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Manuel Wetscher, Richard

offset print on paper, 21x15 cm, 15 pieces, 2024

Richard is an artist's book by photographer and filmmaker Manuel Wetscher. It brings together a unique archive of photographs by his father Richard Jenewein, discovered years after Richard died of AIDS. With Richard's illness long concealed by the family, and the cause of his death only discovered by Manuel a decade later, the work questions the evocative power of an altered narrative. Within a universal family album documenting Manuel's childhood, sister and mother, from the late 80s to 1993, the book deals with the effects of a taboo and the poetic force of images. A selection of 15 single spreads will be shown over the course of the exhibition.

## *About Manuel Wetscher's Richard*

One day Aunt M. showed up at our house, very sick. She seemed confused and wasn't making any sense. I wasn't home for her arrival and what I know from that moment is what other aunts told me much later – always whispering behind closed doors, with desperate pleas for discretion, and a lot of moral panic. Often, the versions differ from the others.

What I can say that I remember well is that from that moment on everything happened very quickly: within a few weeks, Aunt M. was no longer with us. I was sleeping when a cousin called me to tell me that Aunt M. had died – of complications related to AIDS.

That was in 2005. At the time, it was speculated that she had contracted the virus from her husband, who had recently died shortly before of a mysterious pneumonia that seemed incurable, regardless of the treatment. And years before that, when news of the couple's engagement and marriage spread, gossip ran wild. That's because the groom, Uncle G., was ridiculed in the small town where they lived for being „effeminate.“

Perhaps Aunt M. and Uncle G. never had sexual relations and got married in order to support each other – he, a closeted homosexual in his conservative family, and she, a working single mother who made her own money and did things as she pleased. We will never know what really happened, but one thing is certain: blaming her death on her husband's homosexuality was, I believe, an unconscious way my family invented to absolve her – because, as we know, in a sexist society, a sexually active woman is equated with a criminal – and thus better deal with the trauma of her death.

My aunt's illness and death forced us to confront collective taboos: at the hospital where she was taken, health care providers refused to touch her, and we were often responsible for giving her medications and changing her IV line. On the day she died, they refused to dress her and didn't even help my mother with the task. But what happened to Aunt M. also exposed long-standing, private taboos in our family—for example, our brutal homophobia.

Before Uncle G., there were other queer relatives, some of whom were even HIV-positive, but who were only tolerated among us if they behaved like heterosexuals and kept their illness absolutely secret. The fact that my aunt's death was blamed on her “gay looking” husband seems to me to be yet another manifestation of the homophobia that was already part of our family's daily life, as they preferred to blame someone they already hated as the cause of Aunt M.'s death, rather than deal with the fact that she may have contracted the virus through her previous heterosexual relationships.

Finally, her death, in addition to exposing these pre-existing taboos, created new ones: at the time, my cousin strictly forbade me from talking about it with her husband; my mother warned me never to talk about it in front of grandma; everyone warned each other not to let aunt M.'s son know the real cause of his mother's death. And it is still like this today – my cousin, her son, is a 50-year-old man who still does not know the real cause of his mother's death.

In this regard, his story reminds me a lot of the story that Manuel Wetscher tells in Richard: not only the silencing of the past, but also the different ways in which the past is reinvented. Thus, it seems appropriate to me that Manuel decided to share this story with us, choosing not to edit the images, but to deliver them to us in their entirety. The book becomes almost a form of historical reparation, for the years in which he heard his own story in an edited, reinvented, incomplete, cut-up form. It is as if Richard were the antidote to the fictions we collectively invent and maintain within our families and societies.

Even today, at home, this subject is barely discussed. While writing this text, I asked some family members a few questions, and their reaction was panic. For the love of God, don't open that drawer, was the message I received from my aunts, Aunt M.'s sisters. Richard is about that drawer, or rather, that heavy suitcase full of memories. What strikes me, when confronted with the reaction of my own family members in 2024, is realizing that this book is as relevant today as it would have been in 1993. According to the Robert Koch Institute, for example, more than 90,000 people in Germany were living with HIV at the end of 2021, while around 9,000 of them were unaware of their infection. Around 1,800 people were infected with HIV in 2021, while in 2023 that number rose to 2,300.

We still have a lot to talk about this.

*Adelaide Ivánova*