Spring 4-30-2021

Art and AIDS: Viral Strategies for Visibility

Stephen Baylor Pillow

ART AND AIDS: VIRAL STRATEGIES FOR VISIBILITY

by

Stephen Baylor Pillow

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford, MS

April 2021

Approved by

_____

Advisor: Dr. Kris Belden-Adams

_____

Reader: Dr. Nancy Wicker

_____

Reader: Joshua Brinlee

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank everyone who allowed me to talk off my share of ears on this subject, most notably my parents and Kate Appel. Really, I was just thinking out loud, but I'm thankful for every conversation nonetheless.

It would be impossible to write an acknowledgement entry for this thesis without thanking my tireless (thesis and academic!) advisor Kris Belden-Adams, whose input, direction, edits, and early morning Zoom calls are not only appreciated, but deeply respected. Kris, thank you for *everything*.

In addition, I would like to thank my committee, Dr. Nancy Wicker and Josh Brinlee, for partaking in this project alongside me, their mentorship for my future as an art historian is invaluable, and I sincerely thank them both.

What a strange, yet unforgettable time it has been.

All the best,

Baylor Pillow

Silence = Death!

ABSTRACT

"Art & AIDS: Viral Strategies for Visibility" examines the complex relationships between social stigma, healthcare, homophobia, and mortality, and how these impacted the lives of Western artists and manifested in their works. Most of the art discussed in this thesis was produced during the height of the AIDS crisis (late-1980s to mid-1990s). During this period, gay artists and their allies employed new strategies in their work to inspire activism, and convey intense emotions — predominantly frustration, grief, and anxiety — associated with HIV/AIDS. In the U.S., the inaction of the Reagan administration was largely due to widespread homophobia kindled by reinvigorated social/cultural/religious conservatism in the 1980s. Against all odds, gay artists and their allies persevered against two deadly forces, homophobia and HIV, using their voices both in and out of the gallery to increase the visibility of the gay community, thus keeping AIDS at the forefront of the public's minds. AIDS radically changed "gay" art, eventually migrating into its own sub-category: "AIDS art."

This thesis discusses the various "viral strategies" adopted by AIDS artists to argue for change. Introduced by Joshua Chambers-Letson in the 2010 essay "Contracting Justice: The Viral Strategy of Felix Gonzalez-Torres," a "viral strategy" makes an impression on the viewer by metaphorically functioning like HIV. Like a virus, an artist's work requires a "host" (viewer) to implant itself in, and thereby "infect" (make an impression upon). Some artists took a more literal approach to "viral strategy" and literally entered the body of the viewer. However, more subtle works employed a "viral strategy" by simply provoking the mind of the viewer, and/or using media "virality" or mass dissemination to spread its ideas.

Today, the impact of the AIDS crisis still haunts us as the art world lost countless great artists and connoisseurs to the virus, Medical advances have led to improvements in the quality of

life for HIV+ persons, so contraction is no longer a certain death sentence. Nevertheless, AIDS art of the past and present reminds viewers that HIV/AIDS still carries a stigma, affecting the lives of millions, and homophobia remains rampant against the LGBTQ+ community.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures

Chapter One-
INTRODUCTION

You can pretend to be straight, but you can't pretend not to be dead.

– Fran Lebowitz

on life during the AIDS crisis.[1]

In 1981, five young, previously healthy gay men in Los Angeles, CA, were diagnosed with a rare form of pneumonia, *Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP)*. Simultaneously, other gay men in both New York and California were diagnosed with aggressive forms of the rare cancer, *Kaposi's Sarcoma*. By the end of 1981, 121 patients had died from severe immune deficiency.[2] The number of gay patients diagnosed with similar symptoms by mid-1982 prompted healthcare professionals to first dub the condition "GRID," or Gay-Related Immune Deficiency, though, by the end of this year, the increased number of hemophiliacs,

[1] Fran Lebowitz, "Interview with Sam Fragoso," *Talk Easy with Sam Fragoso*, Podcast Audio, July 19, 2020. Accessed March 25, 2921: https://talkeasypod.com/artist/fran-lebowitz/

[2] "History of HIV and AIDS Overview," *Avert* (October 10, 2019). Accessed March 22, 2021: https://www.avert.org/professionals/history-hiv-aids/overview.

intravenous drug users, and Haitians diagnosed with the disease led the Center for Disease Control to rename the condition Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS).[3]

Though AIDS was not solely a homosexual affliction, its stigma stuck, with many referring to the condition as "gay plague."[4] Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is a retrovirus, meaning that it carries genetic codes in its RNA rather than DNA.[5] By attaching to a host cell, specifically the CD4 white blood cell, HIV uses reverse transcription to produce DNA and insert itself as a part of the host cell's nucleus, thereby creating new HIV cells from the host cell at an exponential rate.[6] Over time, the loss of CD4 cells will slowly turn into the condition known as AIDS. This occurs over the course of approximately ten years, known as the asymptomatic phase, and marked by a CD4 count of less than 200 cells/mm3.[7]

HIV/AIDS is believed to have originated in the region around Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, and is linked to a condition known as Simian Immunodeficiency Virus (SIV) found in chimpanzees and monkeys. SIV likely "species jumped" to human hunters in the area in the early-twentieth century. The

---

3 "History of HIV and AIDS Overview," *Avert*, n.p. Avert's timeline states that heterosexuals were found to be able to pass HIV between each other in 1983. The report from that year discusses the passage of AIDS/HIV from men to women through sex. None of the Haitian patients from 1982 reported engaging in homosexual activity, according to Center for Disease Control's records: Center for Disease Control, "Opportunistic Infections and Kaposi's Sarcoma among Haitians in the United States," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, Vol. 31, No. 26 (July 9, 1982): 353-4, 360-1. Accessed March 22, 2021: https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00001123.htm

4 "History of AIDS," History.com (A&E Television Networks, July 13, 2017). Accessed March 22, 2021: https://www.history.com/topics/1980s/history-of-aids.

5 "The Science of HIV and AIDS," n.p.

6 "The Science of HIV and AIDS," n.p.

7 "The Science of HIV and AIDS," n.p.

earliest confirmed case of AIDS/HIV was discovered in a blood sample in 1959.[8] Kinshasa's infrastructure and position as a trade route allowed it to become a growing center for the sex trade, which is likely how the virus spread to port cities, and eventually, to Haiti by the 1960s. From Haiti, it likely made its way to U.S. cities like Los Angeles, Atlanta, and New York.[9] How the virus found the gay community is still unclear. The first cases of HIV likely entered the U.S. around 1970, enjoyed a decade-long asymptomatic period, and caused a growth rate of AIDS-related deaths over the course of the 1980s (121 dead in 1981, almost 350,000 by 1990). While asymptomatic, HIV likely spread heavily through the 1970s, due to a "perfect storm" of the sexual revolution and the gay-liberation movements.[10]

For most of history, "coming out" was not just risky; it also was illegal. The end of the first and second world wars provided queer Americans with new opportunity: moving to cities with small yet thriving LGBTQ+ communities, with distinct subcultures marked by their own slang and artforms.[11] These subcultural practices and venues were subject to scrutiny, and though cities were "safer" options for homosexuals, gay communities were by no means "safe." Police raids, for

---

[8] "Origin of HIV & AIDS," *Avert* (October 30, 2019). Accessed March 22, 2021: https://www.avert.org/professionals/history-hiv-aids/origin.

[9]"Origin of HIV & AIDS," n.p.

[10] Max Roser and Hannah Ritchie, "HIV / AIDS," *Our World in Data* (April 3, 2018). Accessed March 22, 2021: https://ourworldindata.org/hiv-aids.; Sally Kohn, "The Sex Freak-out of the 1970s," *Cable News Network* (July 21, 2015). Accessed March 22, 2021: https://www.cnn.com/2015/07/21/opinions/kohn-seventies-sexual-revolution/index.html.

[11] Nicholas C. Edsall, *Toward Stonewall: Homosexuality and Society in the Modern Western World: Homosexuality and Society in the Modern Western World* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003).; Don Kulick, "Gay and Lesbian Language," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 29 (2000): 243-85. Accessed March 20, 2021: http://www.jstor.org/stable/223422.

example, were common.[12] Since the act of homosexuality itself was widely considered immoral, and, in some states, technically illegal until Lawrence v. Texas (2003), discretion was the norm. To be "outed" as a homosexual was to be outed as a "pervert" and a moral deviant, so covert, discreet encounters would have been the norm in clandestine locations including dark sex clubs, bathhouses, and bathroom-stall "glory holes." These surreptitious sexual practices, combined with general promiscuity and a tight-knit subculture, allowed for HIV to spread easily among the community.

In 1988, "Patient Zero," flight attendant Gaëtan Dugas (an early AIDS casualty), was identified. According to a profile in *People Magazine*, about 40 patients either had been sexually involved with Dugas or someone who had been sexually active with him.[13] While Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), has since verified that recent studies in HIV variants have proven that Dugas was far from "Patient Zero," as the virus had been in transmission earlier, an annotated clipping of Dugas' profile sent to the San Francisco AIDS Foundation in 1988 (**Fig. 1.1**) reveals the hateful stigma placed on AIDS patients.[14] On the clipping in red ink, an anonymous author has written the words "Pervert" and "Get rid of these b------- [bastards], and we'll get rid of AIDS!" – with both phrases directed with red hand-

[12] Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Suzanna M. Crage, "Movements and Memory: The Making of the Stonewall Myth," *American Sociological Review* 71, no. 5 (2006): 724-51. Accessed March 20, 2021: http://www.jstor.org/stable/25472425.

[13] Nsikan Akpan, "America's HIV Outbreak Started in This City, 10 Years before Anyone Noticed," Public Broadcasting Service (October 26, 2016). Accessed March 22, 2021: https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/america-hiv-outbreak-origins-nyc-gaetan-dugas.

[14] Akpan, "America's HIV Outbreak Started in This City," n.p.

drawn arrows at Dugas. This poster's sentiment is a microcosm of the government inaction and public hatred that frustrated the gay/AIDS community during the AIDS crisis. Supporting AIDS patients was regarded as synonymous with supporting "immorality," and, therefore, many AIDS patients were considered a lost cause and turned away.[15]

Most of the public speculation surrounding AIDS was morally-focused rather than public-health-focused, and the president's rhetoric did not help. The Reagan administration's response to AIDS can be summarized in one word: pathetic. Reagan spoke about AIDS minimally, and only when it was necessary in the later days of the crisis. In its early days, press secretaries often laughed and brushed off questions about the administration's response to AIDS.[16] The silence from President Reagan was deafening. It was not until 1987, for example, that Reagan gave his first major address regarding the AIDS epidemic. However, once he stepped off the plane, Reagan suggested to one reporter that AIDS was growing at such a fast pace because schools were not teaching children morally-upright values.[17] While it is true that the president alone was not responsible for all American AIDS deaths, had his administration taken the disease more seriously, worked to reduce its hateful homophobic stigma, and had he taken a sex-positive approach rather than a moralistic stance, many AIDS patients may have had a better quality of life. Some of

---

[15] "The HIV Epidemic: The Journey from Deadly Crisis to ...," *Health Matters*. New York-Presbyterian Hospital. Accessed March 22, 2021: https://healthmatters.nyp.org/the-hiv-epidemic-the-journey-from-deadly-crisis-to-routine-care/.

[16] *Vanity Fair*, *Reagan Administration's Chilling Response to the AIDS Crisis*. *YouTube* (Posted Dec. 1, 2015). Accessed March 22, 2021: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yAzDn7tE1lU

[17] "President Reagan Delivers First Major Speech on AIDS Epidemic in 1987," (Video) *ABC News*. Accessed March 22, 2021: https://abcnews.go.com/Health/video/president-reagan-delivers-major-speech-aids-epidemic-1987-46492956.

the treatments we have today might have been discovered before it was too late for many AIDS/HIV victims.

The moral argument denouncing AIDS patients was deeply rooted in religious conservatism. Steven Sainsbury, who dubbed the disease "Twentieth Century Leprosy," examined how Biblical texts' depictions of lepers influenced the right-wing Christians to denounce people with AIDS. [18] Leprosy is a disease associated with behavior. Therefore, lepers fill pages of the Bible with stories of redemption, more so than healing. As Sainsbury eloquently states, "Lepers were not cured, they were cleansed."[19] By associating unholy behavior with a disease, AIDS was no longer a public health crisis: AIDS was a "scarlet letter." AIDS patients, like lepers, were both ostracized because they were considered physically and morally unclean.

However, many heterosexuals, as well as hemophiliacs, became HIV-positive and later died of complications from AIDS. These patients prompted the public to consider that AIDS impacted not only "immoral" homosexuals. To better explain the strength of the virus's persisting "gay" stigma, Dorothy Nelkin stated:

> The press labeled AIDS, not a viral disease like hepatitis, but a "sexually transmitted disease" [S.T.D.] like syphilis. This concept of S.T.D. lumped together unrelated and quite different problems, but clearly laid the blame on immorality. A stream of articles appeared on homosexual promiscuity,

[18] Steven J. Sainsbury, "AIDS: The Twentieth-Century Leprosy." *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (1992): 68–77.

[19] Sainsbury, 68-77.

> emphasizing the number of daily contacts and behavior in bath houses. The only solution to the spread of the disease, often referred to as the plague, seemed to be monogamy or abstention. The S.T.D. label helped to stigmatize those with AIDS and implied that all sexual contact was immoral and dangerous. Such views, of course, did not originate with the press, which usually tends to mirror official view.[20]

News media, Nelkin writes, plays an extremely important role in communicating ideas into society. On one hand, the role of news is to report facts directly. In order to draw interested readers, though, print news media must write for its audience.[21] When reporting on the AIDS crisis, the print news media was essentially reporting on risk, a task which disproportionately instilled fear. Wanting to please its readers, the print media therefore reported on HIV/AIDS as a "moral issue," a disease for "the dirty," or, as Nelkin puts it, as "a disease for others: gays, drug users, Africans, Haitians, those who are somehow immoral."[22] Presenting AIDS as a moral argument rather than a public health crisis perpetuated inaction by American government and holier-than-thou attitude of the American public – especially of the religious right, or Moral Majority.

Because of the sizable population of homosexuals in the arts and entertainment industries, many public figures either contracted the virus or knew

---

[20] Dorothy Nelkin, "AIDS and the News Media," *The Milbank Quarterly*, Vol. 69, No. 2 (1991): 293-307.

[21] Nelkin, 293-307.

[22] Nelkin, 293-307.

several friends who did.[23] Since the media remained sexually and socially conservative, and continued the narrative of AIDS patients being unclean and immoral, many prominent figures in the Hollywood film industry became engaged in AIDS activism.[24] Public figures became political figures. Elizabeth Taylor, in particular, was the first "big-name" celebrity to support those affected by HIV/AIDS, as well as the LGBTQ+ community. Physician and public health advisor Mervyn F. Silverman writes the following about Taylor's activism:

> She had been affected greatly by the illness of her good friend, Rock Hudson, and others in the entertainment community, and was determined to help in confronting this troubling new syndrome. In becoming involved when she did, with no thought of the risk to her own standing and reputation, she brought attention not only to HIV/AIDS itself, but also to [amfAR, the AIDS foundation Taylor worked with]. Perhaps the most valuable of all her contributions was her early outspokenness when almost all of the other celebrities in the entertainment field were reluctant to associate themselves with this troubling issue.[25]

From this point forward, AIDS activism would become mostly synonymous with Taylor's name. This silver-screen legend used her powerful voice to make the public care, even if the government did not. Furthermore, Taylor called upon the inactive

---

[23] This increased number of homosexuals in the arts can likely be attributed to the fact that the arts/entertainment industries generally are based in larger cities, and the arts allow for self-expression, something homosexuals were often not afforded in the 20th century. The arts are often the best and/or only way to speak freely in the face of oppression/marginalization.

[24] Nelkin, 293–307.

[25] Mervyn F. Silverman, "Elizabeth Taylor and the Early Days of AIDS." *AIDS Patient Care and STDs,* Vol. 25, No. 12 (2011): 699–700.

government to do more about the AIDS epidemic. She spoke before Congress and invited then-President Ronald Reagan to speak at the third annual amfAR dinner.[26] At the time of this speech, more than 40,000 American lives had been lost to AIDS-related illnesses. Yet this speech was only the *second* given by Reagan on the subject. Taylor knew this, and used the stage of the dinner to call the President to action.[27] By using her platform to influence both public and political spheres, Taylor began to represent the voices of all those affected by AIDS. Taylor also became a rallying voice, and called out celebrities with similar high-profile positions to do more to draw attention to the AIDS crisis.

Criticizing Reagan was an essential part of early AIDS activism. In 1987, Reagan first started to publicly mention AIDS. After capitulating to Congressional pressures, he created a committee for addressing AIDS. However, the committee's apparent lack of expertise incited critique.[28] In 1987, too, artist Donald Moffett criticized Reagan's late-blooming involvement with AIDS in his work *He Kills Me* (**fig. 1.2**). In it, the work's title overlays a black-and-white photograph of Reagan alongside an orange-and-black geometric figure resembling a target. This piece uses a tactic that many AIDS artists employed: exposing direct responsibility.

Artworks considered "AIDS art," as this thesis will suggest, share an inherently political purpose, strive to create a sense of understanding (of AIDS, of the threat it poses to *all* people, and of the humanity of the LGBTQ+ community),

---

[26] Silverman, "Elizabeth Taylor and the Early Days of AIDS," 699–700.

[27] "Artifacts: The Age of Aids - Frontline: President Reagan's amfAR Speech," *Public Broadcasting Service*, Accessed March 22, 2021: https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/aids/docs/.

[28] Donald Moffett, "He Kills Me," International Center of Photography (May 18, 2019). Accessed March 22, 2021: https://www.icp.org/browse/archive/objects/he-kills-me.

and to inspire additional activism. Many of these artworks employ artists' personal experiences. As the AIDS crisis worsened, often the desperation and vulnerability expressed by these works increased. This thesis explores those shifts, as well as the "viral" strategies used by artists to reach an often-complacent public already bombarded by homophobic messages about the virus. AIDS forced LGBTQ+ artists to reflect on their motives and methods, and engage activism to defend their own communities, partners, lovers, and friends.

AIDS activism engaged more than only visual artists and Hollywood stars, but also included writers who were allies in the struggle for their gay friends. In 1987, social critic and lesbian Fran Lebowitz published the following column in *The New York Times,* after losing many close male friends to AIDS:

> 1. The Impact of AIDS on the Artistic Community is that when a 36-year-old writer is asked on a network news show about the Impact of AIDS on the Artistic Community particularly in regard to the Well-Known Preponderance of Homosexuals in the Arts she replies that if you removed all of the homosexuals and homosexual influence from what is generally regarded as American culture you would be pretty much left with "Let's Make a Deal."
>
> The interviewer's lack of response compels her to conclude that he has no idea what she is talking about and she realizes that soon many of those who do know what she is talking about will be what is generally regarded as dead.
>
> 2. The Impact of AIDS on the Artistic Community is that on New Year's Eve Day a 36-year-old writer takes a 31-year-old photographer to get a chest

X-ray and listens to him say with what can only be described as a certain guarded hope, "Maybe I just have lung cancer."

3. The Impact of AIDS on the Artistic Community is that a 36-year-old writer has a telephone conversation with a dying 41-year-old book editor whom even the most practiced verbal assassin has called the last of the Southern gentlemen and hears him say in a hoarse whisper, "I'm sorry but I just hate old people. I look at them and think, 'Why don't you die?'"

4. The Impact of AIDS on the Artistic Community is that an aspiring little avant-garde movie director approaches a fairly famous actor in a restaurant and attempts to make social hay out of the fact that they met at Antonio's and will undoubtedly see each other at Charles's and Antonio's and Charles's are not parties and Antonio's and Charles's are not bars and Antonio's and Charles's are not summer houses in chic Tuscan towns – Antonio's and Charles's are funerals.

5. The Impact of AIDS on the Artistic Community is that a 36-year-old writer is on the telephone with a 38-year-old art director making arrangements to go together the following morning to the funeral of a 27-year-old architect and the art director says to the writer, "If you get there first sit near the front where we usually sit and save me the seat on the aisle."

6. The Impact of AIDS on the Artistic Community is that a 24-year-old ballet dancer is in the hospital for 10 days following an emergency appendectomy and nobody goes to visit him because everyone is really busy and after all he's not dying or anything.

7. The Impact of AIDS on the Artistic Community is that a 36-year-old writer takes time out at a memorial service for the world's pre-eminent makeup artist and a man worth any number of interesting new painters to get angry because the makeup artist's best friend and eulogist uses a story that she has for years been hoarding for her book which she can't write anymore anyway unless she writes it as a historical novel because it's about a world that in the last few years has disappeared almost entirely.

8. The Impact of AIDS on the Artistic Community is that a 36-year-old writer runs into a 34-year-old painter at a party and the painter says to the writer that he is just back from Los Angeles and he says with some surprise that he had a really good time there and he asks why does she think that happened and says it's because New York is so boring now that Los Angeles is fun in comparison and that's true and it's one reason but the real reason is that they don't know the people who are dying there.

9. The Impact of AIDS on the Artistic Community is that a 36-year-old writer has dinner every night for 11 nights in a row with the same 32-year-old musician while he waits for his biopsy to come back because luckily for her she is the only one he trusts enough to tell.

10. The Impact of AIDS on the Artistic Community is that a 36-year-old writer trying to make plans to go out of town flips through her appointment book and hears herself say, "Well, I have a funeral on Tuesday, lunch with my editor on Wednesday, a memorial service on Thursday, so I guess I could come on Friday, unless, of course, Robert dies."

> 11. The Impact of AIDS on the Artistic Community is that when the world's most famous artist dies of complications following surgery at the age of 61 it doesn't seem like he really died at all - it seems like he got off easy.
>
> 12. The Impact of AIDS on the Artistic Community is that at a rather grand dinner held at a venerable New York cultural institution and catered by a company famous for the beauty of its waiters a 39-year-old painter remarks to a 36-year-old writer that the company in question doesn't seem to employ as many really handsome boys as it used to and the writer replies, "Well, it doesn't always pay to be popular."[29]

Lebowitz, the "36-year-old writer," was close to many of the AIDS artists mentioned in this thesis. As an ally and insider, her voice is invaluable to the understanding of a community that largely has vanished. As she aptly describes, the impact of AIDS on the artistic community can be summarized in a single word: *grim*.

Though the AIDS crisis brought on immeasurable loss, the impact of AIDS has broadened the understanding of what it means to create art in an emergency, in advocacy of social and political advances for the LGBTQ+ community. Joshua Chambers-Letson argues in the 2010 essay "Contracting Justice: The Viral Strategy of Felix Gonzalez-Torres" that the "viral" artistic strategies of communicating with a broad audience of Felix Gonzalez-Torres (whose work will be discussed later) are likened to the transmission of a virus in a human body.[30] This thesis examines the

---

[29] Fran Lebowitz, "The Impact of Aids on the Artistic Community," The New York Times, September 13, 1987.

[30] Joshua Chambers-Letson, "Contracting Justice: The Viral Strategy of Felix Gonzalez-Torres," *Criticism* 51, no. 4 (2010): 559-587.

"viral strategy" analogy further, providing many examples of artworks that employ a variety of subject matter and compositional decisions, thus reframing the idea of viral "infection," and allowing for a broader understanding the role of subjectivity in art's ability to "infect." By understanding the context of gay culture at the time of AIDS and studying both gay and AIDS-related artworks produced over the course of the late 20th century, it is evident that HIV/AIDS artworks created a legacy for this community that often outlived its creators.

The chapters that follow discuss these issues through artistic case studies and social/contextual analyses: (1) Homosexuality occupied a marginalized social position related to the hegemony around the time of AIDS, and power structures reinforced homophobia and the demonization of AIDS victims; (2) Artists fought back. Art about HIV/AIDS enjoyed societal influence and helped humanize the plight of its artists while furthering the gay-rights movement; (3) AIDS art engaged a variety of strategies to reach broad audiences; (4) Both AIDS and gay art helped progress LGBTQ+ liberation.

Chapter Two -
HOMOSEXUALITY: ANOTHER VIRUS?

If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet destroy every closet door in the country.

- Harvey Milk, 1977[31]

The AIDS crisis forced many gay Americans to come out, whether because of their own HIV-positive status or the newfound strength in visibility that AIDS activism facilitated. Within this chapter, the work of several representative artists (David Wojnarowicz, Patrick Angus, and Robert Mapplethorpe) will be discussed to provide insight into the role that homosexuality played in artworks, and to examine the controversies incited by several of their works. This chapter provides context for the position in queer history which AIDS entered into and tells a story of gay artists who did not necessarily intend to become "activists," but whose circumstances drew them to defend the humanity of their community.

[31] "The Castro: Harvey Milk, Hero and Martyr," Public Broadcasting Services (2009). Accessed March 22, 2021: https://www.kqed.org/w/hood/castro/harveymilk.html.

David Wojnarowicz: Humanizing Gayness

Born to Ed and Dolores Wojnarowicz on September 14, 1954, David Wojnarowicz would later become one of the most prolific, impactful artists creating work about the gay experience and the AIDS crisis.[32] Wojnarowicz's childhood was not a pleasant one. In his early life, Wojnarowicz never experienced a unified family, as his parents were officially divorced by 1957. Following their divorce, Dolores Wojnarowicz placed her three children, Steven, Pat, and David, in a boarding home, where she rarely visited, and the children were subjected to strenuous rules and abuse. Upon learning this, Ed Wojnarowicz kidnapped his children and took them to Michigan, where the family lived until they moved to Long Island, N.Y., and by 1960, to New Jersey.

Living with Ed Wojnarowicz was hell. Throwing children to the ground, committing verbal abuse, and even heaving a pickle jar at Steven for scratching his leg during a "lecture," Ed Wojnarowicz's alcohol-filled rage, in addition to his mother's absence, caused young David to spend as little time as possible at home. A biography of Wojnarowicz notes his first sexual encounter at a young age, with a boy about fourteen years old. Soon after this, another encounter occurred with an even older boy, which ended when David's father found out, beat David, and even exposed his genitals to David, suggesting for him to "play with it." When David refused, his father continued to beat him. These horrific experiences were formative

[32] Unless otherwise specified, all autobiographical information regarding David Wojnarowicz is from: Cynthia Carr, *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2014).

ones for the artist as he navigated accepting his own emerging gay identity, but encountered oppression immediately, and from a young age, from his family.

Of the works David Wojnarowicz produced during the AIDS crisis, his 1990 work *Untitled (One Day This Kid…)* (**Fig. 2.1**), perhaps best expresses his memories of the experiences of his youth - and those of many other members of the LGBTQ+ community. In *Untitled* (One Day This Kid….), Wojnarowicz places a black-and-white childhood photograph of himself in the center of a print and wraps the following text around it:

> One day this kid will get larger. One day this kid will come to know something that causes a sensation equivalent to the separation of the earth from its axis. One day this kid will reach a point where he senses a division that isn't mathematical. One day this kid will feel something stir in his heart and throat and mouth. One day this kid will find something in his mind and body and soul that makes him hungry. One day this kid will do something that causes men who wear the uniforms of priests and rabbis, men who inhabit certain stone buildings, to call for his death. One day politicians will enact legislation against this kid. One day families will give false information to their children and each child will pass that information down generationally to their families and that information will be designed to make existence intolerable for this kid. One day this kid will begin to experience all this activity in his environment and that activity and information will compel him to commit suicide or submit to danger in hopes of being murdered or submit to silence and invisibility. Or one day this kid will talk. When he begins to talk, men who develop a fear of this kid will attempt to silence him

> with strangling, fists, prison, suffocation, rape, intimidation, drugging, ropes, guns, laws, menace, roving gangs, bottles, knives, religion, decapitation, and immolation by fire. Doctors will pronounce this kid curable as if his brain were a virus. This kid will lose his constitutional rights against the government's invasion of his privacy. This kid will be faced with electro-shock, drugs, and conditioning therapies in laboratories tended by psychologists and research scientists. He will be subject to loss of home, civil rights, jobs, and all conceivable freedoms. All this will begin to happen in one or two years when he discovers he desires to place his naked body on the naked body of another boy.

Within this work, the artist does not cite the physical, mental, and verbal abuses he endured as a child. In fact, the only mention of family (or the like) is a reference to "false information" that has been intergenerationally passed down, perpetuating homophobia. In *Untitled* (*One Day This Kid)*, Wojnarowicz makes note of various societal practices that dehumanize, oppress, and marginalize homosexuals, such as gay bashing, medical discrimination, government scrutiny, and religious rejection.

Though much of the work produced by gay artists during the AIDS crisis pertained to the HIV/AIDS epidemic's impact on the gay community, *Untitled (One Day This Kid….)* removes AIDS from the conversation. Instead, Wojnarowicz uses this work to explain the discrimination and complex, multifariously oppressive issues gays faced at this time — issues that worsened with the tacit additional discrimination enabled by the AIDS crisis. As mentioned in the introductory chapter

of this thesis, casting AIDS as a moral issue rather than a public health crisis only led to further inaction by Western societies and their governments.

Since *Untitled (One Day This Kid….)* makes no mention of Wojnarowicz's troubled childhood, viewers can assume that hate crimes and homophobia affected him equally, or even more so than his abusive upbringing. Around 1985, Wojnarowicz produced works that centered on family, such as *You Killed Me First* (1985) and *Installation #5* (1985) (**Figs. 2.2** & **2.3**). He also made an appearance as a terrifying father character of an intensely rebellious teenage daughter in an extremely violent family in Richard Kern's short film *You Killed Me First* (1985). This performance in Kern's *You Killed Me First* can be read as an expression of this frustration, as he recreates the film's final scene in which the frustrated, angsty teen kills her family out of rage, declaring "you killed me first!" when her mother asks her why she killed her father and sister. Wojnarowicz made his own interpretation of this last scene from the film for an installation piece by the same title in 1985. Wojnarowicz's installation includes a graphic display of a family of charred skeletons at a bloodied dinner table. However, only a few pieces from Wojnarowicz's portfolio center on family, and on his specific experiences. The largest portion of his portfolio is dedicated to his frustration about existing in a world that fears, hates, and seeks to erase him.

Frustration from within the Margins

The larger part of Wojnarowicz's work, however, did not address family. In the 1970s, it was hardly surprising to be shunned by one's family for being gay. He and many other LGBTQ+ artists relocated to larger cities to seek greater acceptance.

However, greater acceptance still was not *full* acceptance. A frustration with being marginalized informs most gay work in the late-twentieth century. Anger over an overbearing, incessant culture of homophobia, as well as frustration toward governments' inactions toward curbing the spread of AIDS, are common threads in visual art about AIDS and the gay experience in the 1980s and early 1990s. This frustration was born out of the AIDS-stunted gay-liberation movement beginning in the late 1960s and persisting throughout the 1970s. It was further kindled by the Stonewall Riots of the summer of 1969, which gave rise and urgency to a gay-liberation movement that targeted government policies and police brutality against the LGBTQ+ community.[33] Throughout the 1970s, protesters in major U.S. cities worked to grow gay visibility and discourage homophobic policies and laws. In the late 1970s, San Franciscans elected Harvey Milk, an openly gay man, as a City Supervisor. Milk won the hearts of many San Franciscans, and not just its gay citizens. Milk fought for the elderly and working class, as well as for the gay community. With his popularity among both straight and LGBTQ+ citizens, Milk became an influential politician that gained national attention. Milk used his friendly nature and powerful oratorical skills to create a kind of patriotic allyship in the city, exemplified further by this excerpt from a Gay Freedom Day speech delivered at City Hall in front of around 250,000 listeners:

[33] "The Stonewall Riots" were a series of protests in the summer of 1969 initiated after police violently raided the Stonewall Inn in New York City. Stonewall was a popular spot among gay New Yorkers that was frequently raided by police. Violence toward LGBTQ+ persons was/is all but uncommon. In addition to the beatings at Stonewall, for example, in 1973 the UpStairs Lounge, a gay bar in New Orleans, LA, was subject to an arson attack that killed 32 patrons. Violence toward the LGBTQ+ community persists. The current average lifespan of trans persons of color is 30-35 years. Ose Arheghan, "A Beginner's Guide to Trans Awareness Week," *GLAAD* (Nov. 14, 2018). Accessed March 22, 2021: https://www.glaad.org/amp/beginner-guide-transweek-2018

> Let me remind you what America is. Listen carefully. On the *Statue of Liberty* it says: 'Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.' In the "Declaration of Independence" it is written: "All men are created equal and they are endowed with certain inalienable rights." And in our National Anthem it says: "Oh, say does that star-spangled banner yet wave o'er the land of the free." For Mr. Briggs and Mrs. Bryant . . . and all the bigots out there: That's what America is. No matter how hard you try, you cannot erase those words from the "Declaration of Independence." No matter how hard you try, you cannot chip those words from off the base of the *Statue of Liberty*. And no matter how hard you try, you cannot sing the "Star Spangled Banner" without those words. That's what America is. Love it or leave it.[34]

In 1978, Harvey Milk was murdered alongside San Francisco mayor and political ally, George Moscone, by former conservative City Supervisor Dan White, whom the mayor had recently refused to reinstate to his position.[35] [36] Though White turned himself in for both murders, his sentencing on May 21, 1979, led to one of

---

[34] "Mr. Briggs" refers to state representative John Briggs, who introduced the California anti-LGBT bill "Proposition 6," while "Mrs. Bryant" refers to Anita Bryant, former entertainer who fiercely advocated against the LGBTQ+ community and invigorated Christian conservatives. For the full quotation: Simon Hall. "The American Gay Rights Movement and Patriotic Protest." *Journal of the History of Sexuality,* Vol. 19, No. 3 (2010): 536-62.

[35] Dan White had resigned from the board of supervisors, yet sought to regain his seat. White's motive for slaying Milk is not clear, however it was most likely homophobia. White saw himself as the "defender of the home" and was the only supervisor who voted against a resolution to end discrimination based on sexual orientation. Wallace Turner Special, "Suspect Sought Job," *The New York Times* (November 28, 1978): A1. https://www.nytimes.com/1978/11/28/archives/suspect-sought-job-moscone-had-been-asked-to-reappoint-him-as-a.html.

[36] "10 Facts About the White Night Riots," *Mental Floss* (August 14, 2020). Accessed March 22, 2021: https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/627028/white-night-riots-facts.

the largest protests in gay history, the White Night Riots. Posters such as the anonymously made *Poster Denouncing the Verdict in the Dan White Murder Trial* (1979) (**Fig. 2.4**), were hung in gay neighborhoods such as the Castro or Haight-Ashbury to urge the community to protest the unfairness of government policies toward marginalized groups across the U.S., not just toward the gay community. In **Figure 2.4**, White's hegemonic status as a straight male is not mentioned as a possible reason for his slap-on-the-wrist sentence of seven years and eight months in prison for double manslaughter, though it was implied. More than anything, the communities who sought justice for Milk were more interested in mitigating class inequality, calling out police brutality, and promoting justice. In a powerful photograph taken from their protest, *Crowd Watches Police Cars Burning During the White Night Riots, San Francisco* (1979) (**Fig. 2.5**), protesters do not intervene to protect their police. The message this sent was clear: *police do not protect people like us, so why should we protect them?*

As marginalized groups spoke out about injustice in the 1960s and 1970s, (including Civil Rights activists, second-wave feminists, and LGBTQ+ rights advocates), religious fundamentalists – led by the Moral Majority – did the same. They called changing social structures a moral failure of the nation, and fought to reel back the progress of these movements and project Christian values into the public and legal spheres. With the new empowerment of religious conservatives and election of U.S. President Ronald Reagan, the advance of social-justice issues and the funding of government programs beneficial to those constituents came to a halt.[37]

[37] "The People vs. America." *Al Jazeera*. Accessed February 28, 2021: https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2017/the-people-vs-america/1980s.html.

The AIDS crisis, too, would be ignored by the Reagan administration. Both fortunately and unfortunately, AIDS would not be kept quiet for long. Diagnoses of AIDS would force open "closet" doors and put gay lives and relationships in the public sphere, forcing a nation to reckon with generations worth of stigmatization and marginalization.

Patrick Angus: Embracing Gayness

One artist whose work sought to bring homosexuality and gay culture to the attention of the mainstream hegemony was Patrick Angus. A California native, Angus was particularly inspired by the work of David Hockney, whose paintings often depicted affluent gays living freely. Hockney's *Domestic Scene* (1963) or even his less suggestive (yet most famous) *Pool with Two Figures* (1972) (**Figs. 2.6** & **2.7**).[38] Hockney's earlier work was more expressive of gayness, but the paintings for which he was most well-known (and most successful with a mainstream audience) focus on normalizing California gay life - so much so that the gayness is overlook-able. Angus's subjects were inspired by Hockney's depictions of the "good gay life", however, the issues of loneliness and struggles of finding real love, the "bad gay life", were also apparent in much of Angus's work.[39] By providing this wholistic

[38] Though the homoerotic content of Hockney's *Pool with Two Figures* is somewhat debatable, Hockney's identity as a gay artist is not. Here, the question of whether the artist's identity can be removed from the reading of the work comes into play. Even earlier works by Hockney, such as *We Two Boys Together Clinging* (1961) (**Fig. 2.8**) are quite 'obviously' gay artworks upon viewing the work itself, understanding the artist's biography, and considering the title of the work. It is inconceivable that Hockney's work would become void of homosexuality as his career progressed considering the subject is so often ingrained into his early work. Patrick Angus found Hockney's depiction of "gay life" as a major source of inspiration: Balasz Takac, "How Patrick Angus Portrayed the Gay Experience in 1980s New York," *Widewalls*. Accessed January 19, 2021: https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/patrick-angus-exhibition-bortolami-gallery.

[39] Douglas Blair Turnbaugh, "Patrick Angus," in *Patrick Angus* (Stuttgart: Galerie Thomas Fuchs, n.d.), 6-7.

perspective, Angus presents an extremely personal account of homosexuality in New York. After moving to New York City in 1980, he was still devoted to his still life, landscape, and portraits. Slowly, though, Angus's work became increasingly personal, and his sketches began to depict the male body and suggestive imagery, like the shoes left in the doorway in *Untitled (Shoes in Doorway)* (1980s) (**Fig. 2.9**). This sketch evokes a Hockney-esque soft gay presence that is found in much of Angus's earlier work, but less so in later works.

As Angus became more acquainted with New York City, he began to visit gay theaters such as The Gaiety Theater and The Prince. Angus's own diagnosis with HIV came in 1990, however he rarely spoke of his condition; Angus viewed the time he had left to live as precious, and any time spent focused on his health was a distraction from painting. The worsening of the AIDS crisis, his own diagnosis with HIV, and his assimilation into New York gay culture more than likely prompted Angus to produce more overtly homosexual works, as in *Hanky Panky* (1990) (**Fig. 2.10**), for example, Angus depicts a theater full of gay men watching soft-core pornography. The pornography displayed on the screen portrays an homage to Hockney, as the figures stand next to a pool, and the still is painted in color-blocked, vibrant hues reminiscent of Hockney's painting style.[40] In addition to the film on screen, viewers see gays of all ages, sub-cultures, and body types, especially on the far left of the image, where an old man in a sweater looks over to a young man in a cropped sleeveless shirt and jockstrap. Robert Stuart, a friend of Angus, writes the following:

[40] The swimming pool was featured in many of David Hockney's works.

> The theater Patrick painted was public. Anyone who paid the entrance fee and walked through the turnstile was in. From there you connected or not according to your desire, or sat quietly in a seat watching the film. The screen itself was often large. There was something grand about this theater, which the screen represented. The viewer saw a film, not a video. Or that was true in the earlier years. Patrick got the grandeur of this kind of theater.

Stuart's account of New York City's erotic theater scene highlights Angus' affinity for the underground culture associated with homosexuality, however, also comments on the existence of loneliness in the presence of community. Out of respect for the gay community and their artforms, Angus depicts gay culture in a drastically different style than many of his contemporaries; His style was that of gay realism, expressed through portraiture and still life. Paintings and sketches by Angus represented his newfound community and culture. It was apolitical work that became forcibly political because of its "gay" subject matter, which gladly assumed ownership of the sexual expression of homosexual attraction.

Angus died in 1992 due to AIDS-related complications, and it is likely that his worsening experience with AIDS made him more fiercely and overtly express his sexuality through his artwork. In *I Get Weak* (**Fig. 2.11**) from 1991, Angus again brings viewers to a theater. However, this time viewers are confronted with an explicit scene of homoeroticism, "rimming", which is common in gay sexual practices, yet might have been perceived as shock factor by a straight audience. While Angus's enjoyed only minor commercial success while alive, his unrestricted expressions of gay culture and sexuality (in a manner that was both aesthetically pleasing and void of anger) in the face of public condemnation are, in short, brave.

Gay in the Gallery: A Controversial Existence

Some artists' works to connect gallery-goers to the gay sexual experience were not well-received. Robert Mapplethorpe, for example, allowed – in art historian Richard Meyer's words – gallery goers to "rub shoulders" with leather daddies and BDSM-loving homosexuals in the security of the white cube.[41] However, some gallery-goers, especially in more conservative cities/publicly funded spaces, found this chance for engagement with the gay community to be an abomination, and they advocated pushing this community of "filth" back into the quiet of their dark back-rooms and HIV-testing centers.[42]

In 1990, one year following Mapplethorpe's death from AIDS-related complications, the Contemporary Arts Center of Cincinnati (CAC) welcomed the touring retrospective of Robert Mapplethorpe's photography, *The Perfect Moment*. Though the Corcoran Gallery denied the show to be exhibited in Washington D.C. in the summer of 1989, most other cities welcomed the exhibit with little disruption. It was in Cincinnati that this rubbing of shoulders did not go over well. Within hours of the exhibition's opening, police were called to the CAC to clear the gallery for investigation after a protest by the organization Citizens for Community Values

---

[41] BDSM is an abbreviation that encompasses the following: Bondage and Discipline (BD), Dominance and Submission (DS), Sadism and Masochism (SM). This subculture exists across the gender-attraction spectrum, although Mapplethorpe examined only its presence in the gay community.

[42] Richard Meyer, "Imagining Sadomasochism: Robert Mapplethorpe and the Masquerade of Photography," *Qui Parle* 4, No. 1 (1990): 62-78. Accessed February 15, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20685907. The "White Cube" refers to a certain gallery aesthetic characterized by its square or oblong shape, white walls and a light source usually from the ceiling. "White Cube," *Tate Museum*, London, U.K. Accessed March 22, 2021: https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/w/white-cube

called Mapplethorpe's work inappropriate, obscene, and lacking in artistic merit.[43] This polarized groups in Cincinnati and around the nation, and prompted a live debate between a lawyer in defense of the exhibit, Allen Brown, and a representative from the Citizens for Community Values, Dr. Mark Snyder, on the April 10, 1990, episode of Ted Koppel's television show "Nightline." An excerpt of the debate's transcript states:

> ***Ted Koppel:*** *...you do understand that much of the great art of the Medieval period and the period, even before that, depicted, uh, scenes of extraordinarily brutal torture. I mean, people being nailed to wooden crosses, people being struck by arrows while tied to trees, it's not the subject to which people objected; it was the exquisiteness of the art upon which they focused. That's why I asked you the question that I raised with you at the beginning.*
>
> ***Mark Snyder:*** *Yes, sir, you want me to respond to that?*
>
> *[pause]*
>
> ***TK:*** *If you would please, yes.*
>
> ***MS:*** *Okay, again with respect to these issues, these are not, uh, paintings these are photographs of individuals that are taking part in sexual practices which are degrading and dangerous.*
>
> ***TK:*** *Well, I mean, you do acknowledge that photographs can be artistic? There is such a thing as artistic photography.*

[43] Grace Dobush, "25 Years Later: Cincinnati and the Obscenity Trial Over Mapplethorpe Art," *The Washington Post* (October 24, 2015). Accessed March 23, 2021: https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/25-years-later-cincinnati-and-the-obscenity-trial-over-mapplethorpe-art/2015/10/22/07c6aba2-6dcb-11e5-9bfe-e59f5e244f92_story.html

MS: *(Nods) Yes sir.*

Allen Brown: *I can't see the distinction between a painted picture and a photograph. Both are someone using techniques to depict life, so I don't see where that distinction takes place.*

TK: *What distinction did you have in mind, Dr. Snyder?*

MS: *Well the distinction specifically has to do with the subject matters that are depicted in the photographs.*

AB: *(interrupts) But subject matters are not forbidden?*

MS: *Mr. Brown, please don't interrupt me. Let me finish it. Thank you, uh, When you, uh, portray, when you depict practices that are associated with, uh, with harm to individuals... I've actually seen a patient, uh, suffer the harm from another person inserting their forearm up that patient's rectum, and I knew that patient to later die… it is degrading when an individual urinates into the open mouth of another, and I've agonized with several families…*

TK: *(interrupting) But we're not, if you'll forgive me for interrupting you… what is not at issue here is whether you approve of the practices. The only question is whether these things are works of art, and as works of art whether they whether it is permissible to have them exhibited, and to have a public, and in Cincinnati at the, uh, exhibit, for example, it's only a public over the age of 18 that can go to see the exhibit. Whether that public should be permitted to do so if it wants to. No one's forced to go to the exhibit.*

MS: *Right, but, again the concern, Ted, here, with regard to these pictures is that if you include pictures like this in an art museum, and I certainly am all for the arts and support*

it, but if you include these kinds of pictures in an art museum, and you by doing so sort of implicate a legitimacy about it, then an individual who is struggling with pornographic addiction or sexual violence against children may find, by looking at these things, that this may be a legitimate thing to do.

TK: *Go ahead, Mr. Brown*

AB: *May I interrupt? Because this is so full of false premises, it's amazing. First of all there's a murder trial going on in New Jersey where a man killed his entire family based upon the Bible and his belief. You do not measure what is available for persons to inspect… you measure it by the average, reasonable man, therefore, that point is not well taken. Secondly there is no imprimatur; does the Rape of Lucrece, a famous painting, give an imprimatur of rape? The depiction of life and attitudes come out of art but they are always subject to the great debate, including the debate concerning homosexuals, all right? Frankly, I think we're dealing with homophobia, not obscenity.*

TK: *Mr. Brown and Dr. Snyder, I thank you both very much....*[44]

This nationally televised debate provides a microcosm of the divisiveness surrounding the growing visibility of the LGBTQ+ community. Mapplethorpe's work was often particularly divisive, often drawing criticism for overt sexuality and borderline child pornography [for *Rosie*, (1976)].[45]

---

[44]Psyched Videos, "Nightline: Robert Mapplethorpe Cincinnati Censorship Case," YouTube, Video, 22:10, Accessed September 6, 2020: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZJEzEww6YOA.

[45]Paula Span, "The Children's Portraits Innocence or Pornography?" *The Washington Post* (May 3, 1990). Accessed March 22, 2021: https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1990/05/03/the-childrens-portraits-innocence-or-pornography/34fa3716-3c0d-4a83-9c23-cc16291274d3/.

At the center of the Cincinnati controversy over overt sexual content was Mapplethorpe's photograph *Self-Portrait, N.Y.C* (1978), which pushes the boundaries of sexual explicitness (**Fig. 2.12**). In *Self-Portrait,* the artist bends over a stepped platform which is covered by a white sheet. Mapplethorpe wears a black-leather set which features a small vest and pants that have the rear portion removed. The artist's bare buttocks are visible, and Mapplethorpe has inserted a bullwhip into his own rectum. The rest of the whip snakes down onto the floor. Mapplethorpe's head is turned so that he looks directly at the viewer — with confidence. Mapplethorpe forces the viewer to both see and reckon with homosexuality and BDSM culture. With *Self-Portrait, N.Y.C* (1978), Mapplethorpe forced viewers to see a glimpse into a world that had been kept behind closed doors.

Eventually, courts sided with the artist, ruling that Mapplethorpe's exhibition was, in fact, not an obscene showcase of pornography, and set the precedent that the government cannot control the arts on grounds of obscenity. This effectively secured the longevity of the National Endowment of the Arts throughout the AIDS crisis, although its funding sharply declined hereafter.[46]

David Wojnarowicz, too, made headlines around the same time as the Mapplethorpe case. Wojnarowicz's *New York Times* obituary states:

> Like the artist himself, his art never pulled punches. Mr. Wojnarowicz gained the national spotlight in 1989, when the National Endowment for the Arts

[46] Grace Dobush, "25 Years Later: Cincinnati and the Obscenity Trial over Mapplethorpe Art," *The Washington Post* (October 24, 2015). Accessed March 22, 2021: https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/25-years-later-cincinnati-and-the-obscenity-trial-over-mapplethorpe-art/2015/10/22/07c6aba2-6dcb-11e5-9bfe-e59f5e244f92_story.html.

> decided to rescind money for a catalogue to an exhibition about AIDS because of an essay in which he attacked various public figures. The endowment reversed itself. It also supported a 10-year retrospective of his work that was organized at the University Galleries of Illinois State University in Normal, Ill., which included a catalogue that reproduced the essay.
>
> Mr. Wojnarowicz was in the news again after the American Family Association of Tupelo, Miss., an antipornography lobbying group, and its leader, the Rev. Donald E. Wildmon, issued a pamphlet criticizing the endowment. The pamphlet included photographs cropped from works by Mr. Wojnarowicz that included sexual images. The artist sued the organization for misrepresenting him and damaging his reputation. In 1990, a Federal District Court judge in New York ruled in his favor and ordered that the organization publish and distribute a correction. Mr. Wojnarowicz was the only artist to challenge Mr. Wildmon in court.[47]

The first controversy involved a 1989 National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant, which supported an art show related to AIDS, "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing." It was awarded a $10,000 grant from the NEA. In *The New York Times*'s coverage of this controversy, attorney John Frohnmayer stated that the decision was not based on the artwork itself, but rather on the catalogue, which was overly political in its criticism. Frohnmayer was quoted on television news saying that most

[47]Michael Kimmelman, "David Wojnarowicz, 37, Artist in Many Media," *The New York Times* (July 24, 1992). Accessed March 22, 2021: https://www.nytimes.com/1992/07/24/arts/david-wojnarowicz-37-artist-in-many-media.html.

of the show' content was "political rather than artistic in nature."[48] Much of the work was overtly critical of papal and government authority/inaction, however, their criticism was valid, as suggested in the show's title, "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing." As mentioned in the discussion of Angus's work, to make work about homosexuality at this time was a political act, whether or not intended.

As a direct result of these controversies involving freedom of expression, many entertainers, artists, and other public figures voiced support and solidarity with the gay community and AIDS victims. HIV/AIDS forced closet doors open, causing radical shift in gay visibility among the public that mirrored the controversy occurring in galleries over supposed "obscenity." The debates over the Wojnarowicz and Mapplethorpe exhibitions, then, really was not about what is art versus what is not art; the debate was between two ideas for America, appeasing the Moral Majority or upholding the protections of the First Amendment.

A More Recent Controversy: Wojnarowicz's A Fire in My Belly

Though AIDS artists took varied approaches to communicating the homosexual experience, as well as their AIDS/HIV experiences, all AIDS art is linked through a common goal: visibility.[49] Sometimes, that visibility comes at a price,

---

[48] William H. Honan, "Arts Endowment Withdraws Grant for AIDS Show," *The New York Times* (November 9, 1989). Accessed March 22, 2021: https://www.nytimes.com/1989/11/09/arts/arts-endowment-withdraws-grant-for-aids-show.html; *Wojnarowicz: Fuck You Faggot Fucker* (documentary film), Chris McKim, dir. (Los Angeles, CA: World of Wonder Productions, 2020/2021).

[49] One scholar in the field of AIDS art, curator of Hide/Seek, Jonathan D. Katz, has argued both in lecture and in an essay entitled "How AIDS Changed American Art" (from *Art, AIDS, America*, 2015) that AIDS art was "designed to be overlooked" and often was not explicitly about AIDS. While many AIDS artworks do not feature dead bodies or horrific imagery, this is likely due to artistic choice and practice rather than a condition that was forced by laws and higher powers. For example, Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled: Portrait of Ross in L.A.* was not created to be palatable for a wider audience because Gonzalez-Torres was not allowed to be more explicit, but rather because this is the decision the artist made to best communicate his emotions and his goals for the specific piece. Suggesting that AIDS artists tone down their work also implies that most AIDS artists did not fully express their

as seen in the controversy over several of Mapplethorpe's photographs. The work of David Wojnarowicz was under scrutiny again with removal of the film *A Fire in My Belly* from the Hide/Seek exhibition at the U.S. National Portrait Gallery in 2010 (**Fig. 2.13**).

There is no shortage of subject matter in Wojnarowicz's *A Fire in My Belly*, which appeared as a four-minute film shown on a loop in Hide/Seek. In it, viewers encounter scenes including, but not limited to, sexuality (masturbation), Catholic imagery, Mexican cultural iconography, and performative masculinity. With *A Fire in My Belly*, the artist's gallery representative commented that the artwork was not necessarily about AIDS, but instead focused on the plight of being a homosexual in the late 1980s/early 1990s.[50]

Wojnarowicz's use of a film clip of a man masturbating provides yet another talking point, and makes clear that sexuality is not off the table when analyzing this work. The scene of masturbation can be interpreted in many ways, yet the use of this scene to combat the idea that that homosexual pleasure is perilous seems most likely. Wojnarowicz wants to be visible, as is further illustrated by the 'climax' of the masturbation: an image of a machine, which illustrates the idea that the human body is a machine of sorts, and will function as it is programmed. The sexual orientation of the masturbator is unknown. In the film, the masturbator could be gay or straight.

---

visions and experiences. However, much of the artwork produced by gays and allies at this time did express their experiences. It also worked to bring great visibility to both the AIDS community and the gay community, by whichever method artists personally deemed most effective.

[50] David Ng, "Getting the Facts Straight about Wojnarowicz's *A Fire in My Belly*." *Los Angeles Times* (Feb. 2, 2011). Accessed March 22, 2021: https://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2011/02/wojnarowiczs-a-fire-in-my-belly-gets-a-closer-look.html.

Such use of graphic imagery in LGBTQ+ artwork helps make pleasure and sexuality visible, *human*, and it deconstructs ideas of the foreign-ness of gay sex, attraction, and desire for a cisgender audience.

Multiple expressions of gender performance also are explored. First, clips of wrestlers portray the stereotypical idea of strong masculinity in the form of buff, god-like bodies. But they also comment on the "requirement" of gay men to have perfect, Playgirl-ready bodies. Images of wrestlers reappear and wrestle with a beast, handling chickens, engaged in bull fights, and performing in a circus. These scenes address masculine stereotypes and social status of homosexuals' experiences. Each of those characters exist to *perform*. Gender performance is further illustrated by the inclusion of puppet imagery. Even after being shot, the puppet keeps performing and is only stopped by the fire near the end of the video. The scenes each individually tell a narrative, yet work together to create similarities and contrasts between each clip segment's subject matter.

In the National Portrait Gallery's 2010 show "Hide/Seek," *A Fire in My Belly* was hastily removed following Catholic and Republican leaders threatening the Smithsonian with budget cuts if they did not remove Wojnarowicz's "anti-Christian imagery" from the gallery. While the scene under fire was imagery of ants crawling over a crucifix, it is important to note that Hide/Seek was the first survey of same-sex eroticism and portraiture in a national museum in the United States.[51] Though the Smithsonian stated that they did not wish to shy away from controversy,

[51] Jacqueline Trescott, "Ant-Covered Jesus Video Removed from Smithsonian after Catholic League Complains," (Video) *The Washington Post* (December 1, 2010). Accessed March 25, 2021L https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/30/AR2010113004647.html?hpid=talkbox1&response_type=embed.

however, it was their belief that removing the film would provide more focus to the strengths of the show as a whole. Following the censorship of this piece, some critics felt that the government's response to the demands of the "Catholic League" were similar to the culture wars of the AIDS epidemic; the crucifix was not the blasphemous imagery leaders were concerned with, this was homophobia masquerading as religious justice.[52] Though all of the funding for "Hide/Seek" was private, Republican Congressional leaders used the piece as a signal to all public organizations: keep "them" in the closet or government funding.[53]

The surplus of subject matter in the film and its multiple in-progress versions also constructed false narratives about the work. PPOW Gallery of New York (which represents Wojnarowicz) stated the following about *A Fire in My Belly* to clarify meaning following its censorship:

> 1. *A Fire in My Belly* was originally shot on Super 8-mm film and did not have a completed soundtrack. It is not a "video."
>
> 2. *A Fire in My Belly* was never completed by Wojnarowicz. A text panel at the end of the film reads: "Film in Progress, David Wojnarowicz, 1986-7."
>
> 3. The incomplete *A Fire in My Belly* runs 13 minutes. Had it been completed it would have run longer. We have a cutting script Wojnarowicz was working from, thus we know that there are sections not included in this segment.

[52] Frank Rich, "Gay Bashing at the Smithsonian," *The New York Times* (December 11, 2010), https://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/12/opinion/12rich.html.
[53] Frank Rich, n.p.

4. *A Fire in My Belly* was not created as an homage to Peter Hujar. In fact, it is questionable if it was created as a response to AIDS. It predates Wojnarowicz's finding out that he was HIV positive and the change in his work that reflects his status.

5. An additional section/chapter/excerpt from *A Fire in My Belly* was located on another film reel in Wojnarowicz's collection. It runs 7 minutes. These sections are listed in the cutting script under the section heading "Prostitution." This section was used by Wojnarowicz and Rosa von Praunheim in von Praunheim's film *Silence = Death*, 1989. We have a super 8 film roll that Wojnarowicz titled that reads "Peter, etc…. Mexico, etc." and contains the name "Michael Lupetin" written in pencil and has Wojnarowicz's phone number "228-7024 NYC"—all written in Wojnarowicz's hand. Lupetin was the producer of *Silence = Death*. Based on the edge code, the film stock is dated 1986-7.

6. A 4-minute edit of this 7-minute excerpt was used in the Hide/Seek exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery with an added soundtrack derived from an audiocassette from Wojnarowicz's Papers of a June 1989 ACT-UP demonstration. This added soundtrack was not part of the artist's original work and/or vision and probably has led people to think that *A Fire in My Belly* was about the AIDS crisis. The addition of this soundtrack was approved by the Wojnarowicz estate.

7. The Youtube version of *FIMB* with music from Plague Mass by Diamanda Galas was loaded by Semiotext(e). This version originally appeared in Rosa

von Praunheim's film *Silence = Death*, 1989. The master footage for this version with the Galas soundtrack is not in the David Wojnarowicz Papers at the Fales Library nor is there any indication that Wojnarowicz created this version. It is debatable whether the piece included in von Praunhiem's film could be called *A Fire in My Belly*. The most we can accurately say is that the footage was removed by Wojnarowicz from *A Fire in My Belly* and given to Michael Lupetin for use in *Silence = Death*.

8. We do not know why Wojnarowicz never completed *A Fire in My Belly*.[54]

From these eight points, it is most important to understand that *A Fire in My Belly* was not necessarily made in response to the AIDS crisis, and that this unfinished work has been appropriated and repackaged by other artists. The 4-minute excerpt from "Part II" that includes added soundtrack from Diamanda Galas (which had previously been used by ACT-UP), led many to believe that *A Fire in My Belly* was, in fact, solely a commentary on the AIDS crisis.[55] This 4-minute, sound-tracked excerpt was the piece exhibited (briefly) by the National Portrait Gallery.

When considering the film – as shown in Hide/Seek and available on YouTube –it becomes difficult not to question Wojnarowicz's heavy appropriation of Mexican culture. Almost all of the imagery in the work can be attributed to

[54] David Ng, "Getting the Facts Straight about Wojnarowicz's *A Fire in My Belly*." *Los Angeles Times* (Feb. 2, 2011). Accessed March 22, 2021: https://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2011/02/wojnarowiczs-a-fire-in-my-belly-gets-a-closer-look.html.

[55] Refer to the quoted item six on previous page, from the PPOW Gallery release. Wojnarowicz's estate assumed control of the artwork and its completion after his death.

Mexican culture. By pairing his own experiences as a gay man with the social contrasts Wojnarowicz saw visiting Mexico after a terrible earthquake, the piece *A Fire in My Belly* communicates the overwhelming feeling of helplessness Wojnarowicz feels as a homosexual as well as his inability to combat socio-economic injustice in the world.[56] Furthermore, it is likely Wojnarowicz empathized with these "helpless beggars" following the 1985 Mexico City earthquake. Images of coins falling into blood speak further to the point of helplessness, pondering how much quarters can really help those suffering from irremediable loss.

Knowing Wojnarowicz's sexual orientation (as well as the timing of this film's creation), it would be difficult to declare that *A Fire in My Belly* has no ties to the AIDS crisis. *A Fire in My Belly* creates meaning by portraying the artist's emotions about natural disaster in Mexico (human suffering), the AIDS crisis (human suffering), and the systematic marginalization of the LGBTQ+ community (human suffering). The manifestation of the desire to end human suffering and question the institutions that perpetuate said suffering exists as the "fire in the belly." To communicate that "fire in the belly," Wojnarowicz uses both explicit imagery as well as appropriated images from another culture. The combination of both is powerful. Appropriation of Mexican cultural images and scenes communicates the literal inspiration for the work while serving as a platform for microcosmic displays of systematic and hierarchical injustice.

[56] "A Fire in My Belly." *Electronic Arts Intermix: A Fire in My Belly, David Wojnarowicz*, Electronic Arts Intermix. Accessed March 23, 2021: https://www.eai.org/titles/a-fire-in-my-belly.

A Price to Pay for Visibility

In addition to censorship, visibility can also bring out hatred. Those who felt AIDS was a moral issue rather than a public health crisis began to feel empowered with the eradication of society's moral failures— druggies, sluts, and homosexuals. Ann P. Meredith's photograph *AIDS — JUDGEMENT HAS COME* (**Fig. 2.14**) shows the struggle between moral failure and public health crisis. Taken in Slidell, Louisiana, in 1989, Meredith's black-and-white photograph features a set of billboards surrounded by trees. The billboards contain the following statements:

> Billboard (top): SIN WILL KILL YOU! [below] Jesus gives you life. [below] Need Help? Call 892-2989 or 892-9188 [spray painted] Love [below] Peace
>
> Billboard (bottom): AIDS [below] JUDGEMENT HAS COME! [spray painted] There is none righteous (Romans 3:10) No! Not one![57]

Noting that this photograph was taken in the Deep South in the late 1980s, it is fair to assume that this sign was likely agreed with by many passers-by on the road. While many of the other Christians in this Bible Belt region may not have been as blatantly expressive as the verbiage on this billboard, many would have agreed that AIDS was a consequence of a lifestyle that did not align with God's word. Therefore, AIDS was not a condition to pity, but a symbol of God's rightful wrath.

Spray-painted onto the bottom billboard is the Bible verse Romans 3:10,

[57] "I love Sarah" has also been spray painted on the billboard, yet deemed non-essential to this read.

which states, "As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one" (KJV), the latter of which is also spray-painted onto the sign. This quotation, in addition to the words "love" and "peace" spray-painted on the top billboard, signifies the unique struggle of AIDS in Christian, right-wing America: a struggle between wrath-of-God and love-thy-neighbor. Meredith aptly captures this theological struggle in her photograph, the subject of which seems to be wasting away, needing a fresh coat of paint, good cleaning, or new signs altogether. Here, the photograph makes its most pertinent point: while religion fights to navigate its moral convictions, people are wasting away — much like the billboard.

Chapter Three -
LET'S TALK AIDS

I am going to go out screaming so fucking rudely that you will hear this coarse, crude voice of mine in your nightmares! You are going to die, and you are going to die very, very soon unless you get up off your fucking tushies and fight back!
–Larry Kramer,

from the documentary *Positive*, 1990.

Though societal fears about the "effects" of homosexuality were rampant in the late-20th century, the fear of AIDS shaped artworks equally as much as frustrations with a homophobic society. HIV/AIDS originally was referred to as "Gay Cancer" (1981), then GRID, or Gay-Related Immune Deficiency, by 1982.[58] It would not be until 1986 that the U.S. Surgeon General made it known that HIV could not be spread through casual contact or saliva. But even in this report from 1986, Surgeon General Everett Koop continues the trend of moralizing HIV/AIDS, saying:

[58] "Threads of Remembrance: AIDS Introduction," Exhibitions, University Libraries, University of North Texas. Accessed March 22, 2021: https://exhibits.library.unt.edu/aids-quilt/aids-introduction/.

> AIDS no longer is the concern of any one segment of society; it is the concern of us all. No American's life is in danger if he/she or their sexual partners do not engage in high risk sexual behavior or use shared needles or syringes to inject illicit drugs into the body. People who engage in high risk sexual behavior or who shoot drugs are risking infection with the AIDS virus and are risking their lives and the lives of others, including their unborn children. We cannot yet know the full impact of AIDS on our society. From a clinical point of view, there may be new manifestations of AIDS-for example, mental disturbances due to the infection of the brain by the AIDS virus in carriers of the virus. From a social point of view, it may bring an end to the free-wheeling sexual lifestyle which has been called the sexual revolution. Economically, the care of AIDS patients will put a tremendous strain on our already overburdened and costly health care delivery system. The most certain way to avoid getting the AIDS virus and to control the AIDS epidemic in the United States is for individuals to avoid promiscuous sexual practices, to maintain mutually faithful monogamous sexual relationships and to avoid injecting illicit drugs.[59]

Here, Dr. Koop makes pretenses that, while technically valid, allow for conservative readers to feel empowered in their cause. His statement begins with the sentence "AIDS no longer is the concern of any one segment of society; it is the concern of us all," yet in the next sentence contradicts himself, stating "No American's life is in danger if he/she or their sexual partners do not engage in high risk sexual behavior

[59] "Surgeon General's Report on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome." National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health (NIH), n.d.

or use shared needles or syringes to inject illicit drugs into the body." This contradiction alone is an example of the moralization of AIDS; it is also inherently false. By the time this pamphlet was published in 1986, Ryan White, a thirteen-year-old boy from Indiana who contracted HIV via treatment for hemophilia, had already become a public figure after being refused admittance to school following his diagnosis in December 1984.[60] Dr. Koop makes note in his summary of various right-wing values that allow for HIV/AIDS to still be stigmatized as a plague for the degenerate, bringing up death to the unborn (semblance to abortion), the economic strain of AIDS patients (disrupt the "progress" of Reaganomics), and an end to the sexual revolution (re-glorification of the monogamous nuclear family). In many ways, this entry by Dr. Koop allows for readers with the same moralistic values to view HIV/AIDS as a public service, finally removing society's impurities. With this information in mind, recall Ann P. Meredith's 1989 photograph of a slightly aged billboard from the previous chapter (fig. **2.14**), and ponder if public announcements such as this one from the Surgeon General led to its erection.

The understanding that HIV could only be spread through contact with infected blood or semen was not regarded by the public as a breakthrough, per se. Stigmas ran rampant even after this discovery, and casual moments such as Princess Diana shaking hands with AIDS patients in1987, for example, were considered controversial. In this context, straight photographer Andres Serrano's 1990 series of images *Blood and Semen* (**Figs. 3.1** & **3.2**) emphasize the natural origins of

[60] "1985 - Ryan White Banned from School Because of AIDS," Hemophilia Federation of America (March 17, 2014). Accessed March 22, 2021: https://www.hemophiliafed.org/news-stories/2014/03/1985-ryan-white-banned-from-school-because-of-aids/.

HIV/AIDS. In his photographs, blood and semen spiral together, like waves crashing in the sea. This destigmatizes HIV/AIDS by visually communicating its source: bodily fluids. Though the public may distance itself from homosexuality to distance itself from HIV/AIDS, Serrano's images bring viewers closer to the source of the virus than simple contact with at-risk individuals.

This chapter highlights the work of artists and art collectives that decided, proactively, to engage the subject of AIDS directly, transcending emotions both collective and personal, and thereby defending their communities against charges of immorality and to continuing to humanize gayness in the face of crisis.

Acting Up

The work of AIDS activist organizations such as AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power, or ACT UP, also sought to bring the public closer to AIDS, and in doing so, brought visibility to the LGBTQ+ and AIDS-afflicted communities. Visibility was the focus of Larry Kramer, founder of the Gay Men's Health Crisis (1982), and later, founder of ACT UP. In his fiery 1983 essay "1,112 and Counting," Kramer made the following call(s) to action:

> If this article doesn't scare the shit out of you, we're in real trouble. If this article doesn't rouse you to anger, fury, rage, and action, gay men may have no future on this earth. Our continued existence depends on just how angry you can get…. After almost two years of an epidemic, there still are no answers. After almost two years of an epidemic, the cause of AIDS remains unknown. After almost two years of an epidemic, there is no cure. Hospitals are now so filled with AIDS patients that there is often a waiting period of

up to a month before admission, no matter how sick you are. And, once in, patients are now more and more being treated like lepers as hospital staffs become increasingly worried that AIDS is infectious. Suicides are now being reported of men who would rather die than face such medical uncertainty, such uncertain therapies, such hospital treatment, and the appalling statistic that 86 percent of all serious AIDS cases die after three years' time. If all of this had been happening to any other community for two long years, there would have been, long ago, such an outcry from that community and all its members that the government of this city and this country would not know what had hit them. Why isn't every gay man in this city so scared shitless that he is screaming for action? Does every gay man in New York want to die?

….

I am sick of closeted gays. … Every gay man who is unable to come forward now and fight to save his own life is truly helping to kill the rest of us. There is only one thing that's going to save some of us, and this is numbers and pressure and our being perceived as united and a threat. As more and more of my friends die, I have less and less sympathy for men who are afraid their mommies will find out or afraid their bosses will find out or afraid their fellow doctors or professional associates will find out. Unless we can generate, visibly, numbers, masses, we are going to die. I am sick of everyone in this community who tells me to stop creating a panic. How many of us have to die before you get scared off your ass and into action?... Every straight person who is knowledgeable about the AIDS epidemic can't understand why gay men aren't marching on the White House. Over and

> over again I hear from them, "Why aren't you guys doing anything?" Every politician I have spoken to has said to me confidentially, "You guys aren't making enough noise. Bureaucracy only responds to pressure."[61]

Kramer's final line, "Bureaucracy only responds to pressure," summarizes the eventual goal of ACT UP: pressure. With "Silence = Death" as their official motto, ACT UP's organizers unapologetically turned up the volume on their activism.

Criticism of religious organizations was a critical aspect of ACT UP's work. One poster, *Know Your Scumbags* (1989) (**Fig. 3.3**), likens Papal headwear to the shape of a condom, and underneath the condom states: "This one prevents AIDS." The outrage captured in this work is directed at New York City Archbishop John O'Connor, who vehemently opposed public AIDS education and the public distribution of condoms.[62] Hung in a supremely public place, a New York City subway station, it is speculated that this work might have inspired artist Keith Haring to join ACT UP.[63] Nevertheless, ACT UP's pull-no-punches style of activism effectively called out perpetrators of the worsening crisis, giving rise to an early version of "cancel culture." As is true with regard to criticism of Ronal Reagan, although Archbishop O'Connor was not directly responsible for each new diagnosis of HIV, as a person with a strong platform, his own actions did not provide any

---

[61]Karen Ocamb, "Larry Kramer's Historic Essay: AIDS At 30," Bilerico Report, *LGBTQ Nation* (June 14, 2011). Accessed March 23, 2021: http://bilerico.lgbtqnation.com/2011/06/larry_kramers_historic_essay_aids_at_30.php.

[62] Christopher Reed, *Art and Homosexuality: A History of Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 220.

[63]"Richard Deagle and Victor Mendolia - Know Your Scumbags," *ClampArt*, n.d. Accessed March 23, 2021: https://clampart.com/2017/06/know-your-scumbags/deagle-and-mendolia_know-your-scumbags-980/.

resolve to the health crisis existing in his own city. As mentioned throughout this thesis, the AIDS crisis turned into a political/moral argument rather than being treated as a matter of public health. Frustration with this gridlock forced ACT UP, Grand Fury, and similar organizations to aggressively take action against individuals inhibiting progress.

Within ACT UP, smaller sub-organizations formed, such as Gran Fury. This organization produced work that incited understanding and visibility above all else. Perhaps most notably, the work of Gran Fury sought to equalize homosexual and heterosexual relations. This was a revolutionary act considering it was not until 2003's landmark Supreme Court decision, Lawrence vs. Texas, that anti-sodomy laws across the U.S. were lifted.[64] An easy and HIV-safe method for Gran Fury to promote both LGBTQ+ visibility and homo/hetero equivalency was through "kiss-ins" and kissing campaigns. The kiss was a battleground; it was a sex act safe for all orientations. In the bus poster, *Kissing Doesn't Kill: Greed and Indifference Do* (1989) (**Fig. 3.4**) Gran Fury/ACT UP features three couples — one gay, one straight, one lesbian — kissing. Beneath the three couples sits a line of text stating: "Corporate greed, government inaction, and public indifference make AIDS a political crisis." With this bottom line of text, Gran Fury points out the enemies while uniting people of all sexual orientations.

The queer kiss was essential to Gran Fury's communications. Their flyer-turned-t-shirt entitled *Read My Lips* (1988) (**Fig. 3.5**) also featured a queer kiss, this time with two sailor boys embracing. This piece was used to promote an upcoming

[64] "Lawrence v. Texas." *Oyez*. Accessed March 12, 2021: https://www.oyez.org/cases/2002/02-102.

kiss-in sponsored by ACT UP, yet in its duality, also directly challenges heteronormativity through imperative voice and public display.[65] At the kiss-in, a fact-sheet entitled "Why We Kiss" was distributed, stating the following points:

- We kiss in an aggressive demonstration of affection.
- We kiss to protest the cruel and painful bigotry that affects the lives of lesbians and gay men.
- We kiss so that all who see us will be forced to confront their own homophobia.
- We kiss to challenge repressive conventions that prohibit displays of love between

  persons of the same sex.
- We kiss as an affirmation of our feelings, our desires, ourselves.[66]

In short, the queer kiss is natural, and no different from the heterosexual kiss.

The sense of urgency surrounding works by members of ACT UP and similar organizations was due to the overwhelming number of lives lost in the community. Recall Larry Kramer's impassioned article mentioned previously in this chapter. His article's sense of urgency was prompted by deaths of friends and fellow members of the gay community. Whether the gravity of Kramer's words stemmed from anxiety and/or grief, his essay highlights the complex emotional relationship many members of the experienced: fear and sorrow. With these two emotions, death

[65] Charles E. Morris and John M. Sloop, "'What Lips These Lips Have Kissed": Refiguring the Politics of Queer Public Kissing," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 3, no. 1 (August 6, 2006),.

[66] Charles E. Morris and John M. Sloop, "What Lips These Lips Have Kissed."

is the central factor, the fear of death and the sadness over death. Communicating these complex emotions regarding loss, then, became an art form in itself.

The Role of Loss in AIDS Art

The subject of loss is central to the work of artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres. In *Untitled (Billboard)* (1991) (**Fig. 3.6**) the subject of loss is further emphasized in his "portrait" by removing the existence of a physical body from it. The subject of his portrait is physically lost, though their essence remains in the work. *Untitled (Billboard)* in concept, is a relatively simple piece, a black-and-white photograph of an empty bed with two impressions still in the sheets. The piece was completed in response to Gonzalez-Torres losing his lover, Ross Laycock, to AIDS-related complications in the same year. The absence of his lover Ross's body, yet existence of his spirit presents itself in much of Felix Gonzalez-Torres' work, especially *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991) (**Fig. 4.1**), which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Expressing the relationship between Ross Laycock and himself was an essential part of Gonzalez-Torres' work. His piece, *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* (1991) (**Fig. 3.7**) encapsulates their relationship. The work consists of two analog clocks in perfect synchronization, both emphasizing the inevitable flow of time. When commenting on this work, Gonzalez-Torres stated that time was a major fear of his, and this work was one of the scariest pieces he ever had to complete; here he stood, confronted with mortality.[67] Though the piece was realized in 1991, Gonzalez-

[67]Hannah Lim, "Two Viewpoints: Idealism versus Reality," *Medium* (Queerer Things, November 30, 2017). Accessed March 23, 2021: https://medium.com/thinking-about-queer-art-performance/two-viewpoints-idealism-versus-reality-a7889ab17dcb.

Torres' fixation with synchronized clocks and the infinite nature of time began much earlier. In a 1988 letter, with a sketch of two clocks sitting at the same time at its heading, Gonzalez-Torres writes the following to Ross:

> Don't be afraid of the clocks, they are our time, time has been generous to us. We imprinted time with the sweet taste of victory. We conquered fate by meeting at a certain TIME in a certain space. We are a product of the time, therefore we give back credit where it is due: time. We are synchronized, now and forever. I love you.[68]

By confronting his fears, Gonzalez-Torres makes peace with his fear rather than trying to override or ignore; time is too large, too abstract to control, and gratitude is his only respite. Additionally, Gonzalez-Torres argued that his works, such as his clocks specifically, were a more "threatening" approach to portraying homosexuality in artwork; Gonzalez-Torres felt that non-sexualized using objects to explain an emotion or tell a narrative gave the conservative viewer no argument in terms of censorship, whereas an image of a blowjob might provide greater visibility, the explicit nature of such an image gave bait to those who viewed homoeroticism as obscene.[69]

Picturing Doom

Artists expressing their fears and anxiety over HIV/AIDS is not shocking. It was not until fairly recently that the diagnosis of HIV/AIDS was not a death

[68] "The Meaning of Felix Gonzalez-Torres' Clocks / Perfect Lovers," Public Delivery, January 29, 2021, https://publicdelivery.org/felix-gonzalez-torres-clocks/.

[69] Randy Kennedy, "Tough Art With A Candy Center," *The New York Times*, June 7, 2007.

sentence. Because of this anxiety, the sense of doom began to present itself in many artworks produced during the crisis, especially in the late 80s and early 90s, when there were no treatments and the number of positive HIV cases skyrocketed. AIDS-activist group General Idea led similar activist campaigns to Gran Fury. In 1991, General Idea created two similar works, *One Day of AZT* and *One Year of AZT* **(Fig. 3.8**, from a dual-installation view at Museum of Modern Art, 1997). First approved by the FDA in 1987, AZT (Azidothymidine) was one of the only drugs available for AIDS patients.[70] AZT was not a cure, but could slow the reproduction of HIV viruses in the body, yet came with horrible side effects and incredibly high cost that made it inaccessible for many.[71] *One Day of AZT* consists of five gigantic AZT pills, while *One Year of AZT* fills a space with 365 medium-scale sets of the five pill daily dosage. Lilian Tone, a Curatorial Assistant at the Museum of Modern Art who helped organize a 1997 exhibition displaying both works stated that "[a]n undercurrent of tension derives from the friction between formal elegance, with its aestheticizing denial of the pills' function, and the pervasive aura of foreboding."[72] This "foreboding" makes engaging with these works tough, knowing their extreme cost, both monetarily and physically, that may or may not change any outcomes. Indeed, AZT presents a sense of both hope and doom.

Another important work that grapples with impending doom is Wojnarowicz's *Untitled (Falling Buffalos)* (1988-89) (**Fig. 3.9**). Taken by Wojnarowicz

---

[70] "Two AIDS-Related Installations by General Idea are on View for the First Time in New York at The Museum of Modern Art," *Moma.org*. The Museum of Modern Art (November 1996). Accessed March 23, 2021: https://assets.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_327725.pdf

[71] "Two AIDS-Related Installations by General Idea…"

[72] "Two AIDS-Related Installations by General Idea…"

after visiting a diorama at the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History, this image provides both societal critique as well as expresses the artist's own emotions surrounding his HIV diagnosis in the spring of 1988.[73] The purpose of the "Blackfoot Indian Buffalo Drive" at the Smithsonian was to demonstrate how the horseless Blackfoot tribe meticulously drove buffalos off cliffs to their deaths.[74] With this information in mind, the cultural criticism contained in this work is clear. Due to government inaction and public indifference, HIV/AIDS patients were being stampeded off a cliff of their own. This sense of helplessness is felt even deeper considering Wojnarowicz's own HIV-positive status at the time of the piece's creation: knowing there was no turning back into the stampede, Wojnarowicz had to reckon with how close he was to the edge of the cliff. By relating his emotions to nature, Wojnarowicz shifts the viewpoint of homosexuality to the natural and the historical. *Untitled (Falling Buffalos)* encapsulates the dismal energy of the AIDS crisis in terms that are accessible without being what some viewers may have regarded as offensive, which is perhaps why the band U2 used the image for their single "One" (1992), which benefited AIDS research.

Unfinished: Confronting Death

Unfinished works by artists who died from complications of AIDS offer the artists' visions to outlive them, whether almost completely or only somewhat

---

[73] "'Blackfoot Indian Buffalo Drive' Diorama" Smithsonian Institution Archives (The Smithsonian Institution, n.d.). Accessed March 23, 2021: https://siarchives.si.edu/collections/siris_arc_391479. To read more on David Wojnarowicz's HIV+ diagnosis: *Wojnarowicz: Fuck You Faggot Fucker*, Chris McKim, dir., World of Wonder Productions: Los Angeles, CA, 2020/2021.

[74]Dorothy MacKinnon, "Sons, Daughters, Smithsonians! A Guide to Nudging Kids Along the Path To Natural History," *The Washington Post* (October 9, 1987).

articulated. This leaves viewers to speculate on what might have been. "Blank spaces" or unfinished areas were created by AIDS, which becomes a collaborating force within these artworks. For example, though artist Keith Haring's *Unfinished Painting* (1989) (**Fig. 3.10**) was technically "completed" during his lifetime, the work reflects on Haring's inevitable death. Haring was diagnosed with HIV in 1987 and would die aged 31 in 1990, one year after the completion of *Unfinished Painting*.[75] Compositionally, the painting is a large, square canvas, with the top left quadrant of the painting filled in with purple, white, and black painted figures that mix abstract forms with Haring's iconic human outlines. From this quadrant, purple pigment spills down the canvas, resembling blood running from a deep incision and suggesting that time has been cut short. Beginning his career as a graffiti artist in New York City's subways, Haring's style is characterized by tight-lined forms that provide a narrative that is not instantly recognizable. His work often involves the deciphering of a cast of recurring characters. This purple dribble in *Unfinished Painting* is highly uncharacteristic of Haring's work. Typically, his pieces, while visually stimulating, are extremely clean-lined and color-blocked, and harkening back to the linear, iconographic design methods found in Prehistoric works, such as the *Caves of Lascaux* (**Fig. 3.11**), for example. This paint spill conveys the idea of blood spilt, and the remaining three quarters of blank canvas in this work beg the question: *What could have been, if things were different?* Haring uses this piece to act as both a

[75]Liz Fields, "Facing Death from AIDS, Keith Haring Kept Creating," *Public Broadcasting Service* (November 19, 2020). Accessed March 23, 2021: https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/facing-death-from-aids-keith-haring-kept-creating/16169/#:~:text=Lesser%20known%20is%20just%20how,two%20years%20of%20his%20life.

cultural critique and personal obituary, wondering alongside viewers what a life without AIDS might have looked like.

In 2016, artist Peter Hristoff debuted his work *Unfinished Scroll* (**Fig. 3.12**) when opening an exhibition of unfinished works across time at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.[76] In this piece, which was originally read aloud, Hristoff lists names of various creative individuals that he and the art world lost to HIV/AIDS. The title, *Unfinished Scroll*, reminds viewers that the AIDS epidemic is still present. We now have therapies, but have no cure. The scroll is still — most likely — unfinished. After reading the long list of names off, Hristoff asked his audience to reflect on more than just unfinished works, but their unfinished lives, too.[77]

Confronting unfinished lives was a key part of AIDS art. While many AIDS artists expressed frustration with inaction and homophobia or their personal anxieties towards HIV status, presenting death was a strategy that borderlined on taboo. Often artworks leaned toward dealing with *loss* more than the act of *dying*. For example, Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled (Billboard)* and *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* present the viewer with the artist's own experience of love and loss. Viewers of these works feel sympathetic for the artist, and may be reminded of losses in their own lives. Or they may begin to consider the wider issues surrounding AIDS, however, they are not forced to wrestle with death as explicitly or personally as the artists were.

[76] Peter Hristoff, "Peter Hristoff on the 'Unfinished' and the Faith of Practice," The Metropolitan Museum of Art. (May 9, 2016). Accessed March 23, 2021: https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/2016/peter-hristoff-on-the-unfinished.

[77] Hristoff, 2016.

Wojnarowicz's photo series, *Untitled (Peter Hujar)* (1987) (**Figs. 3.13** & **3.14**), shows his friend and ex-lover Peter Hujar moments after his death from AIDS-related illness. These photos are black-and-white, and range from images of Hujar's face, hands, and feet, all lifeless against lily-white bedsheets. In any event, these harrowing images of a dead Hujar in his hospital gown provide an unmediated interaction between the viewer and death: mortality is on display. Similarly, artist AA Bronson also challenged viewers to see death with his photograph *Felix Partz, June 5, 1994* (printed 1999) (**Fig. 3.15**). In this photo, Bronson photographs Partz, a fellow leader of the artist collective General Idea (discussed earlier in this chapter), hours after he died of AIDS-related complications.[78] Wojnarowicz's images of Peter Hujar, while deeply emotional, are less grotesque than Bronson's *Felix Partz, June 5, 1994* (**Fig. 3.15**), as Partz's corpse lies with open eyes, staring at the viewer indefinitely. Bronson's image takes Wojnarowicz's method even further by using color photography and displaying Partz at home. In this image, Partz is photographed in his bold-colored bed linens with home comforts, like cigarettes and a television remote, beside him, and positions his camera so that a viewer almost has a bird's-eye-view of the scene. Bronson emphasizes the eternal stare in this picture and creates a more confrontational, yet intimate, dialogue with the viewer than in the Hujar images. Bronson's image is jarring whereas Wojnarowicz's images are emotional. Bronson photographs the scene to mimic a billboard layout, recalling the work he and Partz completed together for General Idea.[79] By displaying Partz's

[78] "AA Bronson: Felix Partz, June 5, 1994," Whitney Museum of American Art. Accessed March 22, 2021: https://whitney.org/collection/works/16348.

[79]"AA Bronson: Felix Partz, June 5, 1994."

decrepit, lifeless body in full color, Bronson, too, challenges viewers to look at AIDS and mortality. In this image, AIDS and death are, again, no longer abstract, downplayable ideas, but they confront with the viewer directly with their realism.

Wojnarowicz created richer dialogue between viewers and Hujar's photographs by applying them to his work *Untitled (Hujar Dead)* (1988–1989) (**Fig. 3.16**), which juxtaposes text and the images of Hujar to comment on homophobia, greed, and the AIDS epidemic. The overlaid text states the following:

> If I had a dollar to spend for healthcare I'd rather spend it on a baby or innocent person with some defect or illness not of their own responsibility; not some person with AIDS…" says the healthcare official on national television and this is in the middle of an hour long video of people dying on camera because they can't afford the limited drugs available that might extend their lives and I can't even remember what his official looked like because I reached in through the T.V. screen and ripped his face in half and I was diagnosed with ARC recently and this was after the last few years of losing count of the friends and neighbors who have been dying slow and vicious and unnecessary deaths because fags and dykes and junkies are expendable in this country "If you want to stop AIDS shoot the queers" says the governor of Texas on the radio and his press secretary later claims that the governor was only joking and didn't know the microphone was turned on and besides they didn't think it would hurt his chances for re-election anyways and I wake up every morning in this killing machine called America and I'm carrying this rage like a blood filled egg and there's a thin line between the inside and the outside a thin line between thought and

action and that line is simply made up of blood and muscle and bone and I'm waking up more and more from daydreams of tipping Amazonian blowdarts in "infected blood" and spitting them at the exposed necklines of certain politicians or government healthcare officials or those thinly disguised walking swastikas that wear religious garments over their murderous intentions or those rabid strangers parading against AIDS clinics in the nightly news suburbs there's a thin line a very thin line between the inside and the outside and I've been looking all my life at the signs surrounding us in the media or on peoples lips; the religious types outside st. patricks cathedral shouting to men and women in the gay parade: "You won't be here next year–you'll get AIDS and die ha ha" and the areas of the u.s.a. where it is possible to murder a man and when brought to trial one only has to say that the victim was a queer and that he tried to touch you and the courts will set you free and the difficulties that a bunch of republican senators have in albany with supporting an anti-violence bill that includes 'sexual orientation' as a category of crime victims there's a thin line a very thin line and as each t-cell disappears from my body it's replaced by ten pounds of pressure ten pounds of rage and I focus that rage into non-violent resistance but that focus is starting to slip my hands are beginning to move independent of self-restraint and the egg is starting to crack america seems to understand and accept murder as a self defense against those who would murder other people and its been murder on a daily basis for eight count them eight long years and we're expected to quietly and politely make house in this windstorm of murder but I say there's certain politicians that had better

> increase their security forces and there's religious leaders and heathcare officials that had better get bigger dogs and higher fences and more complex security alarms for their homes and queer-bashers better start doing their work from inside howitzer tanks because the thin line between the inside and the outside is beginning to erode and at the moment I'm a thirty seven foot tall one thousand one hundred and seventy-two pound man inside this six foot frame and all I can feel is the pressure all I can feel is the pressure and the need for release.[80]

Picturing the duality of overwhelming emotion and cultural critique was a particular talent of Wojnarowicz's. Referring to the "thin line" Wojnarowicz mentioned in the excerpt above, his self-portrait, *Untitled (Face in Dirt)* (1990-1991) (**Fig. 3.17**), proffers an image of a death while still alive. Hujar's expression looks somewhat similar to Wojnarowicz's in *Untitled (Face in Dirt)*, potentially serving as inspiration for his stylistic approach for this self-portrait. Knowing his diagnosis with HIV would inevitably lead to an untimely death, Wojnarowicz used this work to question whose deaths are swept under the rug by placing himself within the ground and allowing himself to be swallowed by the Earth.[81] In this shallow grave, Wojnarowicz lies halfway between visibility and burial, a "thin line between the inside and the outside," suggesting an acceptance of his eventual fate, but also remaining visible. In this image, Wojnarowicz is simultaneously falling into the Earth and rising out of it, as if to say, *I'm still here*, no matter if he's living or dead.

---

[80] Refer to **Figure 3.16**. The artist's original spelling and grammar have not been changed.

[81] Maggie Vinter, "Epilogue: Afterlife." In *Last Acts: The Art of Dying on the Early Modern Stage* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 147-168. Accessed March 17, 2021: doi:10.2307/j.ctvdtpjv0.8.

Living On

Wojnarowicz was deeply affected by the loss of Peter Hujar as well as by the indifference and homophobia that helped perpetuate the AIDS epidemic. Following Wojnarowicz's death, his friend and ally Zoe Leonard produced *Strange Fruit (For David)* in 1997 (**Fig. 3.18**). The installation consists of a room filled with the empty skins of fruits sewn together over the course of five years, beginning after Wojnarowicz's death in 1992.[82] Leonard picked up the skill of sewing from Wojnarowicz, and after losing multiple friends and colleagues to AIDS — and eventually Wojnarowicz — she began to sew obsessively.[83] The approximate 300 hundred skins of lemons, oranges, bananas, and grapefruits are representative of the attitude of disposability towards those with AIDS by both the public and government.[84] While creating *Strange Fruit*, Leonard initially worked to figure out a way to preserve the skins of the fruits as best as possible. After some consideration, Leonard decided that the nature of decay is part of the prowess of this piece, and emphasizes the decay intrinsic to having HIV/AIDS.[85] Leonard's stitching is also suggestive of the barely-available and largely unsuccessful treatments available to AIDS patients in the most dire times of the crisis. Her humble reassembly of the

---

[82] "Strange Fruit," Whitney Museum of American Art., Accessed March 22, 2021: https://whitney.org/media/36953.

[83] Nina Quabeck, "Intent in the Making: The Life of Zoe Leonard's 'Strange Fruit,'" *Burlington Contemporary - Journal* (May 2019). Accessed March 23, 2021: https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/journal/journal/intent-in-the-making-the-life-of-zoe-leonards-strange-fruit. Leonard's style of sewing (thick, red string) can be seen in some of Wojnarowicz's work, too, especially the previously mentioned *Fire in My Belly* (**Fig. 2.14**).

[84] Quabeck, 2019.

[85]Whitney Museum of American Art, "Zoe Leonard: Strange Fruit," YouTube, 2:26:28 (March 24, 2018). Accessed March 23, 2021: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfD8iWicHB4

fruit cannot save the fruit from its fate. The piece's title, *Strange Fruit*, is derived from a Billie Holiday song that recalls the lynching of an African American, whose lyrics are:

> Southern trees bear a strange fruit
>
> Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
>
> Black bodies swingin' in the Southern breeze
>
> Strange fruit hangin' from the poplar trees
>
> Pastoral scene of the gallant South
>
> The bulgin' eyes and the twisted mouth
>
> Scent of magnolias sweet and fresh
>
> Then the sudden smell of burnin' flesh
>
> Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck
>
> For the rain to gather
>
> For the wind to suck
>
> For the sun to rot
>
> For the tree to drop
>
> Here is a strange and bitter crop[86]

[86]Whitney Museum of American Art, "Zoe Leonard: Strange Fruit," YouTube video, 2:26:28, March 24, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfD8iWicHB4; Billie Holiday, "Strange Fruit," Genius, accessed March 22, 2021, https://genius.com/Billie-holiday-strange-fruit-lyrics.

By re-appropriating the meaning of this song, Leonard compares indifference and inaction to a lynching, rendering a scene of loss and decay that might have been prevented under a more active government and less-homophobic public.

Chapter Four -
VIRAL STRATEGY AND OTHER METHODS FOR PRODUCTION

AIDS ART. THIS ART IS ABOUT

AIDS. THIS ART RAISES AWARENESS ABOUT

AIDS. I AM TALKING ABOUT

AIDS. THIS ART MAKES YOU AWARE OF

AIDS. YOU ARE THINKING ABOUT

AIDS. I HAVE

AIDS. I HAVE RAISED AWARENESS ABOUT

AIDS. THIS ART HAS RAISED AWARENESS ABOUT

AIDS. YOU ARE AWARE OF

AIDS ART. I AM AN

AIDS ARTIST.

—*Vincent Chevalier, from the blog* "Hyperflesh Markup Language" (2013).[87]

[87] "Not Over Exhibition Checklist," *Visual AIDS*, n.d. Accessed March 23, 2021: https://www.visualaids.org/uploads/events/downloads/NOT_OVER_Checklist.pdf.

Every artist producing work about the AIDS crisis wrestled with their own experiences, as well as with anxieties surrounding both the often-contentious social reception of homosexuality, and the looming threat of HIV/AIDS. As a whole, the varied artworks about AIDS strove to increase gay visibility, activism, and provide a means of expression of personal emotion. To accomplish these goals, each artist created the voice they thought was missing from the art world, and that added to the growing clamor of AIDS activism using multiple strategies to appeal to a broad field of viewers. Among those are the use of "viral" media strategies to spread their ideas metaphorically like AIDS itself spread.

What is 'Viral Strategy'?

Performance theorist Joshua Chambers-Letson coined the term "viral strategy" in his essay "Contracting Justice: The Viral Strategy of Felix-Gonzalez Torres," which examines the methods of production Gonzalez-Torres, and reframes his work as a metaphorical body. A set of laws, like the body, also are "living things," he suggests, as their interpretations and power may be "infected" (or, more simply, influenced) by well-strategized movements for reform.[88] Chambers-Letson states:

> For a virus to spread, it needs a host, or a body. Rather than regarding the body's susceptibility to infection as a weakness, Gonzalez-Torres structured his artwork to function as carriers of his viruses. Bodies — as sites of infection and potential vectors for infection — became necessary components of his work. Producing art during a period when bodies marked

[88] Joshua T. Chambers-Letson, "Contracting Justice: The Viral Strategy of Felix Gonzalez-Torres," *Criticism* 51, no. 4 (2009): 559–87.

by difference from the national norm were under vicious attack, Gonzalez-Torres developed a corpus of work that was simultaneously engaged with bodies while often lacking one.

As Chambers-Letson notes, many of Gonzalez-Torres's artworks, such as *Untitled: Portrait of Ross in L. A.* (**Fig. 4.1**), encouraged physical interaction with viewers to create a relationship with the viewer. This piece, composed of candy, weighs as much as his lover at the time of his death.[89] Visually, the visually striking piece catches the viewer's eye with reflective multicolored cellophane. To experience the piece, viewers take a piece of the work (a piece of hard candy), unwrap it, and eat it. Some interpretations of this piece suggest that viewers physically experience a piece of the man Gonzalez-Torres loved and lost.[90] The sweet taste of candy reflects the sweetness of Ross's nature. Based on careful reads of Gonzalez-Torres's own writings, though, the work is more melancholy than the candy and bright cellophane would suggest. As each visitor interacts with this piece, they cause the slow but inevitable destruction of the work as a whole, taking pieces of candy from the gallery as they exit - just as AIDS slowly took Ross. Like a recipient of a Catholic communion wafer at Mass, viewers who engage the installation allow the symbolic "body" of Ross to slowly dissolve in their mouths and energize their own bodies. Thus, viewers are paradoxically invited by Gonzalez-Torres to personify the AIDS virus - while enacting Catholic ritual. Eventually, nothing will be left of Ross.[91]

---

[89]National Portrait Gallery, "Hide/Seek: "Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)" by Felix Gonzalez-Torres - National Portrait Gallery," YouTube video, 2:16, April 7, 2011. https://youtu.be/37bSb-aQ4BM.

[90]National Portrait Gallery, "Hide/Seek."

[91] This is true until the piece is refilled to match Ross's weight at death. The piece is continuously refilled. The disappearance of Ross's body is a recurrent event.

Gonzalez-Torres reinforces this point via the experience of eating the candies, which are sweet for a moment, but vanish. *Untitled: Portrait of Ross in L.A.* is a commentary on mortality, on the demise caused by HIV/AIDS, and on consumption. Viewers become like viruses rather than innocent bystanders that pass by artworks at the museum. They are invited to be complicit catalysts in Ross's demise.

Untitled: Portrait of Ross in L.A. also exemplifies the strategy of viral expansion in artwork.[92] Gonzalez-Torres was a prolific artist who communicated the anguish associated with personal loss due to AIDS, as well as expressing his own struggles with the virus. Because of this, Chambers-Letson argues that Gonzalez-Torres uses a "viral" strategy in his work– using a type of strategic marketing to make his work larger than life, to take his work out of the gallery and into the public domain. As seen with *Untitled: Portrait of Ross in L.A.*, as each viewer takes their piece of this work, more of the work is spread out of the museum, brought home.[93] Viral expansion is an important technique in AIDS art, as it mirrors the efficient spread of AIDS/HIV. AIDS was an invisible, unseen enemy, but a majority of the American people put the crisis out of sight, out of mind until artwork such as Gonzalez-Torres' symbolically pushed it into the public's bodies and homes.

In terms of Felix Gonzalez-Torres' public works, like *Untitled (Billboard)* (1991) discussed in the previous chapter, the artist wanted to demystify contemporary art and challenge the existing idea that public art had to be big, heavy,

[92]Chambers-Letson, 2009.

[93]Chambers-Letson, 2009.

and/or expensive.[94] Gonzalez-Torres argues that the main idea of his billboard works are their ability to become part of the surrounding landscape, and via their subdued style, spark dialogue. In a 1995 interview, Gonzalez-Torres stated, "I want to make art for people who watch *The Golden Girls* and sit in a big, brown, La-Z-Boy chair," further emphasizing the point that his work was inherently democratic; Gonzalez-Torres wanted his pieces to speak to everyone, not just those who immediately 'get' it.[95] In the same year, though, when asked "Who is your public?," Felix Gonzalez-Torres said "Ross," without hesitation, "The public was Ross."[96] Though these statements on audience seem contradictory, Gonzalez-Torres likely is speaking about two different kinds of public; the Lay-Z-Boy public is who Gonzalez-Torres wanted to get through to, to grow their understanding of AIDS, homosexuality, and conceptual art. The late Ross Laycock, on the other hand, was likely the kind of "public" that understood the artist's work better than anyone—Gonzalez-Torres' best critic.

The Necessity of Repetition

To further understand Americans' silence towards AIDS victims during the early days of the AIDS crisis, one must consider the attitude about masculinity in America and the internalized homophobia within the gay community. As noted by C. J. Pascoe and Tristan Bridges, homophobia is deep-rooted in America, with much of it stemming from homosexual activity's direct challenge to traditional masculinity.

---

[94] Steve Bennett, "Public Art Redefined," *S.A. Life*, February 24, 2010, sec. Conceptual Works.

[95]Bennett, 2010.

[96]Bennett, 2010.

Survey data reveal that men are far more likely to express sexual prejudice than women.[97] As Pascoe and Bridges argue, "Homophobia is the central organizing principle of our cultural definition of manhood."[98] Because of Western society's own attachment to patriarchy, homosexuality exists as an opposition to not only manhood, but our society as a whole. With this viewpoint in mind, combined with heightened conservatism in the 1980s-90s, it is no surprise that some artists argue that a more powerful style of art-activism regarding AIDS was to keep the work about just that: AIDS.

Activist group General Idea's aptly titled work, *AIDS* (1987) (**Fig. 4.2**), does just that, while using a viral strategy to call viewers to action and keep the crisis at the front of their minds. Based on Robert Indiana's famous *LOVE* (1964) (**Fig. 4.3**) silkscreen print, *AIDS* was conceptualized by General Idea (A. A. Bronson, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal). *AIDS* was a relatively simple piece: "A.I." are stacked over the last two ("D.S."), using two shades of red to further imply love (in addition to the letters' visual similarity to Indiana's *LOVE*).[99] Soon after this iconic logo's creation, *AIDS* by General Idea would be reallocated into another work, Imagevirus (**Fig. 4.4**).[100] This began a global branding campaign. Soon, subways, busses,

---

[97] C. J. Pascoe and Tristan Bridges, "Masculinities and Post-Homophobias?" in *Exploring Masculinities: Identity, Inequality, Continuity and Change*, eds. C. J. Pascoe and Tristan Bridges (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 412–420.

[98] C. J. Pascoe and Tristan Bridges, "Masculinities and Post-Homophobias?" 412–420.

[99] "Before There Were Memes, There Was LOVE, AIDS, RIOT," *Visual AIDS*, March 27, 2013. Accessed March 10, 2021: https://visualaids.org/blog/before-there-were-memes-there-was-love-aids-riot.

[100] "Before There Were Memes, There Was LOVE, AIDS, RIOT," 2013.

billboards, and construction sites were covered with color-blocked artwork that repeated General Idea's *AIDS* motif. AIDS had infected the public's visual domain.

Keith Haring's un-intrusive, easily-digestible iconography communicated complex messages to people of all social and economic backgrounds on the New York City subways. Much like Imagevirus, Haring's work was ubiquitous, and his signature style became a brand in itself. A culmination between identity, politics, and aesthetic exists in one of Keith Haring's less-public works, *Once Upon A Time* (1989) (**Fig. 4.5**), which is a mural painted in a bathroom at the New York LGBT Community Center.[101] Due to homosexuality's history of discretion, the public restroom is synonymous with gay cruising; during the AIDS crisis, though, the gay restroom changed identities, becoming a center for public health pleas. By the mid-1980s, gay clubs and bathouses had been forced to close, and any 'gay' spaces that were still open, especially public restrooms/locker-rooms, contained AIDS-related posters promoting safe sex, like in **Figure 4.6**, made in collaboration by Gay Men's Health Crisis and Safer Sex Committee of New York.[102] With its fairy tale-adjacent title, Haring uses *Once Upon A Time* to remember the beautiful danger that once existed in these spaces; the piece is, as one critic describes, "a dark hallucination of gay promiscuity, spanning the full menu of no-longer-safe sex acts."[103] Covered in penises, fellatio, and sperm figures, just to name a few, Haring's mural celebrates and

[101] In this context, "less-public" refers to the straight viewers who might see this work. The differences between a random viewer's involvement with AIDS are highly variable between New York City subway station audience and that of the LGBT Community Center.

[102] Daniel Marcus, "Daniel Marcus on Keith Haring's Once Upon a Time, 1989," *Artforum International* (June 1, 2020). Accessed March 23, 2021: https://www.artforum.com/print/202006/daniel-marcus-on-keith-haring-s-once-upon-a-time-1989-83298.

[103] Marcus, 2020.

exposes gay sexuality, and, frankly, gay promiscuity, in a time where these ideas were often doused in shame and fear. One essay makes the following note about Haring's attitude towards homoeroticsm:

> Unlike many homosexual artists who have long sought to maintain the clandestine, invisible character of their sexuality, in his own artistic expression Keith Haring found the means of affirming his pride in being gay through the very explicit homo-erotic character of his works. Keith Haring's determination to fully incorporate his homosexuality as one of the indissoluble facets of his art – in spite of the homophobia and oppression that many of his predecessors had suffered throughout history – was the component triggering a huge movement in which artists no longer held back from positively expressing their homosexuality in their art.[104]

Though Haring would die of AIDS-related complications a year following the creation of *Once Upon a Time*, his unapologetic embrace of his own sexuality carried through his diagnosis until his death. While *Once Upon a Time*, then, is a celebration of identity and sexuality, an excerpt from the essay "Sex is Life is Sex" states the following about Haring's expression of the past:

> ...his works are denoted by a defiance, a warning, a certain violence sometimes that disturbs the onlooker and bears witness to the dichotomy the artist was in as regards his work.[105]

[104]Jerome de Noirmont Gallery, "Sex Is Life Is Sex," Keith Haring Foundation. Accessed March 22, 2021: https://www.haring.com/!/selected_writing/sex-is-life-is-sex.

[105]Jerome de Noirmont Gallery, "Sex Is Life Is Sex."

In short, *Once Upon A Time* exists to both celebrate and critique promiscuity and sexuality, surrounding the viewer with a double-edged sword.

The struggle between easily-digestible work and more explicit imagery was constant between artists during the AIDS crisis. One of the most notable examples of this struggle existed between the collectives General Idea and Gran Fury. Essentially, both organizations used the viral strategy to keep AIDS in the public domain, to infect the urban landscape with the virus. Gran Fury argued that General Idea's work was too tame and did not create a sense of urgency; simply reminding the public that the virus existed was not the same as making the public live with the virus as many HIV+ artists were.[106] The solution for Gran Fury was to create work that not only received public attention but also created public anxiety. The most direct critique Gran Fury made against General Idea was their adaptation of *AIDS*. Mirroring the stacked text from Robert Indiana's *Love* and using the same color scheme as General Idea's *AIDS*, Gran Fury created *Riot*, (**Fig. 4.7**) a piece that harkened back to the progress that was made in the gay community after the Stonewall and the White Night Riots.[107]

Poster, a 1990 oil-on-canvas painting by American artist Hugh Steers, provides insight into the inner conflicts of gay artists (**Fig. 4.8**), and demonstrates the importance of both artmaking and activism. In the work, viewers see a man at a desk, where he was presumably writing. He turns around in his chair and looks ambiguously across the room. On either side of his gaze lie two objects: an ACT UP

[106] "Before There Were Memes, There Was LOVE, AIDS, RIOT," Visual AIDS, March 2013, https://visualaids.org/blog/before-there-were-memes-there-was-love-aids-riot.

[107] "Before There Were Memes, There Was LOVE, AIDS, RIOT"

picketing poster (left), and a blank canvas on an easel (right). The ACT UP poster is the "typical" emblem of a pink triangle and the words "Silence = Death." The subject obviously understands the mission of ACT UP, and viewers can assume he is a protester. Yet he seems to be coming into the understanding that the more powerful tool is to channel his activism into his artwork and tackle the blank canvas. Steers's painting amplifies the very real need for gay artists to produce work and use every power possible to call attention to AIDS.

Spelling it Out: The Role of Text in AIDS Art

While *Imagevirus* as well as Gran Fury's *RIOT* both use appropriation and virality as a means of production, these two works also speak to a powerful tool used by AIDS artists: text. Though the act of looking at work is in and of itself communication, the directness of an artist actually writing down their thoughts as a part of the viewer's visual experience forces the viewer to reckon with exactly what is being said. There is little speculation over meaning when a work's meaning is spelled out unambiguously.

Some artworks including text in their work inspire consideration outside of what is directly stated. In contrast to *Untitled (One Day This Kid….)* by Wojnarowicz mentioned in the second chapter, which calls for viewers to understand and wrestle with the gay experience he describes in detail, British artist Derek Jarman's work produced towards the end of his battle with AIDS generally allows for a greater amount of interpretation of the text he displays.

Derek Jarman was diagnosed as HIV+ in 1986, and eventually lost his battle with AIDS in 1993. Over the course of his illness, the style of Jarman's work shifted

significantly. While pieces from earlier decades, such as *Sea Shore and Bronze Post* (1967), *Untitled* (1977), and *Free Fall* (1982) (**Figs. 4.9, 4.10, 4.11**) do show evolutions in Jarman's style, a transition from geometric work to more realist geometric work to more abstracted realist work, there is not a change so stark as the shift in Jarman's work following his diagnosis.

As the virus began to drastically change Jarman's body, the work he produced changed, too. One of his final works, *Ataxia — AIDS is Fun* (1993) (**Fig. 4.12**), includes four lines of text, saying "Blind Fail," "Ataxia," "AIDS is Fun," and finally, "Let's Fuck." These words are finger painted into layers of multicolored oil paints atop a bright red canvas.[108] Ataxia, a condition of the brain which slowly destroys coordination, was one of the conditions Jarman suffered because of AIDS. Additionally, Jarman's eyesight was also affected by his condition, which made blindness relevant to his later work.[109] One may read the four inscriptions of this work in a sequence, "Blind Fail" potentially being a statement Jarman says to himself as he begins the work, then stating "Ataxia," possibly blaming the condition for the "blind fail" of a work," then laughing at the idea of finger painting artwork, signing "AIDS is Fun," and, to finish with something cheeky, Jarman suggests, "Let's Fuck."

Jarman's suggestive "Let's Fuck" manifests itself in an earlier work, *Fuck Me Blind* (1992) (**Fig. 4.13**). Compositionally, the work features a pale-yellow canvas with a uneven, thick black line brushed across. In the center of this black line, Jarman

---

[108] Richard Martin, "'Ataxia - Aids Is Fun,' Derek Jarman, 1993," The Tate Modern (March 2014), https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/jarman-ataxia-aids-is-fun-t06768#:~:text=The%20slogans%20included%20in%20Ataxia,of%20balance%20and%20co%2Dordination.

[109] Martin, 2014.

writes the title pharse, "fuck me blind," in a manner that is similar to bathroom stall graffiti. The phrase "fuck me blind" has a dual meaning here; one being a suggestive statement for rough sex, and, conversely, a literal statement of Jarman's fate: fucked, now blind. Again, Jarman's use of text provides room for a bit more nuance via his use of dark comedy; his later work is an exercise in frustration and humor.

Mastering Dark Humor

Inserting tongue-in-cheek and/or dark humor into AIDS art was not solely the work of Derek Jarman. Similar to *Fuck Me Blind*, artist Jerome Caja produced *Bozo Fucks Death* in 1988, a graphic piece composed of nail polish on a plastic tray (**Fig. 4.14**).[110] Caja, a San Francisco drag queen, produced an array of works which feature recurring motifs such as clowns, "Venus" (a drag queen), as well as frequent erect penises. Often making work from whatever was available, Caja's portfolio of materials includes eyeshadow, lipstick, nail polish, and even pistachio shells.[111] In *Bozo Fucks Death*, a nude clown still in his face make-up bends over Caja's "Death" character, a recurrent figure in his work who is a skeleton, and inserts his penis into Death from behind. In the literal sense, Bozo the clown literally "fucks" his way into death by having intercourse with Caja's "Death" skeleton. Bozo will contract HIV from this interaction. In addition to the two figures, Caja includes a few other icons that appear in other works. On the nightstand in *Bozo Fucks Death* sits a fruit basket, which again is referenced in Caja's *Bubbles the Clown Giving Away His Fruit* (1992) (**Fig. 4.15**), which features a side-profiled clown holding up a fruit basket with a

[110]"Jerome Caja," Visual AIDS, accessed March 22, 2021, https://visualaids.org/artists/jerome-caja.

[111] "Jerome Caja," *Visual AIDS*.

banana protruding from the top, as his erect penis is protruding from his pants. Looking closely at the fruit basket in *Bozo Fucks Death*, again a banana protrudes from the basket.

Jerome Caja's use of dark humor is on full display in his mixed media work, *Death Shoots a Load of Nice Days into the Bay* (1990) (**Fig. 4.16**). This piece exists in two parts: an upper painting (completed in nail polish and whiteout) and a lower print clipping that states "I worship your cock, Sir." In the painting, a large, erect penis sits in the middle of the San Francisco bay, with local architectural highlights such as the Golden Gate Bridge and Transamerica Pyramid in view. On the shaft of the penis, Caja's Death skeleton character sits with a menacing smile looking at the flying semen overhead. In the semen are small, yellow smiley faces being scattered throughout the city. As the title suggests, the "nice days" are days of sexual pleasure, as depicted by the flying smileys. The yellow smiley face is not only featured within this piece, it also exists in the aforementioned *Bozo Fucks Death*, over the face of a virgin Mary figure. Caja's use of the smiley face is typically aligned with deceit. As in *Death Shoots a Load of Nice Days into the Bay*, the "nice days" appear to be just that, nice days, until the HIV tests results return, only for the receiver to realize Death sent those nice days. In the case of *Bozo Fucks Death*, the smiley face over the Virgin Mary figure likely suggests a distrust in religion as protection from Death. This attitude towards religion may be best captured in his piece *Untitled* (1990) (**Fig. 4.17**), which features a framed yellow smiley face (painted on a pistachio shell) with a pendant cross hanging from the bottom of the frame; the gold tones and stylistic opulence of the piece makes the work look somewhat expensive and draws a viewer in, however, the smiley face serves as a reminder that this, again, is deception.

Constructing Visibility: The Importance of Collage

Collage is another method that allowed for greater understanding of the effects of AIDS on the gay community. At its core, collage allows objects in one context to be repurposed/repositioned, therefore creating a new context that spans across place, time, and meaning, all without losing the integrity of the salvaged objects' original identities. Collage is an inherent practice of queer artwork; after all, how can an artist take objects from a straight world and adjust their meaning into a representation of queer ideas and experiences without the use of collage? Of the collages produced during the height of the AIDS epidemic, none is more widely known than the AIDS Memorial Quilt, first displayed in 1987 on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. (**Fig. 4.18**)

The AIDS Memorial Quilt was born out of remembrance for the assassination of Harvey Milk. Each year, activist Cleve Jones led a candlelight vigil honoring Milk, but in 1985, he was burdened with the fact that over 1,000 citizens of San Francisco had been lost to AIDS-related complications. To honor those lost, Jones asked attendees to write placards with the names of lost friends and family, and had them taped to the side of the San Francisco Federal Building — a memorial resembling a quilt. By 1987, Jones created the NAMES Foundation, which received immediate support and submissions from around the nation. On October 11, 1987, the quilt went on display at the National Mall for the annual March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights; thousands came to see the quilt and raised money for AIDS-related organizations It would not be until Bill Clinton's attendance at the 1996 display that a sitting U.S. President visited the quilt. Today, the quilt weighs over 54 tons and travels in pieces around the United States and the rest of the globe.

The AIDS Memorial Quilt is not simply a public art installation. The quilt is a living presence, a work whose goals are straightforward: to serve as an un-ignorable reminder and to, hopefully, one day be finished.[112]

Artist-ally Nan Goldin's collective work, *The Plague* (1986–2001, printed 2007), (**Fig. 4.19**) uses collage to unify the heartbreak of AIDS across time. In *The Plague*, Goldin combines various photographs with differing moods to provide viewers with a 360º view of the interior lives of those affected by HIV/AIDS. While each individual photograph contains a story within itself, the work's narrative shifts with each row. On the top row, Goldin aligns individual portraits. On the next row, the photographs all contain embraces between two individuals. In the third row, Goldin again shows individual portraits. Finally, on the fourth and final row, each image contains a dead body. Through this the striated composition of this collage, Goldin effectively captures the individuality of each person's experience, however, emphasizes the similar pathways and doomed future lurking for these marginalized stories.

Using the body as a battleground was not unheard of during the AIDS crisis. In "Art is Not Enough: The Artist's Body as Protest," author Hannah Calkins argues that many HIV+ artists during the AIDS crisis reclaim themselves from the virus, thereby transforming their bodies into objects both artistic and political.[113] *Equipped* (1990) (**Fig. 4.20**), a work by Ray Navarro and executed by Zoe Leonard, exists as a

[112]"Quilt History," The National AIDS Memorial. Accessed March 22, 2021: https://www.aidsmemorial.org/quilt-history.

[113] Hannah Calkins, "Art Is Not Enough: The Artist's Body as Protest," *Gnovis Journal* XV, no. 1 (2014).

multi-faceted collage. The first aspect of *Equipped* that uses collage is its combination of text and image. The piece exists as three images, each with a paired caption: a cane with "third leg," an overturned wheelchair with "hot butt," and a walker lying on the ground with "stud walk." With this methodology, *Equipped* embodies the idea of queer collage. On their own, these images simply make reference to healthcare, illness, and bodily deterioration. Without the included captions, yes, these images might still be AIDS art, however, they would not be an apt representation of AIDS art with respect to queer collage. Phrases like "third leg," for example, referencing a long penis, are common phrases thrown around in gay circles. Including captions allowed the images to further provide visibility for the gay community through more than just the images of medical devices; the subtle humor yet heartbreaking relationship between image and word combine a world known (medical) to a world unknown (gay sexuality) for the straight audience.

The second way *Equipped* works as a collage is its combined creation. Due to AIDS complications, Ray Navarro was both immobile and blind by 1990 (he would die in November of this same year, aged 26). Because of this, artist and friend Zoe Leonard aided Navarro on this work. Leonard is careful to emphasize that this work was not a collaboration between Navarro and herself, but rather an extension of the artist's own hand through Leonard, which, per these reasons, causes Calkins to argue that this work is self-portraiture, yet with both artist and creator's bodies removed. Leonard states the following about creating the work:

> It was not going to be a collaborative thing or a collective project. It was about becoming his hands.[114]

By becoming Navarro's hands, *Equipped* is not a gay work translated into a straight work, it is a representation of empathetic ally-ship, a result of Leonard's own understanding and emotions surrounding the AIDS experience and Navarro's concept. Because of the absence of a body in this self-portrait, there is a kind of haunting that comes with the work, the sense that any queer body can be inserted into the work, into this experience. This open-subject style portraiture and dual work of artist and creator, (Navarro and Leonard) are additional ways *Equipped* works as collage. The viewer could insert anyone as the subject of this portrait, whether the viewer is queer and potentially inserting themselves, or straight and inserting a family member or friend.

Bridging the gap between time and place is the central focus of artist Shimon Attie's work. Attie, perhaps best known for his projection pieces related to the Holocaust, examines the blurred lines between past and present in his work, which exist as living memories. In his Holocaust projections, for example, Attie uses old black-and-white photographs projected onto modern sites where the photos were originally taken, the artist describes his work as, "a kind of peeling back of the wallpaper of today to reveal the histories buried underneath."[115] In his projection *Untitled Memory (Projection of Axel H.)* (1998), Attie again collages past and present to bring attention to the concept of living memory (fig. 4.21). In the piece, set in Attie's

[114] Calkins, 2014.

[115] "Biography," Shimon Attie. Accessed March 22, 2021, http://shimonattie.net/biography/.

former San Francisco apartment, his subject is projected onto a bed where he once laid. Whether friend or lover, it does not really matter to the work as a whole; the subject is dead.

Warhol, AIDS, & Consumer Culture

Andy Warhol's almost-nonsensical *AIDS, Jeep, Bicycle* (1985) examines the relationship between American culture and AIDS (**Fig. 4.22**). The piece contains a section of the header of the *New York Post*, a blue bicycle priced for $79.97, a Jeep advertisement printed in green, and the word "AIDS, painted to resemble fire. Warhol's painted collage provides an impressionistic overview of the August 30, 1985, edition of the *New York Post*. While fumbling through this paper, a reader would be confronted with branding and advertisements, only to see AIDS - the real issue - equal in importance to advertisements in the mainstream U.S. media.

Warhol also produced *Collage* (**Fig. 4.23**) around the same time, which was a physical collage of pages from the *New York Post* that conveyed the same message as *AIDS, Jeep, Bicycle*: AIDS was being treated too lightly. In addition to questioning the public's ignorance of AIDS, Warhol includes a religious motif in *Collage*. In the center of the work, the phrase "The Big C" is printed. As Warhol neared the end of his life, "The Big C" appeared more frequently. In 1986, Warhol painted *The Last Supper (The Big C)*, in which the "C" referenced Jesus Christ, whose multiple images in this work are surrounded by motorcycles, the Wise potato-chip owl, and a central large price tag (**Fig. 4.24**).[116] According to Jessica Beck's essay, "Warhol's

[116] Jessica Beck, "Warhol's Confession: Love, Faith, and AIDS," *The Andy Warhol Museum,* May 27, 2020. Accessed March 10, 2021: https://www.warhol.org/warhols-confession-love-faith-and-aids/.

Confession: Love, Faith, and AIDS," Christ is not the only "Big C" Warhol references. It also is linked to Warhol's fear of the disease of cancer. This phobia's connection to AIDS, also known as "gay cancer," is unmistakable. The $6.99 price tag works as both an innuendo (to the "69" sex act) as well as to the Biblical mark of the beast ("666"). Beck makes the following observation:

> The image of Christ offering his flesh in the Eucharist was a symbol of salvation during a time of suffering, an unusually personal and emotional image for Warhol. In keeping with the complexities of his construction of death in the Death and Disasters, and with its repression in the diaries, the painting speaks of sex and of judgment. It is an allegorical triangulation of mourning, punishment, and fear.[117]

Though Warhol did not die from complications of AIDS, his personal paranoia and concern for his community was earnest, and his work about AIDS appeared relatively early in the epidemic. *AIDS, Jeep, Bicycle* and *Collage* are not the only AIDS-related works that Warhol produced. *Heaven and Hell Are Just One Breath Away!*, *Repent and Sin No More!*, and *The Mark of the Beast* (all produced 1985-1986) each reference the struggle between sexuality and religion, and showcase Warhol's own questioning of whether or not AIDS actually might have been a punishment from God.[118]

[117] Beck, 2020.

[118] Beck, 2020.

AIDS Art in the Digital Era

With the introduction and subsequent popularization of video games, digital artist CM Ralph created the first know LGBTQ+ video game in 1989, entitled *Caper in the Castro* (**Fig. 4.25**), a computer game that began the player, who existed as a world-renowned lesbian detective in the game, to solve the mystery of a kidnapped drag queen, which leads to the discovery of an even larger case.[119] In a 2014 interview, the game's creator referred to *Caper in the Castro* as a kind of "charityware" rather than software, as downloaders of the game were asked to donate to an AIDS charity of their choice rather than paying CM Ralph upfront.[120] The creation of *Caper in the Castro* exemplifies the example of the adage that necessity is the mother of invention, and emphasizes the fact that the creative response to AIDS was an all-hands-on-deck mission.

Digital art continued to progress as an incredibly influential artform throughout the late 20th-century, and today is one of the most common forms of artistic production. Though *Caper in the Castro* was produced in the midst of the crisis, it is one of very few digital artworks regarding AIDS. Most digital artwork regarding AIDS was produced much more recently, such as Vincent Chevalier 's *Your Nostalgia Is Killing Me!* (made in collaboration with Ian Bradley-Perrin, 2013) (**Fig. 4.26**), which depicts a virtual teenage bedroom decorated in AIDS artwork (and Justin Beiber in

---

[119] Andrew Borman, "Game Saves: Preserving the First LGBTQ Electronic Game," National Museum of Play (September 7, 2018). Accessed March 23, 2021: https://www.museumofplay.org/blog/2018/09/game-saves-preserving-the-first-lgbtq-electronic-game.

[120] Luke Winkie, "A Q&A with The Designer of the First LGBT Computer Game," *Paste Magazine* (June 9, 2014). Accessed March 23, 2021; https://www.pastemagazine.com/games/caper-in-the-castro-interview/.

an ACT UP t-shirt). The premise of this work questions internet-culture's nostalgia for 'vintage' aesthetics as well as society's general consensus that AIDS exists in the past. In theory, *Your Nostalgia Is Killing Me!* works similarly to Attie's works, commenting on the notions of living histories. *Your Nostalgia Is Killing Me!*, though, takes Attie's concept further, suggesting that a perceived past is not equivalent to a living memory; nostalgia for what is still present allows it to persist. Chevalier, who was diagnosed with HIV in 2002 at age 19, provides a unique viewpoint as an AIDS artist in the 21st century, living in a post-crisis world which still affects over 38 million people annually.[121] Living with the memory of the AIDS crisis alongside personal experience of becoming HIV-positive and receiving treatment provides room for dialogue about artistic dichotomy. Inspired by Richard Hamilton's 1992 reinterpretation of his own work, *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?* (orig. prod. 1956), Chevalier's work critiques the overpopulation of image sharing on the internet, especially with regard to AIDS art, questioning if seeing images too regularly strips them of meaning.[122] Chevalier almost did not use the phrase "Your nostalgia is killing me!" within the work, originally toying with "I don't know much about AIDS but my blog looks fierce!," which would have provided a more direct statement regarding the criticism the piece engages with,

[121]"Global HIV & AIDS Statistics - 2020 Fact Sheet," UNAIDS. Accessed March 22, 2021: https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/fact-sheet.; Simon Thibault, "The Fine Art of Vincent Chevalier," *Xtra Magazine* (April 12, 2012): https://www.dailyxtra.com/the-fine-art-of-vincent-chevalier-32542.

[122] "As We Canonize Certain Producers of Culture We Are Closing Space for a Complication of Narratives," *Visual AIDS*, December 10, 2013. Accessed March 23, 2021: https://visualaids.org/blog/as-we-canonize-certain-producers-of-culture-we-are-closing-space-for-a-comp.

though the gravity of the piece's message would have been diminished.[123] In an interview, Chevalier likened the questionable effectiveness of internet image sharing to the strengths and weaknesses of the previously discussed works *Imagevirus* and *Riot*; without context for images, Chevalier questions to what extent their virality is effective, whereas messaging like Riot calls for a tangible experience to occur outside of the gallery and, likewise, outside of the mind. With *Your Nostalgia Is Killing Me!* Chevalier combines plea with visual, providing a new context atop images whose viral nature has made them too familiar.

[123] "As We Canonize Certain Producers of Culture We Are Closing Space for a Complication of Narratives," 2013.

Chapter Five-
CONCLUSIONS

The gay community [was] a phrase I always thought was bullshit, until the thing was vanishing.

– Thom Gunn,

Regarding "The Man with Night Sweats"[124]

Revolutionary artworks exist at a place in time when art centers on a particular emergency in society. AIDS art, though, utilized revolutionary art practices and challenged viewers to act in revolt against a homophobic status quo. Of the unconventional artistic practices employed by AIDS artists, a drastic change in subject matter has proven to be the most influential. This change in subject matter was relatively simple, yet extraordinary: LGBTQ+ visibility.

Though some LGBTQ+ public figures, like Harvey Milk, an openly gay member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, rose to prominence before the onset of the AIDS crisis, the number of "out" persons, and their wider public

[124] Colin Gillis, "Rethinking Sexuality in Thom Gunn's "The Man with Night Sweats"." *Contemporary Literature* 50, no. 1 (2009): 156-82. Accessed March 17, 2021: http://www.jstor.org/stable/20616416.

acceptance, was low. This is not surprising, as many states still had anti-sodomy laws in place, and the American Psychological Association (APA) did not remove homosexuality from its list of diagnosable illnesses until 1973, with the World Health Organization not following suit until 1990.[125] In a 2015 journal, *Behavioral Sciences*, one scholar argues that the APA's decision eventually led to the following, as long as a person/governments had no moral or religious oppositions to homosexuality, and homosexuals were "productive citizens":

> (1) The repeal of sodomy laws that criminalized homosexuality
>
> (2) The enactment of laws protecting the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in society and the workplace;
>
> (3) The ability of LGBT personnel to serve openly in the military;
>
> (4) Marriage equality and civil unions in an ever growing number of countries;
>
> (5) The facilitation of gay parents' adoption rights;
>
> (6) The easing of gay spouses' rights of inheritance;
>
> (7) An ever increasing number of religious denominations that would allow openly gay people to serve as clergy.[126]

[125] Jack Drescher, "Out of DSM: Depathologizing Homosexuality," *Behavioral Sciences* 5, No. 4 (2015): 565–575. https://doi.org/10.3390/bs5040565

[126] Drescher, 565–575.

While the LGBTQ+ community made modest strides in terms of legal recognition and protection, and public acceptance following this decision, many of these "breakthroughs" still have not reached full fruition in the U.S..[127]

While the APA's changes made it easier for many of the non-religious public to validate homosexuality, gays and lesbians were largely still not socially or culturally embraced or accepted by the hegemony. As noted in *Behavioral Sciences* about the events leading up to the decision, gay activists had been putting pressure on the APA prior to 1973, subsequently grabbing their attention and later creating panel discussions about homosexuality and discriminations gay psychologists experienced within their own professional organization(s).[128] Though the APA's decision to depathologize homosexuality provided scientific legitimacy for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer relations, the decision is not solely responsible for the advancement of the gay rights movement. Yes, this conclusion did provide evidence and context to arguments in support of homosexuality on the basis of science. However, the rise of social conservatism and the empowerment of the religious "right" in the 1980s maintained the religious/moral argument against homosexuality. As a result, the struggle between science and religion only worsened during the AIDS crisis, as homosexuals were cast as moral failures whose "sinfulness" prompted them to reap the wrath of God (AIDS). This greatly stunted the progress of the 1970s gay

[127] At the time of writing this thesis, the Equality Act (117th Congress, House Resolution, No. 5) had still not been signed into U.S. law. For the bill's current status, please see: https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/5

[128] Drescher, 565–575.

liberation movement for decades from the Reagan administration until the Barack Obama administration.

In the same way that the APA's revisions to their diagnostic procedures did not solely initiate society's general acceptance of homosexuality, AIDS artists were not single-handedly responsible for the eventual government action against AIDS and larger public tolerance for LGBTQ+ persons. This notion was best understood by Gran Fury. After criticizing the works of General Idea (such as *AIDS* & *Imagevirus)* as being too soft, Gran Fury's response was *RIOT*. In 1988, Gran Fury critiqued their own methodology with the *Art is Not Enough* campaigns (**fig. 5.1**). These posters were often black and white with bold lettering, generally stating something along the lines of:

> With 42,000 dead... ART IS NOT ENOUGH …. TAKE COLLECTIVE DIRECT ACTION TO END THE AIDS CRISIS[129]

Here, Gran Fury does not say "art does nothing," but does call-out issues associated with visibility. Like today's issue of Instagram Activism, in which an image calling for social justice can easily be shared to an Instagram story and forgotten, Gran Fury demands artists and viewers do more than create work that promotes visibility and understanding; the organization calls for *active*-ism.

A decrease in the production of AIDS art is largely due to two factors: advancements in the treatment and prevention of HIV (antiretroviral therapy and

[129] T. V. Reed, "Acting Up Against Aids: The (Very) Graphic Arts in a Moment of Crisis," in *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Present* (Minneapolis; University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 192.

pre-exposure prophylaxis [PrEP], most notably) and the reality that most AIDS artists have died. A decrease in AIDS art does not mean the eradication of the disease by any means, though. Many AIDS artworks produced in recent years present new dialogues that challenge stigma and/or remind viewers the AIDS epidemic lives on, that HIV/AIDS has been greatly remedied, but not cured. For example, Vincent Chevalier's short film *So…When Did You Figure Out That You Had AIDS?* (2010) (**Fig. 5.2**), examines the complex psychology of an HIV+ person confronting their own stigmas about the condition. *So…When Did You Figure Out That You Had AIDS?* is a re-presented home movie made during Chevalier's childhood as he and a friend engage in a pretend talk show. Chevalier plays a clown dying from AIDS complications, and after just a few rounds of interview inquiries filled with stereotypes, Chevalier "dies" from AIDS mid-interview, causing a stir. After this scene, a black screen appears with a simple yet chilling question: "So…when did you figure out that you had AIDS?"[130]

When photographer Adrian Chesser tested positive for HIV and was diagnosed with AIDS in 2004, his shame and anxiety surrounding the truth of his status led him to deep emotional reactions that were ultimately linked to a fear of abandonment. Realizing this fear was irrational, Chesser decided to tell his friends his status, inviting his friends over one-by-one, starting by saying "I have something to tell you…" He then revealed his status and made still photographs of their reactions in a body of work called *I Have Something to Tell You* (**Fig. 5.3**).[131] These images

---

[130] Vincent Chevalier, "So... When Did You Figure out That You Had AIDS?" Vimeo, 2010, https://vimeo.com/20256191.

[131] TEDx Talks, "I have something to tell you: Adrian Chesser at TEDxAmRing," YouTube video, 9:03, June 5, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YzQL4UDQhgY.

present the varied reactions of loved ones discovering deeply personal information. Chesser describes the works as "probably the worst pictures ever taken of my friends, [but] undoubtedly the most beautiful"[132] Their reactions express genuine concern, sorrow, and love. For Chesser, "coming out" was a two-fold experience, once as gay and later as HIV+. Today's treatments have kept Chesser healthy and working, and these images serve as a reminder to the artist and his viewers that the fear of visibility will always be more demanding than living in honesty.[133]

Both AIDS and gay art reveal vulnerable emotions and personal information that hope to grow the presumably straight viewer's understanding; the vulnerability associated with visibility is a common thread of gay experiences as well as the HIV+ experience. Visibility, though, does not eradicate what it exposes. In the context of LGBTQ+ acceptance in America, Ellen Degeneres' coming out was one of the most widely influential moments for gay visibility in the modern era. With her 1990s sitcom *Ellen*, Degeneres challenged the norm of what version of gay was "O.K." for primetime. Earlier shows that featured gay characters, like *The Golden Girls* or *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, presented these characters in one-time, sideshow-like appearances that featured stock plotlines like family acceptance, coming out to a heterosexual partner, or dealing with AIDS. Instead, Degeneres was a main character.[134] She confessed that her coming out allowed her to feel "completely

---

[132] Adrian Chesser, "I Have Something to Tell You," Adrian Chesser Photographer, accessed March 22, 2021, https://adrainchesser.com/.

[133] "I have something to tell you: Adrian Chesser at TEDxAmRing," YouTube video, 2014.; "Photolucida – Adrian Chesser," Wall Space Gallery, The Flat File (June 4, 2013). Accessed March 23, 2021: https://ws-flatfile.com/2013/05/29/photolucida-adrian-chesser/.

[134] B. J. Dow, "Ellen, Television, and the Politics of Gay and Lesbian Visibility." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18 (2001): 123-140.

honest - [which is] something I've never felt in my life."[135] Overcoming the fear of visibility, like in Chesser's *I Have Something to Tell You…* project, is a catalyst for change, not the arbiter of change. In her essay on the impact of the sitcom *Ellen*, Bonnie Dow notes that in the same way that the *Cosby Show* did not end racial division in America, *Ellen* did not eradicate homophobia. What the series did do, however, is provide the public with a gay person that they knew, someone they had invited into their living rooms for years before knowing Degeneres was a lesbian.[136]

In the time that this thesis was composed, the world struggled with another viral pandemic: COVID-19. While the US response to the pandemic has been far from perfect, it is interesting to consider the differences between the handling of COVID-19 with the handling of HIV/AIDS. Though COVID-19 is a virus that has the potential to be deadly, a positive HIV test was a grim death sentence until fairly recently. Living through the COVID-19 pandemic while studying the AIDS crisis in this era of internet culture, the term 'viral' has surrounded every aspect of this research. In the "Contracting Justice: the Viral Strategy of Felix Gonzalez-Torres," Chambers-Letson notes that Gonzelez-Torres's viral strategy comes from two key strategies: withholding yet suggesting a body & the use of active participation on behalf of the viewer; these two methods, then, allow the work to "infect" a viewer (or "host"), even if the viewer did not agree with the politics imposed by the work, the viewer is still "infected" as they have had a reaction to the work, positive or negative, and will go out from the gallery spreading their version of the contagion,

[135] Dow, 123-140.

[136] Dow, 123 - 140.

i.e. amplifying the artist's vision or working against it.[137] While Gonzalez-Torres's work often encouraged participation on behalf of the viewer and sometimes took a literal approach to viral strategy than most works (think: *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in LA)* (1991), where the viewer literally ingests the piece), Chambers-Letson's essay only tells a part of the story; at its core, the nature of consumption is viral. Upon living through any circumstance, whether the experience is viewing artwork or losing a loved one, the result of acquiring experience is effect. Social commentator Fran Lebowitz commented "A book is not supposed to be a mirror. It's supposed to be a door," as a way to describe the test challenged to any artist, and this sentiment is true when considering viral strategy in artwork; the job of every artist is to present a door for a viewer to come through, thereby "infecting" a viewer with additional perspective and understanding.[138]

In the same way that *Ellen* did not eliminate homophobia, understanding and perspective provided via AIDS artwork did not eradicate AIDS. Generally speaking, AIDS artwork has largely not even been viewed by most of the public; it is unlikely that many most Americans would be able to recall even one piece by an AIDS artist, other than possibly Keith Haring. *So why does AIDS art matter?* AIDS art— like Stonewall, Harvey Milk & the White Night Riots, the APA decision, Harvey Milk & the White Night Riots, *Ellen*, and Obergefell v. Hodges endures as a piece of the entire puzzle of queer history and liberation.[139] The art of the AIDS crisis serves as

---

[137] Chambers-Letson, 2009.

[138] "Fran Lebowitz: Reflections on Austen," The Morgan Library & Museum, May 22, 2015. Accessed March 23, 2021: https://www.themorgan.org/videos/fran-lebowitz-reflections-austen.

[139] Obergefell v. Hodges (2015) was a landmark supreme court case that allowed same-sex couples to marry in the U.S.. For more information: https://www.oyez.org/cases/2014/14-556

visible remnants of a community that was itself made invisible and largely forced into extinction; it is an artistic doorway that by entering provides a lens to understand the gravity of ignorance, intolerance, and dehumanization.

FIGURE IMAGES HAVE BEEN REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT PURPOSES.

Bibliography

"10 Facts About the White Night Riots." Mental Floss, August 14, 2020. https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/627028/white-night-riots-facts.

"1985 - Ryan White Banned from School Because of AIDS." Hemophilia Federation of America, March 17, 2014. https://www.hemophiliafed.org/news-stories/2014/03/1985-ryan-white-banned-from-school-because-of-aids/.

"AA Bronson: Felix Partz, June 5, 1994." Whitney.org. Whitney Museum of American Art. Accessed March 22, 2021. https://whitney.org/collection/works/16348.

"A Fire in My Belly." Electronic Arts Intermix: A Fire in My Belly, David Wojnarowicz, Electronic Arts Intermix, https://www.eai.org/titles/a-fire-in-my-belly.

Armstrong, Elizabeth A., and Suzanna M. Crage. "Movements and Memory: The Making of the Stonewall Myth." *American Sociological Review* 71, no. 5 (2006): 724-51. Accessed March 20, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25472425.

"As We Canonize Certain Producers of Culture We Are Closing Space for a Complication of Narratives." Visual AIDS, December 10, 2013. https://visualaids.org/blog/as-we-canonize-certain-producers-of-culture-we-are-closing-space-for-a-comp.

Akpan, Nsikan. "America's HIV Outbreak Started in This City, 10 Years before Anyone Noticed." PBS. Public Broadcasting Service, October 26, 2016. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/america-hiv-outbreak-origins-nyc-gaetan-dugas.

"Artifacts: The Age of Aids: FRONTLINE: President Reagan's AmfAR Speech." PBS. Public Broadcasting Service. Accessed March 22, 2021. https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/aids/docs/.

Beck, Jessica. "Warhol's Confession: Love, Faith, and AIDS," The Andy Warhol Museum, May 27, 2020. Accessed March 10, 2021: https://www.warhol.org/warhols-confession-love-faith-and-aids/.

"Before There Were Memes, There Was LOVE, AIDS, RIOT," Visual AIDS, March 27, 2013. Accessed March 10, 2021: https://visualaids.org/blog/before-there-were-memes-there-was-love-aids-riot.

Bennett, Steve. "Public Art Redefined," *S.A. Life*, February 24, 2010.

"Billie Holiday – Strange Fruit." Genius. Accessed March 22, 2021. https://genius.com/Billie-holiday-strange-fruit-lyrics.

"Biography." Shimon Attie. Accessed March 22, 2021. http://shimonattie.net/biography/.

"Blackfoot Indian Buffalo Drive' Diorama." Smithsonian Institution Archives. The Smithsonian Institution, n.d. https://siarchives.si.edu/collections/siris_arc_391479.

Borman, Andrew. "Game Saves: Preserving the First LGBTQ Electronic Game." Game Saves: Preserving the First LGBTQ Electronic Game | The Strong. National Museum of Play, September 7, 2018. https://www.museumofplay.org/blog/2018/09/game-saves-preserving-the-first-lgbtq-electronic-game.

Calkins, Hannah. "Art Is Not Enough: The Artist's Body as Protest." *Gnovis Journal* XV, no. 1 (2014): 1–12.

Carr, Cynthia. *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz*. New York London New Delhi Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2012.

"The Castro: Harvey Milk, Hero and Martyr." The Castro: Harvey Milk, Hero and Martyr. Public Broadcasting Services, 2009. https://www.kqed.org/w/hood/castro/harveymilk.html.

Chambers-Letson, Joshua. "Contracting Justice: The Viral Strategy of Felix Gonzalez-Torres." Criticism 51, no. 4 (2009): 559-87. Accessed March 22, 2021. http://www.jstor.org.umiss.idm.oclc.org/stable/23131532.

Chesser, Adrian. "I Have Something to Tell You." Adrian Chesser Photographer. Accessed March 22, 2021. https://adrainchesser.com/.

Chevalier, Vincent. "So ... When Did You Figure out That You Had AIDS?" Vimeo, 2010. https://vimeo.com/20256191.

Dobush, Grace. "25 Years Later: Cincinnati and the Obscenity Trial over Mapplethorpe Art," The Washington Post (October 24, 2015). https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/25-years-later-cincinnati-and-the-obscenity-trial-over-mapplethorpe-art/2015/10/22/07c6aba2-6dcb-11e5-9bfe-e59f5e244f92_story.html.

Dow, B.J. "Ellen, Television, and the Politics of Gay and Lesbian Visibility." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18 (2001): 123-140.

Drescher, Jack. "Out of DSM: Depathologizing Homosexuality." *Behavioral Sciences* 5, No. 4 (2015): 565–575. https://doi.org/10.3390/bs5040565

Duberman, Martin, and Andrew Kopkind. "The Night They Raided Stonewall." *Grand Street*, no. 44 (1993): 120-47. Accessed March 22, 2021. doi:10.2307/25007620.

Edsall, Nicholas C. Toward Stonewall: Homosexuality and Society in the Modern Western World. Charlottesville; London: University of Virginia Press, 2003. Accessed March 22, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wrkgb.

Fields, Liz. "Facing Death from AIDS, Keith Haring Kept Creating." Public Broadcasting Service, November 19, 2020. https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/facing-death-from-aids-keith-haring-kept-creating/16169/#:~:text=Lesser%20known%20is%20just%20how,two%20years%20of%20his%20life. .

"Fran Lebowitz: Reflections on Austen." The Morgan Library & Museum, May 22, 2015. https://www.themorgan.org/videos/fran-lebowitz-reflections-austen.

Gillis, Colin. "Rethinking Sexuality in Thom Gunn's 'The Man with Night Sweats.'" *Contemporary Literature* 50, no. 1 (2009): 156-82. Accessed March 17, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20616416.

"Global HIV & AIDS Statistics - 2020 Fact Sheet." UNAIDS. Accessed March 22, 2021. https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/fact-sheet.

Hall, Simon. "The American Gay Rights Movement and Patriotic Protest." Journal of the History of Sexuality 19, no. 3 (2010): 536-62. doi:10.1353/sex.2010.0011.

"He Kills Me." International Center of Photography, May 18, 2019. https://www.icp.org/browse/archive/objects/he-kills-me.

"History of HIV and AIDS Overview." Avert.org. Avert, October 10, 2019. https://www.avert.org/professionals/history-hiv-aids/overview.

"History of AIDS." History.com. A&E Television Networks, July 13, 2017. https://www.history.com/topics/1980s/history-of-aids.

"The HIV Epidemic: The Journey from Deadly Crisis to ..." Health Matters. New York-Presbyterian. Accessed March 22, 2021. https://healthmatters.nyp.org/the-hiv-epidemic-the-journey-from-deadly-crisis-to-routine-care/.

Honan, William H. "Arts Endowment Withdraws Grant for AIDS Show." *The New York Times*. November 9, 1989. https://www.nytimes.com/1989/11/09/arts/arts-endowment-withdraws-grant-for-aids-show.html.

Hristoff, Peter. "Peter Hristoff on the 'Unfinished' and the Faith of Practice." The Metropolitan Museum of Art, May 9, 2016. https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/2016/peter-hristoff-on-the-unfinished.

"Jerome Caja." Visual AIDS. Accessed March 22, 2021. https://visualaids.org/artists/jerome-caja.

Jerome de Noirmont Gallery. "Sex Is Life Is Sex." Sex is Life is Sex | Keith Haring. Keith Haring Foundation. Accessed March 22, 2021. https://www.haring.com/!/selected_writing/sex-is-life-is-sex.

Katz, Jonathan D., et al. *Art AIDS America*. Seattle London: Tacoma Art Museum in association with University of Washington Press, 2015.

Kennedy, Randy. "Tough Art With A Candy Center." The New York Times. June 7, 2007.

Kimmelman, Michael. "David Wojnarowicz, 37, Artist in Many Media." The New York Times, July 24, 1992. https://www.nytimes.com/1992/07/24/arts/david-wojnarowicz-37-artist-in-many-media.html.

Kohn, Sally. "The Sex Freak-out of the 1970s." Cable News Network, July 21, 2015. https://www.cnn.com/2015/07/21/opinions/kohn-seventies-sexual-revolution/index.html.

Kulick, Don. "Gay and Lesbian Language." Annual Review of Anthropology 29 (2000): 243-85. Accessed March 20, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/223422.

Lebowitz, Fran. "The Impact of AIDS on the Artistic Community." The New York Times, September 13, 1987. https://www.nytimes.com/1987/09/13/arts/the-impact-of-aids-on-the-artistic-community.html.

Lebowitz, Fran. Interview with Sam Fragoso, *Talk Easy with Sam Fragoso*, Podcast audio, July 19, 2020. https://talkeasypod.com/artist/fran-lebowitz/

Lim, Hannah. "Two Viewpoints: Idealism versus Reality." *Medium*. Queerer Things, November 30, 2017. https://medium.com/thinking-about-queer-art-performance/two-viewpoints-idealism-versus-reality-a7889ab17dcb.

MacKinnon, Dorothy. "Sons, Daughters, Smithsonians! A Guide to Nudging Kids Along The Path To Natural History." *The Washington Post*. October 9, 1987.

Marcus, Daniel. "Daniel Marcus on Keith Haring's Once Upon a Time, 1989." Daniel Marcus on Keith Haring's Once Upon a Time, 1989 - *Artforum International*, June 1, 2020. https://www.artforum.com/print/202006/daniel-marcus-on-keith-haring-s-once-upon-a-time-1989-83298.

Martin, Richard. "'Ataxia - Aids Is Fun', Derek Jarman, 1993." Tate. The Tate Modern, March 2014. https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/jarman-ataxia-aids-is-fun-t06768#:~:text=The%20slogans%20included%20in%20Ataxia,of%20balance%20and%20co%2Dordination.

"The Meaning of Felix Gonzalez-Torres' Clocks / Perfect Lovers." Public Delivery, January 29, 2021. https://publicdelivery.org/felix-gonzalez-torres-clocks/.

Morris, Charles E. and John M. Sloop, "What Lips These Lips Have Kissed: Refiguring the Politics of Queer Public Kissing," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 3, no. 1 (August 6, 2006).

National Portrait Gallery, "Hide/Seek: "*Untitled(Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*" by Felix Gonzalez-Torres - National Portrait Gallery," YouTube video, 2:16, April 7, 2011. https://youtu.be/37bSb-aQ4BM.

Nelkin, Dorothy. "AIDS and the News Media." *The Milbank Quarterly*, vol. 69, no. 2, 1991, pp. 293–307. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3350206.

Ng, David. "Getting the Facts Straight about Wojnarowicz's *'A Fire in My Belly'*." *Los Angeles Times*, 2 Feb. 2011, https://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2011/02/wojnarowiczs-a-fire-in-my-belly-gets-a-closer-look.html.

"'Not Over' Exhibition Checklist." Visual AIDS, n.d. https://www.visualaids.org/uploads/events/downloads/NOT_OVER_Checklist.pdf.

Ocamb, Karen. "Larry Kramer's Historic Essay: AIDS At 30." *Bilerico Report*. LGBTQ Nation, June 14, 2011. http://bilerico.lgbtqnation.com/2011/06/larry_kramers_historic_essay_aids_at_30.php.

"Opportunistic Infections and Kaposi's Sarcoma among Haitians in the United States." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, July 9, 1982. https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00001123.htm.

"Origin of HIV & AIDS." Avert, October 30, 2019. https://www.avert.org/professionals/history-hiv-aids/origin.

Pascoe, C.J. and Tristan Bridges, "Masculinities and Post-Homophobias?" in *Exploring Masculinities: Identity, Inequality, Continuity and Change,* C. J. Pascoe and Tristan Bridges, eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 412–420.

"The People vs. America." Al Jazeera. Accessed February 28, 2021. https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2017/the-people-vs-america/1980s.html.

"Photolucida – Adrian Chesser." Wall Space Gallery. June 4, 2013. https://ws-flatfile.com/2013/05/29/photolucida-adrian-chesser/.

"President Reagan Delivers First Major Speech on AIDS Epidemic in 1987 (Video)." ABC News Network. Accessed March 22, 2021. https://abcnews.go.com/Health/video/president-reagan-delivers-major-speech-aids-epidemic-1987-46492956.

Psyched Videos, "Nightline: Robert Mapplethorpe Cincinnati Censorship Case," YouTube video, 22:10, September 6, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZJEzEww6YOA.

Quabeck, Nina. "Intent in the Making: The Life of Zoe Leonard's 'Strange Fruit'." *Burlington Contemporary - Journal.* May 2019. https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/journal/journal/intent-in-the-making-the-life-of-zoe-leonards-strange-fruit.

"Quilt History." The National AIDS Memorial. Accessed March 22, 2021. https://www.aidsmemorial.org/quilt-history.

Reed, Christopher. *Art and Homosexuality: A History of Ideas.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 220.

Reed, T.V. "Acting Up Against Aids: The (Very) Graphic Arts in a Moment of Crisis," in *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Present.* Minneapolis; University of Minnesota Press, 2019.

Rich, Frank. "Gay Bashing at the Smithsonian." The New York Times. The New York Times, December 11, 2010. https://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/12/opinion/12rich.html.

"Richard Deagle and Victor Mendolia: Know Your Scumbags." *ClampArt*, n.d. https://clampart.com/2017/06/know-your-scumbags/deagle-and-mendolia_know-your-scumbags-980/.

Roser, Max, and Hannah Ritchie. "HIV / AIDS." *Our World in Data,* April 3, 2018. https://ourworldindata.org/hiv-aids.

Sainsbury, Steven J. "AIDS: The Twentieth-Century Leprosy." *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, vol. 25, no. 3, 1992. 68–77. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/45227903

"The Science of HIV and AIDS - Overview." Avert, October 10, 2019. https://www.avert.org/professionals/hiv-science/overview.

Silverman, Mervyn F. 2011. "Elizabeth Taylor and the Early Days of AIDS." *AIDS Patient Care and STDs* 25 (12): 699–700. doi:10.1089/apc.2011.9867.

Special, Wallace Turner. "Suspect Sought Job." *The New York Times*. November 28, 1978. https://www.nytimes.com/1978/11/28/archives/suspect-sought-job-moscone-had-been-asked-to-reappoint-him-as-a.html.

"Strange Fruit." Whitney Museum of American Art. Accessed March 22, 2021. https://whitney.org/media/36953.

Stuart, Robert. "Theater." *Patrick Angus: A Visual Diary*, edited by Anna Siccardi and Fabio Cherstich, Paris: OneStar Press, n.d. 36–40.

"Surgeon General's Report on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome." Bethesda, MD: National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health, n.d.

Takac, Balasz. "How Patrick Angus Portrayed the Gay Experience in 1980s New York." *Widewalls*, January 19, 2021. https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/patrick-angus-exhibition-bortolami-gallery.

TEDx Talks, "I Have Something to Tell You: Adrian Chesser at TEDxAmRing," YouTube video, 9:03, June 5, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YzQL4UDQhgY.

Thibault, Simon. "The Fine Art of Vincent Chevalier." *Xtra Magazine*, April 12, 2012. https://www.dailyxtra.com/the-fine-art-of-vincent-chevalier-32542.

"Threads of Remembrance: AIDS Introduction," Exhibits, University Libraries, University of North Texas. Accessed March 22, 2021: https://exhibits.library.unt.edu/aids-quilt/aids-introduction/.

Trescott, Jacqueline. "Ant-Covered Jesus Video Removed from Smithsonian after Catholic League Complains (Video)." The Washington Post. WP Company, December 1, 2010. https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/30/AR2010113004647.html?hpid=talkbox1&response_type=embed.

Turnbaugh, Douglas Blair. In Patrick Angus, 6–7. Stuttgart: Galerie Thomas Fuchs, n.d.

"Two AIDS-Related Installations by General Idea are on View for the First Time in New York at The Museum of Modern Art," The Museum of Modern Art, November 1996. https://assets.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_327725.pdf

Vinter, Maggie. "Epilogue: Afterlife." In *Last Acts: The Art of Dying on the Early Modern Stage*, 147-68. New York: Fordham University Press, 2019. Accessed March 17, 2021. doi:10.2307/j.ctvdtpjv0.8.

Whitney Museum of American Art, "Zoe Leonard: Strange Fruit," YouTube video, 2:26:28, March 24, 2018: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfD8iWicHB4

Winkie, Luke. "A Q&A with The Designer of the First LGBT Computer Game." *Paste Magazine*, June 9, 2014. https://www.pastemagazine.com/games/caper-in-the-castro-interview/.

Wojnarowicz: Fuck You Faggot Fucker, Chris McKim, dir. World of Wonder Productions: Los Angeles, CA, 2020/2021.