

Loss Within Loss: An Interview with Edmund White and Patrick Moore

BY TIM MILLER

The new book *Loss Within Loss: Artists in the Age of AIDS* is an extraordinary achievement of witness, memory and love. Edited by noted novelist Edmund White and created in cooperation with the Estate Project for Artists With AIDS, *Loss Within Loss* has brought some of America's most

eloquent writers together, from Maya Angelou to Brad Gooch, to remember the lives and the art that were stolen from us by AIDS. Amid the cultural zeitgeist that would have us sweep HIV/AIDS under the carpet as old business from the end of the last century, I was struck by the pride and sorrow I felt for those fierce lives that were lived with such heat and joy. Raphael Kadushin of University of Wisconsin Press said of *Loss Within Loss*, "What struck me about the book was the fact that it was never depressing or maudlin. It's not really about death and dying. In the end it's about the act of living, and how exhilarating it was (and is) to be a truly gifted artist as a young man."

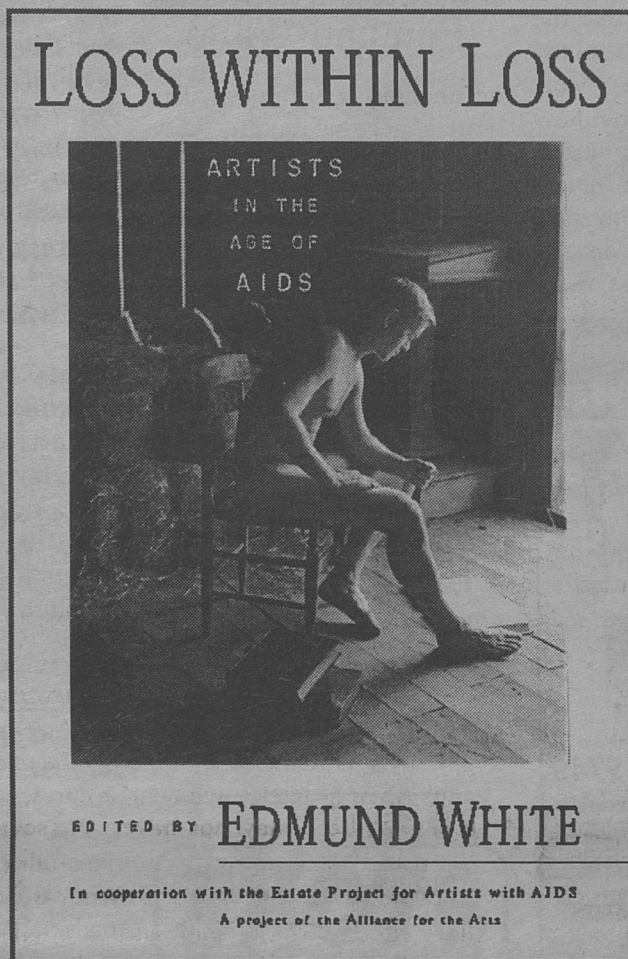
The variety of the lives remembered — as well as the powerful and varied approaches each of the writers employed to mark the loss of one individual — made reading the book a memorable journey of great depth. Searing in their honesty, these essays uncover new truths about one of the horrific events of the 20th century. The writing is endlessly surprising and is a huge contribution to acknowledging the psychic and emotional scars of the last two decades.

Though there have been a number of AIDS memoirs in the last fifteen years, many of them among the most powerful writing done on any subject in recent memory, *Loss Within Loss* invites us anew to ponder the swath of genius and creativity that were taken from us so early. The book accumulates great force from the breathtaking variety among the pieces. The reader is pulled from a stately and deeply felt funeral oration by Alan Gurganus on James Merrill to the angry and irreverent missile that Craig Lucas' launches on our complacency as he ponders the men in his life that have been ripped from him. In his deeply felt and eloquent introduction to the book Edmund White details the hot pain of that love and loss that fills these memories in *Loss within Loss*: "When I hold these essays in my hand I can feel the heat rise off of them - the intense, baked terra-cotta heat of longing and desire, or the headachy, sobbing heat of grief writhing on the mattress, pounding it like a defeated wrestler. And I can feel the simple, blunt fact of the heat of human presence - of eyelashes brushing the pillowcase, of breath held, heart bursting, of another head on the pillow, drinking it all in, a bit stunned by such voluminous and cruel information but observant nonetheless, memorizing the moment."

I had conversations recently with Edmund White, editor of *Loss Within Loss*, and Patrick Moore, director of The Estate Project for Artists With AIDS who planted the seeds of this inspiring collection.

Tim Miller: How did *Loss Within Loss* come to be?

Edmund White: Patrick Moore had the title and the whole project and approached me to edit the collection. I suggested about half the people and the Estate Project already had picked about half. I was brought in to write an introduction and to edit the pieces. People were eager and excited to do it. Some of the writers, Alex Chee for example, brought lots of unresolved feelings of passion and love for painter Peter Kelloran. He was also worried that the painter might be completely unknown otherwise. That was really part of the thrill for people was to have a chance to write about friends and lovers who had



I think one thing that is due to the dead is absolute honesty. There is such a tendency to have a kind of piety that sets in almost automatically when someone dies.

meant so much to them. That was the excitement of this project, to have a forum for discussing all these richly lived lives that might have gone unnoticed otherwise.

Patrick Moore: I had hoped that these essays would be deeply personal and subjective discussions of both the artists lost and their work. We worked together for nearly two years to solicit the essays and present them to publishers. Whether we have

reached a new period of hope with AIDS or are just experiencing a lull, it is the right time to look back at the impact of what happened during the first wave. We Americans seem not to be very interested in remembering and learning from crisis. It is my hope that the book will help us see just what we've already lost. *Loss Within Loss* was a title I came up with to acknowledge that, with the death of these artists, we face a loss not only of the person but their work as well.

TM: The enormous ongoing mourning of this event can be overwhelming. It hit me as I read the book how much unfinished business there is with marking the huge losses we have faced from HIV/AIDS. What did you discover or learn about the ongoing process of mourning and memory through putting the book together? What's our job right now? The book sets a strong challenge to acknowledge what has gone on.

EW: I think that people have become quite willfully blasé about HIV-AIDS. With my own last novel *The Married Man*, I had an awful lot of gay journalists, no straight ones, who said to me "How can you write about this tired old material? Why did you choose to write about AIDS when it's over?" I think that anything that dealt such a huge wound as the AIDS epidemic has, has to be acknowledged for another fifty years at least. The book is some link to a future consciousness. What do we need to be doing right now? The Estate Project for Artists with AIDS is doing a great thing because they are digitalizing all the art work of artists that died of AIDS. That's a tremendously useful thing, because especially those who haven't achieved fame are terrified that their work would be dispersed, destroyed, sold off, painted over after their deaths. The idea of total erasure is one of the most frightening ideas for an artist. The only reason to make all these sacrifices is that maybe your artwork will linger on for a while. This book is in a tiny, minor way preserving a lot of these lives and hope it will suggest that people do other books that are similar. I do think their stories show some of the range of gay life and the experiences that the AIDS epidemic inflicted on people.

PM: I discovered that mourning and time are enormously healing, but I also discovered that we are almost all willing to speak ill of the dead. I think that AIDS deaths carry with them an enormous amount of unresolved emotions that are pretty clearly seen in these essays.

TM: That complexity moved me powerfully in the book — the honesty the writers express about how layered, even contradictory, their feelings are about the dead. Ramsey McPhillips' piece on enfant terrible artist Mark Morrisroe is so unflinching and tough on this multi-faceted person.

EW: We were all thinking of cutting that one and actually my boyfriend Michael Carroll read it and said, "Are you kidding this is the most lively and honest piece in the whole book". Thank God he spotted it and we all came around to his way of thinking.