

CHRIS MCCORMACK ON ART, ACTIVISM AND AIDS

The recent surge of interest in 1980s AIDS activists, such as ACT UP, General Idea and Gran Fury, shows how art can effect real change. Looking back also reveals how narrow current definitions of healthcare are and encourages us to agitate for a more diverse future.

LOVE AIDS RIOTS



Most of us could not, did not face what we had really endured,' observes Sarah Schulman in *Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination*, 2012, which recounts life in downtown New York both during and after the AIDS years. 'Looking back at the gay dead,' she adds, 'locked in their youth, their youth is now locked in the past. Eighties haircuts, ACT UP demonstrations, tentative first novels from defunct presses. Memories fade.'

Nearly 40 years since the first case of AIDS was discovered in San Francisco, the incommensurable sense of loss that marked a generation – and, for some, as Schulman describes, an inability even to acknowledge it – has, over the past few months in the UK, been the focus of several exhibitions. These include Gran Fury's 'Read My Lips' exhibition at Auto Italia, General Idea at Maureen Paley (both in London) and the work of queer and feminist activist groups, including ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and pro-abortion contingent groups, in 'Still I Rise' at Nottingham Contemporary and De La Warr Pavilion (Reviews AM422). These exhibitions have returned to the activist histories of the AIDS crisis, highlighting an often overlooked period of

collectively made works by often undefined and divergent lesbian, feminist and gay civil-rights alliances that briefly unified around HIV/AIDS issues but which also brought forth undeniable antagonisms and fragmentations. (Although still marginalised across society, trans-alliances were latterly ushered in more forcibly by Queer Nation in the early 1990s.)

These activities and works shows how the lack of medical understanding and care provided in the 1980s was further underscored by social stigmatisation which branched off into homophobia, racism and misogyny. These works also sought to counter mainstream media representations of HIV/AIDS and to redraw its perception, a task that many involved in AIDS activism described as leading to burn-out and exhaustion. Writing in 1985, sociologist Cindy Patton argued that this anxious state was widespread, even affecting those with a strong gay pride: 'Lurking deep in the heart of even the most positive and progressive lesbians and gay men was the fear: maybe they are right, homosexuality is death.'

Looking at the protests of the late 1980s today, it is conceivable that they might evoke nostalgia for a time when sexual dissidents hadn't yet been assimilated – or gentrified,

Phyllis

Christopher

Queer Nation
'SHOP' (Suburban
Homosexual
Outreach Project)
action at Sun Valley,
Concord, California
1990

Gran Fury

Kissing Doesn't Kill
1990

KISSING DOESN'T KILL: GREED AND INDIFFERENCE DO.



CORPORATE GREED, GOVERNMENT INACTION, AND PUBLIC INDIFFERENCE MAKE AIDS A POLITICAL CRISIS.

to adopt Schulman's view – into mainstream discourses and the pursuit of heteronormativity. As an emblazoned T-shirt by the artist Joe Mama-Nitzberg from 2012/18 states: 'All my friends died of AIDS and all I got was marriage equality.' The sense of disillusionment with progressive politics that runs through Mama-Nitzberg's sentiments, from AIDS to gay marriage, is considered by Jasbir Puar in her 2007 book *Terrorist Assemblages*, as emblematic of the turn in how queer subjects are figured, from those who are left to die to those who produce life, concluding that 'not all sexually or gender non-conforming bodies are "fostered for living"; just as only some queer deaths are constituted as grievable, while others are targeted for killing or left to die.'

The link between access to healthcare and what might be deemed assimilationist LGBT policies are explicit in the US with many marrying to gain access to their partner's health insurance cover. In the light of this, how might the current revisiting of AIDS activism from the late 1980s be carried out without curtailing the necessary exchange with present discourses surrounding those who are living with HIV or deemed to be in 'high-risk' groups who continue to be further isolated and excluded? Furthermore, how has the story of the AIDS crisis and the messy place in which queer theory and, increasingly, crip theory and left politics intersect been absorbed or modified in its institutional telling by academia? Might it be continually shorn of its complexity, as activist Avram Finkelstein succinctly summarises in his 2018 book *After Silence: A History of AIDS Through Images*: 'AIDS is a saga that torques our understanding toward one appealing corner of it, the generational foundation of HIV manageability in a post-protease inhibitor world. It is a heroic tale of an embattled community demanding accelerated drug research that paved the way for pharmaceutical advances offering viral suppression to patients with access, a parable that proves the system works in a way so predicated on the presumptive neutrality of whiteness, male physiology, pharmaceutical intellectual property rights, and a deregulation-mad political landscape that it turns its back to the pandemic that continues to rage, offering resolution in its place.'

If Puar and Finkelstein both situate the shortcomings in response to the present-day AIDS crisis – still, in 2017, largely because of the cost of drugs, there were 940,000 deaths globally

of AIDS – they also point out how the assimilationist drive by the LGBT community in recent years may have forestalled the progress for many living, or forced to live, outside homonormative lines. From out of this context, might revisiting works of the late 1980s to consider additional ways forward be found? As the opening quote from Schulman wonders: could we look back?

Towards the end of last year, Sunil Gupta republished a set of photographs taken in 1976 on New York's Christopher Street – the predominantly gay neighbourhood that was home to the Stonewall bar and riots – that shows figures walking towards the camera. Although all those pictured are predominately gay, cis-gendered, if non-conforming body types – in what might be deemed sexually confrontational clothing or just maverick attire – one can't help but be struck by the light, heat and the capacity of a city to sustain lives that would have been impossible elsewhere at that time. The images provide glimpses of the looks and exchanges, of cruising and sexual possibilities that circulated on the street before the advent of AIDS, but also before these bodies were exposed to more violent forms of public scrutiny. Through this return of overlooked queer histories, there is perhaps a capacity to apprehend by looking towards the past (and towards alternative, possibly utopian promises contained in lives that have been otherwise erased), to bring potentially recuperative narratives into the present. Such subjects have been outlined by queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz, who proposes the idea of 'a backward glance that enacts a future vision'. How might these backward glances, filled with latent intimacies, be conceived and how might they possibly form recuperative positions on the AIDS crisis and the losses inflicted?

In tandem with these debates, recent exhibitions have also begun to help sociopolitically situate one of the most significant modern health crises. For example, the current group exhibition 'Intimacy, Activism and AIDS' at Tate Modern, curated by Gregor Muir and Kerry Greenberg, attempts to address the scale of the pandemic through a global, largely non-white-bodied prism. At Focal Point Gallery last summer, Ed Webb-Ingall's video *We have rather been invaded*, 2016, examined the lawful instrumentalisation of homophobia in education by way of Section 28 of the Local Government Act of 1986. This law was introduced in 1988, revealingly during the AIDS crisis, only finally being revoked across the UK in 2003. The exhibition 'Deep Down Body Thirst', organised by the collective Radcylffe Hall as part of Glasgow International, situated the work of feminist and lesbian practices in the 1980s-90s as part of an under-examined period of activist and sex-positive experiences that both threatened hetero- but also homonormative codes. In addition, McDermott and McGough's *The Oscar Wilde Temple* currently on show at Studio Voltaire brings together a project the duo initially conceived in the 1980s which 'commemorates LGBTQ+ martyrs and those lost in the AIDS crisis'. Forthcoming exhibitions that reflect on the AIDS crisis include an exhibition of Lorenza Böttner at Stuttgart's Kunstverein and the travelling retrospective of David Wojnarowicz (Reviews AM419), alongside a show of lesser-known theatre director Reza Abloh, all of whom died of AIDS, that opens at Berlin's KW this spring.

Central to the discussion of AIDS activism is the collective ACT UP which formed in



Gran Fury

left: *The Pope and the Penis* 1990
right: *Sexism Rears Its Unprotected Head* 1988

Dona Ann McAdams

ACT UP/NY
organises a national action to Storm the NIH (National Institute of Health) 1990

1987. The artists and many of the activists involved in ACT UP were principled in documenting their work – partly because of the availability of cheaper video cameras. The group's actions ranged from 'death-ins' and the scattering of the ashes of loved ones who had died of AIDS-related complications on the lawn of the White House, to taking over public health institutions, actions that questioned the violence of government inaction while seeking to redefine healthcare and force further gender and sexual equality. As

ACT UP member Maxine Wolfe recalled: 'They have made more of an impact, both conceptually and in terms of saving people's lives, than any group I've ever been part of ... And they were pro-sex at a time when sex was being connected to death.' Similar organisations were set up throughout Europe and latterly South Africa (TAC), adopting ACT UP's name and utilising its public strategies to draw attention to AIDS, while sharing networks of information (the 2017 French film *120 Beats Per Minute* vividly captures this period).

Indeed, it is the political and ideological dimensions of the AIDS epidemic that separates it from other health crises and concerns. As Simon Watney noted in his 1987 book *Policing Desire*, 'the British government's ban on gay materials coming from the US until late 1986 meant, in effect, that people in the UK were legally prohibited from learning about AIDS during a crucial period. The ban also meant that the British Department of Health had to sneak American gay publications into the country in diplomatic pouches in order to prepare the Thatcher government's bullying "Don't Die of Ignorance" campaign.' One might wonder how many lives might have been saved had the UK government provided this information earlier.

An interesting antidote to this compulsory heterosexism is Isaac Julien's video *This is Not an AIDS Advertisement*, 1987. Shot in Venice and London, a voice-over declares repeatedly 'feel no guilt in your desire'. The work is structured over two parts: the first comprising suspenseful overlays of ritualised movements (flowers held aloft to the camera, or steps on a flight of stairs) before they are remixed into a hedonistic choreography

of models posing to camera with looking-to-be-looked-at faces. Julien's point is not simply one of finding or embracing pleasure, but is also about using pleasure as a tool of resistance at a time when it was being forced into retreat. The impact of ACT UP in the UK, and the shifting understanding of HIV/AIDS over the 1980s, is perhaps visible in the music videos of Coil's 'Tainted Love', 1984, and Jimmy Somerville's 'Read My Lips', 1989. The first depicts the harrowing, horrifying reality of the effects of AIDS, filled with latent violence and sadism (the video was subsequently purchased by MoMA and is considered one of the earliest responses in popular culture to AIDS). Five years later, this is replaced by Somerville with an irrepressible, empowering song of political change through collective will, now galvanised by a demand: 'money is what we need not complacency'.

The partial survey show at Auto Italia of Gran Fury's distinctively clear-eyed framing of information and positive antagonism about the HIV/AIDS crisis speaks directly to this political shift. It largely comprises the group's billboard and fly-poster campaigns that ran from 1988 to 1995 (when the group disbanded), this is only the second solo exhibition of Gran Fury's activities – the first being in 2012 at 80swe in New York, while, in the UK, the collective was part of the 1992 show 'Read My Lips: New York AIDS Polemics' at Glasgow's Tramway – and thus emblematic of the group's resistance to being institutionalised and co-opted by art-market forces. Despite this, the collective astutely used the global network of public art institutions to disperse its work and produce transnational debates surrounding HIV/AIDS. The collective, mostly made up artists, named itself after a type of car popular with police in the early 1980s – but the name is also suggestive of the Greek Furies. Several billboard works were remade for this exhibition, each containing specific targets – state provision, the church, misogyny and pharmaceutical self-interest – all backed by key facts and simple slogans that drove tight 'message discipline' from billboard to public protest to get the message across effectively. Slogans such as 'Sexism Rears its Unprotected Head' next to an image of an erect penis still has the power to shock. Similarly, 'Women Don't Get AIDS, They Only Die From It' flips commonly held beliefs – commanded by the way in which female-related illnesses linked to HIV/AIDS fell outside the 'male research matrix' for the virus – with stinging effect.

The group's 11 members, who met through ACT UP and were spurred by participating in the making of one of the defining works of the time – *Let the Record Show*, produced for the windows of the New Museum in 1987 – took an approach not previously associated with left-wing organisations by consciously making televisual actions and performances, media-friendly soundbites and slickly produced advertising graphics. The group lifted the aesthetics of Barbara Kruger's work and, with her permission, incorporated her distinctive font, Futura Extra Bold Italic. Through production and display, Gran Fury's works are compelling, precisely because they rub up and jolt against, other images and meanings pasted up around them; one of the distinguishing qualities of the group's works is the materiality that they brought to protests – indeed, one might



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ask, are the presentation of these works by art institutions a symptom of something lacking in our digitally saturated present or an art world grasping for ‘real issues’?

Stretched across the main room and visible from the street outside is the image of three interracial couples kissing: two men kissing, two women kissing and a straight couple kissing. Each couple enacts a different type of kiss – from tender, to all-consuming, to sensually enraptured – alongside the script: ‘Kissing Doesn’t Kill. Greed and Indifference Do: Corporate Greed, Government Inaction, and Public Indifference make AIDS a Political Crisis.’ By appropriating the gesture of romantic love, when love and affection was deemed incompatible with the climate of fear amid unstoppable death, the work foregrounds touch and affection as sites of resistance while confronting prevailing homophobic views and, in particular, the public misperception that HIV could be transmitted through saliva. *Kissing Doesn’t Kill* was inscribed in the lives of those taking part in ACT UP, activist and writer Gregg Bordowitz recalled in 2002: ‘In ACT UP, you had to kiss everybody because you couldn’t be afraid of people with AIDS.’ The advert’s tagline also pushes up against the lethality of the prevailing culture which many felt sought to erase AIDS and the existence of HIV-positive bodies (it is worth recalling the fear around HIV transmission during the early years, when in 1985 an 18-year-old Coventry man thought he had caught AIDS after drinking from the same bottle as a gay man whom he punched and killed; the man received only a three-month sentence at Warwick Crown Court in what was described as a ‘wholly exceptional case’).

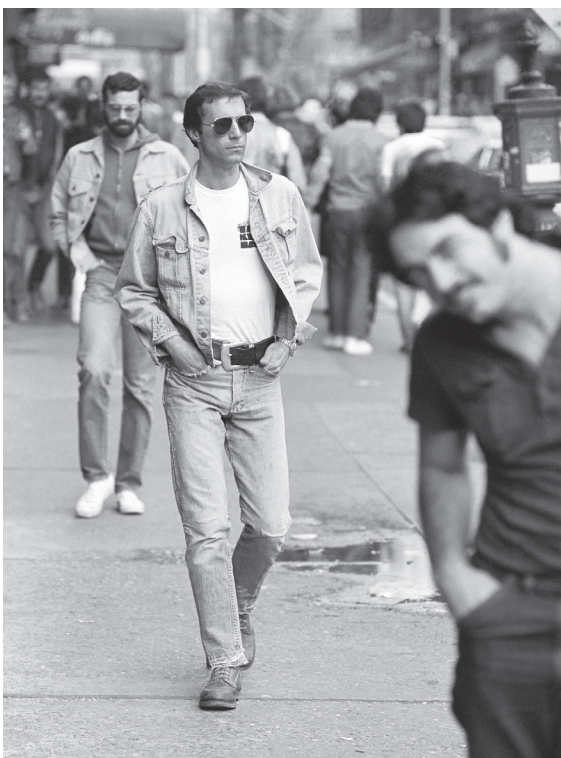
The deliberate embracing of professional advertising aesthetics, particularly that of distinctive branding work by art director Oliviero Toscani at Benetton, subversively mirrors that of state-led or capitalist-driven endorsement in an attempt to cut across expectations and confound passersby with its message of AIDS transmission and overt same-sex affection (two years later Toscani infamously appropriated an image of David Kirby dying of AIDS for Benetton; members of Gran Fury – Tom Kalin and McCarty – comment on the dubious ethical usage of the image, alongside Toscani’s self-aggrandising views, in Matt Wolf’s video *The Face of AIDS*, 2016).

Kissing Doesn’t Kill was commissioned by Creative Time and

amfAR’s (American Foundation for AIDS Research) curator Ann Philbin, who approached Gran Fury to make a work for display across the US public transport system as part of its ‘Art Against AIDS on the Road’ project. The poster appeared on buses in New York and San Francisco before it caused considerable controversy in Chicago, numerous adverts being defaced or torn down and officials attempting to ban the advert. Philbin, in an interview with Schulman, reveals her frustration with amfAR, which never publicly defended the work and distanced itself from the project because it did not wish to alienate key financial supporters in Chicago. Indeed, it is worth highlighting (although outside the reach of this essay) that amfAR, founded by the actress Elizabeth Taylor in 1985, opens a parallel discussion of fundraising and public-facing work: one of celebrity, artists’ auctions and high-profile figures of support. Indeed, the decision to scatter the gallery’s floor with photocopied dollar bills – carrying messages such as ‘Fuck Your Profiteering, People are Dying while you Play Business’ – is one directed at Wall Street and the cost of AZT antiretroviral medication charged by UK-firm Wellcome Burroughs to the US market, but also a pointed reminder of organisations that profited under the auspices of supposed benevolence, such as the ‘Blow the Whistle on AIDS’ art campaign which gave 40% of profits raised to amfAR.

Indeed, it is anger which governed a structure of action that overtook and replaced the mourning of those who died, as Gran Fury comprehended during an *Artforum* interview with Douglas Crimp in 2003 when they felt ‘permission to mourn’. Or, as Deborah Gould diagnosed in her 2009 book *Moving Politics* about life in ACT UP: ‘Anger was one of our primary idioms and we turned it against ourselves in a manner that made it difficult to work with one another. Largely unacknowledged, feelings of rage, fear, betrayal, non-recognition, mistrust and anger went unaddressed and took an enormous toll on individuals and on the movement.’ Fractures inside ACT UP ultimately led to necessary splinter groups and more evolved ways of responding to HIV/AIDS. As Gould asks: ‘How could one reply sensitively to assertions that HIV-negative people were trying to build a social justice movement on the graves of gay men with AIDS?’

The dramatic overspill of sexuality and gender nonconforming bodies on to the streets in protest is best captured by nebulous affinity groups such as the Candelabras (named in reference to Liberace and formed by artists Zoe Leonard and David Wojnarowicz), the lesbian activist video collective Diva TV, GANG (made up of Adam Rolston, Wellington Love, Jeff Nunokawa and Leonard), fierce pussy (seemingly one of the few collectives from that era that are still active), Lesbian Avengers, House of Color and Testing the Limits, and anonymous collectives such as the formative Silence=Death project, or Little Elvis, who made the stickers ‘The AIDS Crisis is Not Over’. Acronyms made linguistic play possible, such as the delightfully camp CHER group whose members redefined the meaning of its name every time they were asked, ranging from ‘Commie Homos Engaged in Revolution’ to ‘Cathy Has Extra Rollers’. The formations of these groups speak explicitly of subjects of kinship and self-care as being necessary alternative structures. However, these groups perhaps also mirror, in the



AA Bronson + General Idea
installation view
at Maureen Paley,
London 2018

Sunil Gupta
from the
'Christopher Street
1976' series

way in which these collectives mostly fell apart and disbanded, the individuated system that AIDS treatment has now become.

Gran Fury itself collaborated with numerous other artists and networks, including the similarly influential Group Material, with their work *AIDS Timeline*, along with Guerilla Girls, PONY (Prostitutes of New York, which

included Annie Sprinkle) and so on. 'Read My Lips' also includes an accompanying fold-out information sheet, which helps contextualise some of the material and present-day concerns surrounding HIV/AIDS. It is interesting to consider, however, what might have been possible given a larger exhibition of works: one subject missing is the way in which people with HIV are increasingly criminalised by US and European laws. Indeed, the phrase 'Kissing Doesn't Kill' is given renewed purpose here because in the US in the past ten years at least 12 states have convicted individuals with HIV for spitting or biting, neither of

which poses a risk of transmission. Any fears that these works, unplugged from the context in which they first were made, might be reduced to historical remnants from a period that has been left behind by advancements in medicine and education about transmission, or, worryingly, signal that the crisis has passed, are quickly overturned by the current threats to healthcare spending (the NHS in the UK, 'Obamacare' in the US), the anti-vaccine/anti-science movements and a pervasive threat to democracy itself.

Concurrent with the exhibition of Gran Fury was the work of AA Bronson and General Idea at Maureen Paley. Made up of Bronson, Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal (Partz and Zontal both died of AIDS in the early 1990s), General Idea's work has straddled public space and that of the gallery, overtly provoking discourses of postmodernity and conceptualist practices, especially when compared with the more directly activist work of Gran Fury. The group started the project *AIDS* in 1987 by

adapting Robert Indiana's mass-produced graphic motif *LOVE*, 1966. If Indiana's work is inscribed with the late 1960s hippy counterculture movement's goals of sexual and universal freedom, General Idea's work absorbs that message and reframes it into the shifting deadly paradigm of a virus. The placing of the four letters that make up the acronym AIDS into Indiana's square brings new dimensions to how the virus comprises meaning, making visible through repetition the ways in which meanings coalesce and perhaps break apart around the letters AIDS.

The exhibition comprised General Idea's now well-recognised work *AIDS Wallpaper*, over which several large-scale panelled paintings, *Great AIDS*, and a smaller, archival poster from the 1980s were rhythmically ordered. The overwhelming retinal pulsation that is captured by the strobing clash of colours in each of these works – one that evokes a misplaced advertising brief – is confounded by an ambivalent blankness to the word AIDS itself. As Bordowitz writes in *Afterall's* 'One Work' book series in 2010: 'They went Kabbalistic on the word, cracked it open to reveal the limitless significance of the thing. They opened the word to both revelation and revolution.' The multiplicity of the ways in which the work is presented, the group producing numerous versions of its *AIDS* paintings and also supplying the wallpaper to museums and institutions so that other artists' works may be arranged upon it, poses questions of scenography and hierarchy; one might consider works that are sited on the *AIDS Wallpaper* as details or close-ups on a viral map, forming insets from the cartography behind them.

General Idea's looping sign of AIDS ran in tandem with the increasingly available technology of xerography itself; the group went on to disperse the work across the billboards of Times Square and posters on subways, suggestively fulfilling the viral capacity of the subject but also the promiscuity of a body reduced only to the signifier 'AIDS' that was a culpable and continual infectious threat. However, the elegance of the work's propositions perhaps led to many finding it at odds with the anger and confrontational demands being faced. Gran Fury, for instance, viewed General Idea's replacing of Indiana's 'love' for AIDS as 'negative', or 'incomplete', before adding 'that it left no doors to action for the viewer'. The group's response was to reformat Indiana's motif to instead spell 'riot'.

By charting the sometimes antagonistic relation between those living with HIV and queer alliances to the violences imposed on bodies during the initial AIDS crisis, it is worth returning to Paur's conception of differing access and equalities of sexually or gender nonconforming bodies, specifically those that dignify protection and love, and those that are subject to oppression or even annihilation. People living with HIV/AIDS have always been stigmatised, but earlier forms of stigma were based explicitly on identity markers such as sexual orientation, gender, race, sexual history and nationality. In the current era of criminalisation, these older forms have been augmented with sexual irresponsibility and antisocial intentions.

Ultimately, these interlinked histories of AIDS, across racial, sexual and other biopolitical formation and regulation, evidently capture a conflicting picture, but it is a sharp reminder that without the work of Gran Fury, ACT UP, General Idea, Group Material and the myriad collectives of artists and activists that have forced these violences into vision, these histories would otherwise be left ignored. ■

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