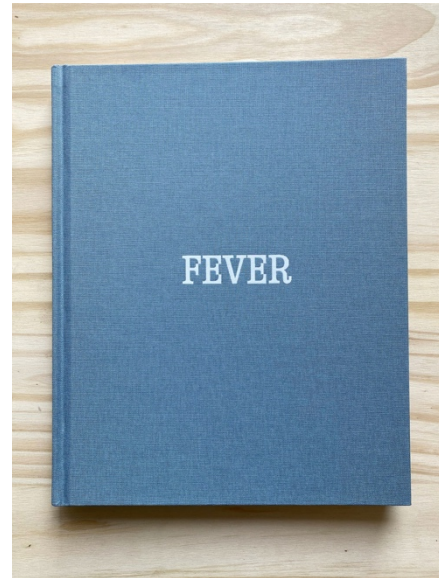


Art Books

Allen Frame's *Fever*

Photographs from 1981 illustrate
the artist's
archival care for his community.

By **Megan N. Liberty**



Fever
Allen Frame
With an introduction by Drew Sawyer
(MATTE Editions, 2021)

In an interview with his friend the writer Jane Warrick, photographer Allen Frame mentions saving a copy of her first published story in *BOMB* magazine: “I’m not only archiving myself but I’m archiving everyone I know.” The guise of the archive is the best under which to first approach Frame’s body of work, especially his color photography from 1981, collected and published for the first time in a new monograph *Fever*. I too am a born archiver (I’ve got shelves of handmade scrapbooks from high school and college, digitally produced albums from recent years, and boxes and boxes of analogue family photographs, all in addition the notebooks and photographs I inherited from my dad); I feel a kinship with Frame’s impulse to rescue his friend’s work and legacy from oblivion. Personal archiving can be a form of care, a form of love. When those we love die, we vow to remember them and thus keep them alive, in a way, through our memories. The archive, at its best, is the institutional form of remembering. In the archive, we all live forever.

For Frame, this act of archival care carries special weight, since his own creative community’s legacy was disastrously impacted by the AIDS crisis. Curator and scholar Drew Sawyer sets the context for this body of work with his opening essay, focusing on Frame’s milieu and distinct use of color photography: “Part of the pleasure of these photographs for present-day viewers might come from recognizing well-known artists such as Robert Gober or Cady Noland. What made Frame’s psychologically imbedded pictures radical at the time was his use of color and his focus on the private lives of a queer community.” The photographs capture the moment, in the 1980s in downtown

New York and Brooklyn, just before there was any awareness of AIDS, how it would remain ignored for so long, and how it would rip through the lives of those pictured. As Frame reflects in the monograph, “We were full of joy and hopefulness about our lives, about what we would accomplish creatively, about our close-knit relationships.”

It’s these close-knit relationships Frame highlights. Though the images are intimate and domestic, the book resists being relegated to family album status. Each image is slightly off center against a matte white page. Even the page number is tucked surprisingly into the bottom left corner, preserving the illusion of the white page as the gallery wall. Unlike a family album, the images are not accompanied by the who, where, or when. That is saved for the back index.

The book’s first photo shows a man in a white t-shirt facing away from the camera looking out a window in a small, sparse, slightly disheveled room with artwork hanging on the walls. On the next page, a woman irons something in the same room, the other figure no longer visible. With each flip of the page, we see new similarly closely cropped domestic scenes—though some later photographs are street scenes, they retain the tenderness of the interior shots.

They are snapshots in a way—quick and unframed—and yet, the small details and omissions reveal as much as they conceal, evidencing a close looking, documenting, and refocusing. As Sawyer notes, “He produces a feeling of psychological tension or narrative potential through his friends’ placement and the seeming orchestration of their gestures within the photograph. Solitary figures frequently stand in contemplation, or groups appear in frieze-like arrangements in domestic settings.”

In one spread, the left page shows figures perched around the fridge in a messy entrance kitchen. One man casually leans near the door, a cigarette in hand. He’s in the background—the foreground and central figure of a man’s back as he sips coffee. On the right page though, Frame has singled out the man from the background for a portrait, his gaze still directed at the others now cut from the frame. Consulting the index at the back reveals the who and where of the images (Dan Mahoney in the first; Butch Walker in the second; John West, Mahoney, and Darrel Ellis in the kitchen; and Ellis alone). Though the identities are saved for the

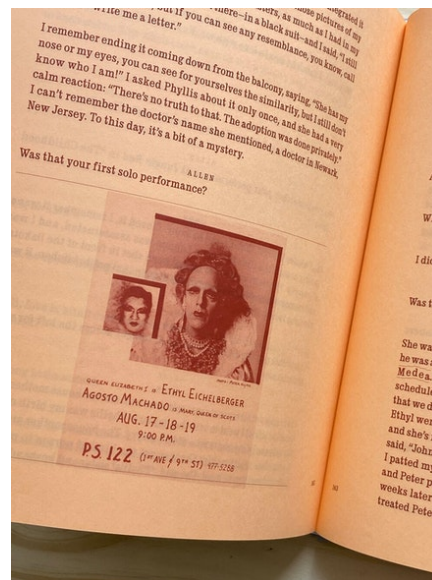


Courtesy MATTE

end, the detail in their listings conveys the importance, no doubt partially because many of these figures (Mahoney, West, and Ellis) are no longer alive.

The book's title evokes this bittersweet catch-22; fever is both a sign of illness in the body, a rising heat, but also, according to Merriam Webster, "a state of heightened or intense emotion or activity" and "a contagious usually transient enthusiasm." Having not experienced this moment of creative flurry, followed by such widespread and fast loss, fever seems an apropos descriptor. These images capture much of what is romanticized about the era: creative life and art blurred together in a mix of small gatherings, shared meals, and seated figures in studios.

But the meticulous documenting that follows them in the second half of the book, the index and a collection of interviews with the people still alive pictured in the photographs: Butch Walker, Ken Tisa, and Jane Warrick, to name a few, shadows the light-hearted tone of the pictures. It recalls Jaques Derrida's notion of "archive fever"—*mal d'archive*—that captures the contradiction of the archive: the trouble and tension of an institutional keeper of once private desires and thoughts, and the deep yearning for the archive that necessitates death to exist. "It is to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away," writes Derrida. "It is to run after the archive, even if there's too much of it, right where something in it anarchives itself." In 1981, Frame and those pictured in his images had no idea what was on the horizon, and yet he documented. Methodically, carefully, and lovingly his photographs show an archive fever. It reminds us of Frame's duty to his community, his duty to archive. The archive is a keeper of the past, but also continues to rewrite the past, as Derrida states, "The archivist produces more archive, and that is why the archive is never closed. It opens out of the future." *Fever* opens to the future, as a memorial not to what was lost, but what was lived, full of color and life, and continuously open to rereadings.



Courtesy MATTE.