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An engaged aesthetic : Aids activism through cultural practice.

Jennifer Kates

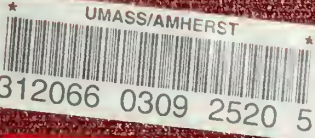
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AN ENGAGED AESTHETIC:
AIDS ACTIVISM THROUGH CULTURAL PRACTICE

A Thesis Presented

by

JENNIFER KATES

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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Department of Political Science

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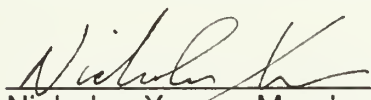
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This work was one attempt to combine the often disparate spheres of activism and academia. While I'm still uncertain that this task can ever be fully accomplished, or that I'd want it to be, there were many people who helped to keep me grounded even as I sought theoretical explanations and ideas for my daily experience in AIDS activism.

First, I would like to thank Professor Pat Mills, who has given me endless guidance, insight, and friendship, and has supported my very "different" conception of politics and power. I would also like to thank Professors Nicholas Xenos and Sheldon Goldman for their comments and patience.

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CHAPTER 1
AIDS, SEXUALITY, AND AESTHETIC ENGAGEMENT

I'm within a two block radius of the meeting place for ACT UP New York; I would know that just by observing the variety of T-shirts which are becoming increasingly abundant on the people around me:

"SILENCE=DEATH" (a pink triangle on a black background); "READ MY LIPS" (picture of same-sex couple kissing), "MEN WEAR CONDOMS OR BEAT IT" (phallus). It's 1990 and 93,775 Americans have died of AIDS (more than were killed during the Viet Nam War). By the end of 1993, an estimated 285-340 thousand people will die of AIDS.¹

We have entered the tenth year of the AIDS epidemic with no promise of remedy. Moreover, there is no cure for what AIDS has come to mean. For AIDS does not merely represent a disease, it represents a diseased society: a society which lets people die because they are gay, poor, or black; a society which cannot cope with illness, death, or sexuality. AIDS permeates our culture and as such has had a tremendous impact on cultural politics. In

¹Data obtained from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) *AIDS Monthly Surveillance Report*: (404)330-3020, 3021, 3022. Data refers to the number of reported AIDS cases through September 1990. For a number of reasons, which will become clearer in my thesis, this data tremendously underestimates and distorts the true magnitude of AIDS. For one, it refers to the number of *reported* AIDS cases, not HIV infection. See Appendix A.

HIV (or HTLV-III, the human T-lymphotropic virus type III) is the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, the virus believed to cause AIDS. It is a retrovirus which means that it has RNA as its genetic code and has the ability to copy that RNA into DNA and incorporate it into an infected cell. HIV can change its structure with each generation, thereby preventing the body from recognizing it to fight it off. AIDS, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, is the name given to any number of illnesses caused by severe immune deficiency. AIDS is not a virus or a disease; it is a *syndrome*. In the United States, the most common of these illnesses, particularly among white men, are Kaposi's Sarcoma (KS) and Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP). See *Report of the Presidential Commission on the Human Immunodeficiency Virus Epidemic, June 1988*; Steve Connor and Sharon Kingman, *In Search of the Virus*; Cindy Patton and Janis Kelly, *Making It*.

the face of death, the AIDS activist movement has turned to engaged aesthetic practices to fight the epidemic. Indeed, aesthetic intervention has been integral to the definition of the movement. Through its challenge to the traditional separation of aesthetics and politics, activist AIDS art disrupts the given, exposes the contradictions of society, and rearranges the social text of sexuality and death for the possibility of freedom.

The AIDS activist movement has exposed AIDS as a construction of discourses and symbols (e.g. cultural, political, medical, sexual, racial) through which society has come to "understand" the epidemic. AIDS must be viewed as constructed by these various discourses to truly understand the cultural and political stakes of the epidemic. AIDS reflects an already stratified society and defines the emerging stratified "AIDS society". As a construction of discourses in this sense, AIDS highlights and exposes the many interrelated layers of domination and control in society.² Viewed in

²Some examples: (1) the government did not act when AIDS seemed to be killing only gays and had not yet visibly entered the "general population". Witness the popular concern over pediatric AIDS; (2) women, who are seen both as nonsexual, unless they fall into sexually deviant categories such as prostitute, and as inferior so that their deaths are not of concern, were not targeted for AIDS education and prevention. Currently, however, heterosexual women have a greater rate of infection than heterosexual men. Among women aged 25-40 in New York City, AIDS is the leading cause of death. The problem is exacerbated due to the fact that many women are becoming infected by their HIV positive IV-drug user partners; (3) prostitutes were scapegoated for spreading the "AIDS virus", not their johns, despite the fact that prostitutes organized and educated themselves early; (4) the poor, who largely intersect with the minority population, cannot afford AIDS drugs or adequate health care; (5) the black and latino communities' long standing strained relationship with the public health system has prevented AIDS information, education, diagnoses, and care from reaching them; (6) the government did not care that IV drug users (IVDUs) were dying from a new disease and still refuses today to legalize and sponsor clean needle and bleach exchanges despite evidence that the rate of HIV infection decreases among IVDUs involved in clean works programs. Seattle is one of the few notable exceptions; in response largely to Seattle ACT UP, the city government legalized clean needle exchange. But even this exception is dwindling. Seattle soon enacted a loitering and drug possession law which allowed police to arrest people with drug paraphernalia. It was unclear if this would mean those people sponsoring or benefitting from the clean needle exchange. In many other cities and states, activists are arrested all the time for exchanging needles. At the Framingham Prison in Massachusetts, no clean needles or condoms are allowed, despite the fact that IV drug use and sex are known elements of

this way, AIDS does not mean anything beyond its construction; it is not *real*; rather, it is a composite of societal and cultural myths about sexuality, race, class, and gender. For instance, the assumption that AIDS is a gay disease or that gays deserve AIDS does not comport with reality. As Douglas Crimp says,

AIDS does not exist apart from the practices that conceptualize it, represent it, and respond to it. We know AIDS only in and through these practices. This assertion does not contest the existence of viruses, antibodies, infections, or transmission routes. Least of all does it contest the reality of illness, suffering, and death. What it does contest is the notion that there is an underlying reality of AIDS.³

Exposing the various meanings of AIDS, and understanding their interaction, is one of the first liberating strategies of AIDS activism. It is also an underlying force behind cultural intervention.

"Dominant culture", the "general society", the "public" of public health, has created the most predominant constructions of AIDS to control and repress certain groups in society, as well as to insure that AIDS is a problem for "them" not "us". For instance, in 1981, AIDS was called GRID, Gay Related Immune Deficiency, because an immune deficiency was first seen in gay men. Although the Centers for Disease Control officially named the virus HIV, and the syndrome AIDS soon after, the name and the blame have stuck; most consider AIDS to be a gay disease and gay problem.⁴ This is a

prison life. (7) and AIDS has shown just how fragile the public health system really is, as it flounders in the midst of the public health crisis.

³Douglas Crimp, *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, p.3.

⁴ An even more subtle construction is AIDS itself, which is an arbitrarily defined stage of HIV infection as is ARC (AIDS Related Complex). By arbitrarily defining AIDS and ARC this way, many affected groups are overlooked and misdiagnosed. A prime example of this is women, whose AIDS symptoms manifest themselves mostly in the form of prolonged vaginal infections. Many doctors today will still refuse to believe or suggest an AIDS diagnosis even if their female patient has these symptoms and places herself in an at risk group (personal

particularly easy task because AIDS first affected the already marginalized groups of society. By constructing AIDS as a gay, black, or IV drug-user disease, dominant culture has desperately tried to sustain a myth that AIDS is not part of the "general population"(read white heterosexuals): "The widespread resistance to acknowledging the long-established fact of heterosexual transmission is not simply an example of 'ignorance' or 'misinformation': it stems from the ideological construction of AIDS as emblematic of otherness".⁵ AIDS has conveniently served as ammunition for the New Right, which has used AIDS to espouse and legislate its "morality" in the name of the family. Moreover, the dominant constructions of AIDS serve to bolster the ideological hegemony of Western culture: "'official' AIDS information participates actively in the ideological foreground of all Western societies, seemingly validating social values and boundaries with the full authority of 'science'".⁶ What threatens this hegemony most is the threat of sexual diversity and the threat of death.

Sexual politics plays one of the most significant roles in the construction of the AIDS epidemic. This is in part due to the medical reality

communication). For many reasons, people of color often die undiagnosed and of different symptoms. People of color historically have a negative relationship with health care and often use hospital emergency rooms as their doctor. Furthermore, many people of color who have AIDS are exposed to different infections and illnesses than white gay men (an example would be tuberculosis). These arbitrary categories often misdirect treatment efforts (most AIDS drugs are tested on those who have full-blown AIDS, the last defined stage of HIV infection before death). Moreover, the HIV virus and AIDS are often conflated; the *New York Times* still calls HIV the AIDS virus. This seriously misrepresents HIV positive people as well as distorts the extent and diversity of the epidemic. Often, one can be HIV positive for years before developing "full-blown" AIDS, yet the label of AIDS virus relegates HIV positive people to quick and certain death.

⁵Simon Watney, *Taking Liberties*, p.19.

⁶Simon Watney, *Taking Liberties*, p.18.

that the most common transmission route for HIV is through sex⁷, and the human reality that most people engage in sexual activity. Yet, it is even more so because the first identified group of people to be infected with HIV were gay men. Gay men were already defined by their sexuality, beaten up and even killed for what dominant culture saw as a threat to "normal" sexuality, to the family, to children.⁸ AIDS has "worked" for dominant culture in the sense that it has helped to "expose" gay sex and to condemn it. Cindy Patton has observed that, for the first time, the diverse practices of gay sex are under public scrutiny.⁹ Gay men reading the *New York Times* or *Newsweek* can now read about their "deviant" sex acts, which have been equated with AIDS. On an even more dangerous level, the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) controversy is directly related to the repression of gay sexuality and safer sex efforts. Jesse Helms began his attack against the arts by waving Gay Men's Health Crisis Safer Sex materials around the Senate floor. As a subculture struggling with the very meaning of sex in the face of death, this "publicity" threatens to rob gays of the

⁷HIV is a fragile virus which dies in air. It survives, however, in bodily fluids of high concentration. The greatest concentrations of HIV are found in blood and semen. In general, safer practices (whether for sex or drug use) involve preventing the exchange of bodily fluids which can allow the virus to get into your bloodstream. See Cindy Patton and Janis Kelly, *Making It; Safer Sex and Drug Use Guidelines* from the *Gay Community News*, Appendix B.

⁸The sexual politics of AIDS have manifested themselves on many different levels. For instance, prostitutes were blamed for the spread of HIV, not their johns, despite the fact that prostitutes organized safe-sex education early on; the rate of infection has leveled off in this community. Women in general were not considered to be at risk for HIV infection. This "oversight" was in part due to a societal conception that women (unless in a sexually "deviant" position, ie: prostitute) are not sexual and in part to the expendability of women. Cosmo printed an article telling women not to worry about AIDS. The reality that women do have sex, and their sexual partners may be bisexual males or IV drug users has overtaken the statistics. Currently, in New York City, AIDS is the leading cause of death among women aged 25-40. This is moreso for women of color. The problem is augmented by the fact that almost all "AIDS drug" testing has been done on men; scientists and doctors do not know how these drugs will affect women, especially pregnant women.

⁹Cindy Patton, public talk at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, April 4, 1990.

languages, practices, and images which have helped to define their understanding of their sexuality.

In response to the very real threat of death from HIV and from the societal syndrome of AIDS, marginalized groups have developed *re-constructions* of AIDS in order to come to terms with its meaning to their sexuality and lives. For gays, this has meant confronting the dominant cultural conception that gay sex = AIDS = death, when, at some levels, this is real. As Michael Bronski puts it, "We as gay people must learn to face the reality of death with the same energy and imagination we have put into claiming and enjoying our sexual desires and experiences".¹⁰ While dominant culture in the name of political, legal, and medical authority has used AIDS to reveal and repress the sexuality of gay men, the gay community has had to respond by politicizing the diversity of sexuality and sexual practices while simultaneously eroticizing safer sex practices. Yet the sexuality of gays is not just under siege by dominant culture; it is threatened by the virus itself. Thus the project of eroticizing radical sexuality must be done within the necessity of safer sex. Gay men have had to reclaim their sexuality through the promotion of positive images and sex-positive safer sex campaigns. Since AIDS has interrupted and changed the form of the gay and lesbian liberation movement, the fight against AIDS and the fight for sexual freedom go hand in hand.

The sexual politics of AIDS has powerful and profound implications for lesbians. A recognition of the meaning of AIDS for lesbians, on both a medical, personal, and cultural level, helps to illuminate the radical potential

¹⁰Michael Bronski, "Death and the Erotic Imagination".

of the AIDS activist movement. This is particularly important because lesbians have been virtually invisible within the (medical) epidemic¹¹, yet, at the same time, have suffered a great deal of anti-gay attack. The stigmatization of AIDS as a "gay disease" has resulted in a "guilt by association" for lesbians. The incidence of queer bashing has increased dramatically, as have attacks by the Right against gay and lesbian civil rights. Many of the reasons given for these physical, moral, and symbolic attacks have been "couched" in anti-AIDS rhetoric. A clear example of this paranoia occurred in the mid-eighties in California when a group of lesbians were denied the right to donate blood.¹² On another level, AIDS involves lesbians because lesbians have, almost from the start, been involved in fighting the epidemic as health care workers, care providers, educators, and activists. Lesbian involvement in the AIDS crisis began even before the activist community began to publicly acknowledge that lesbians are at risk. Despite the prevalent belief (particularly among lesbians) that lesbians are immune to AIDS, lesbians do get HIV and do die from AIDS. Many lesbians have in the past or do sleep with men, including a large percentage of bisexual men. Lesbians have been and are IV drug users. The idea that lesbians are immune (or that any category, such as "monogamous", "heterosexual", "lesbian") is immune to HIV is a desperately needed but false belief. It is grounded in a strict notion of identity which attaches fixed

¹¹Even today, the CDC does not collect any data about HIV/AIDS and lesbians. No studies have been done on the sexual transmission of HIV between women. This information has only been collected by local women and AIDS support/activist organizations. Lesbians are left invisible in the statistics and most probably exist within the other categories of the CDC's data such as "women" and "IVDU".

¹²Jan Zita Grover, "AIDS: Keywords", p.25.

sexual practices and desires to the label "lesbian", ones which are often far from the reality of lesbian sexuality. By overlooking or excluding the vast array of sexual practices and desires that make up lesbian sexuality, this view denies women sexual agency and desire. For lesbians, AIDS activism holds the possibility of breaking out of a sexual policing of "community", one modeled on the principle of sameness (like the "lesbians do-it-side-by-side mentality of the 1970's) that has characterized much of the lesbian feminist movement to date.¹³

Theoretically and practically, in both the context of AIDS and safer sex practices, the labels of "lesbian" and "gay" become very unfixed even as community activism grows stronger. Cindy Patton connects this directly to the significance of the gay and lesbian liberation movement for AIDS activism:

The tie that binds this community together is a shared history of oppression....The respect for and celebration of the idiosyncratic, autonomous person in the context of a community which must negotiate vast differences in order to pursue a common agenda provides a rich personal community experience of viscerally felt politics--which holds important lessons for many other progressive movements.¹⁴

¹³One of my favorite terms for the lesbian sex police is the "vanilla militia", a term often found in *On Our Backs*, a sexually explicit lesbian publication. Currently, there are no stores in the "Happy Valley" which will carry *On Our Backs*. The last that did was a women's bookstore which was fire-bombed by anti-porn feminists in the community.

A wonderful example of this is the work of the Kiss & Tell Lesbian Art Collective of Van Couver, BC. Their exhibit, "Drawing the Line" showed pictures of two women in various sexual encounters with each other. Women visiting the exhibit were encouraged to write their reactions to these images on the walls of the exhibit (men were only allowed to write in a book off to the side). What the collective set out to do was to show that drawing the sexual line is quite difficult to do for a community as well as for individuals; indeed, the written responses were tremendously varied and some women had different responses on different days.

¹⁴Cindy Patton, *Sex and Germs*, p.147-8, 158.

Since HIV is a virus which doesn't discriminate, strict identity tied to a fixed set of sexual practices becomes meaningless and dangerous.¹⁵ Each individual has to evaluate for her or himself their own sexual practices and history apart from any preconceived notions about what a "lesbian" or a "gay" man is supposed to do in bed. Moreover, even though viruses don't discriminate, AIDS is constructed so that certain groups of people are infected and affected more than others. In this sense, a gay/lesbian sex positive identity becomes extremely important to the success of safer sex and the fight against sexual oppression even as the meaning of gay and lesbian changes. The combination of these two paradoxical realities--that viruses don't discriminate but AIDS does--marks the radical starting point of AIDS activism.¹⁶ The battle against AIDS is a battle against its ideological basis in Western notions of individuality and fear of difference, disease, and sexuality. Because AIDS touches upon all those fragile and "protected" areas of this ideological hegemony, AIDS activism threatens its foundation and revolves around a politics of sexual diversity.

The engaged aesthetic response to the AIDS crisis must be understood both as a critique of dominant constructions which have made AIDS into a cultural/societal epidemic as well as a medical one, and as a *re-construction* of the epidemic to allow for the possibilities of life and sexual

¹⁵As a lesbian friend of mine who gives safer sex workshops put it, you don't go approach a group of women and say "O.K., who's a lesbian, who's bisexual etc.". You tell them that HIV is transmitted through the exchange of body fluids and that they should use latex when having sex which involves potential contact with body fluids. They can figure out for themselves what this means for the various types of sex they practice. Their sexual identity may have very little to do with their sexual practices.

¹⁶Very different communities have come together over the fight against AIDS. This includes lesbians and gays, but extends to the Latino community, IV drug users, prostitutes.

freedom. It derives from a belief that art cannot be separated from lived experience; that "art *does* have the power to save lives".¹⁷ Aesthetic engagement has been part of militant AIDS activism (in the form of such groups as ACT UP) from the beginning (1987), and the movement has been defined by its aesthetic activism as well as by its specific policy goals and broader claims. This is different than the various social movements whose models AIDS activists have borrowed from and grown out of. This is not to say that aesthetic images have not been important to other social movements (images of Malcolm X, a raised fist) but that the array of new and different symbols and images within the context of social activism has never before been so integral to a movement's definition and representation to itself and to dominant culture. Images are carrying the movement forward, calling new members, defining new goals, exposing more elements of unfreedom and rearranging the given equation of SEX = DEATH.

The image is important to AIDS activism because it is a movement for sexual liberation. The issue of visibility is integral to the struggle for sexual freedom in the midst of sexuality under siege, a battle which overlaps with the struggle for gay and lesbian liberation. Visibility is a pivotal point for a movement for sexual liberation. Sexual minorities, unlike people of color or women for instance, are invisible within society. On the one hand, this has served to protect sexual minorities who have been able to literally hide from persecution by dominant culture. On the other hand, visibility is one of the most important steps in forming a community of diverse individuals; the history of the gay and lesbian liberation movement has been one of gaining

¹⁷Douglas Crimp, *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, p.7.

visibility and thus critiquing the given heterosexual norm. At the same time, visibility has led to persecution; there are many documented cases of violent crimes committed against butch/fem lesbians, effeminate gay men, and drag queens because of the overt nature of their sexuality. To negotiate the important but dangerous nature of visibility, sexual minorities have developed complex coding systems to allow them to identify each other for survival and community.¹⁸ And, as the gay and lesbian movement has become a public social movement, the movement has stressed visibility, “coming out”, showing dominant culture that we are here. “Coming out” has been strategic to the movement.¹⁹ “Coming out” not only provides visible images of lesbians and gays for those struggling with their sexual identity or feeling isolated because of it, the philosophy behind coming out includes a belief that the more visible we are, the more powerful, and the less dominant culture will harm us. Of course, this last point has been straddling a dangerous wall in the 80’s and early 90’s as the New Right has (an echo of an earlier era) used our very visibility to denounce us and deprive us of recently gained “liberties” and rights. A final philosophy behind “coming out” and public visibility is that of pushing the boundaries of the given sexual line; the reality of sexual diversity calls the “norm” into question (while there are many difficulties with advocating “coming out” for all people who identify as a

¹⁸e.g. the use of color-coded bandanas by gay men in the seventies, and s/m gays and lesbians today; tattooed blue star on wrist of 50’s lesbians in the Buffalo Lesbian Community; butch/fem in the 50’s; handkerchiefs of gay men in the 20’s and 30’s.

¹⁹“Coming out” is not a uniform strategy or solution for all sexual minorities. Because of differences of race, class, and gender, coming out poses a variety of difficulties to different groups. A lesbian with children may face losing her children, for instance. This is why “outing”, the recent project of gay activists to “out” major public figures who are closeted, is a difficult strategy to evaluate. “Coming out” and “outing” are not clear cut decisions; their benefits are visibility; their harms may be further loss and persecution.

sexual minority/radical, it does force dominant culture to see the other).²⁰ AIDS activism, as a movement for sexual freedom, has revolved around the use of imagery within a contested sphere of sexuality.

With AIDS, visibility becomes extremely important (as well as dangerous) because HIV threatens to literally "make invisible" those it infects. For the most part, people with HIV, ARC, or AIDS are invisible to society and when society chooses to recognize them, they appear as emaciated, guilty individuals. People dying with AIDS, whether they are gay, people of color, or women, must make their struggle visible to dominant culture before death makes them literally invisible. Like sexuality, disease is something society does not want to deal with. Society attempts to "white wash" itself from the "others" who make up the radical fringe. As Cindy Patton says of sex and germs,

We need a new way of understanding how germs--things we fear will invade our bodies from the outside--and the erotic--the power that threatens to take over our bodies from within--are politicized to exert social control over the expression of our deepest fears and joys....AIDS activists are forced to understand the interrelationship between sex and germs historically and intrapsychically if they are to evolve relevant strategies that will cope with the immediate challenge of AIDS without sacrificing the broader cultural and political aims which

²⁰The relationship between visibility and politics is a contested one (see my "Star Gazing"). Yet, I think it is clear in this analysis, at least, that the philosophy of "coming out" and the public visibility of the gay and lesbian liberation movement from 1969 on has created a strong, identifiable movement. Indeed, in order for there to be a movement, the movement had to be visible to itself and to dominant culture. A personal example is my college's gay and lesbian "support" group which was comprised mainly of closeted gay men, none of whom would ever make a public statement in support to gay and lesbian rights (let alone admit to being gay). We even had a president of the organization that remained closeted. Needless to say, little got done, no voice from the gay and lesbian students on campus was heard, and the group remained a private one of whining frat boys who could not deal with their sexuality. Without people willing to make themselves publicly visible (granted, a difficult task when there are only 4 "out" people on the entire campus) it is impossible to make any kind of movement.

provide the framework for moving out of individual despair to community strength and hope.²¹

In order to counter an ideological cleansing system, People With AIDS have had to make themselves visible, to show society the reality of disease as it affects those of different ages, races, sexes and sexual preferences. People With AIDS also stand as a visible record of stratification; the faces are mostly of gays, people of color, and IV drug users. For those who are sexual minorities, double invisibility makes their struggle that much more difficult.

The reality that there is a very large percentage of gays in the arts and cultural fields in general has bearing both on the development of the AIDS crisis, as well as on the activist response. The art world has early on felt the effects of the epidemic. I am not essentializing the fact that many gays are involved in the arts; this reality is due to complex historical, social, and cultural circumstances. It is important to debunk essentialist appeals which state that gay men are naturally effeminate, creative, tidy, or inclined to the arts. One reason for the disproportionate number of gays in the arts²² is that, due to societal repression of "deviant" sexuality, gay men and lesbians turned to media through which they could express their desire in creative and concealed ways. Indeed, historically, the gay playwright (screenwriter, filmmaker) has had to be extremely creative in presenting different "realities" to a diverse audience. As gays were able to find relatively "safe" expression in the arts through their creativity, they were able to create a relatively "safe" environment for other gays (a self-perpetuating cycle). This has bearing on the activist art of the AIDS epidemic because many of the activist artists who

²¹Cindy Patton, *Sex and Germs*, p.4.

²²Suggested to me in conversation with two playwrights who have studied gay and lesbian theater (Nickie Lambert and Chris Hogan).

are gay are quite experienced in the creation of aesthetic objects with complex meanings, and complex relationships to the issue of visibility; SILENCE=DEATH is a prime example.

Unfortunately, much essentializing, from the right and left, has followed from the fact that there are many gays in the arts. Moreover, and connected with this, is the belief that because artists are dying, art is threatened and must somehow be preserved: "It would appear...that what is at stake is not the survival of people with AIDS and those who might now be or eventually become infected with HIV, but rather the survival, even the flourishing, of art".²³ AIDS activism fights against this idealist conception of art.

The threat of death has propelled many gay people to come out and be public about their sexuality. It has brought an increased awareness within the gay, lesbian, and bisexual community of its own sexual diversity. The AIDS crisis has brought issues of sexuality to the fore; simply by virtue of discussing safer sex, people have had to discuss their different sex practices. AIDS activists fight against the repression and control by dominant culture by making their sexual practices public and visible. What AIDS activism has led to is *queer* activism.²⁴ To fight the ideological information system²⁵ of dominant culture that produces and permeates one

²³Douglas Crimp, *AIDS Cultural Analysis: Cultural Activism*, p.5.

²⁴"Queer" has been adopted by the movement both to reclaim the term from dominant culture and to indicate a diverse sexual identity, different from the norm, which cannot be subsumed under fixed labels.

²⁵Some images that come to mind: a gas station in rural Vermont has a sign "Premises guarded by Pit Bul with AIDS"; bumper stickers which show two men engaging in anal sex with a line drawn through them; pictures of babies, presumably infected with HIV, with the caption, "Innocent Victims".

myth, the AIDS activist movement has had to use its own images, images produced within a battle of sexuality and life in the face of repression and death.

Their project is quite tenuous. They are battling the power of the culture industry of late capitalist society where “the whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry”.²⁶ This filter produces images of sameness, of identity, images which cultural consumers want to see, to believe (e.g. that people with AIDS are always gay, that people with AIDS are decaying, frail, dying). The art of the AIDS activist movement bombards the culture industry with images of difference; it exposes the contradictions of society by using the means and forms of the culture industry itself, for, as a movement at the invisible margins, it has no other tools. It is precisely this appropriation of means, as well as the radical critique through content, that makes the co-optation of activist AIDS art so difficult, for this is the ultimate concern of the activist community. Driving this is the radical critique of sexuality based on difference. Their images must work, must provoke, must challenge, but they must not be co-opted by a culture which would like to see them (movement activists, PWA's) dead. As “propaganda” for the movement, it has to differentiate itself from propaganda for the status quo; the latter promulgates the project of sameness (which in the case of AIDS is death for many) while the former speaks the suffering and ends the silence, of diversity, of otherness, which is filtered out by the screen of the culture industry. Activist AIDS art is propaganda for the hope of freedom and life.

²⁶Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.126.

Adorno: Aesthetics and Politics

The aesthetic interventions of the AIDS activist movement operate from a belief that aesthetics and politics cannot be separated. This is the lived experience of many AIDS activists; first, because many do not see their “work” lives as separate from their “activist” lives and “sexual lives”, and second, because the culture industry, the AIDS information society, is spreading dangerous images and information into people’s living rooms, newspapers and schools. Here, politics as the domination of the powerless by the powerful, is disguised under the guise of the sameness of the status quo--the norm (white male heterosexual, “general population”, immune to disease, immune to diversity). To explore the connection between aesthetics and politics, I would like to turn to Theodor Adorno.

CHAPTER 2
ADORNO AND ACTIVIST AIDS ART:
CONFRONTING THE "INDIVIDUAL"

The work of Theodor Adorno revolves around the project of keeping the hope of freedom alive in a society where increasing unfreedom pervades the social whole. Adorno finds such hope in the art object: "art may be the only remaining medium of truth in an age of incomprehensible terror and suffering".²⁷ The art object has the power to confront the individual with the reminder of death, which in turn can strengthen the individual, "contrary to the weakening of the ego that is promoted by the culture industry".²⁸ Art, through an immanent critique of the given, offers a rearrangement of the given for the possibility of freedom. Thus, Adorno's project is very compelling to the contemporary crisis of AIDS.

I turn to Adorno because his work, while not providing a formula or means for interpreting AIDS art, offers a method of aesthetic theory and a "language" for discussing the contemporary AIDS art. In addition, I wish to depart from the more abstract debates about Adorno such as was he or was he not a Marxist, or did he or did he not argue for a revolutionary praxis. Rather, I would like to consider Adorno within a concrete historical space and time--now, in the midst of the AIDS crisis--much in the tradition of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School which "spoke" from the historically specific place of its theorists. Critical theory acknowledges its place in the

²⁷Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 27.

²⁸Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.347.

world, a self-understanding marked by tension, and exposes the false appearance which is the given.

In a related sense, I also wish to depart from the current rhetoric of post-modernism, which tends to almost casually mention the plight of oppressed groups on par with its decentering of language and everything else. Somewhere along the line, real suffering seems to get lost, as well as the power of historical agency itself to disrupt "master narratives". Adorno is often quoted from but rarely dealt with on a large scale basis. More often than not, contemporary critics dismiss his project as outdated, despite the fact that many of his predictions are coming true.²⁹ I find Adorno's project more compelling than the post-modern polemic which often falters as it searches for a politics that it just destroyed. To borrow a passage from Lucy Lippard,

For all the talk within postmodernism of a 'resistant' or 'transgressive' esthetic, the overwhelming emphasis on objectification, commodity, production, and consumption finally blurs the peripheries, where I like to hang out. Objectified women are swept up with all objects (including art objects) as merely socialized signs of our unworthiness. In the process, oppositional art gets mellowed down into 'critical practice'....And it's true that North American culture at its most activist still functions mainly as a consciousness raiser...and raider.³⁰

I use this passage for more than one reason. In addition to agreeing with Lippard's warning against post-modernism, she criticizes the lack of a progressive politics which goes beyond consciousness raising. Adorno would do the same, although he would go further in his antinomial style by

²⁹I am indebted to Ian Pepper for clarifying this point in his paper, "Historicizing' Adorno: Reified Modernism and the Liquidation of the Aesthetic" and through many conversations.

³⁰Lucy Lippard, "Both Sides Now", p.32.

arguing that to raise consciousness is a false project given that everything, including consciousness, is manipulated by the culture industry. Rather, Adorno would argue the need to raise critical consciousness which is a consciousness that engages with the very commodities/objects reified by late capitalism, in a new relationship with them. Lippard's criticism of North American consciousness-raising is not to deny the validity of such a stage in movement politics, but to say that they must go further. I believe that AIDS activism today goes beyond consciousness-raising as an immanent critique of consciousness (in the Adornian sense) for it is consciousness which allows society to "sleep through the AIDS crisis".³¹ Furthermore, this immanent critique of society is done much through the technique of negation, a negative rather than affirmative politics. ACT UP is not simply about the affirmation of life, though this is very much a part of everyone's response to AIDS. It is also about anger and negative energy, as in the SILENCE = DEATH slogan. Negation is a critique of the politics of identity, which threaten to leave the status quo intact. AIDS activism, as a politics of sexual diversity, negates this tendency.

Yet another reason for the turn to Adorno is his view of the interrelatedness and tension between culture and politics, the aesthetic and the "real world". A reading of his *Aesthetic Theory* demonstrates this. Not only can't the aesthetic be considered apart from the social whole (an idealist position) it cannot be wholly reduced to the social world. In this antinomial struggle is the potential for critique of the given. Adorno's

³¹Susan Morgan, interview in *The Valley Advocate*, p.6.

understanding of the aesthetic provides a needed perspective for looking at the art of the AIDS activist movement.

Adorno's notion of negative dialectics is fundamental to any understanding of his work. Negative dialectics of a given theory intervenes and transforms it; it is a critical appropriation of what has been silenced and left out of theorizing. Through negative dialectics, Adorno attempts to find a new relation between subject and object which would allow freedom for otherness. This new relationship would be a new kind of "reconciliation" (he strongly critiqued the Hegelian reconciliation of subject and object), one which would not consist of hierarchy or positivity. The parallels between Adorno's hope to reclaim freedom for otherness by re-appropriating what has been silenced and the project of the AIDS activist movement are significant.

Negative Dialectics is also a critique of idealism. Adorno argues the need for a strong, truly autonomous subject "to break through the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity".³² Subjectivity is constituted through objectification, thus it is the object which has been relegated to otherness and dominated as such: "one might write a primeval history of the subject...but one cannot write a primeval history of the object".³³ From this perspective, the problem of intersubjectivity in modern society is due to the relation of dominance between the subject and object. Adorno's project, then, is to yield to the object without replicating it, to philosophize out of the concept. And, if he

³²Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. xx.

³³Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p.185.

had any Utopia at all, "it would be a togetherness of diversity".³⁴ This hope is an explicit condemnation of the politics of identity.

To understand how negative dialectics proceeds, we must look at Adorno's concept of exact fantasy. Exact fantasy takes hold of the elements of the given and rearranges them for a different potential. As in fantasy, the rearrangement is recognizable, in that the elements are recognizable, but different from the given reality. This rearrangement of the given creates a critical distance from reality which enables the subject to have an interpretive moment. Exact fantasy allows the subject to understand what is possible by rearranging the given into constellations without simply reduplicating what is. Exact fantasy is immanent critique because it takes the given reality and works on it from within rather than critiquing it from outside or above. Works of art as well as philosophy have the ability to rearrange the given into changing and discontinuous constellations.

Adorno's turn to aesthetics and culture derived from his profound concern with the totalization of the administered society, where all passed through the "veil of the culture industry", particularly after the Holocaust, where we get his famous dictum "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric".³⁵ Although it was after WWII when "Adorno identified the structure of domination as the primary evil", he had incorporated Lukacs' concept of commodity structure within bourgeois consciousness even earlier.³⁶ Yet with fascism came the aesthetization of culture; fascism used images to shape a false collectivity; Hitler used technology to kill millions of Jews and

³⁴Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p.150.

³⁵Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, p.34.

³⁶Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, p.27.

other select groups of individuals. The connection between technology and annihilation and aesthetics and fascism could not be tolerated by Adorno (or the Frankfurt school in general) and the bulk of his post-Auschwitz work was devoted to the task of tracing the loss of the individual within a totally administered world, where TV commercials could control what food people ate, and, more dangerously, their beliefs. Adorno had a tremendous dislike and distrust of mass culture because he believed "that the culture of the masses was a wholly synthetic concoction cynically imposed on them from above. Rather than cultural chaos or anarchy, the current situation was one of tight regimentation and control".³⁷ Adorno, along with Horkheimer, called this the culture industry, where "culture...impresses the same stamp on everything".³⁸

The concept of the culture industry is developed in its most fullest in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In the culture industry, "something is provided for all so that none may escape", so that all fall prey to its illusion.³⁹ The illusion is that the way the world is presented to the consumer is the way the world really is. Even the notion of the individual is an illusion. What the culture industry takes away from the individual is their spontaneity and imagination. The ego of the consumer, the individual, is weakened because they believe that everything they need is indeed provided for them; what they lack--freedom, strength in subjectivity--is rendered invisible. This is the false promise of the culture industry--"[it] perpetually cheats the consumer of

³⁷Martin Jay, *Adorno*, p.119.

³⁸Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.120.

³⁹Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.123.

what it perpetually promises".⁴⁰ The consumer is locked into the culture industry because "not to conform means to be rendered powerless".⁴¹ The power of sameness makes difference life-threatening. Those who do not conform, who go "cold and hungry" are rendered outsiders, "the most mortal of sins".⁴²

Adorno's account of the culture industry was based on "his own experience with the new, technologized, anonymous mass culture of the Weimar era, Nazi pseudofolk culture and the American popular culture of the 1930's and 1940's".⁴³ If anything, Adorno's observations about the tightening grip of the culture industry have become more true, spreading throughout society, into consciousness: "The stronger the positions of the culture industry become, the more summarily it can deal with consumers' needs, producing them, controlling them, disciplining them, and even withdrawing amusement: no limits are set to cultural progress of this kind".⁴⁴

Of course Adorno does not seem to mean this in the absolute sense. In the midst of his pessimism, we always find hope. The power to expose the culture industry comes from Adorno's negative dialectics, his theoretical praxis as "dialectics without identity".⁴⁵ For Adorno, theoretical praxis did not equal revolutionary praxis. As Buck-Morss observes, "his philosophy never included a theory of political action...no concept of a collective

⁴⁰Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.139.

⁴¹Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.133.

⁴²Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.150.

⁴³Martin Jay, *Adorno*, p.120.

⁴⁴Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.144.

⁴⁵Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, p.58.

revolutionary subject which might accomplish that change".⁴⁶ For Adorno, theory, when transformed into "an instrument of revolutionary practice", manipulated truth.⁴⁷ Adorno disagreed with the Marxist (particularly Lukacs'), belief that the proletariat were the vanguard, the subject/object of history who had the "truth"(Lukacs) and did not appeal to the proletarian consciousness (Brecht); the actual workers could not see their objective position. Adorno instead put forth the notion of the revolutionary avant-garde. Through critical thinking, the intellectual of the revolutionary avant-garde could interpret the world and this interpretation or immanent critique could lead to social change.

Adorno finds hope in the realm of high art, through the formal techniques of the most advanced modernist work. For Adorno, aesthetics and philosophy, while not interchangeable, have an important relationship and similar critical capability:

works of art are like windowless monads, representing something which is other than they, as subject to a dynamic or immanent historicity and a dialectical tension between nature and domination of nature...the dialectic of art resembles the social dialectic without consciously imitating it.⁴⁸

Aesthetic Theory begins with the crisis of art--its fundamental questioning of itself: "Today, it goes without saying that nothing concerning art goes without saying, much less without thinking. Everything about art has become problematic: its inner life, its relation to society, even its right to exist".⁴⁹ In the modern world of commodification, even art becomes reified,

⁴⁶Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, p.24.

⁴⁷Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, p.29.

⁴⁸Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.7.

⁴⁹Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.7.

a commodity in the market place: "Along with the social force of production, the decisive relation of production, namely the commodity form, as well as the antagonism between both, affect the work of art".⁵⁰ But art is a commodity like none other. Art becomes an absolute commodity,

social products which have discarded the illusion of being-for-society, an illusion tenaciously retained by all other commodities. An absolute commodity rids itself of the ideology inherent in the commodity form. The latter pretends it is being-for-other whereas in truth it is only for-itself, ie. for the ruling interests of society.⁵¹

As an absolute commodity, art acquires an exchange value: "What might be called use-value in the reception of cultural commodities is replaced by exchange value; in place of enjoyment, there are gallery visiting and factual knowledge: the prestige seeker replaces the connoisseur".⁵² The work of art has "purposefulness without a purpose".⁵³ Significantly, the autonomous work acquires a distance from the social reality which allows it to critique that reality: "it is through this relationship to the empirical that works of art salvage, albeit in neutralized fashion, something that once upon a time was a shared experience of all".⁵⁴

The autonomous work of art has a dual essence in its dialectical relation to society. Art is both "an autonomous entity and a social fact" in that the art work follows immanent laws that are analogous to the laws of society. Artistic work is social and the art work itself is a social product. Art, however, can oppose society via its ability to reveal the unfreedom of society, society's

⁵⁰Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.336.

⁵¹Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.336.

⁵²Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.158.

⁵³Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.201.

⁵⁴Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, pp.7, 8.

regressive tension as the forces of production become even more technologically advanced. In fact, the autonomous work must keep up with the most technologically advanced modes of production in order to maintain its autonomy, its critical distance from the empirical world, which allows it to critique the very domination of nature which results from technological advance and capitalist development: "The socially critical dimensions of art works are those that hurt, those that bring to light (through the medium of expression and in historically determined ways) what is wrong with present social conditions".⁵⁵ As an autonomous work of art, art must be tied to society. The social essence of art makes it complicit with society, while its autonomous essence allows it to critique society. This is the precarious position of modern art in capitalist society:

if it lets go of its autonomy it sells out to the established order, whereas if it tries to stay strictly within its autonomous confines it becomes equally co-optable, living a harmless life in its appointed niche. This dilemma reflects the larger phenomenon of a social totality capable of ingesting all that comes its way.⁵⁶

The relationship between form and content of the art object is a key to understanding Adorno's analysis. Form is central to Adorno's aesthetic theory because art is oppositional through form: "opposition to the real world is in the realm of form....the unresolved antagonisms of reality reappear in art in the guise of immanent problems of artistic form".⁵⁷ Not only does art question its precarious position at the level of form, it is through the law of form that the elements of the given reality are rearranged into

⁵⁵Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.337.

⁵⁶Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.337.

⁵⁷Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, pp.7-8.

constellations (exact fantasy) and the possibility of freedom unfolds: "hence form represents freedom whereas empirical life represents repression".⁵⁸ Form is necessarily difficult to define because it is mediated through content. Form is the "sedimentation of content".⁵⁹ In addition, the very notion of art is so intertwined with form "as to defy isolation".⁶⁰

It is through aesthetics that Adorno finds the ability to expose the harm done to the individual. In the culture industry, the identification of subject and object collapses the distance between them; while many get entertained, they can't make judgments about the social world. The relationship between the subject and object is one of "precarious balance".⁶¹ Aesthetic theory holds the promise of rescuing the object, of yielding to it, and of finding a new relationship between subject and object.

The object, the art work, serves an important critical function for the subject. The object challenges the subject by triggering concern, discomfort, a "tremor" as the subject gives itself over to the object, "looses his footing...discovering that the truth embodied in the aesthetic image has real tangible possibilities".⁶² This tremor on the part of the subject is a response to the fear of being overwhelmed; it is a reminder of death. The reminder of death strengthens the subject enabling the subject to make a judgment about the truth content of the art work--"the subjective experience of an opposition to the ego is a moment of the art's objective truth".⁶³ It is this

⁵⁸Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.207.

⁵⁹Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.7.

⁶⁰Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.203.

⁶¹Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.238.

⁶²Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, pp.346-7.

⁶³Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.348.

judgment that is critical consciousness and which allows for interpretation of the empirical world contrary to the illusion produced by the culture industry.

Adorno and the AIDS Crisis

Adorno's understanding of the aesthetic, his critique of the culture industry, and his focus on the power of the art object offer much for theorizing about the contemporary cultural crisis of AIDS and the aesthetic response by AIDS activists. Perhaps one of the most interesting connections and important starting points is the shared significance of the Holocaust. For Adorno, the quantification and technological efficiency of death marked a qualitatively regressive change in society--"the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism", particularly since death was a sentence applied to some, not all.⁶⁴ Art, too, suffered a qualitatively regressive change in the age of mechanical reproduction; as the art object was reproduced again and again, its original power as an autonomous object diminished. This regression has a dialectical relation with the democratization of art through the means of mechanical reproduction: the tension between having an autonomous realm largely inaccessible to the masses yet retaining formal capability of critical distance, and the distribution of works beyond the elite of the avant-garde.

The Holocaust marks a significant critical juncture for the AIDS activist movement as well. Many AIDS activists have made analogies between the Holocaust and the the AIDS epidemic which condemn the qualitatively

⁶⁴Adorno, *Prisms*, p.34.

regressive nature of the epidemic as it has been played out in the social world. The enormous quantity of death associated with particular groups in society, death subtly promoted by the politics and the politicians of the day ("advertisements for the world through its duplication"⁶⁵), has recalled the Holocaust in the minds of many involved in fighting the AIDS epidemic. Just as fascism aestheticized politics and used culture to manipulate the masses, the construction of AIDS through the culture industry, which is contemporary society, has made these deaths acceptable, the result of a particular lifestyle, or particular act. Gays, people of color, the poor--those already "traditional others"--are seen as possessing an almost natural predisposition to getting HIV (much as Jews were seen as naturally inferior). If gays, a threat to the family, the very "backbone" of the social structure, are said to get AIDS through fault of their own deviant acts, they become that much more easily expendable. A further connection between the Holocaust and the AIDS activist movement is the persecution of gays by Hitler, another silence of history. Gays were yet another group branded with an identification marker, in this case the pink triangle, and sent off to the gas chambers. The Nazis certainly saw a similar threat presented by gays that our culture feels today (the parallels are scary).⁶⁶ This is from where the SILENCE=DEATH slogan derives its power.

For Adorno, the Holocaust held particular ramifications for art, beyond that of the fascist aestheticization of politics. Art is the language of suffering.

⁶⁵Adorno, *Prisms*, p.34.

⁶⁶Even today, the link between Nazism and the killing of gays exists--a Nazi youth group was recently infiltrated by the CIA on the night it planned to bomb its first target, in a scheme to reconstitute the Aryan Nation through annihilation: their first target was a gay and lesbian bar in Seattle.

"Art is perhaps the only remaining medium which can express suffering...art identifies and expresses that condition, thus anticipating its overcoming".⁶⁷ This capability of art counters the limits of rationalism's "inability to cope with suffering" for

Reason can subsume suffering under concepts; it can furnish means to alleviate suffering; but it can never express suffering in the medium of experience, for to do so would be irrational by reason's own standards. Therefore, even when it is understood, suffering remains mute and inconsequential--a truth, incidentally, that everybody can verify for himself by taking a look at Germany after Hitler.⁶⁸

Adorno offers us a powerful warning: we cannot forget suffering, because the "need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth."⁶⁹

The appropriateness of this critique for the AIDS crisis is striking. The suffering of many due to the way AIDS has been constructed is silenced, for those very constructions are designed to make their suffering silent. The irrationality of the status quo is that it becomes "rational" to repress sexuality, particularly queer (non-reproductive) sexuality since it is an affront to the repression which keeps the mechanism of the status quo in motion. The art of the AIDS activist movement expresses the suffering which is too easily repressed; the suffering is not just that of an individual who has HIV--it is the suffering of a society which paves the road to death for its most threatening "members". Art that shows the individual as an "AIDS victim" or an "AIDS sufferer", the art of direct representation, is not what this art is about. AIDS art that attempts to portray AIDS in this way feeds into a consumer culture

⁶⁷Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.27.

⁶⁸Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.27.

⁶⁹Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp.17-18.

which needs to see these images. The culture industry packages the image of the "AIDS victim" as "Other" both in terms of physical appearance (the "victim" is usually depicted as so deteriorated and helpless that it is magnificently easy for cultural consumers to maintain the illusion that AIDS can only affect "them" not "us") and in terms of societal status (as gay, black, poor, or an IVU). Reality is something masked, covered by the gloss of the culture industry. The art of direct representation implies that "even in the so-called extreme situations, indeed in them most of all, humanity flourishes".⁷⁰ As Adorno wrote of art which depicted the Holocaust directly,

The so called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle butts contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it. The moral of this art, not to forget for a single instant, slithers into the abyss of its opposite.⁷¹

Instead, art that seeks to disrupt the given must use immanent critique. Activist AIDS art exposes the structure of the domination which causes suffering, and which silences suffering--it is the voice of suffering fighting back.

Yet another connection between Adorno and the AIDS activist movement is found in the concept of exact fantasy. An integral part of AIDS activism has been the development of safer sex. Safer sex⁷² enables people to explore their sexuality and sexual pleasure even in the "Age of AIDS"; it is explicitly a sex-positive philosophy, as opposed to the

⁷⁰Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (eds.), *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, p.313.

⁷¹Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (eds.), *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, p.313.

⁷²It used to be called "safe sex" but the activist community began to call it "safer sex" because of an inability to know the full extent of sexual transmission of HIV. It also gets out of the dichotomy of "this sex is good (ie.. safe)--that sex is bad (unsafe). Rather, safer sex provides a continuum for each individual to assess his or her own sexual practices.

government's and New Right's platforms of "no-sex, no AIDS". The way safer sex works is by plugging into the sexual imagination; people have to learn how to re-organize their given conceptions of sex and to eroticize different and changing practices. This is true even for a community of people who have been exploring sexuality behind the scenes of society; and it is particularly difficult for queers because sexuality has always been something fought for by them, as an integral part of their self-understanding. Now, sex must be reformulated, much like Adorno's idea of exact fantasy which takes elements of the given and rearranges them into the possibility of freedom. Safer sex is the power of the imagination in the project of survival.

AIDS Activism, Historical Agency, and Adorno

Adorno provided a framework for interpreting how the formal techniques of autonomous art critique the empirical world. This framework allows us to talk about the power of the art object in relation to the numbing effect of the culture industry. Using Adorno to help interpret the contemporary AIDS activist movement, however, sets the stage for confrontation. Adorno was highly critical of committed art and of propaganda which buy into the "all encompassing system of communication" to spread their message to the masses.⁷³ Activist AIDS art is directly engaged art. If we accept Adorno's critique of propaganda as valid and necessary to any political project which seeks to expose domination, then how can we also say that AIDS activist art is valid?

⁷³Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.344.

Adorno's arguments against propaganda are very powerful:

How absurd it is to try to change the world by propaganda. Propaganda makes language an instrument, a lever, a machine.... Propaganda manipulates people; when it cries freedom it contradicts itself. Deceit and propaganda are inseparable. A community in which the leader and his followers come to terms through propaganda--whatever the merits of its content--is a community of lies. Truth itself becomes merely a means of enlisting support and is falsified in the very utterance. This is why genuine resistance knows no propaganda.⁷⁴

In this passage, it seems as if Adorno is critiquing the heart of the AIDS activist aesthetic of today, as a powerful propaganda which seeks to change the world. He clearly states that content, whether the message be of the political right or left, does not validate propaganda; it is the form that Adorno argues against--as form, propaganda is manipulative and false. It lies because of its manipulation of the truth--"It is not the portrayal of reality as hell on earth but the slick challenge to break out of it that is suspect".⁷⁵ Instead, he says, "If art works are to have any social influence at all, it is not by haranguing, but by changing consciousness in ways that are ever so difficult to pin down".⁷⁶

Adorno's critique of propaganda and committed art would seem to eliminate a valid starting point for the activist AIDS art of today (and feminist art, black art, latino/a art, gay art...). It poses particular problems for activists interested in aesthetic engagement and progressive collectivity because it so forcefully exposes propaganda as an instrument of domination and warns

⁷⁴Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.255.

⁷⁵Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.256.

⁷⁶Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.344.

of the falsity of collectivity. For Adorno, the idea of a collective subject was marred by identity and conformity. Instead, "Adorno had as his criterion the individual subject's nonidentity with the world...with intellectual nonconformity".⁷⁷ Adorno provides an important critique of identity politics which presents a needed critical angle from which to view movements for liberation: "the smallest trace of senseless suffering in the empirical world belies all the identarian philosophy that would talk us out of that suffering...This is why the philosophy of identity is the mythological form of thought".⁷⁸ When applied to progressive collectivity, this critique becomes a measure of tension, the tension created by a society which makes identity profitable and sometimes necessary for survival. This tension pulls at the desire to end domination. In the context of AIDS activism, this critique serves both as a warning and as a support of the politics of the movement: AIDS activism operates from an understanding of difference and revolves around non-identarian politics, and this figures into, indeed determines, the art of the activist community. My contention is that activist AIDS art falls between autonomous art and the art of mass culture, the dichotomy set up by Adorno. As such, it is propaganda in a different sense than that critiqued by Adorno. As art other than autonomous art, it uses popular forms and techniques to undermine the culture industry. Yet it also has similar capabilities as autonomous art such as its ability to confront and shock the individual into critical judgment, and its refusal to represent a corrupt and false reality.

⁷⁷Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, p.84.

⁷⁸Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p.203.

Elizam Escobar, an artist and political prisoner⁷⁹, writes about the art of liberation from his jail cell. For him, art recognizes the "power of the imagination's struggle...against prohibitions based on fear and ignorance".⁸⁰ Imagination becomes a weapon, particularly for those whose everyday experience is marked by repression. In the context of sexuality, this does and does not apply to every individual, for sexuality itself is the history of the dialectic between repression and freedom. As Cindy Patton observes, the movement for sexual freedom must "grant the right to a liberated *heterosexuality*"⁸¹ as well, while recognizing that it is the experience of the sexually marginalized which offers the imaginative power of freedom. The "propaganda" of the movement, then, takes on a different project:

"...one must always make the distinction between the art of propaganda, publicity, or design; and art as an act of liberation. The fundamental distinction is that an art of liberation can neither be a model nor a specific aesthetic or style. It is a concept and an attitude with no specific formulations, only that it must be open to any strategy that can help liberate art (and through art, people)".⁸²

Activist AIDS art goes beyond a confrontation with the individual to a collective call for action in an effort to liberate people. Moreover, the anti-identarian politics of the movement approximate Adorno's hope for a "togetherness of diversity".

⁷⁹Escobar is an active member of the Puerto Rican national liberation movement. He has been in prison since 1980, serving a 68 year sentence for his political activities (Elizam Escobar, "Art of Liberation: A Vision of Freedom", p.86).

⁸⁰Elizam Escobar, "Art of Liberation: A Vision of Freedom", p.86.

⁸¹Cindy Patton, *Sex and Germs*, p.148.

⁸²Elizam Escobar, "Art of Liberation: A Vision of Freedom", p.93.

To begin with, Adorno does not present his aesthetic theory as a universal and timeless method for immanently critiquing society; rather, aesthetic theory is a way of thinking about the dialectic of art and society, of "progress" and repression. Similarly, immanent critique begins from the historically specific site of the critic her or himself. From this perspective, critical theory is non-elitist even as it maintains a particular project: the end to domination. This in part explains why Adorno does not subsume art under one definition:

The definition of art does indeed depend on what art once was, but it also must take into account what has become of art and what might possibly become art in the future. Art, we said, is different from empirical reality. Now this difference itself does not stay the same; it changes because art changes...art has a changing scope and it may be just as well not to try to define sharply what's inside and what's outside of it....It is through its dynamic laws, not through some invariable principle, that art can be understood.⁸³

Forms weave in and out of history depending upon circumstance. Thus, Adorno's statements about certain forms of art cannot be taken as eternal condemnations or praise. This understanding of Adorno's project allows activist art to stand its ground, a ground which finds itself between the duality of autonomy and social essence. Part of the reason for this is that although Adorno recognized this duality--"[it] is stamped on every single work of art"⁸⁴--and saw its solution--"Immanent"⁸⁴ critique is designed to break the hold [of] this simplistic alternative"⁸⁵--he did not always escape it; his reliance on autonomy, even though he recognized its social essence, is to the exclusion

⁸³Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.3.

⁸⁴Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.351.

⁸⁵Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.352.

of art that is directly engaged.⁸⁶ It is not that autonomy cannot be considered a politically valid realm; rather, I believe that there is an alternative for art and social change which exists between the duality of autonomy and social essence. In general, this alternative is contingent upon the power of historical agency to disrupt the given; in particular, it is a factor of the power of a movement for sexual diversity to upset the politics of identity, and its result--death, for "Auschwitz confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity as death".⁸⁷

The duality between autonomy and social essence is related to another: the duality between the critical intellectual and the proletarian consciousness, one which roughly reflects the debate between Adorno and Brecht: "Both Adorno and Brecht agreed that the goal of intellectual work was critical enlightenment, the freeing of 'consciousness' from the veil of bourgeois ideology, but the question was, whose consciousness, that of theorists and artists or that of the proletariat?"⁸⁸ Adorno placed no hope in a revolutionary class such as the proletariat, since he believed that no class could possess a "metaphysical truth". He believed that any philosophy "lost its legitimacy when it overstepped the boundaries of material experience and claimed metaphysical knowledge".⁸⁹ The proletariat, or any other subject for that matter, doesn't have the "truth". Instead, it was the intellectual whom Adorno relied upon (namely himself) and believed that intellectuals working in isolation from each other could arrive at the same

⁸⁶Art that is directly engaged is not art that is a direct representation of reality.

⁸⁷Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p.362.

⁸⁸Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, p.34.

⁸⁹Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, p.25.

truths; the lone intellectual, "focusing on particulars which reflected the same objective reality" would experience critical consciousness.⁹⁰ Brecht, on the other hand, believed that the intellectual should ally him/herself with the proletariat. The problem is that this debate does not break out of the duality between the intellectual (and autonomous art) and the essentializing of the proletariat (and mass culture). The latter alternative, the proletarian consciousness, is critiqued strongly by Adorno, who saw it as bestowing some sort of inherent truth upon a group of individuals who at best had a false class consciousness. The former, however, does not seem to free the consciousness of the people⁹¹, or transfer power to them. It is not that the intellectual cannot speak for anyone else; rather, this perspective does not explain the relationship between the intellectual and the rest of the world. Moreover, it does not address the relationship between historical agency and the aesthetic. This is due to the fact that Adorno works from a problematic notion of the "individual" and of "intellectual", one which risks perpetuating silence.

Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* is largely concerned with the problem of yielding to the art object to discover a new relationship between subject and object. Adorno speaks from the center; his concern with the art object is

⁹⁰Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, p.85. This is a particularly grey area in Adorno's work, because he continually looks toward the intellectual and comes out against collectivity. Yet in *Aesthetic Theory*, he writes favorably of "isms": "if artists want to survive in a corporate-capitalist society, they must organize themselves externally as well....It is by no means that the case of isms have shackled the productivity of the individual. On the contrary, they have augmented it, not the least through collective co-operation"(Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, pp.36-37). Similarly, Adorno himself often engaged in intellectual collaboration. These factors make his condemnation of collectivity cryptic, and perhaps dependent on historical circumstance. Even with this support of isms, however, Adorno does not connect collective co-operation to historical agency.

⁹¹Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*.

integrally bound to his project of tracing the fate of the individual under the tightening grip of instrumental reason. Adorno does not tackle the problem of intersubjectivity directly. The problems between subjects cannot be solved until we reclaim and rework the relationship between subject and object by surrendering to the object and recalling the "affinity which objects have for each other".⁹² In Adorno's work, it is unclear whether or not subjectivity can be constituted by objectifying other "subjects", who then become objects to be dominated. Can we read Adorno's "subject" to include every individual?⁹³ Or, must Adorno's subject be read as the white male subject of history, theory, politics, war, who has had the "opportunity" to relegate the object to otherness? (in other words, when Adorno says that we cannot write the history of the object, women, people of color, gays and lesbians immediately come to mind). From this perspective, making the problem of intersubjectivity contingent upon finding a new relationship between subject and object runs the risk of leaving many at the margins, those who have never had a "subjective" relationship to the object.

Although Adorno did not consider art works as independent of the artist, this may explain why he was not concerned with an examination of the artist as subject, the viewer as subject, or the subject matter of art. His project would never take up the representation of Woman as Object or the lack of a gay or black subject in art, for instance. And although Adorno at

⁹²Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 25.

⁹³The only exception to this that I could find is in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* where Adorno and Horkheimer talk about the relationship between women, Jews, and nature. But this recognition of women as Other, and Jew as Other, is not carried into an examination of the relationship between the subject and object of history. It is a gap which, in the end, seems to leave the category of "Other" intact.

times seems to support the democratization of art, he comes out on the side of the loss suffered by the art work when reproduced. Yet it is precisely these issues which are presented by the politics of marginalized subjectivities. By way of example, subjects cannot have the same experience when the viewer/subject is black and the painting is white. As Buck-Morss says, "Adorno's statements about the subject were remarkably unconcerned with considerations of class origin or a particular subject's position within the social relations of production".⁹⁴ For him, the artist and the labor of the artist were not as important as the work of art itself. This presents an interesting paradox in his work; in his attempt to "rescue" the individual through critical insight, he overlooks the very powerful potential of the marginalized "individual" to function as an artist or critical viewer from within the movement. While the individual in the traditional sense might be "saved", the marginalized individual remains silent.

Within the current situation of the AIDS epidemic the "picture" looks quite different. AIDS art practices are fundamentally different from the propaganda critiqued by Adorno because they are *from* the movement politics of the marginalized struggling for sexual freedom.⁹⁵ They are also different from Brecht's attachment to the movement politics of the working class, an attachment based on the intellectual's alignment with the struggle

⁹⁴Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, p.83.

⁹⁵Although Adorno lived through the sexually turbulent 60's, he was not taken by the emerging sexual politics. Indeed, the "free love" ideal was potentially guilty of allowing bodily pleasure to blind individuals from the increasingly gloomy fate of capitalism. Yet sexual politics commands a powerful role for those groups in society (namely women, racial, and sexual minorities) for whom sexual pleasure has always been a site of contestation, societal repression, and control. What the "free love" concept seems to me to be guilty of is that it did not embrace sexual diversity and it mostly spoke for white heterosexual men, who have historically held positions of power and control over sexuality. This contradiction is what in part prompted such a strong response from women and gays and lesbians.

of the proletariat. First, because of Adorno's critique: that there is no essential identity of the proletariat as a class. AIDS activists work from an understanding that HIV can infect and affect anyone; yet because of historically determined circumstances, it only kills certain people. They struggle against the essentializing tendencies of the New Right and the Left to create the "AIDS victim", as well as naturally determined "high risk categories". Second, the engaged art practices of AIDS activists emerge out of the struggle over contested identities, one which erupts given definitions and images and expresses a fluid notion of sexual identity. It is not the propaganda of identity. This is what comes from within, not from an intellectual aligning, leading, or speaking for the voices of a perceived class of people. Finally, the theoretical lines between intellectual, artist, and activist do not hold within the AIDS epidemic because of the the everyday lived experience of movement activists and because of the acknowledged reality of death.

The struggle of AIDS activists against oppression and death contains a critique of the meaning of "individual" in traditional theoretical discourse, including Adorno's. Adorno found the art object to have the ability to confront the individual with their ego-limit: the threat of death. This confrontation would strengthen the individual and allow for critical self-reflection. Similarly, AIDS activists are trying to confront dominant society with the growing threat of death. Yet their message is more complicated. First of all, the acknowledgment of death is perhaps the one thing that movement activists have in common from the start. The "individual" targeted by the movement is a critical shift away from Adorno's generic (albeit

intellectually gifted) individual. When one uncovers the first layer of false appearances of the AIDS epidemic, one discovers its basic paradox: *that anyone can get HIV because it's a virus yet, society is organized in such a way that certain groups are more likely to get infected with the virus; moreover, certain groups are more likely to die.* Thus while the art object of Adorno's aesthetic confronts "the individual", activist AIDS art has a different function--it differentiates between "the individual" (read white heterosexual, "general population", "us not them") and the marginalized groups of society who are most affected by the epidemic (this differentiation is one already constructed by dominant culture). Thus the project of AIDS activists engaged in this cultural work is quite difficult; at the same time that they want to convey to the world that the line between us and them is a thin one, one that a virus easily crosses, and that the general population is becoming more and more of a fiction, they need to convey that the line does exist and it is one which spells out death. Given the nature of their project, the movements of marginalized groups have an unusual relationship to mass culture and autonomous art; they "find themselves suspended uneasily between center and periphery".⁹⁶ Adorno did not consider these lines in his aesthetic theory and the lack of an examination of historical agency did not enable him to see the possibilities of critical activism from a movement itself.

AIDS activists operate from an understanding of difference from which they build a collective movement, and this forms the basis of their aesthetic

⁹⁶Neil Lazarus, "Modernism and Modernity: T.W. Adorno and Contemporary South African Literature", p.153.

engagement. Their struggle involves a critique of identity politics. The critical practices of the AIDS activist movement position "the critical self *within* the field of struggle that is sexual politics...an engagement, not only with the repressions visited on sexuality and the body, but,...with their pleasures".⁹⁷ Furthermore, the cultural work of AIDS activists embodies a critique of essentialism: "It prescribes new priorities, new sites of struggle, and, crucially, the active construction of political agents".⁹⁸ I will support this argument through an examination of the meaning of historical agency vis-a-vis sexual politics and through an analysis of the activist art practices of the movement. In particular, I will look at the development of the gay and lesbian liberation movement and identity to demonstrate how the AIDS crisis has marked a critical juncture in the movement for sexual freedom. My focus on the sexual politics of sexual minorities is not to the exclusion of the racial, class, and gender politics which also play into the AIDS epidemic. In fact, sexual politics also figure prominently in the racial, class, and gender aspects of the epidemic. Because HIV can be transmitted sexually, however, it has been constructed as a sexual disease from the beginning of the epidemic.⁹⁹

⁹⁷Erica Carter, "Sexual Politics Revisited", pp. 8-9.

⁹⁸Peter Redman, "Lay Down Your Weary Tune; the Left and The Cultural Politics of AIDS", p.131.

⁹⁹This is the case despite evidence of "junkie pneumonia" among IVDU's in the 1970's. Today, many believe that the "junkie epidemic" was AIDS; no one, however, took notice of dying drug addicts. (Cindy Patton, "Powers and the Conditions of Silence").

CHAPTER 3

THE MOVEMENT FOR SEXUAL FREEDOM:

"A TOGETHERNESS OF DIVERSITY"

To understand the relationship between historical agency and sexuality in the lives of many AIDS activists and as an integral factor in activist art, it is necessary to look at the development of the gay and lesbian liberation movement. Embedded within this history is the movement of the discourse of sexuality. I want to explore here, the interplay between visibility and sexual freedom, for not only is this interplay crucial to the development of a gay and lesbian culture and political movement, it is of the utmost importance within the AIDS crisis. Furthermore, I want to show how the AIDS crisis has helped to form a new generation of sex radicals¹⁰⁰ and, thus, has marked a significant change in the discourse of sexuality. This change has been a move from the formation of gay and lesbian identities to a fluid notion of sexuality, which recognizes, indeed grows out of, the diversity of sexual community.

Historical analyses of the gay and lesbian liberation movement focus on the development of sexual identity and its relationship to community. Theorists, such as Patton, D'Emilio, Berube, and Weeks, believe that although gays have certainly existed throughout history, a homosexual culture and an identity attached to that culture have only recently formed. The development of an identity attached to explicit sexual practice is due to the changing material conditions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth

¹⁰⁰This phrase was first used by Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality".

century. The industrial revolution in particular, drew many people to the cities away from their small town familial environments. This created much more of an opportunity for men and women who had experienced homosexual/lesbian behavior or had desires for someone of the same sex. In the city, men and women found themselves in single sex living and working environments.¹⁰¹ For women, for example, there was a relative freedom from an ideology which prescribed emotional, economic and sexual dependence on men. The free labor system of capitalism allowed individuals to make a living apart from family units and thus established the economic means and social space for identity formation.¹⁰² As Cindy Patton notes,

Until the industrial revolution, Western sexuality had been acted out relative to kinship and family networks. Cultural taboos, which were codified in civil and canon law, detailed whom one could and couldn't marry (the only legal form of sexuality). Rural areas limited the contact an individual might have with both possible spouses and possible illegal sex partners. They also created an environment where it was much easier to oversee individual behavior.¹⁰³

This view of gay identity formation does not at all deny the existence of homosexual behaviors or desires; rather, it looks at these behaviors historically, observing that certain economic and social conditions had to be in place for these behaviors to gain a social meaning to a group or groups of people.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹Cindy Patton, *Sex and Germs*, pp.120-126.

¹⁰²John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity", pp.102-3.

¹⁰³Cindy Patton, *Sex and Germs.*, p.122.

¹⁰⁴It should also be noted that this historical analysis applies much more directly to the white gay experience. See Scott Bravmann, "Telling (Hi)Stories: Rethinking the Lesbian and Gay Historical Imagination".

World War II was a significant event in the consolidation of gay and lesbian identities. The massive mobilization of men and women into the military enabled lesbians and gays to meet others for the first time and ended a sense of geographic isolation. Gays and lesbians were (reluctantly) tolerated in the military, facing discharge rather than formal sanction. At the same time, as women in the States were forced to work, they gained even more economic independence from men and they associated in all-female environments.¹⁰⁵ The development of a bar life began during this period. Bars not only served as a meeting place for gays and lesbians to create a lifestyle, they provided the public space necessary for later politicization and collective action.¹⁰⁶

The end of World War II brought an end to the relatively tolerant attitude towards lesbians and gays, as the United States tried to reconstruct itself and its values. Lesbian "witch-hunts" which had been minimal during the war increased dramatically. Gay veterans suffered military purges back on U.S. bases. Women were forced out of their jobs, away from economic independence, and replaced by the returning military force. The U.S. Senate and many state legislatures held anti-homosexual hearings and the FBI began a nationwide watch of gay and lesbian bars.¹⁰⁷ McCarthyism increasingly used state power to crack down on the existence of a gay and lesbian lifestyle. Gay and lesbian lifestyles grew not only in spite of, but because of the law: "The danger involved in being gay rose even as the

¹⁰⁵Allan Berube, "Marching to a Different Drummer: Lesbian and Gay GIs In World War II", pp.88-96.

¹⁰⁶Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents*, p.192.

¹⁰⁷Allan Berube, "Marching to a Different Drummer: Lesbian and Gay GIs In World War II", pp.96-98.

possibilities of being gay were enhanced. Gay liberation was a response to this contradiction".¹⁰⁸

The growing number of bars made bar-life a nightly experience, and increased the dialogue about lesbian and gay life and sex. Davis and Kennedy's fascinating study of the Buffalo lesbian community in the 40's and 50's demonstrates how the increasing oppression of gays and lesbians led to a growing sense of public defiance, as well as community mechanisms for survival. At first, during the years before a public and identifiable movement had emerged, there were elaborate private community signals and codes which allowed these lesbian and gay communities to identify each other, yet survive. The challenge for these communities before 1969, and even for many today, was to become visible to each other while remaining invisible to dominant culture. As the community grew, and began to face increasingly overt oppression, many of the women in the Buffalo women's community, for instance, began to teach new members the social and sexual ways of the community in an effort to develop pride and maintain a stance against their oppression.¹⁰⁹ Although butch/fem roles were often strict, they allowed lesbians to express sexuality and love to each other and provided a structure for sexual fulfillment. Butch/fem roles challenged dominant norms about the relationship between gender, erotic role, and sexual practice and helped to create a politicized sexual life. While this stance was not overtly political, it was a necessary step in the development of a gay and lesbian liberation movement; there needed

¹⁰⁸John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity", p.108.

¹⁰⁹Madeline Davis and Elizabeth L. Kennedy, "Oral History and Study of Sexuality in the Lesbian Community: Buffalo, New York, 1940-1960", pp. 5-26.

to be a coalescence of groups of individuals who attached a more or less common understanding to their sexual difference and there needed to be visible images of sexual difference. The stakes were high: visibility to dominant culture often meant loss of job, housing, family support, and death.¹¹⁰

Gays and lesbians began to form significant political organizations for the first time in the 1950's. In 1951, the Mattachine Society was founded from a collection of men's "guilds". Its purpose was in part to "lead in the area of political action against discriminatory and oppressive legislation".¹¹¹ In 1955, lesbians formed their first political organization, the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB). At first, the Mattachine Society had a leftist bent and its founders adopted the position that gays and lesbians were "cultural minorities", a radical position for that time. The climate of McCarthyism, however, led to a new, more moderate leadership with an assimilationist position that strove to integrate gays and lesbians into society by downplaying their difference. By implication, this position downplayed the differences among gays and lesbians as well. The Mattachine Society provided dress and behavior codes, for instance. These organizations emphasized an assimilationist position through public education, and this became the ideological basis for the homophile movement of the 50's and 60's¹¹²: "It never occurred to us in those early days that we could speak for ourselves, that we had the expert knowledge on ourselves. We were the

¹¹⁰Of course these outcomes are also the fate of many today but social and legal norms have changed enough that these are no longer automatic, and some are even illegal.

¹¹¹Warren J. Blumenfeld and Diane Raymond, *Looking at Gay and Lesbian Life*, p.292.

¹¹²Warren J. Blumenfeld and Diane Raymond, *Looking at Gay and Lesbian Life*, pp. 292-296.

ones explored, but we thought we needed the intervention of experts to do the exploring".¹¹³

The civil rights battles of the 1960's led to an increasing militancy among gays and lesbians who moved in the direction of direct political action to end discrimination and police harassment. The importance of bar culture to sexual minorities was (retrospectively) dramatically demonstrated at the Stonewall Riots at Stonewall, a bar in the West Village of New York City, in June of 1969. This time, when the police went to raid a gay bar and harass its patrons, the queers fought back, in an active defiance which literally ended their invisibility. The usual attempt to stay "hidden" gave way to a public stance against oppression based on sexuality. This sense of agency has been fundamental to the development of the contemporary movement of sex radicals--the power to define their own terms of battle and their own terms of love.

As with the homophile movement of the 50's, an ideological split developed in the emerging movement. The older gays of the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis held the philosophy that "demonstrations which define the homosexual as a unique minority defeat the very cause for which the homosexual strives--*to be an integral part of society*".¹¹⁴ The more radical Gay Liberation Front, which formed soon after Stonewall and was modeled after the new-left organizations of the 60's, advocated the strategy of "coming-out" in order to end discrimination and oppression. Rather than advocate a minority rights position, it stressed the goal of androgyny,

¹¹³Barbara Gittings, co-founder of DOB, as quoted in Warren J. Blumenfeld and Diane Raymond, *Looking at Gay and Lesbian Life*, p.296.

¹¹⁴Jeffrey Escoffier, "Sexual Revolution and the Politics of Gay Identity", p.142.

arguing for the liberation of the homosexual in everyone. Unfortunately, what this early, seemingly radical notion really did was to look toward a Utopian future where very real differences based on sexuality would simply disappear. The gay and lesbian liberation movement of the 70's incorporated the idea of "coming out" into legal, social, religious, family, and cultural spheres, and it adopted the idea of a "gay minority" from the other social movements which served as its model. The use of a minority rights position is at least partially necessary in the United States, where groups of individuals with common differences must frame their struggle within the language of minority rights claims to obtain any advance within the system:¹¹⁵

The consolidation of a minority status has obvious advantages. It fits easily into the common discourse of liberal pluralist societies. It offers legitimacy to the claims of the oppressed minority and can act as a spur for legal and other reforms. It is also, as the ex-Communist founders of Mattachine saw, a mobilising idea: it might be a myth, but it is a powerful and believable one.¹¹⁶

Although the minority rights position has enabled gays and lesbians to achieve many rights within the system, it does not serve as a radical critique of the system. For one, it looks to the state for protection and definition, a strategy which gives the state tremendous power. Secondly, it does not offer a critique of the given mechanisms of oppression; instead, they are left intact, with the external appearance of "change".¹¹⁷ While the development

¹¹⁵A good example is the recent passing of Massachusetts' Gay and Lesbian Civil Rights Bill, which is the legal extension from the civil rights of racial minorities to (some) sexual minorities not to be discriminated against in employment and housing.

¹¹⁶Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents*, p.198.

¹¹⁷I do not mean to imply that I am against efforts which try to seek legal and political rights, just that I am wary of the result. It's a catch-22 which shows the power of the system to co-opt

of gay and lesbian identities has been fundamental to movement politics, it has also led to an identity politics essentialism, which obliterates difference (much like the situation of the contemporary women's movement). This is most prominent in the politics of lesbian separatism and lesbian feminism, which tend to essentialize lesbian identity as the "truest", most "natural" way to be, and see lesbianism as an ahistorical truth. Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" typifies this kind of thinking, one which critiques the methodology of patriarchy by using the methodology of patriarchy:

Part of the problem with compulsory heterosexuality is that although separatists using it usually imply that heterosexual attraction is socially conditioned rather than innately biological, they also want to draw the conclusion that lesbianism is somehow a more 'natural' or authentic choice for women.¹¹⁸

In addition, this perspective tends to downplay the sexual aspect of lesbian relationships, seeing relationships between women more as spiritual bonds.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, it is not only ahistorical, it feeds into the hands of the New Right. A good example of this is the unusual "alliance" between the feminist anti-porn movement and the New Right against pornography. The common strain of these two movements is the fear of difference. Separatism has also been critiqued by women of color who argue that their experience of oppression does not allow them to separate their struggle for sexual

what appears to be an increase in freedom. A good example can be found in the current debate among gays and lesbians about marriage. Despite the economic and legal advantages of marriage (and its tempting ideological/romantic power) I cannot understand why so many gays and lesbians would actually want the right to marry, to join a system based on patriarchal ownership, not to mention a system which derives its power from the State.

¹¹⁸Ann Ferguson, *Blood at the Root: Motherhood, Sexuality and Male Dominance*, p.191.

¹¹⁹Rich proposes a "lesbian continuum" which encompasses many different interactions, not necessarily sexual, between women. While this may be empowering, it does not address lesbian sexuality.

freedom from their struggle against racism, both of which lead to multi-faceted demands and alliances. Perhaps the most harmful "byproduct" of this identity politics essentialism has been the exclusion of many other sex radicals from the movement for sexual freedom. For example, whereas butch/fem lesbians characterized much of the lesbian experience in the pre-Stonewall days, post Stonewall lesbians shunned them as recreating heterosexual power relations.¹²⁰ This critique, however, did not take into account the historical specificity of the butch/fem experience; without an historical perspective, it is easy to overlook the powerful challenge butch/fem women posed to dominant society. By excluding women who identify as butch/fem de facto, lesbians are overlooking the diverse loci of desire. Today, there has been a resurgence of butch/fem in the younger, more urban lesbian communities in part because of a recognition of the fluid nature of desire, practice, role playing, and sexual identity. Nevertheless, much of the lesbian community has undergone a self-policing (which has augmented along with an overall societal trend towards fundamentalism). This has evidenced itself most recently in the condemnation of the lesbian s/m community by many lesbians.¹²¹ Visibility plays prominently into these politics; those sex radicals most often excluded from the "community" are

¹²⁰According to one new left lesbian of the 70's, "we had just about had it with the male-dominated left and weren't going to stand for any more male shit. So when you went to the bars, you didn't want to see it around you--all those old dykes pretending they were men, ready to punch you out if you wanted to dance with their 'girls'". See Sasha Gregory Lewis, *Sunday's Women*, p.38.

¹²¹to the point of not allowing s/m women to participate in an annual Women's Music Festival. The imposition of this type of identity politics has been hard at work even in Northampton. In addition to ostracizing s/m people in the community, many lesbians have excluded bisexual women. This escalated and reached an explosive level at the 1990 Northampton Pride March, where a group of lesbians were able to get the word "Bisexual" removed from the title of the march, and pass a policy which excluded bisexuals from the planning committee.

those who are most visible about their sexuality. In response to this identity politics (e.g. you are not a lesbian unless you..."), many sex radicals have turned to history as well as to their current and diverse experiences to show the fluidity of sexuality. Last year, as one queer reminded others in the days before the twentieth anniversary of Stonewall:

Our Movement has forgotten that our people are made up of drag queens, butch lesbians, angry mobs, s/m leather boys, vegetarians, AIDS activists, hippies, radical faeries, separatist lesbians, boy lovers, queer anarchists, witches, pagans, and others that are most concerned with being herself. Let's remind everyone of who we are and what we stand for. Our visibility can help create a consciousness for a new, more radical culture that fucking loves diversity, and loves fucking diversely.¹²²

Not surprisingly, many of these "other" sex radicals were the first to organize and advocate for safer sex practices.

The movement for sexual freedom contains a radical tendency, a radical critique of the given society as well as of identity politics. With the onslaught of the AIDS crisis, this radical tendency has become harnessed-- not because of any romantic notion that "tragedy has brought a community together" (as many have observed) but because the AIDS crisis highlights and augments the intensity of stratification in society. The mechanisms which created AIDS were firmly entrenched before the appearance of a real, biological, virus collided with a society that was ready to obliterate difference. The critique of identity essentialism by AIDS activists is grounded in a politics which does not define "gay" and "lesbian", but, rather, focuses on a whole range of sexual ways of being and acting. This has

¹²²Jennie McKnight, "Radical Stonewall Commemoration Planned", p.2.

been fundamental to fighting AIDS, to combatting a society which believes that being gay (= man having anal sex with another man) is what gives you AIDS. AIDS activists have had to transform the *belief* that it is (gay) sex which gives you AIDS to the *fact* that it is unsafe sex practices (as well as needle sharing) which put you at risk for HIV. From this struggle, both with the Right and within the community of sexual minorities, has come the notion of "queerness". Queerness embraces the movement's emphasis on diverse sexualities and behaviors; it does not dictate a fixed sexual identity but recognizes the fluidity of sexuality and encompasses a range of individuals who practice and experience sexuality in ways that challenge the institution of heterosexuality.¹²³ AIDS activists must work from an understanding of the diversity of sexual practices and desires: first, because a virus enters the body through an exchange of body fluids and this can happen through a variety of sexual practices, regardless of identity or desire; second, because the epidemic was stigmatized as a gay disease, not only have gays, but all other sexual minorities have had to fight for their lives against a system which wants them to die and die alone¹²⁴; third, it is essential to the survival of a community whose sexuality is under siege to focus on sexual diversity for the successful implementation of safer sex guidelines.

Many contemporary theorists who focus on sexuality have made distinctions between desire, practice, and sexual identity. These distinctions form the basis of an understanding of a unity of diversity which is

¹²³This does not mean an absolute pluralism, or acceptance of all sexual practices such as non-consensual s/m and abusive sex, like rape and incest.

¹²⁴For instance, many dying gay men have been denied the right to have their partners or community of friends (not relatives in the traditional sense) spend time with them in hospitals.

characteristic of the current movement for sexual freedom as it intersects with AIDS. Cindy Patton writes of the radical potential of the movement in contrast with the New Left and feminism:

Recent feminist and gay liberation theory suggests that gender and sexuality must be separated conceptually in order to understand, analyze, and develop strategies to cope with sexual oppression. The "sex radicals," as the new unorthodoxy has been dubbed, are heavily reliant on concepts developed by the new left, feminism, and gay liberation. Unlike the general tendency of the new left and orthodox feminism to relegate "correct" sexual expression to *after* the revolution (when women are free, sex will be liberated; when material relationships shift, sexual liberation will be achieved), the "sex radicals" argue that it is essential to understand the pattern and history of sexual repression as *a separate form of oppression*, not as one merely adjunct to or supportive of capitalist or patriarchal relationships".¹²⁵

In other words, contrary to an orthodox Marxist position, and even the modified Marxist positions of the Frankfurt School, sexual repression must be understood as a form of oppression with its own history and structure. While material conditions certainly play an important role in the patterns of sexual repression and sexual freedom, they are not the penultimate determinant, and the "erotic is intransigent":

The new models must be understood as methods of sorting out from a matrix of oppression components which in reality are overlapping. The most difficult element of this new project is its anti-utopianism, its refusal to reduce this oppression to one or a set of elements which when eliminated, will leave a "correct" sexuality".¹²⁶

This perspective supports the need to recognize the importance of historical agency vis a vis sexuality; eg. if sexuality must be understood separately (in

¹²⁵Cindy Patton, *Sex and Germs*, p.103.

¹²⁶Cindy Patton, *Sex and Germs*, p.104.

addition to understanding its interdependence with other forms of oppression), then the historical/sexual agency claimed by groups whose sexuality has been historically repressed is a radical critique of sexual repression:

one of the crucial features of the unorthodoxy is its reassertion of the body as the site of human subjectivity, as the locus of the variety of features that shape identification with a particular race, class, gender, etc. Strategically, it is this body which holds the most promise for interrupting the seamless articulation of ideas that perpetuate oppression.¹²⁷

The relationship between the multitude of desires, practice, sexual identity and sexual freedom is direct. This is also true of the relationship between sexual diversity and visibility, although this relationship is marked by tension. Due to an increasingly visible political and cultural movement, there is more room for a fluidity of roles. At the same time, visibility of sexual difference opens it up to attack, both by the Right and by the identity politics which tempt the movement itself. Again, AIDS has forced a reconsideration of the meaning of "individual" and "community" as diverse individuals, infected and affected by HIV/AIDS in different ways, are finding themselves in a diverse community. As Jeffrey Weeks says, "the recognition of 'sexual identities', in all their ambivalence, seems to be the precondition of sexual diversity".¹²⁸ Once sexuality is analyzed as a separate category of oppression, the formation of identities around the body and sexuality becomes a valid site of resistance to dominant repressive norms and opens the doorway to the diversity of sexuality found in the complex relationship

¹²⁷Cindy Patton, *Sex and Germs*, p.106.

¹²⁸Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents*, p.210.

between desire, practice, and identity.¹²⁹ The challenge of the movement for sexual freedom is that it pushes the boundaries and increases the space for individuals to explore the multifaceted relationships between these aspects of the erotic. The movement not only confronts dominant Western ideology which condemns sexual deviance, it faces "normalizing" tendencies among its own by confronting an analysis which does not challenge the ideological basis responsible for the construction of AIDS.

The art of the AIDS activist movement operates from this critical perspective: from within a movement which critiques the construction of AIDS and the repression of sexual "deviance". It cannot be understood apart from the idea that sexuality has been the location of the development of an historical agency, a sexual agency, which acts and protests from the margins. This confronts Adorno's notion of autonomy, which does not take into account the power of historical agency of marginalized subjects and their relation to art. But, in a dialectical twist with Adorno perhaps, this activist art also works as an immanent critique of the given, an anti-identarian critique, much in the way Adorno described. It expresses a suffering fighting back and it rearranges the elements of the given for sexual freedom. The contradiction and tension between Adorno and AIDS activism is the dialectical movement of history which Adorno writes about.

¹²⁹Esther Newton and Shirley Walton propose a useful schema for discussing the diversity of sexuality and pleasure. They discuss the concepts of erotic identity, erotic role, and erotic acts. See Esther Newton and Shirley Walton, "The Misunderstanding: Toward a More Precise Sexual Vocabulary". The idea of fluidity of identities, roles, and acts is supported by recent work in the psychology of sexuality. Carla Golden's study of lesbians in a small women's college led her to question the traditional psychological assumption that we always strive for a congruence between our sexual feelings, activities, and identities. See Carla Golden, "Diversity and Variability in Women's Sexual Identities".

AIDS Art as Cultural Intervention

The art of the movement is directly related to the history of AIDS activism. By 1981, doctors had ascertained that an immune deficiency was causing the unusual cases of KS and PCP in an increasing number of gay men. The number of cases grew at an incredible rate: 225 at the end of 1981, 1400 by the spring of 1983, 15,000 in the summer of 1985, 40,000 in 1987.¹³⁰ Although the response was fairly quick in the gay community (the Gay Men's Health Crisis formed in New York City, for example), it was not until 1987 when an "out" AIDS activist movement, in the form of ACT UP began to emerge. ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) first formed in New York City in the spring of 1987 and AIDS activism has really taken off from there. Similarly, AIDS art has its own historical transformations, or, as Jan Zita Grover calls them, the "periodization of AIDS art". Zita Grover observes that the "first kind of work emerging from any affected community is memorial....The Names Quilt is just one example of such a communal and ongoing art project".¹³¹ Only after a period of mourning, is it possible to have action, or, militancy (Douglas Crimp makes this connection explicit in "Mourning and Militancy"). Adorno makes a similar observation about the "stunning effect" of such a qualitatively regressive situation.

It is important to recognize that there are many different types of AIDS art that have emerged during the epidemic--memorial, portrait, activist, video, exploitative--and that these overlap. It is often difficult, for instance, to

¹³⁰John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*. pp.18-19.

¹³¹Jan Zita Grover, "AIDS the Artists' Response", p.3.

talk about a memorial work without mentioning its radical potential. I am choosing to focus on the art created and used by the activist community--the art of the streets. This does not mean that all AIDS activist art is found in the subway; it does mean, however, that it comes from the margins and derives its power from a developed sense of historical agency. Thus while the Names Quilt is radical in many senses (e.g. it literally names the thousands of people society would rather forget and celebrates their diversity, sexuality, and lives), it functions as a memorial, and not as an activist intervention.¹³² As a memorial, its power of remembrance is great; but as a memorial, its is accepted as a non-threatening challenge to the status quo. While I do not wish to overlook the fact that many people viewing the Quilt are moved to action, its primary function is as an act of remembrance, important to any group under siege.¹³³

The experience of AIDS has brought its specificity and diversity home.

AIDS activism must be understood as geographically specific:

AIDS remains preeminently a local phenomenon...Both the federal government's and national media's pronouncements on AIDS are for the most part profoundly misleading, for they are based on unproblematized generalizations about geography, race, and culture.¹³⁴

¹³²The Quilt is part of a long tradition of women's craft work, and is probably the largest example of any collective quilting effort; the Quilt travels around the country allowing many communities to participate in its experience and add to it.

¹³³I experienced a recent example of this from within an AIDS care community. The Family Planning Council of Western Mass recently sponsored an art exhibit entitled, "Illuminating AIDS Through Art". The exhibit had some very powerful and moving pieces. As a whole, however, it did not serve as an activist intervention or challenge to the given. In fact, the "winner" of the exhibit was an aesthetically traditional and pleasing work. The only other art form mentioned, even among this community of people, was the Names Quilt.

¹³⁴Jan Zita Grover, "AIDS the Artists' Response", p.3.

AIDS activists learn this lesson early on (a lesson which should play more of a role in the politics of other social movements but rarely does). The recognition of the localization of the epidemic has profound implications for movement politics; activists must combat a general construction of AIDS which obliterates difference even as they need to focus on its specificity on a daily basis. The recognition of diverse identities in conjunction with a developing sense of community challenges the construction of AIDS. Geographic specificity is important to AIDS activism just as is sensitivity to different communities. Questions of audience are extremely important to activist AIDS art: since the pull of the culture industry, in the form of government and media disinformation, is so strong, AIDS activists must find ways to use cultural intervention to target different communities, those already affected and dying and those who live under the false assumption that they are part of the safe "general population". This task is an extremely difficult but integral part of a politics of diversity. As Zita Grover says, "Many young artists...have learned the salutary lesson that it is difficult to speak effectively for or to people unlike themselves. Difficult but necessary"¹³⁵-- because the stakes are death.

Activist AIDS art weaves in and out of a dialectical relationship with Adorno's aesthetic theory: its specificity, its operation and creation from its own historical/geographic space without claims to universal values is much like Adorno's conception of art. Its conscious direction to audiences, however, conflicts with Adorno's notion of autonomy. This is because its specificity is due to historical agency. By not taking historical agency into

¹³⁵Jan Zita Grover, "AIDS the Artists' Response", p.3.

account, Adorno fails to see how communities of diverse individuals could make art that critiques from within the confines of the culture industry using the tools that are not only the most available, but the ones that are the most powerful weapons against them: T.V., newspapers, billboards, and posters, for instance. These are the forms the culture industry uses to deliver its punishment, which, in the case of the AIDS epidemic, is stigmatization and death. Although their art is not autonomous, activists achieve a tremendous intervention in the construction of the epidemic by using popular forms rather than what Adorno considered formal technique. What Adorno can help us to understand is the powerful potential of taking the elements of the given and rearranging them into an exact fantasy of safer sex or same sex kissing (not that he would ever give these examples!). Furthermore, Adorno helps us to understand the power of the aesthetic to shock the individual into critical reflection, which is what AIDS activists create their art for too. They go further, however, by moving beyond reflection to action, the critical piece which seems to be missing from Adorno's negative dialectics: namely, how can autonomous intellectuals, or autonomous art, achieve a praxis which is more than critical reflection? In AIDS activism and art, action is embedded within. As a group of individuals under siege, AIDS activists are not working separately, apart from each other to uncover certain truths; they are working from their experience, their place within the construction of AIDS to change that construction and thus save lives. Within the historical context of AIDS, it is doubtful that autonomous art even if its formal technique has the potential to critique the given would be able to intervene in the construction of the epidemic and do so within a realistic time frame.

Time is an extremely important consideration in AIDS activism. The possibility that an autonomous work of art found in a museum or art gallery or private collection will be able to affect the construction of AIDS specifically, and the complexity of stratification it highlights generally, is unlikely, particularly when the kind of art PWA's and gays and lesbians need to see to help form a construction of themselves as a diverse community is not given a forum in which to operate. When this is the case, art must "take to the streets" and make its critical intervention there. In an epidemic, where the death toll is increasing exponentially each year, each day becomes that much more critical. In the tenth year of an epidemic, it may seem to some that ten years is not too long, at least on the scale of art; yet in ten years, over 90, 000 AIDS related deaths have been reported and it took Reagan 7 years to say the word AIDS publicly. Time also plays a dramatic role in the day to day life of the AIDS movement. Activists not only have to deal with the loss of friends, family, and other activists who are usually quite young and have gotten sick and died in a relatively short time, they have to face the reality that they or the people they work with and love might be gone the next day. This reality supports the war metaphor for the AIDS epidemic.

Time has a tremendous influence on the art of the movement. Since the art is designed and crafted from within the movement, it integrates the realities of time. For instance, many of the art works and practices used today may not be used tomorrow; they live for the moment: "You have to recognize that a practice...is only intervening in the AIDS crisis now and next year it will be out of date and won't be a great object, and won't go in a

museum".¹³⁶ The recognition of the significance of time in the epidemic reinvokes the critique of idealism. AIDS confronts the idealist belief that art represents immortality and lasting values, that "Art lives forever"¹³⁷. If the AIDS activist movement did not operate with this understanding, their aesthetic interventions would be futile efforts. For instance, many of the images activists use are specific to certain issues, people or events. Many images are modified over time to absorb and respond to the changing nature of the epidemic and thus remain significant to battle. This approximates Adorno's understanding of the inability to define art. It is also a parallel to Adorno's belief that art must keep up with the most technologically advanced forces of production; activist AIDS art must keep up with the most advanced mechanisms of repression. The dynamic that is operating here is one of mediation between form and content--the forms of mass culture used in alternate ways to express a content mass culture does not want to see. The relationship between form and content is extremely crucial to the interventions of the movement. By using the forms of mass culture with radically altered content, activist art undermines these forms within their own realm, immanently. This understanding of form and content has an antinomical relationship with Adorno. On the one hand, activist art works from Adorno's belief that form and content are intertwined. On the other hand, Adorno did not consider it possible to use the forms of mass

¹³⁶Interview with Douglas Crimp by Timothy Druckrey in *Flash Art*, p.174. I don't think Crimp is making an absolute statement about the future of every art practice, but trying to emphasize the fact that engaged aesthetic practices are not created with the goal of entering the traditional art establishment. He also means that the art of the movement is not considered "great" art or even art by the establishment at all.

¹³⁷Elizabeth Taylor, quoted in Douglas Crimp, *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, p.5.

culture to achieve immanent critique. Yet AIDS activists work within the powerful information society of our culture to expose myths and rearrange the dominant discourses of the given. They use the forms of mass culture as mass culture uses them against them.

Another major characteristic of activist AIDS art is repetition. The power of SILENCE=DEATH is not just in its aesthetic image and meaning, its in the fact that it is seen everywhere--on buttons, T-shirts, posters, bank machines, and spray painted on sidewalks (even on the sidewalks of Northampton). Working from an understanding that AIDS is everywhere--in other words the epidemic and all its constructed meanings--and thus disinformation and dying are everywhere, AIDS activists use their images to make visible what is obscured below the surface. Again, this highlights a complex relationship to Adorno. For Adorno, the culture industry was everywhere powerful so that only the autonomous work of art, which was and was not a part of society, could critique the given. Repetition had negative effects on the quality of the artwork; mechanical reproduction, a quantitative leap, led to a regression in the quality of art. Even though Adorno does not give an explicit definition of "quality" in art, we can ascertain that he means the ability of the art work to confront the individual with the threat of death and provoke critical reflection. This qualitative loss due to repetition/reproduction, however, was a function of the work's autonomy. For activist art. on the other hand, repetition serves as a powerful and necessary critique of the culture industry. Without repetition, activist art could not even begin to confront the power of the status quo. This is due to the fact that the art of AIDS activists has a different dialectical relation to the

given--it comes from the margins. This dialectic is determined by the critical place of the movement activists themselves, thus contradicting Adorno's belief that the artist was not as important as the artwork. AIDS activists do not make that separation; they cannot, for their lived experience dictates a different picture. Again, the gap in Adorno's analysis is due to Adorno's unproblematic assumption of the "individual".

Yet another interesting characteristic of activist AIDS art is that almost all of it contains image and text, an aesthetically borrowed strategy from many contemporary "post-modern" artists (Barbara Kruger, Richard Prince, Mary Kelly etc.) Borrowing strategies and forms of artists and of the culture industry is characteristic of art seeking to make an activist intervention in the AIDS crisis because activists are willing to use, transform, and blaspheme any technique which helps their aesthetic project and thus saves lives. This "imitation" is part of the action of the movement; it is not parody or satire in the traditional sense--aesthetic imitation in the AIDS crisis is serious. Here, the use of text becomes important to counter the silence of those at the margins. Since the images of the culture industry are so powerful in their ability to manipulate the masses, text becomes part of the activist intervention. AIDS activists use text to subvert images and expose the power of the image to manipulate and control. This does not mean that activists use text to convey a message "A" or "B" but rather to show that images themselves contain messages and that these messages are part of the powerful construction of AIDS. Text in this sense becomes a condemnation of the given--of the media, of consumer culture, and of AIDS information.

CHAPTER 4

YOUR GLOVES DON'T MATCH YOUR SHOES!

YOU'LL SEE IT ON THE NEWS!

This is the chant that AIDS activists shouted at the rubber-gloved police who arrested them at the Third International Conference on AIDS in Washington D.C. in June of 1987. I like this chant a lot, in part because I agree with Douglas Crimp that it is a "very queer chant"¹³⁸--it conjures up all those campy associations and gay humor which seem to help us deal with the numbing effects of the magnitude of death. The chant also points to the role of the media as the forum for the dissemination of (false) information and as such seems fitting for a discussion of the aesthetic practices of the movement, particularly since it places the cultural control of the epidemic right where I want it--with AIDS activists as they confront the threat of state control.

I believe that the aesthetic interventions of the movement are *experienced*. The word "experience" suggests an ongoing and interactive human process, in contrast to one which sees the separation of art and life, or the bombardment of art on a passive and unchanged audience. The power of art is in its ability to critique the given through this interactive process which can instill critical thought. This was what Adorno meant by finding a new relationship between subject and object. Going beyond Adorno, however, with a consideration of historical agency, this process signifies the constitution of subjectivity for those objectified at the margins.

¹³⁸Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston, *AIDSDEMOGRAPHICS*, p.33.

Here, the distinctions between artist, art object, viewer, and collective begin to blur. What this means is that the art objects I refer to cannot be separated from their creation within and use by the AIDS activist movement; they gain meaning from the movement even as they express meaning for it. This interdependence makes a discussion of the different examples of AIDS activist art particularly difficult. Not only is it hard to separate them from their movement context (and I will try not to do so), it is hard to separate them from each other--to isolate them, much as a discussion of Beethoven or Monet would isolate the artist or artwork from all others and treat him/it with special significance. It would be impossible to analyze the whole gamut of activist responses to the epidemic, particularly since they differ by location and time period. What I do not want to give, for instance, is a "museum exhibit catalogue" of AIDS activist art, which seems to open them up to the highest bid by the reader. Nor do I present these examples as universally representative of the AIDS activist aesthetic. Instead, I want to offer the experience of these artistic practices, in all their ambiguity, newness, repetition, and contradiction, to show how they achieve an immanent critique of the given.

Perhaps the most widely experienced example of activist AIDS art is SILENCE=DEATH, which first emerged from the movement in 1987 (see Appendix C). It marked a dramatic moment for many in the AIDS activist movement, as well as for sexual minorities in general, because it was the first powerful image to come from within, as an exposure of and direct challenge to the given construction of AIDS: "It was war-zone graffiti, produced as a slick, tasteful poster warning anyone in a position to

understand that this was our war".¹³⁹ SILENCE=DEATH is an aesthetic object by way of its design: two words and a diagram in solid colors. By using a catchy diagram with a powerful symbol, SILENCE=DEATH is an aesthetic coup. For gays, lesbians and AIDS activists, the first appearance of SILENCE=DEATH meant that the terms of the epidemic were no longer being created by the powers that be. With SILENCE=DEATH, the tables turned and the movement began to speak for itself by ending SILENCE.

SILENCE=DEATH was created by the SILENCE=DEATH project, a design collective, and is used all over the world by ACT UP and similar organizations. It first appeared in New York City. The fact that SILENCE=DEATH was developed by an anonymous collective and spread quickly and anonymously throughout New York City, is important to understanding its success as an activist intervention. As a ubiquitous symbol, its repetition at many sites throughout the City acted as powerful points of localized intervention. As Cindy Patton observes, "the insight 'silence=death' must be rewritten for each city because the experience of gay people with respect to repression is unique in each place".¹⁴⁰ At the same time, SILENCE=DEATH contains a more collective statement and imagery.

First, SILENCE=DEATH contains significant iconography for the gay and lesbian liberation movement and the AIDS activist movement. The pink triangle was used by the Nazis to label gay men and was reclaimed by the

¹³⁹Cindy Patton, "Power and the Conditions of Silence", p.31

¹⁴⁰Cindy Patton, "Power and the Conditions of Silence", p.39.

gay movement in the 1970's.¹⁴¹ As it is used in the SILENCE=DEATH intervention, however, the triangle is reinverted so that the point is facing up, the opposite from the triangle of the Nazi death camps. This pink triangle symbolizes active resistance, an end to the silence about homophobia, AIDSphobia, and sexual repression.

In many complex and interrelated ways, SILENCE=DEATH also functions as a reminder of the important and dangerous role visibility plays in a community of sexual "deviants". In the death camps, the triangle was used as a literal sign of death; those who wore it were sent to the ovens. There, visibility meant death, as did silence about the Holocaust. Even after the Holocaust, many countries and organizations refuse to acknowledge the fact that gays were killed by Hitler for being gay. Many Holocaust memorials, films, and books neglect to mention the persecution of gays. This obliteration of suffering is what Adorno found most dangerous about post-Holocaust culture. To forget or trivialize suffering was to show complicity with fascism. Today, within the context of activism, visibility signifies power, even as activists remember the past and the present danger of visibility. The remembering of suffering becomes an empowering act, a suffering fighting back. By reclaiming the pink triangle, the movement actively remembers the suffering of those persecuted for being gay. Furthermore, the incorporation of the words SILENCE=DEATH into the design of the inverted triangle exposes the meaning of silence about the

¹⁴¹Lesbians were even invisible in the Holocaust. Although the Nazis used a black triangle to brand women who were spinsters, as well as Gypsies and other "undesirables", they did not seem to recognize that women did engage in sexual behavior with each other. The use of the black triangle, then, was not to condemn explicit lesbian behavior, but women who did not participate in the traditional institutions of motherhood and marriage. Some lesbians today have reclaimed the black triangle as their symbol.

Holocaust, about homophobia, and about the AIDS crisis. These silences have led to the deaths of society's most marginalized "others". To see SILENCE=DEATH is to be confronted with the very "loudness" of SILENCE: it is to be confronted both with one's own complicity in SILENCE and with the potentiality of death. This is in part how SILENCE=DEATH functions as an aesthetic object; it remembers suffering, recognizes the threat of death, and disrupts the given complacency of the culture industry. As such, it incites many to act.

SILENCE=DEATH also contains collective imagery and significance because it appears everywhere--on posters, subway walls, bank machines, buttons, and sidewalks--SILENCE=DEATH both mimics the mass production of the culture industry and subverts it through its own techniques. The popular forms used for SILENCE=DEATH in conjunction with its powerful content expose the perpetuation of SILENCE, a silence of forgetting and omission. SILENCE=DEATH is a powerful critique of a mass culture which uses the form of T-shirts and buttons to "sell" catchy phrases of late industrial capitalism. Mass culture in this sense is propaganda for the status quo. SILENCE=DEATH is an immanent critique of this identity propaganda. "Traditional" propaganda contains direct and simple messages/ideologies because they operate from a politics of sameness; as such, they do not challenge the given. As Adorno implied, even the propaganda of the left operates from an ideology of sameness, albeit a sameness which is different from that of the status quo. Yet SILENCE=DEATH, and most activist AIDS art, represent complex and mixed "messages" because they operate within the contested realm of sexuality and death. It is these texts that activist

interventions seek to rewrite. The critique by SILENCE=DEATH tears at the fabric of the status quo; its lack of a "message" is due to this explosion, an explosion which gains momentum from the politics of sexual diversity.

It seems appropriate here to consider the group that is most associated with SILENCE=DEATH: ACT UP. ACT UP itself is an aesthetic intervention in the sense that it operates largely as guerilla theatre, a theatre of the streets.¹⁴² Cindy Patton makes the following observation about ACT UP New York: "ACT UP does not protest or demonstrate, rather, they perform, and in their 'actions' they identify the unspoken, inaudible linkages in the power system".¹⁴³ The first ACT UP action in March of 1987 was a demo on Wall Street against "BUSINESS, BIG BUSINESS, BUSINESS AS USUAL". ACT UP protested against the alliance between the FDA and Burroughs Wellcome, the pharmaceutical company which had the rights to AZT, the only drug the government had released for treating AIDS. Activists hung an effigy of the FDA Commissioner, held up traffic, and some tied themselves to the floor of the stockmarket.¹⁴⁴ This "spectacle" of a few hours was the opening curtain for ACT UP and protests since then have included such actions as "DIE-INS", where activists simulate dying in the streets and other activists draw lines around their bodies, and "KISS-INS", usually same-sex kiss-ins. Last year, San Francisco ACT-UP created large one dollar bill graphics. Activists ran up and down passing the bills between each other to symbolize the "Passing the Buck" that has been the

¹⁴²This is not meant to be a blanket statement about all ACT UPs. I also do not mean to exclude the other types of things ACT UPs do such as education and information gathering. Yet, I think it is important to point out that ACT UP does operate publicly as theatre.

¹⁴³Cindy Patton, "Power and the Conditions of Silence", p.39.

¹⁴⁴Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston, *AIDSEMOGRAPHICS*, p.28.

bureaucratic history of the AIDS epidemic. Although ACT UP's street theatre is certainly not an original form of aesthetic activism, it has profound significance for the movement because of the connection between visibility, agency, and sexuality. The street theatre of AIDS activists confronts the silence and invisibility of the many struggles which comprise the fight against AIDS. Here, visibility does not simply get messages across to the Centers For Disease Control; it creates an identity within community as activists literally act to re-create and re-construct and re-present the meaning of the relationship between sexuality and death.

"MEN WEAR CONDOMS OR BEAT IT" was created by Gran Fury, an AIDS art collective, in conjunction with an ACT UP demo around the theme of Women and AIDS. Next to the caption is a large, erect, phallus (see Appendix D). The words, which initially seem to be just a pun, are actually quite serious--safer sex means life or death. This design, which mimics our culture's constant preponderance of the phallus, was a response to the massive disinformation that women could not get HIV through sex (not to mention IVDU). This belief of dominant culture not only supports the view that women are not sexual, and when they are they certainly are not promiscuous, it serves as a powerful reinforcement of male sexual right over women: women cannot demand safer sex with their male sexual partners. This proves true in practice; many women have difficulty convincing or even feeling confident enough to ask their male partners to wear a condom during intercourse. Once again this is a paradoxical situation which affects women negatively. While women (white heterosexual women) are told they're not at risk, "deviant" women (prostitutes, lesbians) are blamed for the epidemic.

"MEN WEAR CONDOMS OR BEAT IT" is a direct challenge to our culture's attack on female sexuality. It is also an attempt to save women's lives by getting their partners to practice safer sex. The statistics show that AIDS is the #1 cause of death among women in NYC. Currently, heterosexual women make up 60% of the reported AIDS deaths among heterosexuals. The discrepancy between heterosexual men and women has only recently become apparent. It means that the rate of HIV infection among heterosexual women is increasing dramatically, a sure sign that the patriarchal information industry is working to maintain male sexual access to women. What this means is that many women will die.

During the Women and AIDS day actions, ACT UP New York's Women's Committee organized a trip to a New York Mets Game, the epitome of American mass/sports/male beer drinking culture (in other words, not the men who tend to practice safer sex), and rented out blocks of seats. Activists handed out information and condoms and hung huge banners which had slogans such as "STRIKE OUT AIDS" and "NO GLOVE NO LOVE".¹⁴⁵ The Women's Committee itself formed as both a way to represent the specific concerns of women in the epidemic and as a response to the massive disinformation of the media. In particular, *Cosmopolitan Magazine* published an article in 1988 which basically told (white) heterosexual women not to worry about HIV. Women activists protested in front of the Cosmo offices. They were also asked to appear on a talk show, "People are Talking" but were thrown off the show when they began to protest the sexism in the re-presentation of the Cosmo incident. In

¹⁴⁵Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston, *AIDSDEMOGRAPHICS*, p.62.

response, the Women's Committee produced a documentary, "*Doctors, Liars, and Women: AIDS Activists Say No to Cosmo*", which countered the arguments and silencing of the dominant media and explored the role of women in AIDS activism.¹⁴⁶

The "READ MY LIPS"¹⁴⁷ design (there are two variations--one shows two men kissing, the other two women) was created for ACT UP's first same-sex kiss-in (see Appendix E). Same-sex kiss-ins developed in response to the homophobia of the AIDS epidemic and as part of the fight for control of the construction of AIDS and its implications for sexuality. "READ MY LIPS" not only challenges the dominant conception that HIV can be transmitted through casual contact, it connects the struggle for sexual freedom to the struggle against AIDS by confronting society with the reality of gay and lesbian sex. It also provides positive images of gay and lesbian sexuality in an era of increasing sexual repression. The idea of a kiss-in itself is a weird sort of guerilla theatre during which sexual minorities take the tremendous risk of visibility. It challenges notions of the public/private aspect of sexuality by placing the private, the hidden, the persecuted, in the public realm and ending a silence around sexuality. When the power of historical agency is considered, the act of kissing becomes an intervention. "READ MY LIPS" is about confronting the given norms of sexuality. It reclaims the sphere of sexuality for those who find themselves part of the equation, SEX=DEATH.

Given the importance of historical agency, the mediation of form and content can be reconsidered. The AIDS activist movement self-consciously

¹⁴⁶Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston, *AIDSDEMOGRAPHICS*, p.41.

¹⁴⁷Douglas Crimp notes that AIDS activists used this phrase before George Bush did.

uses form to convey the content of controversy. This is what makes it directly susceptible to Adorno's criticism. Yet the ability to create, control, and re-organize image content is significantly different for those who have historically lacked this power than for the artist of Adorno's theory. It is not only empowering to these subjects of cultural production but to their marginalized viewers. And it confronts the status quo in the form of what looks like a Gap or Levis advertisement. This is not propaganda in the Adornian sense because of its complexity, and its own condemnation of the ideology of sameness. Designs like "Read My Lips" demonstrate sexual diversity and recreate an active sexuality during a crisis such as AIDS.

An important example of AIDS art activism can be found in the many art collectives which have developed in response to the epidemic: Gran Fury, Testing the Limits, Boys and Girls With Arms Akimbo. Gran Fury¹⁴⁸ is an anonymous art collective which often creates activist interventions that force the viewer to acknowledge the complicity of art (in the Adornian sense of autonomous art), and of the culture industry in the AIDS epidemic. Gran Fury developed out of a collective art project by ACT-UP called *Let the Record Show* (see Appendix F). *Let the Record Show* appeared in the Broadway window of the New Museum of Contemporary Art. A neon SILENCE=DEATH is situated on top of a photomural of the Nuremburg Trials. In front of this picture are the life-sized photos of certain governmental/medical figures who have been particularly deadly in the AIDS crisis, such as Jesse Helms and Jerry Falwell. Each figure is

¹⁴⁸Gran Fury is named after the Plymouth car used by the New York City Police for undercover work. See Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston, *AIDSDEMOGRAPHICS*, p.16.

accompanied by a lighted quote which demonstrates their "record" in the epidemic. Reagan's picture is seen below SILENCE=DEATH.¹⁴⁹ Above the design is an ongoing electronic display of particularly horrifying facts and figures in the epidemic such as

Let the Record Show...New York City: #1 Killer of Women ages 25-29...AIDS. #2 Killer of Women Ages 30-39...AIDS. #3 Killer of Women Ages 15-19...AIDS. #1 Killer of Men Ages 25-44...AIDS.¹⁵⁰

One interesting aspect of this artistic intervention is that Gran Fury has updated the information in the display for subsequent installations, thus confirming its relationship to the historical and its commitment to ending SILENCE. *Let the Record Show* is powerful as an extension of the critique made by the SILENCE=DEATH design. Its use of explicit Holocaust imagery and present day "villains" further exposes the parallels between the Holocaust and the construction of AIDS. The AIDS information that runs with the exhibit is juxtaposed against the false constructions of the epidemic (doctors saying that AIDS gives good reason for hating "faggots").¹⁵¹ The Holocaust imagery and the running texts make the connection between sexuality and death. By exposing the construction of AIDS, *Let the Record Show* begins to reconstruct the epidemic on activist terms. The information is overwhelming and ongoing, much like the epidemic itself. And like SILENCE=DEATH, one is left searching for ways to re-imagine sexuality in the face of so much death.

¹⁴⁹Douglas Crimp, "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism", pp.7-11.

¹⁵⁰ACT UP NY/Gran Fury, "Let the Record Show" Installation at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1988.

¹⁵¹Douglas Crimp, "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism", p.8.

Gran Fury is in an interesting position because it has been recognized by the art world (not accepted, just recognized). As Douglas Crimp says of Gran Fury, "Familiar with the fate of most critical art practices--that is, with the art world's capacity to co-opt and neutralize them--Gran Fury has remained wary of their own success [at getting asked to do work for art institutions]. Such success can ensure visibility, but visibility *to whom?*".¹⁵² When Gran Fury was recently commissioned to do work for an art institution, it produced "WITH 42,000 DEAD, ART IS NOT ENOUGH". Gran Fury's graphic is also a criticism of such efforts as "Art Against AIDS" or "Music for Life". Although activists do not argue against these efforts, they look at them critically. Efforts such as these reaffirm a belief that art can only help in two ways: "by raising money for scientific research and service organizations or by creating works that express the human suffering and loss".¹⁵³ This perspective not only divorces art from life and politics, it supports an idealist conception of art: that art expresses universal human values and emotions. In May of this year, Gran Fury was invited to participate in an opening of the Venice Biennale but their work was detained at Customs and the director of visual arts at the Biennale, Giovanni Carandente, banned their work from the exhibit. Gran Fury was threatened with arrest. In response, the collective wrote on the blank walls allotted to them at the exhibit: "Mr. Carandente, where is our artwork? *Censorata?*" Soon after, Gran Fury's work was installed and displayed.¹⁵⁴ In terms of aesthetic intervention, this incident is indicative of the precarious position of activist art within the

¹⁵²Douglas Crimp, "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism", p.19.

¹⁵³Douglas Crimp, "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism", p.3.

¹⁵⁴John Donohue, "Activist Art", pp.64-65.

totalizing reach of the culture industry--because Gran Fury was asked to participate in the exhibit and because it was censored.

Adorno was careful to write about the difficulty of defining art. Even so, his aesthetic theory concentrates largely on what most people would traditionally call art; this is understandable considering his concern with the autonomous art work and formal technique. The art practices of the activist movement, which are situated precariously between autonomous art and the art of mass culture, are much more difficult to define; they do not fall into anyone's "traditional" conception of art. This ambiguity is what makes the activist practices of the movement all the more interesting and powerful. A good example is in the *New York Crimes* activist intervention by Gran Fury (see Appendix G). Gran Fury sabotaged *New York Times* vending boxes and wrapped each paper with a four page *New York Crimes*, condemning government inaction and the media for their part in the AIDS epidemic.¹⁵⁵ When New Yorkers picked up their *Times* that morning, they saw a very different story. While the obvious impact of the *New York Crimes* was through its content--"stories" such as "AIDS and Money: Healthcare or Wealthcare?" and "Women and AIDS: Our Government's Willful Neglect"--it was through form that Gran Fury achieved its intervention. By using the common media form of *The New York Times*, Gran Fury interrupted the every day "reality" of New Yorkers. Form and content here exist in an important and mediated relationship; to achieve a stunning effect, the content of *The Crimes* needed to be placed in the form of *The Times*. Here, the form gives significance to the content; without this form, the content

¹⁵⁵Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston, *AIDS:DEMOGRAPHICS*, pp.94-95.

would become disregarded and overlooked information--why would it have any bearing on "the general population"? But, *The New York Times*, a form which comforts people everyday (just think of how often you've heard, "Ah, I'll just sit down to read my *Times*" or "My day isn't complete without the *Times*") is one of the most complicit forms of popular culture.

AIDS activists also use the form of video to achieve their aesthetic intervention. Video art, as economically accessible, as well as the "mass cultural form of the nineties" allows the artist more flexibility and distribution, and as such offers a potential site of intervention. It not only interrupts the hegemony of the dominant media, it infiltrates a popular culture which relies so heavily on video entertainment. Many activist video artists are making videos of activism itself, cataloguing activism, to create an activist sense of history (which is quite important in a movement where activists are fighting for historical agency while so many in the movement die). Activist videos also achieve intervention through their own techniques such as the bombardment and juxtaposition of information due to the construction of AIDS itself. Gregg Bordowitz, a member of the video collective, Testing the Limits, comments on this:

what does make sense in the AIDS crisis would, in other circumstances, seem a nonsequitur. The current situation involves a collision of issues that had existed before the epidemic. The response to the epidemic has thus enabled a number of groups to understand social injustices as systemic biases within society that affect all subaltern groups differently.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶Gregg Bordowitz, "Picture a Coalition", p.190.

Activist video art about AIDS reflects this "collision". One example of video intervention is *Testing the Limits*, by the Testing the Limits Collective,

a definitive turning point in representations of AIDS resistance. Born out of the crucible of the early ACT UP meetings...the tape is a freewheeling collage capturing various battlefields in the AIDS war....It explicitly attempts a rewriting of AIDS agendas, insisting on an analysis that refuses to patiently explain or pacify....The tape is disturbing because it refuses to "explain" anything thoroughly.¹⁵⁷

Testing the Limits juxtaposes different issues and different communities affected by the epidemic in such a way as to highlight the impossibility of making sense of AIDS, particularly as the terms of the epidemic move and change so quickly. Its refusal to "explain" AIDS or make explicit connections between the various struggles allows it to stand apart from traditional propaganda: it proposes no solution, no answers, no ideology. Instead, it begins to reconstruct AIDS by showing the collisions and the silences of the epidemic. One minute, a woman from the Community Health Project is on the screen calmly talking about the different colors of dental dams; the next minute, an activist from the Institute for the Protection of Lesbian and Gay Youth is pointing out the multitude of problems facing gay kids in the age of AIDS; then, a woman from the Hispanic AIDS Forum addresses, in Spanish, the issues facing the Latino community.¹⁵⁸ It becomes very difficult to hold onto any concrete understanding or explanation. *Testing the Limits* works

¹⁵⁷ John Greyson, "Strategic Compromises: AIDS and Alternative Video Practices", pp.69-70.

¹⁵⁸ I obtained much of this information from my own viewing of the video as well as the discussions by John Greyson in "Strategic Compromises" and "Proofing" and Gregg Bordowitz in "Picture a Coalition". Bordowitz's article is extremely helpful in understanding the video as well as the difficulties which went into taping and editing. The difficulties the Collective faced were largely due to the overlapping and intersecting issues/communities which have been affected by AIDS.

because it counters the politics of sameness which surround the status quo, the politics of "us not them"--politics which ignore the meaning of AIDS for different groups in society.

Isaac Julien's *This is Not an AIDS Advertisement* is an attempt to get out of equation SEX=DEATH which has been constructed both by dominant culture and by the gay community itself. It is designed to express the diversity and multiplicity of identity in the gay community, with particular attention to black gay men. Throughout the video, above its quick beat, can be heard Julien's reclamation of gay sexuality: "Feel No Guilt in Your Desire", words which speak not just to the gay community in general, as fighting and hopeful words, but against the very real guilt which has accompanied (particularly gay) sexuality in the AIDS epidemic. In a sense, one feels as if Julien is talking as much to himself as to his audience. Again, this points to the blurred lines between artist, viewer and activist in an epidemic which is cultural as well as medical.

In general, I do not think of activism and museum exhibits in the same context. However, there are exceptions to the rule, and last year I was able to see an exhibit which I would call activist. The exhibit was *Witnesses Against Our Vanishing* at the Artist's Space in New York. The purpose of the exhibit was to give expression to a particular group of artists and their experience with AIDS as it affected their community: "a personal reflection on the influence AIDS has had on aesthetics, culture and sexuality".¹⁵⁹ What began as a forum for such expression turned into a confrontation with

¹⁵⁹Press Release from *Witnesses Against Our Vanishing*, The Artists Space, November 16-January 6, 1990.

the powers that be: John Frohnmayer of the National Endowment for the Arts chose to rescind funding for the exhibit because of its sexually explicit (read homoerotic) content (the decision was heavily influenced by the Helms Amendment and the previous incidents surrounding Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe). After ten days of intense "consultations", the grant was restored on a technicality. Despite the fact that the grant was restored, those artists involved in the project confronted the controversy by incorporating it into the exhibit. The first "work" displayed in the exhibit was the collection of letters exchanged between the Museum and the NEA and the Press Releases responding to it. The majority of works in the exhibit were located on the first floor. On the lower level, however, was a wall devoted to an angry activist response to the NEA; the wall contained newspaper articles, graphics, statements, and condemnations of Helms. Finally, the Artists Space chose not to use NEA money to fund its exhibit catalogue in order to allow the artists to express their anger and reactions to AIDS and to the controversy unhindered. The result is illustrated by the selection from David Wojnarowicz, an HIV positive artist:

I'm beginning to believe that one of the last frontiers left for radical gesture is the imagination. At least in my imagination I can fuck somebody without a rubber or I can, in the privacy of my own skull, douse Helms with a bucket of gasoline and set his putrid ass on fire or throw rep. William Dannemeyer off the empire state building....To make the private into something public is an action that has terrific repercussions in the pre-invented world. The government has the job of maintaining the day to day illusion of the ONE TRIBE NATION. Each public disclosure of a private reality becomes something of a magnet that can attract others with a similar frame of reference; thus each public disclosure of a fragment of private reality serves as

a dismantling tool against the illusion...the term GENERAL PUBLIC disintegrates.¹⁶⁰

Wojnarowicz's artistic contribution to the exhibit is a symmetrical design of squares. One square is magnified and bathroom like graffiti within is revealed: "Fight AIDS Kill A Queer" (see Appendix H). While not every piece of art work in the exhibit can be called activist in the abstract sense, the exhibit as a whole, and many of its pieces (such as Wojnarowicz's) is activist in its stance against the silencing of the government and in its self-conscious connections between the aesthetic, sexuality, and the everyday realities of AIDS. Viewing the exhibit is a difficult and disturbing experience in part because it explodes with rage against the hypocrisy of the epidemic. It depicts a shattered sense of sexuality and identity even as it begins to reconstruct them.

The Domination of Other

One way to better understand how activist art practices work is to juxtapose them with examples of AIDS art that is decidedly non-activist. This art fails in that it is complicit with dominant ideas about art, about AIDS, or about both. This art is not engaged with a movement nor does it see the connection between art and politics. Finally, it does not operate from an understanding that AIDS affects "us", but that AIDS affects "them". The work of Nicholas Nixon is a case in point (see Appendix I). Nixon's 1988 MOMA show was a collection of photographs of PWA's, which show PWA's at their "final hour",

¹⁶⁰David Wojnarowicz, "Post Cards From America: X-Rays from Hell" in *Witnesses Against Our Vanishing* (catalogue), pp.10-11.

as dehumanized, deteriorating, and isolated. His photos equate AIDS with "a death sentence"¹⁶¹, as opposed to SILENCE=DEATH which equates government inaction and homophobia with death. Moreover, Nixon uses his photos as a badge of courage; he is a brave warrior who is able to "stalk" and "shoot" dying PWAs, relegating them to the dominated "Other".¹⁶² Nixon's photos give people what they need to see about AIDS; that it is Other, different, grotesque. The activist critique of Nixon's work recalls Adorno's critique of idealism as rage--that the attempt to know the object is to dominate it through a rage towards the other.¹⁶³ Nixon's photographs in no way confront the cultural meanings of the AIDS epidemic. Instead, these photographs become a superficial record of the direct representation of suffering which, as Adorno teaches, implies complicity. This is not historical documentation, in the sense of a documentation of suffering, because it does not critically examine the cultural meanings of AIDS and the position of PWA's. Nixon has no connection to PWAs or the AIDS activist movement. Nixon's work operates from a romanticized demarcation between artist and "object". Rather than serving as a reminder of suffering, Nixon's work serves to reinforce the notion that "we" are safe from suffering, that "they", as different, as other, as deteriorated, somehow deserve it.

Another example of "Art for AIDS" which also serves to support the status quo is a recent exhibit at the International Center of Photography (ICP) called, *The Indomitable Spirit*. The exhibit's brochure demonstrates how it buys into an idealist conception of art: "Leading members of the

¹⁶¹Jan Zita Grover, Jan, "Visible Lesions", p.14.

¹⁶²Jan Zita Grover, Jan, "Visible Lesions", p.14.

¹⁶³Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp.22-24.

photography and art communities were asked to contribute an image that affirmed the will to live, that celebrated human endurance and resiliency in the face of overwhelming obstacles".¹⁶⁴ While the exhibit featured some activist works, it did not have an overall activist or challenging stance. Rather, it called upon the Indomitable Spirit, the lasting values of art and humanity to end the AIDS crisis. Photographers were given this mission statement and asked to submit a work. The result: many of the photos were very hard to relate to AIDS at all, since they concentrated on the "universal values" to be learned from the epidemic. The problem is that the exhibit fails to look at the particular ramifications of AIDS in particular communities and time periods and fails to identify the broader structures of domination highlighted by the epidemic in favor of concentrating on the eternal value of the Indomitable Spirit. Within this universalizing claim, real suffering is left silent.

A final example of the "aesthetic gone bad" in the AIDS epidemic is the book *After the Ball: How America Will Conquer Its Fear & Hatred of Gays in the 90's*, by two gay men, Marshall Kirk and Hunter Madsen. *After the Ball* is a blueprint for a media campaign to end homophobia: Kirk and Madsen even give numerous examples of "pro-gay advertising". Although not explicitly about AIDS, Kirk and Madsen's book condemns the failure of the "gay revolution", particularly in the midst of the AIDS epidemic. They blame gays as well as straights for this failure (this in and of itself is not a bad thing - a little self-criticism is sometimes a good thing). Yet they blame gays for

¹⁶⁴*The Indomitable Spirit* (catalogue) at the International Center for Photography, February - April 7, 1990.

acting in ways which put off, confront, and shock straight society; they blame gays for acting different and "flaunting" their sexuality. Kirk and Madsen believe that the way to obtain the "sympathy" and "compassion" of straight society is to stress the Victim label. AIDS must be carefully used by the gay community to "maximize the sympathy and minimize the fear".¹⁶⁵ Kirk and Madsen then set out to show the gay community how to use dominant media to positively influence straight society and use the AIDS epidemic to their "benefit". Part of the problem, according to them, is that gays have been too confrontational and threatening and that a media campaign should stress the sameness of gays:

Persons featured in the media campaign should be wholesome and admirable by straight standards and completely unexceptional in appearance; in a word, they should be indistinguishable from the straights we'd like to reach. In practical terms, this means that cocky mustachioed leathermen, drag queens, and bull dykes would not appear in gay commercials and other public presentations.¹⁶⁶

What Kirk and Madsen propose is an explicit politics of sameness and identity, an assimilationist view which perpetuates the homophobia they claim to fight. In particular, they hope to keep invisible those "undesirable" gays, to leave silent the underlying diversity of sexuality. AIDS for them seems to be an unfortunate byproduct of the decadent gay lifestyle (typified by the "immoral" atmosphere of the gay bar) and gays should just begin to practice strict monogamy, a principle they stress in their "Self-Policing Social Code". Gays must clean up their act, so to speak, and at least try to use the devastating consequences of AIDS to get some sympathy from the straight

¹⁶⁵Marshall Kirk and Hunter Madsen, *After the Ball*, p.xxv.

¹⁶⁶Marshall Kirk and Hunter Madsen, *After the Ball*, p.183.

world. In addition, Kirk and Madsen emphasize the need for single issue politics: gay rights must be the only thing on the agenda. This strategy is directly contrary to the diverse politics of AIDS activism. Kirk and Madsen's campaign is a campaign for the status quo; it fails to challenge the media form and media complicity in homophobia and AIDS. Kirk and Madsen's book is an ad for the status quo, a book written by two, white, Harvard boys whose only real problem was that they happened to be gay. Kirk and Madsen's reliance on cultural *technique* (T.V. and magazine ads) fails at cultural *critique*.

Concluding Remarks

I have many images colliding in my head right now, both in response to the issues I raised in this work and to the idea of "concluding" such a topic. In terms of the former, I recall that day in June of 1987 when I watched my first Gay Pride March in what "coincided" with the emergence of ACT UP and militant AIDS activism. ACT UP members dressed up in gas masks and rubber gloves and "paraded" by with their float--an AIDS quarantine camp. I also recall the recent demo organized by the ACT UP-Western Mass Women's Caucus. The demo was a lesbian kiss-in at a well known local bar which has a "Gay Night" once a week.¹⁶⁷ ACT UP women got up on the stage, kissed, handed out safer sex information, condoms, and latex gloves. Even among the gay crowd, people were unaccustomed to seeing women

¹⁶⁷The bar is not very gay-supportive. For instance, it charges more on gay night than its weekend nights.

actively kiss other women. I particularly remember women's suspicious shyness at taking latex gloves and safer oral sex information from ACT UP women, confirming our reasons for being there.

In terms of the latter, it is important to emphasize that I do not see AIDS activism as the ideal activist form, the utopian answer of the future, nor do I see ACT UP as the penultimate progressive direct action group--as a member of the group, I experience the problems of organizing, of divisions by race, class, gender, of "traditional" progressive politics. In this sense, my conclusion is not a directive or program for progressive movement politics. This is clarified in Adorno's work. Adorno found hope in art yet he did not find utopia. The importance of art was dependent upon historical, material, circumstances and upon the understanding of art's changing composition. In the context of AIDS, an historically specific perspective is necessary to understanding AIDS activism and art. Both are constrained by the temptations of the status quo: as Adorno stated, the politics of sameness make conformity a matter of survival. Resistance to the totalizing effects of the culture industry, particularly in the realm of the aesthetic, runs the risk of being absorbed and silenced. These constraints threaten the movement's grounding in a politics of sexual diversity; they also explain the defensiveness I sense at ACT UP meetings. But there is more. The defensiveness of the group, and of AIDS activism in general, is the tension between the politics of difference and those of identity. In other words, AIDS activism, as a politics which revolves around Adorno's notion of a "togetherness of diversity" comes up against the strength of the culture industry. Activist AIDS art finds itself in a particularly vulnerable position

because AIDS activists find themselves there too: activist AIDS art comes from those who do not have power, who are not included in the traditional notion of the "individual". This power differential, however, is what gives the art of the movement its potential for intervention.

The aesthetic practices of the movement come from an exploration of the diversity of sexuality, desire, and practice as they form a relationship between sexual identity and sexual community, individual and collective. AIDS activism goes beyond SILENCE=DEATH from the moment it creates the image: AIDS activists end silence through voices which threaten to rupture the world's "reality" by exposing suffering. As Adorno states, "rationality" cannot survive in the midst of the irrationality of suffering. While my project and Adorno's do not converge in a neat theoretical package, Adorno offers the critical perspective needed to view the aesthetic practices of the AIDS activist movement. Adorno shows how crucial the aesthetic is to any project which seeks to end domination. The aesthetic problematizes and reworks the relationship between the subject and the object to be dominated. It is here that I have the strongest alliance with Adorno--in the art object's power to confront the individual with the threat of death. Through a critique of the given, activist AIDS art must reveal the deadly irony of AIDS: Viruses Don't Discriminate but Society Does. AIDS activism has also offered a critical perspective from which to reconsider Adorno. By demonstrating the significance of historical agency to the realm of the aesthetic, particularly the visible aesthetic, we can begin to understand the potential of an engaged aesthetic which operates from a politics of diversity to immanently critique the given.

Death is perhaps the biggest constraint on the movement. Death confronts AIDS activism on a daily basis. It has in some sense defined AIDS activism, given its "guidelines", "time periods" and desperation. In the midst of death, activists have had to reconstruct sexuality, to explore the very different aspects of the erotic in an attempt to reclaim pleasure and desire. To do this, they must work from a space which has no attachment to "what is". Their grounding is in the power of historical agency to confront the equation of SEX=DEATH with the diversity of the erotic, to rearrange the social text of sexuality and death for the possibility of freedom.

APPENDIX A

CURRENT CDC AIDS STATISTICS

as of February 28, 1991

Source: CDC AIDS Monthly Surveillance Report

AIDS Cases

Total cases	167,803
Adults	164,900
Males	148,570
Females	16,330
Children	2,903
Deaths	106,361
HIV Infected	1 - 1.5 million

Projections: End of 1993

Deaths: 285 - 340 thousand
Cases: 390 - 480 thousand

Transmission Category

Bi / Gay males	97,687
IV Drug Users	36,155
Males	27,854
Females	8,301
Gay / IV Male	10,916
Hemophiliacs	1,434
Males	1,400
Females	34
Heterosexual	8,907
Males	3,553
Females	5,354
Transfusions	3,787
Males	2,319
Females	1,468

Racial / Ethnic

White	91,654
Black	47,603
Hispanic	26,853
Asian	1,034
Native American	244

<u>Age</u>	<u># of cases</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u># of cases</u>
0 - 5	2,360	35 - 39	36,676
5 - 12	543	40 - 44	23,363
13 - 19	659	45 - 49	13,184
20 - 24	6,958	50 - 54	7,322
25 - 29	26,610	55 - 59	4,641
30 - 34	40,441	60 - 64	2,606
		65 & over	2,440

Leading States / Territories

New York	35,823	Puerto Rico	5,305
California	31,566	Illinois	4,938
Florida	14,847	Pennsylvania	4,586
Texas	11,901	Georgia	4,482
New Jersey	10,753	Massachusetts	3,510

10 Leading Metropolitan Areas

New York	31,082	Miami	4,509
Los Angeles	11,062	Newark	4,497
San Francisco	9,717	Chicago	4,170
Houston	5,010	Philadelphia	3,468
Washington DC	4,770	Atlanta	3,424

APPENDIX B

SAFER SEX AND DRUG USE GUIDELINES

SAFER SEX AND DRUG USE GUIDELINES

GCM offers these guidelines for all of us who are making decisions about sex and drug use in the midst of the AIDS epidemic.

HIV is a virus widely thought to be a cause of AIDS. The highest concentrations of HIV are found in blood and semen. So it's important to avoid any way in which HIV-infected blood or semen can get from one person's body into another person's bloodstream.

- Fucking (anal and vaginal) without a condom and sharing needles account for almost all the documented cases of HIV transmission.
- Oral sex without a condom or dental dam accounts for a very few documented cases of HIV transmission.
- Other ways of transmitting HIV that have not been documented but which could be theoretically risky include: fisting, finger fucking, rimming, deep kissing, sharing uncleaned dildos. The theory here is that any way HIV-infected bodily fluids get from one person into another involves risk. For example, HIV could be transmitted if a person with a cut on their hand fistfucked their partner and caused bleeding in their rectum or vagina.

HOW TO PLAY SAFER

Only you can decide what risks you are willing to take. Some people use safer sex practices with all their partners. Other people make decisions about the risks they are willing to take based on their own and their partners' sexual and drug use history and/or HIV status. People also make decisions based on how comfortable they feel negotiating safer sex in any particular situation. If you and your partner have not talked about past practices and/or HIV status, don't make assumptions. (For example, many lesbians have had unprotected intercourse with a man in the last ten years.)

- Use a condom when fucking. On the condoms, use water-based lubricants like KY. Oil-based lubricants like Crisco, Vaseline, and baby oil may make condoms break.
- Use a condom when sucking dick if your partner is going to come in your mouth. If HIV-infected cum or pre-cum gets in your mouth, it may get in your bloodstream through cuts in your gums or sores in your mouth.
- Use dental dams (latex squares) when going down on a woman if she is having her period or has a vaginal infection. Menstrual blood and secretions from vaginal infections have more HIV than healthy vaginal secretions or urine. No information has been gathered about the concentration of HIV in "female ejaculate."
- Use latex gloves for fisting or finger-fucking if you have any sores or cuts on your hands.
- Keep semen and blood (including menstrual blood and blood drawn from piercing, cutting or shaving) out of your vagina, anus, mouth, or breaks in your skin.
- If you share dildos, vibrators or other sex toys, use a new condom each time, or clean toys with hydrogen peroxide or soap and water.
- Alternative insemination may put you at risk. Discuss this risk with potential donors or sperm banks.
- Massage, hugging, dirty talk, role-playing, masturbation (solo, with a partner, in a group) and other activities that don't let blood or semen into your bloodstream are safe.
- Alcohol, poppers or other drugs may lower your ability to make good decisions. Many people have reported that they have been unable to maintain safer sex practices after getting high.
- Good nutrition, lots of rest, exercise and nonabuse of alcohol and other drugs may help you fight all illnesses, including AIDS.

INTRAVENOUS DRUG USE

- Don't share works (needles, syringes, droppers, spoons, cottons or cookers)
- If you must share or re-use works, clean them before and after each injection as follows: dip needle and works into bleach, draw up and release three times, dip needle and works into fresh water, draw up and release three times. In an emergency, rubbing alcohol or vodka can be used instead of bleach. Or you can boil works that aren't plastic in water for at least 15 minutes. (Use a fresh solution each time you clean your works.)

RESOURCE NUMBERS

National AIDS Hotline: 1 (800) 342-7514
AIDS Action Committee (AAC) Boston: 1 (800) 235-2331
Latino AIDS Hotline (bilingual), Boston: (617) 262-7248
AIDS Action Committee (AAC) N. Drug Use Taskforce, Boston: (617) 437-4200
Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), New York: (212) 807-6655
National Minority AIDS Council (NMAC), Washington, D.C.: (202) 544-1076
Women's AIDS Network, San Francisco: (415) 864-4376

From *The Gay Community News*

APPENDIX C
SILENCE=DEATH



From AIDS: The Artists' Response

APPENDIX D

MEN WEAR CONDOMS OR BEAT IT

**SEXISM REARS ITS
UNPROTECTED
HEAD**

**MEN:
Use Condoms
Or Beat It.**

AIDS KILLS WOMEN

SPRING AIDS ACTION '88: Nine days of nationwide AIDS related actions & protests.

From *AIDSDEMOGRAPHICS*

APPENDIX E
READ MY LIPS



READ MY LIPS



KISS IN

- Friday, April 29:
9:00 pm March from Christopher & West Sts.
10:00 pm Rally at Sheridan Square
10:30 pm Kiss In at 6th Avenue & 8th St.
11:30 pm Tracks—ACT UP/ACT NOW Fundraiser

FIGHT HOMOPHOBIA: FIGHT AIDS

SPRING AIDS ACTION '88: Nine days of nationwide AIDS related actions & protests.

Grant Tully

From AIDSDEMOGRAPHICS

READ MY LIPS



KISS IN

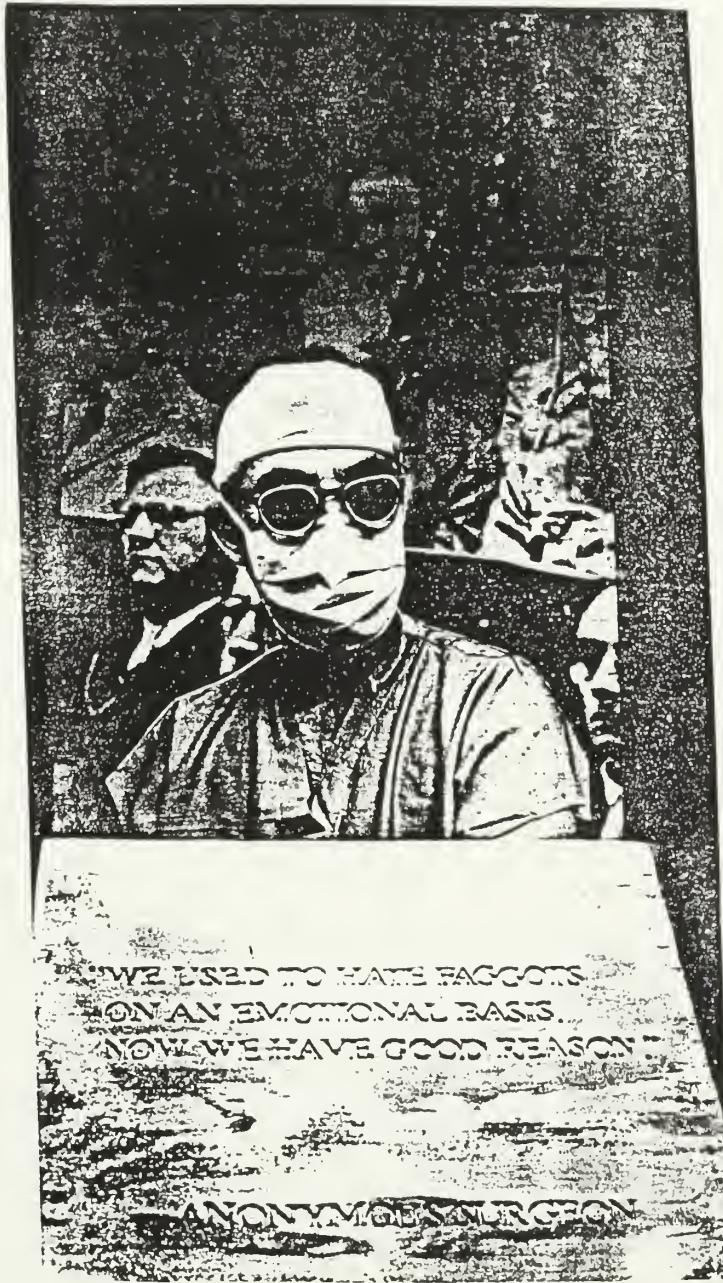
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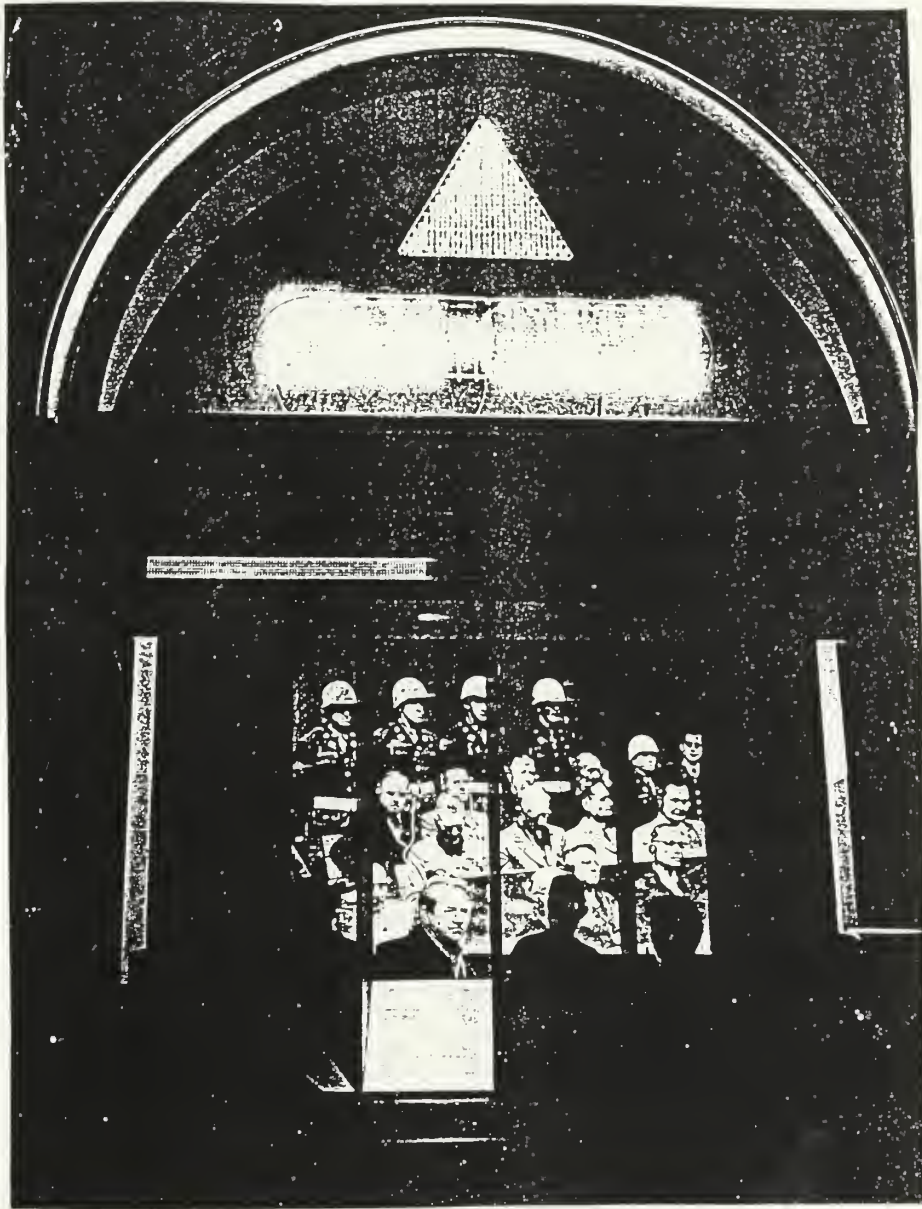
SPRING AIDS ACTION '88: Nine days of nationwide AIDS related actions & protests.

Gay Tag

APPENDIX F
LET THE RECORD SHOW



From AIDS: *Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*



APPENDIX G NEW YORK CRIMES

"Man, Use Condoms
Or Bust It"

The New York Crimes

Early Edition
This Early Edition program presents
a page of news and crime stories
High and low, from state to state
everywhere, Monday through Friday.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH THE NEW YORK TIMES

NEW YORK TUESDAY, MARCH 26 1989

FREE

AIDS and Money:

Healthcare or Wealthcare?

Doctors Make
Dangard the Side

Profiteering from health-care is a term that usually has a negative connotation. It is the accumulation of wealth, not the relief of suffering, that is the goal of the profit motive. The health-care industry is no exception. It is a multi-billion dollar industry that is largely controlled by a few powerful interests.

EXAMPLE: AIDS is the perfect example of how the profit motive can lead to the neglect of the most vulnerable. The AIDS epidemic has been spreading since 1981, and it has already claimed the lives of more than 100,000 people in the United States. Yet, the health-care industry has spent billions of dollars on research and development, but very little on preventing the disease or caring for those who are infected.

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THOUSANDS OF NEW YORKERS MAY BE DYING IN THE STREETS

STATE'S HIGHEST COURT FINDS CITY LEGALLY RESPONSIBLE

NEW YORK, March 25 — A state supreme court decision that thousands of New Yorkers may be dying in the streets because of the state's failure to provide adequate health care to the homeless is a landmark ruling. The court found that the state is legally responsible for the deaths of thousands of homeless people who die each year because of a lack of adequate health care.

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WOMEN AND AIDS: OUR GOVERNMENT'S WILLFUL NEGLECT

The AIDS virus shows the obvious signs of a disease that is spreading rapidly among women. Yet, the government has failed to provide adequate health care to women who are infected with the virus.

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N.Y. HOSPITALS IN RUINS; CITY HALL TO BLAME



Mayor Koch examines the ruins of New York City after years of neglect. Critics blame the disaster of the hospital system and the lack of AIDS services on his administration.

KOCH FUCKS UP AGAIN

NEW YORK, March 25 — Mayor Koch's administration has been criticized for its handling of the AIDS epidemic. Critics blame the mayor for the deaths of thousands of people who have died because of a lack of adequate health care.

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Inmates with AIDS: Inadvertent Political Prisoners

NEW YORK, March 25 — Inmates in New York City jails are being treated as political prisoners because of their status as AIDS victims. The government has failed to provide adequate health care to these inmates, and they are being held in custody for years without any chance of release.

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Thousands gathered for a protest in front of City Hall in New York City, demanding better health care for AIDS victims.

What About People of Color? Race Effects Survival

Studies indicate that people of color have a lower survival rate than white people when it comes to AIDS. This is due to a variety of factors, including a lack of access to health care, a higher prevalence of risk behaviors, and a higher rate of co-infections. The health-care system has failed to address these disparities, and more needs to be done to ensure that all people have access to the care they need.

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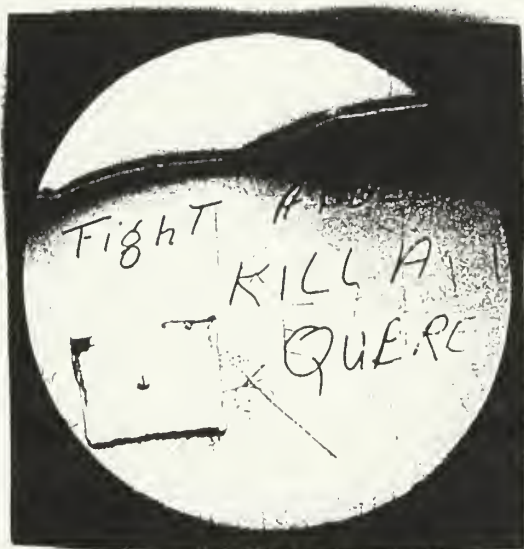
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From AIDSDEMOGRAPHICS

APPENDIX H
FIGHT AIDS KILL A QUEER



DAVID WOJNAROWICZ

Born 1954

Lives in New York City

america 1989

black and white photograph

8x10 inches

Courtesy: PPOW Gallery

From Witnesses Against Our Vanishing

APPENDIX I
NICHOLAS NIXON



From AIDS: The Artists' Response

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