



+ ART AIDS AMERICA

+ JONATHAN DAVID KATZ

ROGER W. PERKIN

BILL ABIRNO

CHRISTOPHER CASTIGLIA AND CHRISTOPHER FERGUSON

WILEY BELMONT

ROBB HERNANDEZ AND KOFI TAYLOR

THEODORE KERN, BENY SROOG, AND JESSICA SARKIS (CO)

ILSE A. BRAMLETTE REEVES

ERIC VONN

SARAH SCHULMAN

DEB VOLZ (CO)

IN ASSOCIATION WITH
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON PRESS
SEATTLE AND LONDON

Undetectable

The Presence of HIV in Contemporary American Art

ROCK HUSHKA

Activists provided the first warnings of AIDS on the street, where they could not effectively be avoided. The earliest and perhaps most influential appeared in lower Manhattan in 1986: a poster proclaiming "SILENCE=DEATH" (fig. 1). A pink triangle anchored the center of the poster's composition, set solidly on its broad base with the vertex pointing defiantly upward. The reference to the pink triangles of the Nazi death camps was not a mistake.¹ Echoing the wisdom and experience of the German pastor Martin Niemöller² and basic grassroots political organizing, the poster's creators urged communities to voice the alarm regarding the AIDS crisis engulfing Manhattan.

In 1987, at the invitation of ACT UP member and New Museum curator William Olander, a number of members of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), including some who were also members of the Silence=Death Project, and other activists who would later coalesce as the AIDS action group Gran Fury created the window display *Let the Record Show . . .* (pp. 160–61) at the New Museum. The text in the display recorded the political and homophobic machinations that shaped federal government inaction against the unfolding AIDS crisis and demonstrated the indisputable relationship between image, lan-

guage, and the politics fueling the AIDS crisis. Gran Fury then continued the warnings, one in 1988, when they emblazoned the streets of Manhattan with a poster declaring, again in simple block letters: "With 42,000 dead, ART is not enough, TAKE COLLECTIVE DIRECT ACTION TO END THE AIDS CRISIS" (fig. 2). Gran Fury updated the numbers for the 1989 exhibition *AIDS: The Artists' Response*, at the Hoyt L. Sherman Gallery at Ohio State University: "With 47,524 dead, art is not enough."³ With these works and many others, Gran Fury set the imperative.⁴

The group appropriated from numerous art practices, everything from agitation propaganda to Madison Avenue sloganeering, feminist precedents, anti-war protests, the theory of activation from the French postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault, and others.⁵ In an interview with art critic and curator David Deitcher, a Gran Fury member explained, "[Our art work sh]ould provoke them, cause a reaction, make them think, and hopefully educate them. Our projects should have the effect that a demonstration by ACT UP has."⁶

The collective deftly manipulated the technologies and networks of their day and inserted AIDS into conversations within the rarefied art world. Their call

1. See Douglas Crimp, with Adrian Rolston, *AIDS Demo Graphics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 14.

2. Martin Niemöller (1892–1954), an anti-Nazi theologian and Lutheran pastor, is known as the author of the statement "First they came . . ." The version in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum reads:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the Trade Unionists,
and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

3. See David Deitcher, "What Does Silence Equal Now?" in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 100.

4. See *Gran Fury: Read My Lips* (New York: BOWSE PUSSELL STEINHARDT, Department of Art and Art Professions, 2011).

5. Rock Hushka, "Silence=Death/Action=Life: The Grassroots Politics of ACT UP and Art as and beyond Commodity" (Master's Thesis, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1994), 54–111.

6. David Deitcher, "Gran Fury," in *Discourses: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture*, ed. Russell Ferguson, William Olander, Maria Tucker, and Karen Fiss, vol. 3 of *Documentary Sources in Contemporary Art* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 146.

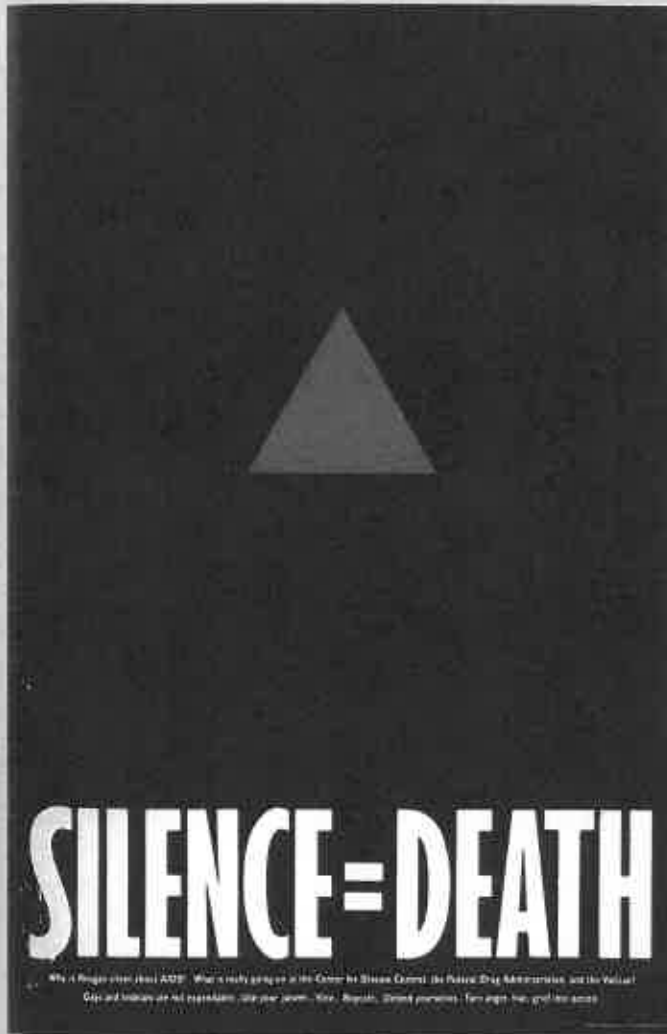


Fig. 1
Silence=Death Project
 (active 1986)
Silence=Death, 1986
 Poster, offset lithography
 29 x 24 inches

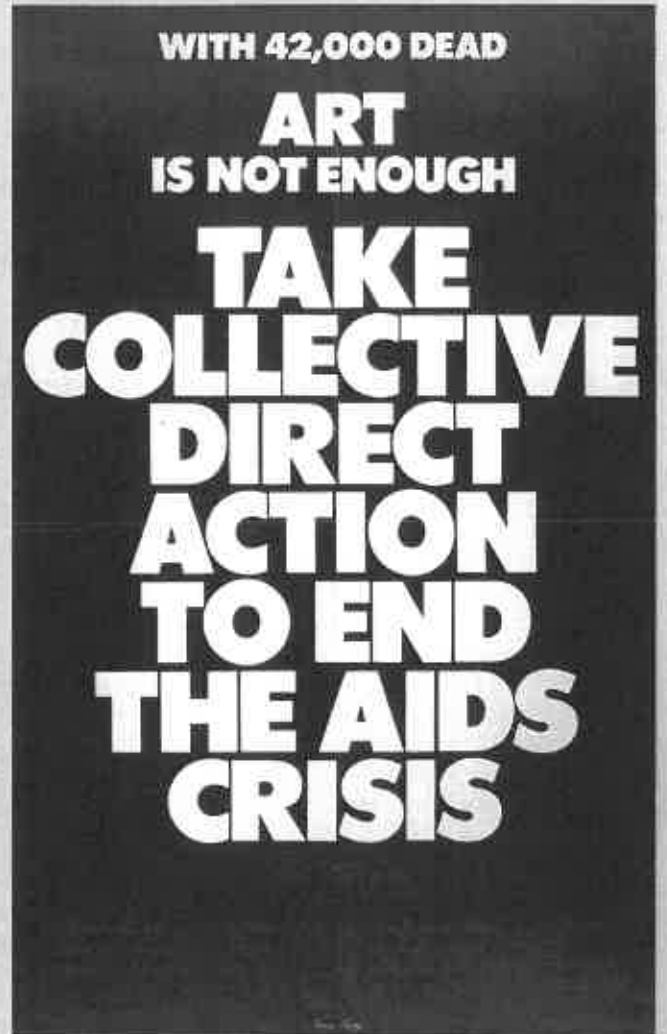


Fig. 2
Gran Fury
 (active 1987-95)
Art Is Not Enough, 1988
 Poster, offset lithography
 18 x 13½ inches

to action and images moved through communities like a contagion, specifically like a retrovirus. It is to this process that we owe the term “computer virus” or refer to something “going viral” on the Internet.⁷ Years before the digital age, Gran Fury’s message “went viral.” Posters, T-shirts, and stickers appeared across the nation. Their emotionally loaded slogans became deeply embedded in our collective psyche. Their work reverberated because Gran Fury activated theory to address an immediate need for the social good. They proved that art could be idealistic and meaningful without apology.

It must not be underestimated that the impact of HIV/AIDS on our society today is paradoxically both repressed and normalized to the extent that the correlations between the meanings and histories of “viral” are rarely spoken. As we consider the art included in *Art AIDS America*, we must not forget this problematic relationship with the complex history of AIDS and our present-day relationship with HIV.

But art was not enough to end or even arrest the AIDS crisis, as concluded by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who liked to say, “Who ever said art was enough?”⁸ Despite Gonzalez-Torres’s curt but insightful summation, art allowed artists to mourn, to advocate, and to politicize. Art provided assurance that histories would be remembered. For many, art functioned as a salve and a poetic trace of beauty, as people became overwhelmed and then broke down. In the rarefied space of galleries and museums, some artists began to reinvest in the traditional function of art—directly communicating their experiences through images and objects. Rejecting such antiauthorial, postmodernist stances as “death of the artist” and reader-

response theories, artists responded to the intensity and immediacy of the AIDS crisis by simply asserting their presence, sharing their experiences, and returning to the eternal human mysteries of life and death. The heroics of the artists who found beauty and voice during an existential crisis forged a legacy that continues to inspire and direct artists today. Herein, art was employed as a multifaceted tool for social change and advancement.

Art about AIDS could meld two divergent theories of postmodernism into a powerful critique of society while simultaneously reclaiming space in the art world.⁹ Exquisitely painful in its dark black irony, AIDS caused the actual death of the artist in a milieu primed by artistic gestures informed by Roland Barthes’s essay “The Death of the Author.”¹⁰ As Jonathan David Katz explains in his contribution to this catalogue, artists suddenly faced imminent death rather than a conceptual formation that purported to erase the authority of the author/artist. The question was immediate: What happens when artists begin to die? Artists answered with a multiplicity of responses—political, personal, elegiac, and any combination of these.¹¹ Until 1994–96, the ferocity of AIDS before HAART (highly active antiretroviral therapy), or the “cocktail,” so engaged artists and activists that everything became a tool, including the conceptual foundations of postmodernism.¹²

Christopher Reed posits that as part of a set of forces and impulses, artists working to respond to the AIDS crisis bent the arc of American art away from the modernist concept of “art for art’s sake” back toward the voice and authority of the artist’s experience, thereby indelibly changing the direction of American

7 The term “going viral” became part of the popular vocabulary as a mass-marketing phenomenon in 1997. See Karine Nahon and Jeff Hemsley, *Going Viral* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 19. The connection between the height of the AIDS crisis, from the early to the mid-1990s, and the rising concern about computer viruses is chronologically significant in that no other contagion presented nationwide alarm. Additional thoughts on the correlation between HIV and “going viral” may be found in Joan Van Tassel, “Going Viral: Mass Media Meets Innovation,” in *The Twenty-First-Century Media Industry: Economic and Managerial Implications in the Age of New Media*, ed. John Allen-Hendricks (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2010), 81–106, and Douglas Rushkoff, *Media Virus! Hidden Agendas in Popular Culture* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 3–16.

8 Quoted in Deitcher, “What Does Silence Equal Now?,” 100.

9 See James Meyer, “AIDS and Postmodernism,” *Arts Magazine* 66, no. 8 (April 1992): 60–68, and Christopher Reed, “Postmodernism and the Art of Identity,” in *Concepts of Modern Art: From Fauvism to Postmodernism*, ed. Nikos Stangos, 3rd ed. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1994), 271–93.

10 Although it was first published in 1967, most American artists would have been familiar with Barthes’s essay “The Death of the Author,” which argues that authors and other “creators” only borrow from preexisting ideas, and the new work is actually a unique creation by each reader, viewer, listener, etc., who interprets the work based on his/her own experience. See Roland Barthes, *Image—Music—Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977). I first encountered Barthes’s argument sometime

after 1990 as a graduate student while reading “Photography After Art Photography” by Abigail Solomon-Godeau in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis with a foreword by Marcia Tucker (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art in association with David R. Godine, Publisher, Boston, 1984), 81.

11 See these early exhibitions: *The Subject Is AIDS*, curated by Larry Jens Anderson and Dan Tally, Nexus Contemporary Art Center, Atlanta, January 7–February 11, 1989; *AIDS: The Artists’ Response*, curated by Jan Zita Grover, Hoyt L. Sherman Gallery, Ohio State University, Columbus, February 24–April 16, 1989; *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, curated by Nan Goldin, Artists Space, New York, November 16, 1989–January 6, 1990; and *From Media to Metaphor: Art About AIDS*, curated by Robert Atkins and Thomas W. Sokolowski, traveled Emerson Galleries,

art. Artists' identities, values, and purpose became interconnected with AIDS.¹³ Using the foundations of identity politics and postmodernism, artists began to insert information, ideas, and images into American galleries and museums, illustrating the full spectrum of experiences with HIV/AIDS. This process has been slow and oftentimes painful, triggering virulent political disagreements. Nonetheless, the change is irreversible and HIV's presence in American art is indelible.¹⁴

Three decades after the syndrome and retrovirus were first identified in 1982 and 1984, respectively, circumstances around HIV are very different and much improved. Today there are few outward manifestations of HIV/AIDS; indeed, scientific research and medical treatments have advanced so greatly that AIDS has virtually disappeared from American streets.¹⁵ HIV is often included in a list of chronic illnesses that comprises hypertension, heart disease, obesity, and arthritis.¹⁶ Treatment may be as easy as one pill a day for those with financial resources to cover the cost.¹⁷ Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP)—taking medications to treat HIV before infection—is now recommended by the US government for gay and bisexual men who have anal sex without condoms, for heterosexuals who do not regularly use condoms during sex, and for people who inject drugs.¹⁸

Instances of Kaposi's sarcoma, wasting, blindness from cytomegalovirus, deformed fingers from fungal infections, and lipodystrophy (unusual concentration of fat due to side effects of medications) are now rare, owing to advances in treatment of opportunistic infections and management of side effects of medications. Likewise, slavish adherence to enormously large

and complicated medication regimes has been eliminated for most individuals with HIV. The number of newspaper obituaries stating death from complications of HIV/AIDS has slowed from page after page of death notices to an unremarkable number, and young gay people in their 20s and 30s no longer attend weekly funerals for their peers.

As positive and welcome as these developments are for our society, HIV exhibits no sign of abating in its mathematical progression. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention record that in the United States 636,000 people have died of AIDS-related causes. More than 1.1 million people are currently living with HIV, and 50,000 new infections are expected annually.¹⁹ Simple division reveals the ongoing human toll: an average of 137 people every day, or nearly one person every 10 and a half minutes, becomes infected. Further, the social and economic issues that aggravated the crisis in the first decade of the epidemic remain virtually identical today. Race, class, gender, and economic factors contribute to the ongoing epidemic in the United States.²⁰

The exponential explosion of HIV combined with its virtual disappearance from day-to-day awareness in the broader American consciousness seemingly has resulted in the repression of HIV in art and popular culture. A progression can be traced: urgent and forceful actions and communication in the early years, a sense of exhaustion and of feeling overwhelmed after a few years, and then finally accommodation and normalization. HIV is everywhere around us and we have learned to live with it.

During the early years of the crisis, much ink was spilled delineating boundaries and strengthening

New York, Center for Contemporary Art, Seattle, Sharadin Art Gallery, Kutztown, Pennsylvania, and Grey Art Gallery, New York, January 1992–October 1993.

¹² Deitcher, "What Does Silence Equal Now?," 92–125; Jan Zita Grover, "Introduction," in *AIDS: The Artists' Response* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1989); and Larry Kramer, *Reports from the Holocaust: The Making of an AIDS Activist* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989).

¹³ Reed, "Postmodernism and the Art of Identity."

¹⁴ Activist and sex columnist Dan Savage tweeted: "The culture war is over and women, gays, people of color won. But work to do." Twitter post, January 11, 2013, 10:29 a.m.; <https://twitter.com/fakedansavage/status/289801318539857920>.

¹⁵ Mirko D. Grmek, *History of AIDS: Emergence and Origin of a Modern Pandemic*, trans. Russell C. Maulitz and Jacalyn Duffin (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 31–33, 60–70.

¹⁶ Steven G. Deeks, Sharon R. Lewin, and Diane V. Havlir, "The End of AIDS: HIV Infection as a Chronic Disease," in *The Lancet* 382, no. 9903 (November 2, 2013): 1525–33; available online at <http://www.eatg.org/gallery/169160/The%20end%20of%20AIDS-HIV%20infection%20as%20a%20chronic%20disease.pdf>.

¹⁷ See www.atrila.com and www.prezista.com for two of the more heavily marketed options in the United States.

¹⁸ See www.cdc.gov/hiv/prevention/research/prep/index.html.

¹⁹ See www.cdc.gov/hiv/statistics/basics/ataglance.html.

²⁰ For a startling, mind-numbing reminder of the glacial pace of change to the social and economic factors that contribute to new HIV infections, compare HIV/AIDS Blog Central and What's New in HIV/AIDS on the website www.thebody.com and the Poz Stories and Community tabs on www.poz.com with the much earlier Paula A. Treichler, "AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification," in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988); and Crimp and Rolston, *AIDS Demo Graphics*.

connections between artists, AIDS, and the culture wars.²¹ The most strident work refuted the equation that gay equals sex equals AIDS. The lessons of the 1980s and '90s include the reinforcement that art does not exist in a historical or social vacuum.²² AIDS clearly affected the arts community disproportionately, and this knowledge has become an axiom of American art that is deeply embedded in our collective psyche. Writing in his introduction to *Loss Within Loss: Artists in the Age of AIDS*, Edmund White eloquently noted that the collected essays attempted to circumscribe a void, "the collapse of a creative world that flourished in the recent past and the end of the promise these gay artists were never able to fulfill."²³

HIV is no longer a literal life-or-death issue facing American artists, but one that quietly and continually activates in the background in intriguing ways, consciously and unconsciously. Today, HIV must be carefully mapped to the artist's intent and experiences. Vestiges of the legacy of the AIDS crisis can be traced either formally through motifs and the influences of earlier artists or by understanding the scope and scale of psychological trauma and challenges that resulted from living with the existential presence of HIV.²⁴

It is fair to ask the questions: If HIV is undetectable in a body and all but invisible in society, why should visibility in art be any different? How do you identify HIV if an artist is unwilling to speak about it but doesn't live a moment of his or her intimate life without being aware of its near-certain presence? How can HIV be read if it can't be seen?

Rather than rely on codes and symbols, we must afford priority to social and personal context. Works of art should be read with empathy and compassion. Individuals address HIV on the most intimate levels both interpersonally and biologically. It is this constant, persistent personal operation that must be highlighted. It must be made impossible to ignore a presence of HIV's magnitude. We need to remind ourselves, through quiet acts of reflection, of the stresses,

anxieties, and realities caused by fears of testing, the burden and stigma of HIV, and the expense of doctors and medications. Art, too, must be explored and understood in this same way. Art since the mid-1980s might not always be about HIV, but in its history and enormity it is rarely not about HIV either. David Román eloquently explored these contours, specifically in respect to choreographers Neil Greenberg and Bill T. Jones, and concluded, "We as cultural critics should also delve into the difficult questions AIDS continues to pose instead of opting for the comforts of a culture that is supposedly not about AIDS."²⁵

The social climate of contemporary art has radically shifted in the context of queer identities. Meanwhile, American society has radically changed its views of homosexuality since the early years of the AIDS crisis, and discussion of homosexuality now rarely occurs in hushed tones. The Supreme Court has overturned its earlier decision criminalizing sodomy (i.e., gay sex); gay men and women openly inhabit virtually every walk of life, including those of politician, pop star, athlete, and religious figure; nondiscrimination ordinances have become commonplace (albeit fiercely disputed on a regular basis); gay marriage has been declared a constitutional right; the Boy Scouts of America allow gay-identified children to participate in their programs; and adolescents today are more easily accepted as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and even transgender.²⁶

Gay characters now appear with little comment in soap operas, television sitcoms, comic books, and major movies. Oscar Wilde's "love that dare not speak its name" had not allowed any lag in the conversation in decades. Compare these changes to the social order of the early 1980s. At that time, the idea of "coming out" as gay was a painful rite of passage. Gay identity was privileged information—closely guarded knowledge that could end a career and engulf an individual and his or her family in shame. Violent attacks against gays, lesbians, drag queens, and trans people were all too common.

21 Deitcher, "What Does Silence Equal Now?"; and Richard Bolton, ed., *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts* (New York: New Press, 1997).

22 See *The Downtown Show: The New York Art Scene 1974–1984* (New York: Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 2006); Helen Molesworth, *This Will Have Been: Art, Love, and Politics in the 1980s* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in association with Yale University Press, 2012); and Massimiliano Gioni et al., eds., *NYC 1993: Experi-*

mental Jet Set, Trash and No Star (New York: New Museum, 2013).

23 Edmund White, "The American Sublime: Living and Dying as an Artist," in *Loss Within Loss: Artists in the Age of AIDS*, ed. Edmund White (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press in cooperation with The Estate Project for Artists with AIDS, 2001), 10.

24 For an introductory psychoanalytic analysis see Tim Dean, "The Psychoanalysis of AIDS," *October* 63 (Winter 1993): 83–116.

25 This approach was explored with much care by David Román in "Not-about-AIDS," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 6, no. 1 (2000): 1–28; reprinted in *Critical Theory and Performance*, ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 372–93. I gratefully acknowledge Mr. Román's contribution to my argument.

26 This broad statement should not candy-coat the difficulties and harsh realities faced by young queer people. Unlike the social

The changes of the last 25 years also influence the way general audiences absorb and synthesize art about HIV/AIDS. In the context of the relative silence about HIV in contemporary art and such rapid social change, we must acknowledge that gay identity has been normalized and that we have adapted to a world saturated by HIV. Anyone born after 1984—30 years ago—would know only a world permeated with HIV.

Artist William Powhida addressed this generational shift with *Safe Sex Rules* (p. 255), commissioned by Visual AIDS in 2008 for its Broadsides poster project. Powhida recrafted the language of safe sex guidelines, developed years earlier, into a voice suitable for younger audiences.²⁷ Using wit and a more colloquial approach, Powhida's drawing of strikethroughs, doodles, and clarifications communicates vital information about risk and personal behaviors to avoid HIV infection. Explaining his approach, Powhida dismissed the abstinence-only message of the George H. W. Bush administration as impractical; he further stated, "Research shows that condom distribution doesn't encourage sex and reduces the spread of HIV. I hope that the message in my work will ultimately make people think through their laughter about the politics of fear and the importance of harm reduction."²⁸

Artists Donald Moffett and Bill Jacobson experienced the AIDS crisis while trying to establish careers in New York in the 1980s. Both men were active in political demonstrations, Moffett being a member of Gran Fury. Their experience in those years was formative and continues to inform their current work, albeit in subtle and oftentimes indirect ways. For example, Jacobson's *Interim Portrait #373* (1992) (p. 205) reads simultaneously as a memento mori recalling lost friends—who, though never to be forgotten, are nonetheless fading from memory as time passes—and as an act of political resistance through exquisite beauty. His more recent work, such as *Some Planes #208* (2007) (p. 253), is equally informed by both his earlier aesthetic and his resilience. Here, he further

refines his meticulous distillation of ideas and images of lived experiences. His indistinct landscape evokes a visceral desire for a place expansive enough to hold ghosts or memories. Although Jacobson's *Some Planes* series is not overtly coded as being about HIV/AIDS, an understanding of his intent can be heightened by activating the visual and political resonances within his earlier photographs.

Likewise, Moffett's 2011 painting *Lot 082011 (cobalt and its troubling perfection)* (p. 263) reflects the artist's personal history, yet resists an explicit interpretation of HIV while refuting any denial of a relationship. The form and content of *Lot 082011* are outgrowths of Moffett's interest in pure painting and his insistence that paintings exist off the wall and in three-dimensional space. His use of unadulterated, thickly applied pigment, by its sheer materiality, challenges the very idea of painterly gesture. Moffett also tips the notion of linear development of painting. The format hints at the banner carried by a triumphant Christ as he rises from his sepulcher in paintings by Titian (*Risen Christ*, ca. 1511) or Piero della Francesca (*Resurrection*, ca. 1460) or as might be seen in ancient depictions of Roman military processions. Further, Moffett obviously references Jasper Johns's *The Dutch Wives* (1977) and its irrefutable sexual innuendo (a "Dutch wife" is a glory hole). This sexual reference activates a chain of associations, including HIV transmission through anonymous sex. Despite this rarefied lineage, Moffett's art historical references were built upon his personal foundation of political activism, memories, and experiences. One—and there must be multiple—interpretation of *Lot 082011* is as a metaphor of personal triumph and resilience.²⁹

Jim Hodges's flower curtains, such as *When We Stay* (1997) (p. 232), fall within this paradigm as well. Hodges actively suppresses interpretations of singular meaning in his works, yet he acknowledges the impact that HIV/AIDS has had on his development as an artist and his ongoing artistic intent. In *When We Stay* he pays

milieu of the 1980s, today's social media offers expansive resources. One of the most prominent has been Dan Savage and Terry Miller's It Gets Better Project. See <http://www.itgetsbetter.org/>. Begun in 2010 as a YouTube video that went viral owing to Savage's national prominence, the website It Gets Better now hosts more than 50,000 user-created videos and has recorded more than 50 million views. Contributors include President Barack Obama and then Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy

Pelosi as well as thousands of individuals from around the world. See also Dan Savage and Terry Miller, eds., *It Gets Better: Coming Out, Overcoming Bullying, and Creating a Life Worth Living* (New York: Dutton, 2011).

The extent of the change was explored, overtly and subtly, in Tacoma Art Museum's "vest pocket" exhibition *It Gets Better: 1990/2010* (February 15–May 1, 2011), which was staged simultaneously with the museum's presentation of *American Chronicles: The Art of Norman Rockwell* (February 26–

May 30, 2011). *It Gets Better* paired the iconic David Wojnarowicz photograph *Untitled (One day this kid...)* (1990) and his prints for ACT UP with access to Savage's It Gets Better Project.

²⁷ See <https://www.visualaids.org/projects/detail/safe-sex-rules>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ E-mail correspondence with the artist, January 7, 2015.

silent homage to his close friend Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who died in 1996, and that artist's bead curtains and light strings. Delicate fabric flowers that Hodges has painstakingly disassembled become deeply visceral symbols of fragility and loss. Hodges elides a simplistic mournful interpretation by reattaching the flowers stitch by stitch into a magnificently beautiful veil that speaks equally of transcendence and resilience.

A reading of HIV/AIDS in the work of artists such as Moffett, Jacobson, and Hodges must be articulated with care. We should use the very mechanisms of HIV to underscore this facet of such art. In a person on a rigorous antiretroviral treatment regime, HIV is undetectable by even the most exquisitely sensitive tests. However, HIV remains present in deep reservoirs within the body and antibodies are still detectable. Thus, the active presence of HIV must be continually monitored.

Art history provides parallel methodologies to raise the experience of the artist, the social context, and the impulses driving creativity. As noted earlier, Katz, Reed, and Román articulated formulations to understand the process by which HIV "infects" the museum and informs artistic practice. In the recent retrospectives of Robert Gober and Jim Hodges,³⁰ HIV is not foregrounded by the curators, but its presence courses through the catalogue texts and chronologies and is manifested in the urgency of the artwork on display.

In addition to relying on conceptual and formal art historical methodologies, it is imperative to take in such work with empathy for the artist's lived experience. Even at the great risk of deriving an overdetermined interpretation, the viewer will come away with a far richer and more sophisticated understanding of the artwork. Inclusion of the presence of HIV in readings of contemporary art underscores our shared humanity and helps explain the sense of fragility and fleeting beauty so often captured by these artists.³¹

Gonzalez-Torres provides important context and antecedents for many artists in addition to Hodges, including Roni Horn in her *Gold Mats, Paired—for Ross*

and *Felix* (1994–95) (p. 59). The pure gold sheets represent the admiration she felt for Gonzalez-Torres and his partner Ross Laycock. As a metaphorical portrait, the value of gold ensures that care will always be taken to preserve this object, while the luminosity celebrates Horn's relationship with her friends. The materiality of this sculpture transforms Gonzalez-Torres's affinity for commercial products and endless multiples into a lasting memorial.

A response that also notes absence, Thomas Haukaas's *More Time Expected* from 2002 (p. 244), focuses on the horse without a rider at the center of the composition. Continuing the Native American tradition of ledger drawings—begun in the late 19th century by Plains tribes who made drawings of their stories and heroic deeds on discarded ledger paper—Haukaas provides an image to open conversations about HIV on reservations. Instances of HIV there are virtually unmentioned, a silence that only worsens an already catastrophic rate of infection. By focusing on absence within a group, he plays to the importance of community and families.

The kind of conversation that Haukaas envisions informs the work of photographer John Arsenault. He readily admits that the subject of his work is not limited to HIV and touches a broad range of factors, such as relationships, sexuality, love, hope, inspiration, acceptance, homosexuality, and much more.³² Within this interconnected series of ideas, HIV must be included as part of his ongoing life experience, particularly given that he creates primarily self-portraits. Arsenault will readily share stories about his past as an AIDS activist protesting in New York and Washington, DC, as well as recent instances of HIV testing. He admits that the stress of the tests, which today are finished in less than 20 minutes rather than the 16-day ordeal of the earlier ones, is nevertheless as great as that of his first. In his provocative 2004 photograph *There Never Was a Woman of My Dreams* (p. 260), Arsenault seductively touches his companion's neck as he presses the shutter release. His self-portrait is a defiant act of proclaiming an identity shaped by his

30 *Robert Gober: The Heart Is Not a Metaphor*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 4, 2014–January 18, 2015; and *Jim Hodges: Give More Than You Take*, traveled: Dallas Museum of Art, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Institute of Contemporary Art, Bos-

ton, and UCLA Hammer Museum, October 6, 2013–January 18, 2015.

31 See Jeffrey Grove, Olga Viso, et al., *Jim Hodges: Give More Than You Take* (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art; Minneapolis: Walker Art

Center, 2013), and Hilton Als and Ann Tempkin, *Robert Gober: The Heart Is Not a Metaphor* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2014).

32 E-mail correspondence with the artist, November 14, 2012.

decisions and experiences. Arsenault demands that pleasure and beauty continue to be pursued despite the omnipresent HIV.

Photographer Kia Labeija provides insight into her journey of self-acceptance and maturity in 24 from 2014 (p. 273). Born HIV positive, Labeija has lived her entire life on an antiviral regime. She has fought through the debilitating side effects of various medications as well as the isolation of living with HIV. In the series she created for her 24th birthday, from the 24th floor of the West Side Manhattan apartment where she has lived all her life, Labeija transforms into adulthood using dressing up for an evening's performance or party as the culmination of a step-by-step process. Beginning with side effects from medicine that leave her unable to move from the bathroom floor, she transitions to the bed wearing only undergarments, and then dons high heels and evening clothes. As a member of the New York City voguing and ball culture, Labeija reenacts her transformation into a vibrant and glamorous performer as an inspiration to other young people who have tested positive for HIV.

Pacifico Silano sought to generate a portrait of an uncle who died of AIDS-related causes and whom his parents rarely mentioned. As a young man, Silano did not have his gay uncle as a role model to help him as he began to understand his own sexuality. He created *Pages of a "Blueboy Magazine"* (p. 265) in 2012 by scanning pages from vintage porn magazines with models who bore a vague resemblance to himself. The result is a study in masculine ideals and sexual awakening, a powerful reminder that a generation of artists have built a self-identity knowing only a world with HIV.

Brett Reichman's *And the Spell Was Broken Somewhere Over the Rainbow* (1992) (p. 209) alludes to the rupture that created the world before and the world after HIV. Recalling that San Francisco was for generations considered the Land of Oz for gay men, Reichman poignantly symbolizes in his painting the devastating effect AIDS had on the gay community there, destroying dreams and happy lives. He also

plays on the ubiquity of Judy Garland's lament for a better place and for happiness. As an instructor at the Art Institute of San Francisco, Reichman now watches as a new generation of young people come to the city and cope with the reality of HIV, experiencing different relationships to the virus than what he remembers from the 1980s and '90s, with notably stronger, more inclusive systems of peer support.³³

Patte Loper described her fear that AIDS would spontaneously burst from inside her body as she watched many artists and friends succumb to the disease.³⁴ Her *Architecture Review 1978 (After the Shoot)* (2006) (p. 251) captures this sense of generalized anxiety and her fear of the natural world. In Loper's painting, a buck stands alert inside a pristine modernist home. At a moment's notice, the deer will bolt and leave destruction in its path. Other threats continue to mount: concurrently with HIV, SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome), swine and bird flu, and Ebola have further aggravated fears of illness and death.³⁵ Given the highly specialized knowledge required to understand HIV and other agents, representing the unknown as a wild, unpredictable animal suggests the artist's attempt to confront her fear.

In the late 1980s and early '90s, as AIDS ravaged the artist community, real-life versions of Loper's collapse of the modernist ideal repeatedly played out in the art world. Because of the AIDS crisis and artists' responses linking art to social and political events unfolding in real time, the hegemony of modernism and postmodernism was continually contested. A high-profile kerfuffle erupted on the pages of *Artforum* as scholar and critic Thomas McEvilley took the Museum of Modern Art and curators William Rubin and Kirk Varnedoe to task for blithely decontextualizing African and Oceanic art in their exhibition "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*.³⁶ Followed soon after, in 1989, by *Magiciens de la Terre*, at the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Grande Halle de la Villette in Paris, and by the 1993 Whitney Biennial in New York, curated by Elisabeth Sussman and known as "the political one,"³⁷

33 Conversation with the artist, October 6, 2014.

34 E-mail correspondence with the artist, March 29–April 4, 2013.

35 Susan Sontag first wrote about the language of sickness and death and its implications in *Illness as Metaphor* in 1978 (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux). This was

an early attempt to reshape dialogue and attention away from the "victim" to pathogens. See also Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989).

36 See Thomas McEvilley, "Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief: *Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art* at the Museum of Modern Art," *Artforum* 23, no. 3 (November 1984): 54–61.

The exchange was reprinted as "Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief: 'Primitivism' in Twentieth-Century Art at the Museum of Modern Art," in *Discourse: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture*, ed. Russell Ferguson, William Olander, Marcia Tucker, and Karen Fiss (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990).

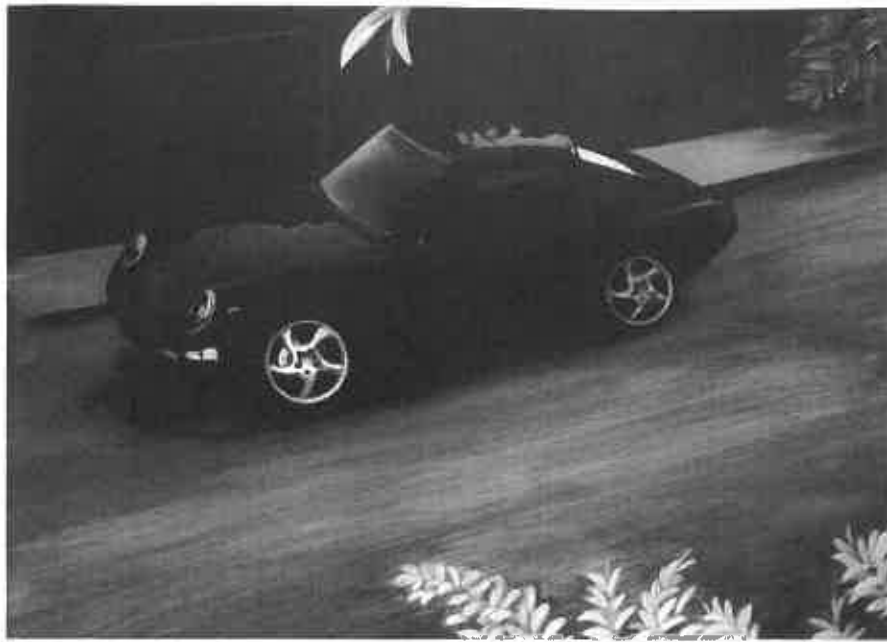


Fig. 3
Marcelino Gonçalves
(born 1969)
Untitled (Car), 2004
 Oil on panel
 24 × 33 × 2 inches
 Collection of Artist Pension
 Trust

exhibitions reinforced the importance of art in service of social and political goals.

The foregrounding of context that the *Primitivism* and *Magiciens* exhibitions forced the art world to acknowledge overtly sharpened understanding regarding the relationship between art and AIDS. Because of the overwhelming impact of the AIDS crisis, artists melded their social and political goals to their art practices in a multiplicity of ways. In works by Hodges, Gonzalez-Torres, Gober, and others, this operation quietly informs their artwork, providing a solid conceptual foundation. Other artists set the intersection of theory and practice more centrally in their work. Tony Feher focuses on beauty, evoking notions of fragility and preciousness from unremarkable objects that are usually overlooked. His practice is frequently discussed as a formal reaction to minimalist sculpture, usually on the basis of the repetition of singular elements and the resulting transformation of an architectural space. In *Green Window* (2001) (p. 242), a long cluster of green plastic soda bottles hanging from the ceiling becomes an eloquent but provocative gesture. Feher views the bottle as a metaphor for the human body ready to be animated: "The simplicity of the gesture is so clean that you get there without a lot of histrionics," he explains.³⁷ In his sculptures, however, he resists any attempt to tamp down

his life experience by devolving into a strictly formalist critique.

In a review of *Tony Feher*, a 20-year survey exhibition organized by the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston, Gregory Williams noted, "Despite the emphasis on material presence in his exhibitions, Feher is known to be vocal in interviews about both his working methods and his biography. The show's catalogue is, accordingly, full of quotations explaining his personal influences, including his involvement with ACT UP and his own struggle with HIV/AIDS."³⁹ Discussing this intimate aspect in regard to the arc of his career, Feher unequivocally acknowledges the ongoing influence of HIV on his art:

The survey has helped me to realize how fortunate I am in terms of my health—that I'm still alive, still fat and sassy. A lot of the work of my coming-of-age period, in the late 1980s and early '90s, was made in the social climate of HIV/AIDS. So many people were confronting their mortality thirty or forty years sooner than you normally do. The intimacy, the fragility—the almost pathetic quality—of some of my early work has given way, over the years that I've survived, to works with more substantial qualities. That might have something to do

37 For a recent reconsideration of the 1993 Whitney Biennial, see Jerry Saltz, "Jerry Saltz on '93 in Art," *New York* magazine, February 3,

2013; available online at <http://nymag.com/arts/art/features/jerry-saltz-1993-art/>.

38 Hilarie M. Sheets, "Message in a Bottle," *ArtNews* 108 (February 2008): 112.

39 Gregory Williams, "Tony Feher: deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum," *Artforum* 52, no. 1 (September 2013): 416.

with the fact that I no longer feel like I might die tomorrow. In 1989, when I found out I was positive, I said to myself, "Well, you're gonna be dead in ten years, so you better get busy. This is not a time to mope around and feel sorry for yourself." Now I'm lucky to be in a situation where sometimes I can even forget about it. I take my medication and everything's good.⁴⁰

Feher's "everything's good" attitude affirms the wholeness of his artistic practice and his personal experience. His sculpture would not exist without a deep desire and need to make art that will carry his voice and story.

Julie Tolentino will also discuss, easily and seamlessly, how HIV/AIDS resonates through her creative process as she works to transform the totality of her personal history into a potent visceral experience for her audience. Considering her background as activist, caregiver, and artist, it comes as little surprise that four of the five artists in her archive project *THE SKY REMAINS THE SAME* are HIV positive. She admits there is no way to understand her work fully without knowing her history with HIV.⁴¹ Tolentino's 2008/2011 performance work *THE SKY REMAINS THE SAME: Tolentino Archives Ron Athey's Self-Obliteration #1* (p. 262) physically manifests the uncleavable relationship between personal experience and artistic practice.

For *THE SKY REMAINS THE SAME: Tolentino Archives Ron Athey's Self-Obliteration #1*, Tolentino first observes Athey's performance of *Self-Obliteration #1* from a nearby platform; then she and Athey repeat the action as a duet. As needles hidden within the performers' wigs lacerate their scalps, blood streams down their faces, forcing the performers into unpredictable territory and responses. The chaos of the performance is mitigated by the synchronous movements of Athey and Tolentino.

The intensity of *THE SKY REMAINS THE SAME: Tolentino Archives Ron Athey's Self-Obliteration #1* is deliberate. The blood heightens the audience's awareness of the HIV status of both performers. Earlier in his career Athey avoided discussion of his positive status, but it nonetheless became integral to his critical reception at a later point. Although Tolentino is HIV negative,

the simultaneous flows of blood from the performers conjoin them in memory and in life-force. Her knowledge of the re-performance (for lack of a more efficient word) achieves her goal of transmitting Athey's performance and memory to the next generation, literally inscribing it into her body.

Danger and anxiety also manifest themselves in the 2004 painting of a black Porsche by Marcelino Gonçalves, *Untitled (Car)* (fig. 3). The Porsche 911 is a sleek and powerful machine, manufactured solely as an object of status and desire. Approached from Gonçalves's unifying aesthetic as queer, the parked car becomes rather menacing, challenging heteronormalizing tendencies and revealing the dark side of status, wealth, and success in American culture. The artist describes the car and the painting as ominous, finding affinities between car crashes and sexual adventure.⁴² The threat of harm is mitigated by the thrill of speed and power or, metaphorically, the promise of sexual pleasure. Through drugs, alcohol, or blinded reasoning, the ability to override caution for the allure of sex, regardless of the consequences, leads to heightened risk of HIV exposure.

Robert Sherer directly confronts the fear of blood contamination by painting with blood collected from friends, of whom some are HIV positive and some HIV negative.⁴³ *Sweet Williams* (2013) (p. 271) was inspired by Sherer's memory of a request from his grandmother. She asked him to gather some flowers from her garden and to take the prettiest ones first. In this painting, Sherer recalls with sadness his many friends who died prematurely of AIDS-related causes, noting their youth and beauty cut down in their prime.

The exuberance of *Eternal Lovers* (2010) (p. 261) by Tino Rodriguez stems from Mexican traditions of skull imagery for Día de los Muertos. Rodriguez activates traditional spirituality to declare a love that will transcend even death. He informs his painting using identity politics, taking effort to overturn expectations in order to prompt deeper engagement. A kind of postmodern prankster, Rodriguez conflates standard dualities such as good and evil or decay and rebirth. The skulls in *Eternal Lovers* are deliberately androgynous; their gender—as well as their cause of death—is unknown. Like Day of the Dead celebrations,

40 Brian Sholis, "Tony Feher as Told to Brian Sholis," *Artforum*, June 4, 2013, <http://artforum.com/words/id=41424>.

41 Conversation with the artist, February 20, 2015.

42 Conversation with the artist, September 1, 2014.

43 See Diana McClintock, *Blood Works: The Sanguineous Art of Robert Sherer* (Kennesaw, GA: Kennesaw State University Press, 2012).

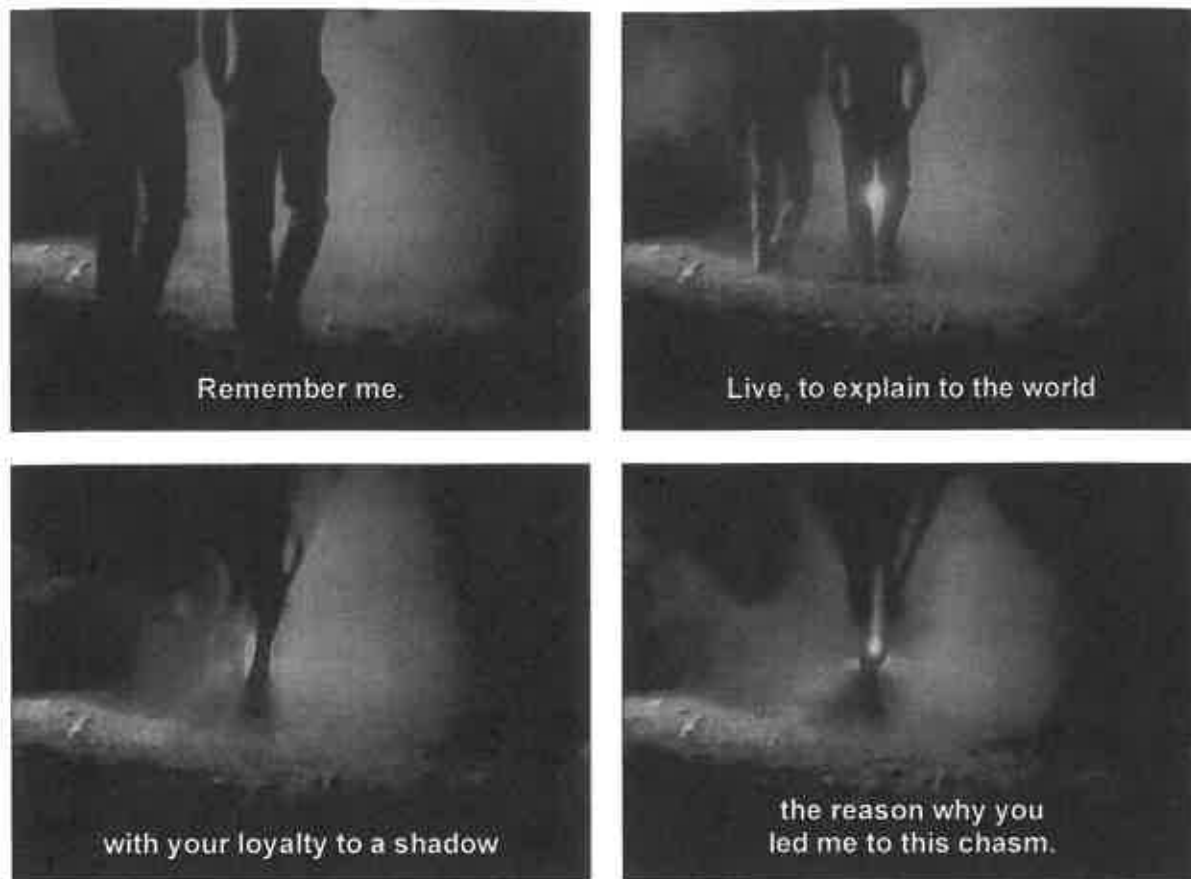


Fig. 4
William E. Jones (born 1962)
v.o., 2006
 Video
 59 minutes
 Courtesy of the artist

Rodriguez's image celebrates triumph and memory over AIDS-related death or any other loss.

Joey Terrill's 2012 painting *Still Life with Forget-Me-Nots and One Week's Dose of Truvada* (p. 266) evokes Tom Wesselmann's pop art rendition of a quotidian interior, *Still Life #30* (1963). But instead of depicting just a quaintly old-fashioned suburban kitchen filled with name-brand products, Terrill includes—in addition to articles of an average household such as the striped tablecloth and grocery items—oversized pills and reproductions of the art of David Wojnarowicz. The forget-me-nots at the center of the composition provide the key to remembering the history of AIDS

activism, the art of Wojnarowicz, and the regime of the one-a-day pill Truvada. Given the lowly status of still life in the hierarchy of painting, the placement of a life-saving medicine as the focal point in the doubly mundane scene (evoking both Wesselmann and a working-class home) is a potent reminder of the high cost of the HIV medications one needs just to stay alive.

Terrill's quiet protest stands in contrast to artists who assert a sharp political edge in the tradition of the agitprop and street graphics of Gran Fury and others. Jonathan Horowitz seeks to sear an image, idea, and stance into viewers' minds. In *Archival Iris Print of*

⁴⁴ Lionel Bovier and Kelly Taylor, eds., *And/Or: Jonathan Horowitz* (Zürich: JRP Ringier, 2009), 179–80.

⁴⁵ "Untitled" was first exhibited in 1992 by the Museum of Modern Art, New York;

Kunst-Werke, Berlin; Tramway, Glasgow; and the Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon. It has subsequently been exhibited in 1993, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2012, and 2013.

an Image Downloaded from the Internet with Two Copies of the New York Post Rotting in Their Frames (2004) (p. 248), Horowitz recasts the inevitability of the decay of human beings and cheap newsprint as a political memory. At the time of former president Reagan's death, Horowitz acquired two commemorative copies of Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post* and mounted them above an acid-free image of an anonymous person who had died of AIDS-related complications. Using the materiality of paper, Horowitz metaphorically asserts a longer game than Reagan's political silence. The unknown dead man will be remembered and honored for his personal struggle long after politicians have moved beyond Reagan's ideological stance and Murdoch's *New York Post* has disintegrated into shards of brittle paper.⁴⁴

The irrevocable bond between the personal and the political is also seen in Dean Sameshima's *In Between Days (Without You)* (1998) (pp. 238–39), a series of photographs of unmade beds, where Sameshima upends the silence and grace of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's iconic billboard project of an image of an unmade bed with two indented pillows (*"Untitled,"* 1991; see p. 58).⁴⁵ After a particularly messy and unpleasant breakup with a boyfriend, Sameshima photographed disheveled beds in Los Angeles sex clubs after anonymous sexual encounters. Playing on the beds' formal variation in color and composition, he uses tropes of minimalist art and well-worn conventions of photographic depictions of time to generate a record of his sexual conquests. Sameshima reclaims for himself the sexual freedom that was central to gay culture before AIDS and uses an iconic AIDS image to declare his intent to exist in a "post-AIDS" world.⁴⁶

Kalup Linzy's 2006 video *Lollypop* (p. 250) foregrounds sexual banter within the sterile confines of the traditional white walls of a museum or gallery. Linzy and artist Shaun Leonardo lip-sync to the 1933 Hunter and Jenkins tune of the same title in a florid acting out of sexual innuendo and gay desire. Echoing across decades, Linzy delightfully recasts sexual negotiation within the contemporary context of masculine identity in African American and Latino

communities and the stereotypes of queerness of gay men of color.

Although HIV is never broached in *Lollypop* (how could it be with the lyrics prescribed by a 1933 pop tune?), it seems disingenuous and naïve to deny any association with HIV. The playful metaphor of sharing candy leads to the negotiations of an intimate relationship, a situation repeated endlessly by young men and women who must navigate the risk of HIV.⁴⁷ Yet by not acknowledging the influence of HIV on the video, it silences the reality of Linzy, his cohort, and our culture.

Derek Jackson places sexual exploration at the center of his 2007 slide show *Perfect Kiss* (p. 252), which reveals the artist in a variety of sexual encounters (two scenes of public sex in a park, connections via social media/Internet, and a hookup in his home) interspersed with images of himself dancing shirtless to a 1980s disco classic. Using "found sound," Jackson appropriates New Order's melancholy song "Perfect Kiss," a 1985 pop lamentation about a friend's suicide. Through his series of sexual encounters, does Jackson equate the risk of HIV infection with suicide by handgun?

The startling feature of Jackson's *Perfect Kiss* is not the graphic simulation of gay sex but the unexpected and penetrating intensity of the artist's direct gaze, which implicates the viewer not only in the sexual exchange but also in the honest disclosure of serostatus. Using the repeating refrain "I know, you know, we believe in a land of love," intermingled with his piercing stare, the artist dares the viewer to join him. At this moment, parties must decide if they will compartmentalize HIV awareness from sexual pleasure.

In his 2006 film *v. o.* (fig. 4), William E. Jones explores the spaces between sexual encounters. Jones revels in the exotic: the glamor of European languages and films and the lost glory of sex before AIDS. Named after the French film term *version originale*, for films screened in their original language with subtitles, Jones spins his own narrative arc, splicing together nonsexual "linking" scenes from gay pornography made before 1985. Jones includes extended scenes

46 My analysis of the works by Derek Jackson, William E. Jones, Kalup Linzy, and Sameshima was explored in a previous essay. See Rock Hushka, "It's an Image of Sex. It's Not about AIDS: The Legacy of the AIDS Crisis on American Art (It's Never Not about HIV),"

GIA Reader 22, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 64–67; available online at <http://www.giarts.org/article/it%E2%80%99s-image-sex-it%E2%80%99s-not-about-aids>.

47 Conversation with the artist, August 5, 2013. Linzy shared that he struggles with the conversation about HIV status at various moments in his intimate relationships.

of “rough trade” that underscore potential violence in sexual exchanges.

To accompany the footage, Jones adds a montage of sound culled from classic foreign films and provides English subtitles such as “Did love begin for you with a boy?” and “Live, to explain to the world with your loyalty to a shadow the reason why you led me to this chasm.” The power of Jones’s work comes from the resonance between the romanticized memories and the meaning that such images have today. As such, the film serves not as an elegy to a decimated generation or homage to a cinematic genre, but as a poignant reminder that the potential for pain and loss informs our every response to such rudimentary desires. Jones lays bare the universal and timeless qualities of desire and the search for love.

Deborah Kass shares this yearning for the euphoric feeling of pre-AIDS optimism in American culture. Her 2007 painting *Still Here* (p. 254), from the series *Feel Good Paintings for Feel Bad Times*, appropriates language from the Stephen Sondheim musical *Follies*: “Good times and bum times, I’ve seen them all / and, my dear, I’m still here.” Kass positions *Still Here* and the other paintings from the series with a sharp political edge as a response to rigid ideologies that emerged from the administration of former president George W. Bush following September 11, 2001.

Kass denies that there is any specific meaning to her paintings, rather, she emphasizes that all paintings are read “socially.”⁴⁸ A socially astute reading of *Still Here* would involve corporate favoritism, denial of climate change, the invasion of Iraq, CIA spying and renditions, and Abu Ghraib torture, as well as the rightward drift of political ideologies and government policies, including those related to HIV/AIDS in the United States. *Still Here* demands a strenuous exercise in goodwill on the part of the viewer, relying heavily on Sondheim’s buoyant lyrics to reassure audiences of their resiliency and resistance.

A similar combination of camp, fight, play, and resiliency is the activating force of *Eden #31* (2012) (p. 264) from the series by LADZ, a collaboration of John Arsenault and Adrian Gilliland. Similarly dressed and matching in physical stature, Arsenault and

Gilliland lean into each other, the stars and stripes of their boxing gloves forced together. Seeking artistic inspiration and aesthetic freedom in the oftentimes vacant interstitial spaces of Los Angeles, the artists inadvertently found an odd connection to the boxing scenes of George Bellows. Their collaboration began as an experiment to mix history painting with the easy accessibility of Instagram. The 21st-century technology provides an important point to emphasize the radical changes for artists socially and artistically. The tag #LADZ is meant to muddle technological slang by mixing the British word “lads” with sexual innuendo and the diffusion of images on the Internet.

Arsenault and Gilliland underscore the playfulness of the sparring with a series of associations about sexuality and availability, all grounded in a world with HIV. Additionally, they assert an open defiance and willingness to continue the struggle for identity and a place in the world. These struggles are intimately combined. The artists have found the space to insert their images and their experiences into the digital and real worlds, employing viral tactics that have been employed at each previous moment of the struggle against HIV and complacency.

The diversity represented by artists discussed in this essay, beginning with Gran Fury’s agitprop and extending to the digital realm of Arsenault and Gilliland, reflects the profound changes in American art and society since the Silence=Death Project in 1986. Hard-fought changes in the social and legal structures have always been framed by HIV/AIDS. Artists jolted us first with awareness, then engaged us through activism, and finally nurtured our collective resiliency.

Our legacy and moral responsibility regarding HIV/AIDS demand that we continue the struggle against the virus and the factors that enable the epidemic’s exponential explosion. Since the earliest moments of the crisis, artists have put forth art and ideas that require multivalent responses, ranging from intimate moments of grief, suffering, and triumph to collective action. They have instilled a candor in their work that absorbs and enables multiple interpretations. To understand the fullness and richness of their art requires awareness.

48 Velvetpark Media, “Painter. Deborah Kass, interviewed by Velvetpark,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x121rfYvrhU>

If we wish to continue these artists' radical positioning of art toward social connection and openness to multiple meanings, we must insist that HIV inform one of those meanings. This is how art affects lives and nudges positive change into existence. Museums should be part of this process. *Art AIDS America* seeks to abolish the silence around HIV and open meaningful and respectful dialogues about the pervasive presence of HIV/AIDS in American art.

