creative purposes and as an aid in coping with the actual and psychological changes in self-image that accompany cancer and its treatment. To accomplish these goals I teach the participants to build pinhole cameras and use them to create self-portraits and other images that document their lives. We meet once a week for anywhere from 8-16 weeks, discussing everything from practical matters such as exposure, development and contact printing to more conceptual issues about representation and documentary, or the relationship of photography to memory and death. I regularly refer to books such as Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*, Jay Ruby's *Secure the Shadow* and Catherine Lord's *The Summer of Her Baldness* as well as the *Intra-Venus* images of Hannah Wilke. Despite the emotionally "heavy" nature of this work, our time together is often pleasurable, and the community we have established has become self-perpetuating as each year new people join based on the recommendations of those who continue to participate.

The project fosters a reversal of roles for the participants. Traditionally the over scrutinized subjects of medical and mechanical observations, the people I work with become observers of others as they learn to take pictures. They are empowered not only by their activity as creators but also by taking charge of their own representation through self-portraiture. From the body attacking itself to treatments that can kill and disfigure, issues of control are very important for cancer patients and survivors and the project addresses them in another way as well. The action of pinhole photography involves both taking control and letting go. Because these cameras have no viewfinder, the results are never completely predictable or controlled by the photographer. This unusual mode of picture making becomes an integral part of the process, and an understanding is established that chance often plays a large role in determining the outcome, as it does in life.

Every year, the project culminates in an exhibition of our work together. As a group, we collaborate on the planning, design and installation of the exhibition. For artists this might seem an insignificant detail, but the people I work with have never participated in an activity like this and it's always very exciting for them, while demystifying some things about artists and the art process. Being the subjects of an exhibition allows the participants lives to be celebrated in a unique way, and gives them the pleasure of seeing themselves through the eyes of others. The different types of images we display transcend portraiture and self-portraiture by merging and juxtaposing these often distinct practices. The exhibits feature three different types of portraits: black and white pinhole self-portraits made by the participants; large format black and white portraits I make of the participants as patients in medical settings; and large (up to 41 x 67 inches) color transparency portraits of the participants which they direct and I photograph with a giant pinhole camera. The participants' role as directors of these collaborative portraits is very important. The subjects choose the location, their pose and what

they wear while displaying a wide range of emotions. For the setting, I ask if they have a meditative or contemplative place that has special significance for them in relation to their illness, treatment or healing process. Each of the color portraits is displayed using four x-ray illuminators as lightboxes. Exhibiting the images in this manner expands their meaning by referring to a diagnostic method used in the discovery and treatment of cancer. These photos suggest another way of looking at, and thinking about the medical images upon which this community depends. The effect of this method of presentation on the subjects and viewers alike is often profound and poses a counterpoint to the negative associations of medical imaging.

My reasons for choosing to work with this community are very personal. In 1988 my partner of three years died of Hodgkin's Disease (cancer of the lymph nodes) at the age of 25 after almost three years of treatment, and in 1999 a very close friend died of AIDS after living with the disease for over fourteen years. Their perseverance in the face of illness and the effects on their mental well being from continuing to create their artwork inspire me to this day. From my experiences since 2001, I have learned that the process of building a camera from raw materials and creating your own images can be both profound and transformative. Pinhole photography is particularly relevant to this disease because its long exposures demand a heightened sensitivity towards the passage of time, something that cancer patients already experience. The simplicity and directness of these cameras helps provide the means for acceptance of the conditions of life with and after cancer, which are never the same as life before. My time working on this project is incredibly rewarding, both for myself and those with whom I work. I also feel that by showing this work, in whatever form, I can help others to expand their idea of the kind of impact art can have on individuals, and on society.

BRIAN C. MOSS, 2007