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Furious Acts: AIDS and the Arts of Activism, 1981-1996

Abstract

In "Furious Acts," I explore the different ways in which art and artistic production were used in AIDS activism between 1980 and 1996 by such artistic and activist organizations as ACT-UP, the Radical Faeries, The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, Gran Fury, the NAMES Project, and the Gay Men's Health Crisis. My project is organized thematically to understand how artistic practice influenced collective identity, safer sex education, and the role of mourning in AIDS activism. I also examine how different artistic media (video, photography, performance, craft) were used for unique purposes and audiences. Ultimately, I aim to show that the artistic practices of AIDS activism were far more than aesthetic and creative outlets; they were also vital forms of communication, education, and advocacy.

Keywords

AIDS, activism

Disciplines

Art and Design | Other Arts and Humanities | Social History

Comments

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**Furious Acts:
AIDS and the Arts of Activism, 1981-1996**

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Submitted for Departmental Honors in History
Advised by Prof. Kathy Peiss

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Introduction

AIDS entered into public consciousness on July 3, 1981 in a cryptic and now famous *New York Times* article titled “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Individuals.” The article stated, “Doctors in New York and California have diagnosed among homosexual men 41 cases of a rare and often rapidly fatal form of cancer. Eight of the victims died less than 24 months after the diagnosis was made.”¹ A month earlier, the Center for Disease Control had published findings in their *Morbidity and Mortality Report* of five cases of a strange “gay cancer” that had been observed in five individuals in Los Angeles.² By 1983, researchers would call the disease AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome)³, and believe that it was caused by a virus, HIV (human immunodeficiency virus).⁴ By 1985, AIDS researchers had developed a method of testing for the antibody. Scientists also discovered that AIDS spread through bodily fluids such as blood or semen, and by practices like hypodermic needle exchange and unprotected anal sex. However, no progress was made towards finding a suitable cure for the disease.⁵

The disease first circulated among specific communities—drug users, hemophiliacs, and gay men. As such, many people believed AIDS was mainly caused by unacceptable sexual and social behaviors, that the disease wouldn’t enter into the lives of the average American. This belief fueled politicians’ decisions to ignore the disease.

¹ Lawrence K. Altman, “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals”, *New York Times*, July 3, 1981.

² Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 225.

³ Although initially the disease was referred to as Gay Cancer, and then GRID (Gay Related Immunity Disorder).

⁴ Bronski, *Queer History of the United States*, 226

⁵ Neil Miller, *Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History from 1869 to the Present*, (New York: Alyson Books, 2006), 410.

President Reagan did not utter the word “AIDS” until 1987.⁶ At that point the number of AIDS deaths had reached 20,000.⁷

National news outlets kept quiet about the disease as well. By 1983, 1,300 people had been diagnosed with AIDS but the *New York Times* had only run six stories about AIDS.⁸ To put this in to perspective, in 1982, someone in Chicago placed cyanide in Tylenol tablets, killing seven people. The *New York Times* wrote about this sensational story 60 times by the end of the year.⁹ The *New York Times* printed a scant amount about AIDS because they didn’t believe it would sell papers. This sentiment was largely fueled by a cultural sense of indifference; AIDS Journalist, Elinor Burkett wrote in her memoir, “Reporting on AIDS is not a plum assignment. Newspaper edits and publishers are indifferent, if not hostile to the beat, Most readers don’t want to hear about what they are sure is somebody else’s plague.”¹⁰

This sense of indifference was fueled by a more intentional silence institutionalized by the United States government, religious officials, and medical authorities. Burkett explained that one of the main reasons AIDS was not given more emphasis in print journalism was that “the government has not declared AIDS a national crisis...”¹¹ In addition, conservative groups, such as the Moral Majority worked actively to keep AIDS management out of the hands of the government. In a 1983 letter to funders, the organization wrote:

⁶ Deborah Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight Against AIDS*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 49.

⁷ “20,352 U.S. AIDS Deaths,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 7, 1987.

⁸ Miller, *Out of the Past*, 410.

⁹ Bronski, *Queer History of the United States*, 225.

¹⁰ Elinor Burkett, *The Gravest Show on Earth: America in the Age of AIDS*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995), 4.

¹¹ Burkett, *Gravest Show on Earth*, 5.

Why should the taxpayers have to spend money to cure diseases that don't have to start in the first place? Let's help the drug users who want to be helped and the Haitian people. But let's let the homosexual community do their own research. Why should the American people have to bail out these perverted people?¹²

By differentiating homosexual “perverts” from real “Americans,” conservative organizations actively vilified a constituency in grave need of medical research and federal funding. That same year, another conservative organization, the American Family Association, sent out petitions to their mailing lists to legislate the forced quarantine of “all homosexual establishments” in order to protect themselves and their families.¹³

Responses from the government seemed more concerned with curbing risky behaviors than investing in medical research. Throughout the 1980s, civic governments grappled with the issues of closing down bathhouses: popular spots for anonymous sex and, many believed, a breeding ground for the disease.¹⁴ In addition, a 1986 Supreme Court ruling, *Bowers v. Hardwick*, upheld a Georgia law against sodomy, claiming that homosexual sodomy was not a constitutional right. Combined with the little emphasis placed on AIDS by the United States government, gays and lesbians began to feel more embittered and helpless as thousands of their community members were dying around them.¹⁵

As the AIDS crisis continued through the 1980s, concerned members of the gay and lesbian community realized that the fight against AIDS would also be a fight about representation. AIDS Activist organizations would have to fight not only to get their

¹² Quoted in John-Manuel Andriote, *Victory Deferred: How AIDS Changed Gay Life in America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 67-68.

¹³ Quoted in Andriote, *Victory Deferred*, 68

¹⁴ Miller, *Out of the Past*, 416.

¹⁵ Andriote, *Victory Deferred*, 140-141.

stories covered in the newspapers, but also to get them covered in a way that pushed back against the demonization of gays and lesbians as “perverts” who were “causing AIDS.”

My thesis is largely about this fight for representation and the ways in which groups advocating for increased funding and attention to the AIDS crisis in the late 1980s and early 1990s utilized art and artistic production as a distinct form of activism. These forms of artistic activism would profoundly change the ways in which gay men and lesbians were conceptualized, the way homoerotic desire was depicted, and the ways in which the diseased body was used in art and entertainment. By utilizing (mostly) visual media, these activist organizations were able to respond quickly to the silence and the demonization present in the mainstream media.

From the start of the AIDS Crisis in 1981, groups such as the Gay Men’s Health Crisis and the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence were creatively and passionately creating grass-roots networks of care for people with AIDS (PWAs). Because of the inaction of the CDC, these groups had to provide basic services for people with or concerned about AIDS. By 1982, New York’s GMHC raised \$150,000 dollars, published and circulated two popular Newsletters, and operated an AIDS Information Hotline.¹⁶ Other organizations like Project Open Hand delivered meals to PWAs in San Francisco who were not old enough to qualify for the Meals on Wheels Program.¹⁷ All across the country, grass roots organizations were helping to improve the lives of PWAs, while the government did little.

Beginning in 1987, a different type of activism began to enter the mainstream consciousness. In that year, The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, or ACT UP, was

¹⁶ Ibid, 87-88.

¹⁷ Ibid, 108.

founded in New York City. The first meeting was planned at an event held at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center in which gay activist and playwright Larry Kramer spoke:

We can no longer afford to operate in separate and individual cocoons. There cannot be a Lavender Hill Mob¹⁸ protesting without a GLAAD¹⁹ mobilizing the media, without a National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and AIDS Action Council lobbying Washington, without a Human Rights Campaign Fund raising money, and without a GMHC and its leaders leading us. That's coordination. Without every organization working together, networking, we will get nowhere. We must immediately rethink the structure of our community, and that is why I have invited you here tonight to seek your input and advice, in the hope that we can come out of tonight with some definite and active ideas. Do we want to reactivate the old AIDS Network? Do we want to start a new organization devoted solely to political action?²⁰

The new organization that formed was ACT UP. Because of this speech, many historians have credited Larry Kramer with forming ACT UP; his speech was surely the motivation for the group forming when it did, but it is clear from the speech and from a nuanced understanding of the gay political scene of the time that ACT UP wasn't simply founded by one person. It was the product of merging energies from numerous organizational models that previously existed, such as the Lavender Hill Mob, the GMHC, and GLAAD. On March 24, 1987, weeks after the first ACT UP meeting, the organization held its first action on Wall Street. A fact sheet handed out the day of the demonstration listed the organizations demands, which included:

1. Immediate release by the Federal Food & Drug Administration of drugs that might help save our lives...
2. Immediate abolishment of cruel double-blind studies wherein some get the new drugs and some don't.

¹⁸ The Lavendar Hill Mob was a radical Gay Activist group that used direct-action strategies that ACT UP would later appropriate.

¹⁹ Gay and Lesbian Anti-Defamation League (GLAAD), this organization attempted to control the way the media portrayed Gays and Lesbians as well as people with AIDS.

²⁰ Larry Kramer's Speech given at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center, March 10, 1987, Quoted in Larry Kramer, *Reports from the Holocaust: The Making of an AIDS Activist*, (New York: St. Martin's Press), 135.

3. Immediate availability of the drugs to *everyone* with AIDS or ARC.
4. Immediate availability of these drugs at affordable prices. Curb your greed!
5. Immediate massive public education to stop the spread of AIDS.
6. Immediate policy to prohibit discrimination in AIDS treatment, insurance, employment, housing.
7. Immediate establishment of a coordinated, comprehensive, and compassionate national policy on AIDS.²¹

ACT UP utilized dramatic public actions to help accomplish these goals and new goals that have developed over the last two and half decades. ACT UP's rise also signals the development of a very visual type of activism: one associated closest to the activist collective Gran Fury, whose posters and billboards utilized popular advertising strategies to raise awareness about the stakes and realities of the AIDS crisis. The collective and its work will be a central thread of my thesis. While featured heavily in Museum exhibitions and in art historical accounts of queer art in the 20th century, little historical research has been done that seeks to understand Gran Fury and their work as legitimate activism. This thesis attempts to reframe a historical understanding of Gran Fury's work as vital to the causes of ACT UP and other AIDS activist organizations.

Many historical factors led to the creation and possibility of these collectives. Queer communities in New York, specifically, had a successful history of collective protest that is most notably remembered with the Stonewall Riots of 1969. Following the riots, gay men felt able to openly carve out their own social spaces in the city, both at gay bars and at bathhouses.²² While these institutions were certainly spaces that allowed HIV to be transmitted among gay men rapidly in the early 1980s, they also provided an important space that allowed for a great degree of social networking and interaction.

²¹ "ACT UP: WALL STREET Demonstration Flier," March, 1987, Box 13, ACT UP Collection, New York Public Library.

²² Miller, *Out of the Past*, 395-400.

These social networks begun in the 1970s were crucial for the development of a collective response to the AIDS crisis. This can be seen in the early organization of the policy-centered GMHC in 1982, just months after GRID was announced by the Center for Disease Control. When ACT UP was formed in 1987, it was largely successful due to the social network and skills of New York's queer community to create change and raise public awareness.²³

The AIDS Crisis was not the first period in which art had been used to further the aims of social and political activism. Many artists who were employed under the Works Progress Association (WPA) as part of the new deal depicted scenes that showed the inequity of the current economic situation. Named the Social Realists, these artists painted Murals that portrayed urban people as sad individuals who had been taken advantage of by a Capitalistic society.²⁴ The tradition continued throughout the 20th Century in the activism for Civil Rights and Women's Liberation. In his book *The Art of Protest*, historian T.V. Reed traces the use of art through various activist struggles. Reed discusses the importance of art forms that range from music, to mural arts, to poetry in distinct 20th century social movements for Civil Rights, Women's Liberation, Chicano Rights, and Native American activism. Reed's work demonstrates that the artistic forms of protest that occurred in the late 1980s had a historical precedent in the popular forms of activism of the 20th Century. However, the graphics of Gran Fury and ACT UP were sleeker and more professional than those of any other activist organization; this was made

²³ Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States*, 231

²⁴ Steven M. Gelber, "Working to Prosperity: California's New Deal Murals," *California History* 58 (1979), 102.

possible by a skilled set of committed activists and through new technology that made production easier and more efficient.²⁵

Beginning in the 1970s, the political was in vogue in the art world. Invigorated by academic feminist politics and post-structuralism, artists had broken the walls between the artistic and the political. Photographer Cindy Sherman took self-portraits of herself occupying different roles typically seen in the narrative American cinema of the last half century.²⁶ Her work was largely inspired by Laura Mulvey's incredibly influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," which argued that all film was produced from the standpoint of the male gaze and therefore designed for men's pleasure.²⁷ In the same decade, conceptual artist Hans Haacke made political art about the very institutions that housed his work such as the Guggenheim and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.²⁸ By the early 1980s, the museum had become a place in which politics were not only represented but also hotly debated. Identity was no longer in the margins of art; it became the subject. Inspired by the world of high art, activists in Gran Fury were able to create posters, fliers, and billboard that blurred the line between activism and fine art.

As the definition of art loosened, activist collectives were able to get substantial funding from cultural institutions, affecting the way the work was seen then and how it is

²⁵ Dieirdre Boyle, *Subject to Change: Guerilla Television Revisited*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 190.

²⁶ Marilyn Stokstad and Michael W. Cothren, *Art History*, (New York: Prentice Hall, 2011), 1109.

²⁷ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screens* 16 (1975), 6-18.

²⁸ Fred S. Kliener, *Gardner's Art through the Ages*, (Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005), 1002.

understood today.²⁹ In addition to the inclusion of politics, the use of pre-existing images was emerging in a new genre called appropriation art. Artists such as Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince made powerful statements about the ownership and power of objects by making them not only the medium, but also the subject of their artistic practice.³⁰ Barbara Kruger, a feminist appropriation artist who was incredibly influential to Gran Fury, took images from advertisements and then used text phrases to subvert, or perhaps reveal, their semiotic meanings.³¹ As the AIDS crisis persisted, individual artists like Karen Finley, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, David Wojnarowicz, and Keith Haring gained artistic fame and credibility making artwork about the experience of AIDS and the loss it had caused. The work of Gonzalez-Torres and Wojnarowicz in particular dealt with the tragedy of the loss of a partner and the deterioration of the self.

This thesis however, is interested in more than just images produced for the sake of fine art. I will be engaging with the visual culture from the period, which includes posters, fliers, postcards, cartoons, and billboards. In doing this, I am able to examine the various artistic strategies that AIDS Activist organizations used outside of a museum or gallery context. Incorporating visual culture into my project allows me to demonstrate that the artistic practice utilized in AIDS Activism is not just significant in the history of art, but the history of culture as well.³²

²⁹ Marilyn Stokstad and Michael W. Cothren, *Art History*, (New York: Prentice Hall, 2011), 1109-1115.

³⁰ Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H.D. Buchloch, *Art Since 1900* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 47-48.

³¹ Kleiner, *Art Through the Ages*, 992.

³² Nicholas Mirzoeff, "What is Visual Culture?," *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff, (London: Routledge, 2002), 9.

Popular visual culture in the 1980s was largely influenced by a new genre of cultural production shown on the newly founded MTV. In the words of cultural theorist Carla Freccero:

Much has been made of MTV's postmodern style: the fragmenting of images, the blurring of generic boundaries between commercial, program, concert, and station identification, the circulation of commodities wrenched from their marketplace context, the sense of play and carnival; the attention to fashion; and the de-centered appropriation of images without regard for context or history.³³

These characteristics are all fully realized in the work of Gran Fury and other organizations that utilized the methods of popular media production in order to make successful visual AIDS Activism. As such, AIDS organizations often adapted their messages to different medium, such as music videos, popular advertising campaigns, and even pornography. By adopting different strategies of cultural production, these organizations utilized the mechanisms of mainstream culture and subverted them for their activist aims.

While the majority of my source material is from after 1987, I will also discuss how visual media was utilized by organizations like GMHC and the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence from the beginning of the AIDS crisis in 1981. By framing my thesis from 1981-1996, I will be able to show the beginning, peak, and decline of several artistic collectives. I have chosen to end my thesis at 1996 because this is the year of the last piece produced by Gran Fury, which in itself marks the end of an artistic and cultural era. By 1996, many of the original activists who cultivated protest in 1987 had died of AIDS. In addition, the Clinton administration's policies towards AIDS were more responsive than the Regan and Bush administration. By 1996, AIDS had fully entered the

³³Carla Freccero, "Our Lady of MTV: Madonna's 'Like A Prayer'," *boundary 2* 19, (1992), 165.

mainstream through films like *Philadelphia* and plays like *Angels in America*. The NAME's Project AIDS Quilt was a recognized monument of loss.

This project contributes to several fields of research. Because of its position in the recent past, it has not been sufficiently examined by historians. As I was born in 1990, I am one of the first scholars to have not lived through the early years of the AIDS epidemic. This project allows for an interdisciplinary, yet firmly historical, approach to understand the cultural implications of AIDS activism. The majority of scholarship on my subjects was written before 1995, or by art historians. Both types of scholarship offer unique problems. Because many critical articles and books are written by people directly involved with AIDS activism, the reader gets a glimpse at the internal discourses surrounding many of these groups; however, these scholars were not able to employ historical hindsight or scholarly distance. The major problem with the art historical literature is that it treats all the work by activist collectives as simply artwork, even though the work was in some cases deliberately made outside of the art world. Neatly placing this work into a queer art history ignores the complex space it occupies as a form of social protest and as a result of collective organization. My thesis aims to situate these organizations and their work in the history of 20th century culture. By taking a cultural historical approach the intersections of politics, sexuality, gender, race, and economics can be understood alongside much of the cultural production that I write about.

To dissect the different ways artistic practice was utilized in this time period I have divided my thesis into three chapters. Within this structure, I have loosely plotted out a chronological history of Gran Fury and the visual activism of ACT UP, but have also included the larger story of other AIDS organizations that utilized artistic

production. The first chapter, “Activism=Art?” traces the beginnings of Gran Fury to their birth in the New Museum of Art. From there I demonstrate the ways in which members of Gran Fury negotiated their identity as both activists and artists, and how large artistic institutions made this type of activism possible.

My next chapter shows the ways in which safe sex was represented as it became a new and important concept in AIDS prevention and activism. I will demonstrate how the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence and GMHC attempted to encourage their constituencies to practice safe sex by making it seem appealing and conducive to a robust and exciting sex life. I will also show how governmental censorship attempted to stifle sex-positive approaches to promoting safer sex, and how GMHC and Gran Fury responded to these attempts at censorship.

My final chapter, “Mourning the Loss,” examines four projects in depth: the NAMES Project AIDS Quilt, Gran Fury’s “Four Questions” and “Good luck...miss you,” and a performance at a Radical Faerie Gathering. I explore the theme of mourning in each of these works and how activist attitudes towards mourning are reflected differently in each of the pieces. With the last two pieces by Gran Fury, I trace the decline of the golden era of ACT UP and show how a changing social and political landscape made the type of powerful visual activism that began in 1987 no longer tenable in 1996. My analysis of the Radical Faerie performance by Wayne Karr situates the mourning of a sexual culture alongside the mourning of individuals and the mourning of activism. I hope that my inclusion of this unstudied monologue will expand the notion of what mourning during the peak years of the AIDS crisis meant and how it looked.

My hope is that each chapter provides a robust look at a singular issue, and that when read together the complex and powerful nature of the visual activism of AIDS is understood as just that: visual activism. This thesis in many ways attempts to reframe art. Art is often understood as separate from the political and social world. This can be seen in the academic divisions created around its study: academic art history versus academic history. The art produced within the context of AIDS activism demands that it be taken seriously. These works of art are serious cultural documents that deserve serious historical scholarship.³⁴ My hope is that my methodology will bridge the gap between pre-existing art historical scholarship and American cultural history.

³⁴ This is not to imply that the field of art history is not serious, just that the inclusion of these art objects into the social and political history of AIDS is extremely important.
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CHAPTER ONE: ACTIVISM=ART?: Gran Fury and the Question of Identity

The cultural activist work of Gran Fury has been remembered as a significant moment in the history of American art. The collective has recently been written about in Christopher Reed's 2010 book *Art and Homosexuality: A History of Ideas*³⁵ and Richard Meyers' *Outlaw Representation*.³⁶ Both of these books place Gran Fury within the context of a queer art history. Art museums and galleries have also explored and showcased the way Gran Fury's work fits into a narrative of late 20th century political art. Within the last year, NYU's 80WSE Gallery exhibited a retrospective of Gran Fury's work entitled "Gran Fury: Read My Lips"³⁷ and Gran Fury's work was also featured in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago's exhibition "This Will Have Been: Art, Love, and Politics in the 1980s."³⁸ This summer, as I would walk to the subway on the Bowery I would pass Gran Fury's neon "SILENCE=DEATH" sign illuminated for the public just as it had been some two and a half decades before at the New Museum. This is all to say, looking back on the 25 years that have passed since Gran Fury's formation, the collective's legacy seems firmly rooted in the art world, rather than in the activist communities it longed to be considered in.³⁹

³⁵ Christopher Reed, *Art and Homosexuality: A History of Ideas*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³⁶ Richard Meyer, *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth Century Art*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

³⁷ "Gran Fury Press Release," accessed February 22, 2012, http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/80wse/GF_PressRelease.

³⁸ "This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s," accessed March 15, 2012, <http://www.mcachicago.org/exhibitions/featured/twhb/works/all/year/2/87>.

³⁹ As will be discussed later in the chapter, Gran Fury often issued statements as a collective; elsewhere I will discuss how individual oral histories from members demonstrate a shared view of the group's history.

How and why did Gran Fury end up being understood only in terms of artistic production? How did Gran Fury maintain a dual identity as art producer and activist collective? This chapter is about Gran Fury's organizational and individual identity within the context of the New York art world in the late 1980s. I will argue that while Gran Fury pushed to be considered an activist organization, the organization's financial ties to artistic institutions planted their identity in the art world. Studying this negotiation of activist identity versus artistic identity in the context of the AIDS crisis raises valuable questions about the political utility of art and the practical applications of artistic practice as a form of activism.

In examining the ways in which Gran Fury negotiated their own identity, I hope to reveal the tensions between artistic practice and AIDS activism. Starting with their inaugural work at the New Museum, Gran Fury had to balance their popularity within the art world with their political investments in the real world. While the collective became a known commodity in the international art scene, Gran Fury maintained their commitment to cultural activism and political action.

LETTING THE RECORD SHOW: The Birth of Gran Fury

Gran Fury began in 1987, shortly after the first months of ACT-UP. Gran Fury member Michael Nesline recalled the formation of Gran Fury in a 2003 interview with Douglas Crimp for *Art Forum*: "Bill Olander, the curator at the New Museum, came to an ACT UP meeting with a proposal that ACT UP use the museum's window on Broadway for a visual demonstration. At the end of the meeting, everyone who was interested met in the back corner of the Lesbian and Gay Community Center."⁴⁰ This "visual

⁴⁰ "Gran Fury Talks to Douglas Crimp," *Artforum* 41 (2003), 70.

demonstration” would later be titled *Let The Record Show...* (Image 1) and the committee behind it would become Gran Fury.

Let the Record Show provided Gran Fury with the funds necessary to start working and thinking collaboratively. Member Don Moffit recalled, “The form developed in the same collaborative way. The issues unfolded, and the form followed.”⁴¹ In this process, work was also distributed among the participants based on their skill sets. Member Tom Kalin added, “The process was additive, like a collage. It just turned out to have a coherent appearance, which made it seem much more planned than it really was.”⁴² The large-scale and multi-media nature of *Let The Record Show* imbued Gran Fury with the communal and collective organizing spirit that was so integral to ACT-UP’s democratic structure and success. ACT UP was a totally volunteer democratic organization. Each meeting was run by a moderator, which changed regularly.⁴³ By modeling their art making off of this model, Gran Fury was able to fuse the democratic ideals of ACT UP within their own artistic practice.

Let the Record Show was the first major museum installation that wrestled with the political implications of the AIDS crisis. The installation featured a multi-media collage of LED text, historical photos, contemporary press photos, and neon lights. Utilizing these media, ACT-UP’s installation connected the present political reality of AIDS to the horrors of the past. By juxtaposing contemporary political figures to images of postwar Germany, ACT UP drew powerful historical parallels between Nazi oppression and governmental inaction towards the AIDS crisis.

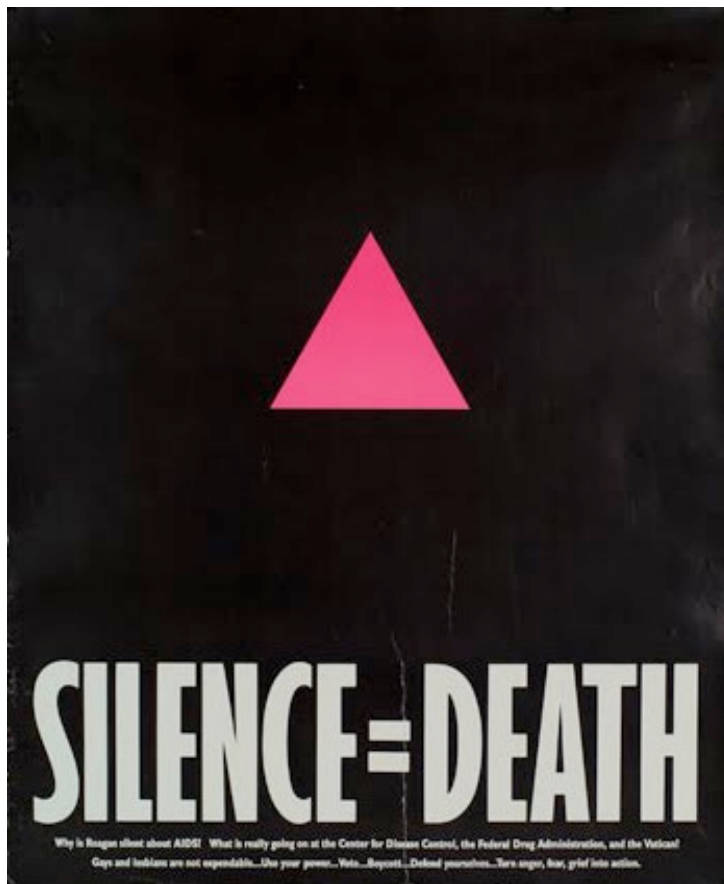
⁴¹ *Ibid*, 70.

⁴² *Ibid*, 70.

⁴³ Gould, *Moving Politics*, 188-189.



Image 1, *Let the Record Show...*, Gran Fury, New Museum, New York, 1987



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Image 2, *SILENCE=DEATH POSTER*, SILENCE=DEATH PROJECT, 1986.

Making this statement boldly, the most eye-catching element of the installation is the neon SILENCE=DEATH logo, *the* symbol of AIDS activism. The SILENCE=DEATH logo had first been seen a year before the formation of ACT-UP in 1986. SILENCE=DEATH posters (Image 2) were the first real sign for many in New York City that political agitation was growing in regards to the AIDS crisis. Bill Olander, curator of *Let the Record Show* stated:

I first became aware of ACT UP, like many other New Yorkers, when I saw a poster on lower Broadway with the equation: SILENCE=DEATH...For anyone conversant with this iconography, there was no question that this was a poster designed to provoke and heighten awareness of the AIDS crisis. To me, it was more than that: it was among the most significant works of art that had yet been done which was inspired and produced within the arms of the crisis.⁴⁴

According to an ACT-UP newsletter published two years after the creation of the logo, “the Silence = Death poster was designed for two purposes; to create a rallying point for a community under fire, and to imply a greater organization go that community than actually existed.”⁴⁵ These posters were created by the SILENCE=DEATH Project, which was made up of six men (including future Gran Fury Member Avram Finklestein). During the first ACT-UP demonstration in 1987, the SILENCE=DEATH Project let ACT UP use their image for advertising and allowed to sell merchandise printed with it as an early form of fundraising.⁴⁶ The history of SILENCE=DEATH could easily warrant its own paper, but it is important to recognize that while many of their members over-

⁴⁴ Bill Olander, “The Window on Broadway by ACT UP,” *On View* (Handout), New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1987, 1.

⁴⁵ “Why We Steal”, *ACT-UP Reports* 4, June 1989, Gran Fury Collection Box 3, New York Public Library AIDS Collection.

⁴⁶ Douglas Crimp, “AIDS Demo Graphics” in *A Leap in the Dark: AIDS, Art, and Contemporary Culture*, ed. Allan Klusacek et al. (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1992), 47-48.

lapped, shared and contributed to each other, ACT UP, SILENCE=DEATH, and Gran Fury were three separate collective entities. *Let The Record Show* thus stands in a pivotal moment for the history of the arts in AIDS activism as it is the birthplace of Gran Fury, as well as the site of visual collaboration between ACT UP and SILENCE=DEATH.⁴⁷

The installation deliberately expanded on the historical parallels to Nazi oppression suggested by the adoption of the Pink Triangle. The pink triangle that has become synonymous with both ACT-UP and SILENCE=DEATH was appropriated from the Nazi's symbol for identifying homosexuals during the Third Reich. The upside-down pink triangle indicated that whomever was wearing it was a homosexual. During the Third Reich, homosexuals were characterized as similar to political dissidents; they were not exterminated deliberately but often "died from overwork, torture, or medical experimentation into cures for their condition."⁴⁸ This symbol, and the history it asked its viewer to remember, was utilized by SILENCE=DEATH to bring to mind the horrifying realities of the AIDS crisis. It "declares the silence about the oppression and annihilation of gay people, then and now, must be broken as a matter of our survival."⁴⁹ As ACT-UP and Gran Fury member Tom Kalin stated, "there was...a strong parallel that was being made to the Holocaust and the burgeoning AIDS crisis – starting obviously, reflected in the choice of the pink triangle and the Silence = Death Project and the inversion of it."⁵⁰

Art historian Christopher Reed argues that interest in the history of persecuted homosexuals had begun earlier in Gay Liberation with the publishing and popularity of

⁴⁷ Gran Fury "Interview for Discourse with David Deitcher" in *Gran Fury: Read My Lips*, ed. Gran Fury et al. (New York: 80WSE Press, 2012), 34.

⁴⁸ Reed, *Art and Homosexuality*, 136.

⁴⁹ Crimp, "Demo Graphics." 42.

⁵⁰ Tom Kalin, Interview with Sarah Schulman, *ACT-UP Oral History Project*, February 4, 2004, 30.

the autobiography *Men with the Pink Triangle* by Henz Heger in 1972, which described in graphic detail the reality of the homosexual experience during the Third Reich.⁵¹

Connecting the AIDS crisis and the United States government to the larger history of homosexual prosecution is a key rhetorical strategy of SILENCE=DEATH as it fundamentally equates government inaction with persecution. In the logic of ACT-UP activism, by being inactive in the face of AIDS, the government was actively persecuting communities of homosexuals and drug users. This visual concept, which is at once historical and political, created a history of queer oppression that in this installation began with Nazi Germany and continued through the AIDS crisis.

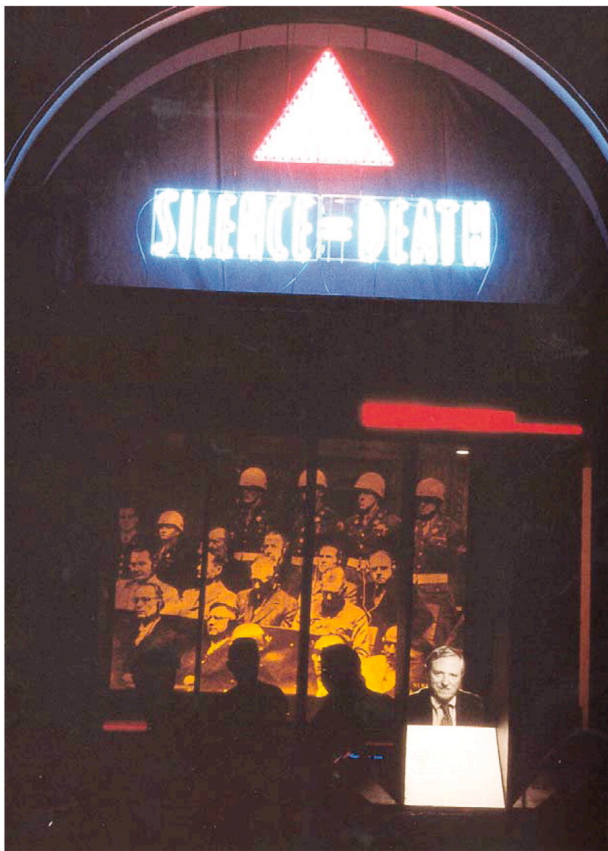


Image 3, Detail, *Let the Record Show...*, Gran Fury, New Museum, New York, 1987

⁵¹ Reed, *Art and Homosexuality*, 136.

The other major historical image utilized in *Let the Record Show...* was the background taken from the Nuremberg trials.⁵² By utilizing the Nuremberg trials, ACT-UP connected the suggestions of tattooing and quarantining, made by William Buckley (Image 3) and Jerry Fallwell (respectively, discussed below) to the international judgment of the actions of the Nazis almost half a century earlier.⁵³ The conception of using the Nuremberg trials as a backdrop for the installation came out of the desire to make a connection “between the current administration – the Reagan Administration – and the criminals of the Nazi era.”⁵⁴ By using the Nuremberg trials as a back drop, ACT-UP set the tone for the urgency of their demands for action and funding; throughout their existence, ACT-UP member have referred to AIDS activism as a type of warfare. In this way, the installation implicates the six figures in the front as “war criminals.” The Nuremberg trials are also historically important, as they were the origin of many medical ethics standards we still hold today, including the notion of informed consent for medical experimentation.⁵⁵

One figure in particular reveals the power of *Let the Record Show*. In a 1986 New York Times opinion column entitled “Crucial Steps in Combatting the AIDS Epidemic; Identify All the Carriers,” William F. Buckley wrote: “Everyone detected with AIDS should be tattooed in the upper forearm, to protect common-needle users, and on the buttocks, to prevent the victimization of other homosexuals.”⁵⁶ This suggestion of

⁵² Kalin, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, 21.

⁵³ Meyers, *Outlaw Representation*, 227.

⁵⁴ Kalin, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, 31.

⁵⁵ Douglas Crimp, “AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism” in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp, (Boston: MIT Press, 1988), 7.

⁵⁶ William F. Buckley, “Crucial Steps in Combatting the AIDS Epidemic; Identify All Carriers,” *New York Times*, March 18, 1986.

tattooing eerily echoes the tattoos that were issued by the Nazi party at concentration camps throughout the Second World War. Tattooing also serves the same function that the pink triangle and yellow star had some forty years before: it makes the target of persecution visible.

Like the Pink Triangles in Nazi Germany, Buckley and Fallwell called for the exclusion and increased visibility of those with AIDS as social menaces. But *Let the Record Show* did something different. It made AIDS itself visible, rather than its victims or survivors. The art installation implicated the political and social powers that blamed the victims of AIDS. While all of the six quotes used in the installation expose the prejudice expressed by some of the country's most powerful people, perhaps the most telling is the quote attributed to Ronald Regan. Under the photograph of Regan is a concrete slab with "... " engraved on it. The ellipsis symbolizes the six years of silence before President Ronald Reagan would publicly utter the word "AIDS." Juxtaposed with the illuminated neon words "SILENCE=DEATH," *Let the Record Show* made silence a culpable act.

Let the Record Show publically inserted political discourse into the streets of New York. Just as people walking around downtown New York between 1986-1987 could not avoid walking by the SILENCE-DEATH posters that were scattered throughout the city, New Yorkers could not avoid the installation. At first glance, the neon SILENCE=DEATH caught people's attention and made a visual connection to the anonymous posters that had been spread around the city. Passersby were further encouraged to stop and look at the installation by the shifting spotlight on each of the six figures showcased, and on the scrolling LED text that listed facts about the AIDS crisis.

The collage of historical and contemporary imagery created a visual juxtaposition that was, and is, striking.

This type of juxtaposition, between word and image, history and the present was a key visual element that would continue with Gran Fury until their termination. Through the social networking that occurred during the creation of *Let the Record Show*, Gran Fury was able to form organically out of a group of innovative artists who wanted their work to accomplish something political. Although *Let the Record Show* existed very much in the context of the art world, it could not be sold or commodified. Because of its placement in the window of the New Museum, everyone could and, in some ways, was forced to see it.

Let the Record Show was an experiment in form for ACT-UP. It proved to be successful. Early on, activists in ACT-UP, SILENCE=DEATH, and Gran Fury realized that artistic and aesthetic practices could not only provide alternative routes to reach the public, they could be used to convey important and complex arguments about the state of the AIDS crisis. In a time period dominated by advertising, television, and visual culture, AIDS activists learned how to effectively incorporate these methods into their direct action. *Let The Record Show* artistically links political inaction to political persecution through visual and historical analogies in an instantaneous fashion. Only through visual media could messages like this have been pushed on to the streets of New York; art was not a convenient strategy for ACT-UP to utilize, it was the only strategy they could have utilized to put their message out in such a way. An article for *ACT UP Reports* about Gran Fury stated:

Intervention into public dialogue is one of the methods of controlling the public debate in this country. It is a tactic used by the powers that be. We need to use it

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too. That is why we “advertise” our political ideas, why we choose public spaces to project them. The seductiveness of a well-turned phrase or good graphics can speak in some culturally genetic way, transgressing the boundaries of political debate.⁵⁷

Gran Fury believed that by making visually striking art, with smart content, they had the power to shift public discourse. The power then of *Let The Record Show* is not only to alter visibility and visual politics of the AIDS Crisis, but also to encourage a civic dialogue about AIDS and its greater political implications. The victims of AIDS, the people who were dying were not visible at all in the installation. Through images, Gran Fury was able to begin to reverse the discourse of blame surrounding AIDS, but also was able to make this claim without including images of those suffering with AIDS. By only including, and therefore indicting, people with power, Gran Fury attempted to destigmatize and liberate the patient with AIDS.



Image 4, Portrait, Nicholas Nixon, Patients with AIDS Series, 1988.

The complex relationship between visual representation and AIDS activism can be seen in a 1988 ACT-UP protest against the Museum of Modern Art’s retrospective on

⁵⁷ “Why We Steal”, *ACT-UP Reports* 4, June 1989, 4.

Nicholas Nixon. MoMA's retrospective included a series of portraits entitled "People with AIDS: Except from Work in Progress." (Image 4) Unlike Gran Fury's installation, Nixon's photographs were taken to create sympathy for patients with AIDS. They are seen as noble sufferers. In a 1989 review of the exhibition, which by that time had traveled to the Museum of Fine Art in Boston, critic Abigail Foerstner wrote, "The sense of common humanity becomes the bridge compelling the viewer to acknowledge that people with AIDS are no different than other people, except that they are terminally ill. The barriers of moral platitudes and prejudices associated with AIDS crumble beneath the force of the pictures..."⁵⁸

While these images do evoke sympathy and connection to people with AIDS, the images often portray people who are helpless or beyond help. As Kalin says in his interview with the ACT-UP Oral History Project, "So now we have the tragic AIDS martyr, covered with the deliciously photographable Kaposi's sarcoma lesions. What's the investment? What's the involvement?" Kalin mocks Dixon's photographs for turning People with AIDS (PWAs) into a visual "type," cut free from their own subjectivity.

At the 1988 MoMA retrospective of Nixon's work, ACT UP protested, handing out fliers that described their concern with his work:

NO MORE PICTURES WITHOUT CONTEXT

We believe that the representation of people with AIDS (PWAs) affects not only how viewers will perceive PWAs outside the museum but, ultimately, crucial issues of AIDS funding, legislation, and education.

The artist's choice to produce representational work always affects more than a single artist's career, going beyond issues of curatorship, beyond the walls on which an artist's work is displayed.

Ultimately representations affect those portrayed.

⁵⁸ Abigail Foerstner, "People With Aids' An Essay on Human Fragility And Dignity'," *Chicago Tribune*, March 17, 1989.

In portraying PWAs as people to pitied or feared, as people alone and lovely, we believe that this show perpetuates general misconceptions about AIDS without addressing the realities of those of us living every day with the crisis as PWAs and people who love PWAs....

The PWA is a human being whose health has deteriorated not simply due to a virus, but due to government inaction, the inaccessibility of affordable health care, and institutionalized neglect in the form of heterosexism, racism, and sexism.

We demand the visibility of PWAs who are vibrant, angry, loving, sexy, beautiful, acting up and fighting back.

STOP LOOKING AT US; START LISTENING TO US⁵⁹

By making representation a key issue of ACT-UP's agenda, they insist on the link between the aesthetic and the political. In the philosophy of ACT-UP, AIDS was not something to merely represent without fighting back against the powers that allowed it to persist. Understanding that *Let the Record Show* and this protest were both rooted in the same ideology of representation, we can understand *Let the Record Show...* as an additional call to arms to stop looking at "us," and start looking at "them." To stop gazing at the PWAs with pity or sympathy, but to look to the government with anger. Gran Fury's activism is crucial to the goals of ACT-UP, as they used visual media to fight back against problems of representation and understanding that were crucial to ACT-UP's core ideology.

MAKING HEADLINES: *THE NEW YORK CRIMES*

On March 29, 1989, Gran Fury made the news. Frustrated with what they perceived as a lack of coverage surrounding important AIDS issues, they produced their own version of *The New York Times* entitled *The New York Crimes*. (Image 5) These fake newspapers were disseminated in Newspaper boxes all over the city. Early that morning,

⁵⁹ "TEXT FROM A FLYER HANDED BY ACT UP VOLUNTEERS TO VISITORS AT THE 1988 MUSEUM OF MODERN ART RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION OF NICHOLAS NIXON'S PHOTOGRAPHY," Reed, *Art and Homosexuality*, 210.

Gran Fury members went around Manhattan with change and laid their fake newspaper covers over the actual *New York Times*. Through this act, they were literally bringing art into the streets. In the upper left corner of the front page read “Men Use Condoms or Beat It!” in the box that usually contained “All the news that’s fit to print.” The other headlines read:

THOUSANDS OF NEW YORKERS MAY BE DYING IN THE STREETS: STATE’S HIGHEST COURT FINDS CITY RESPONSIBLE
 AIDS AND MONEY: HEALTHCARE OR WEALTHCARE?
 NY HOSPITALS IN RUINS; CITY HALL TO BLAME: KOCH FUCKS UP AGAIN
 INMATES WITH AIDS: INADVERTANT POLITICAL PRISONERS
 WHAT ABOUT PEOPLE OF COLOR? RACE AFFECTS SURVIVAL⁶⁰

An ACT-UP newsletter from June 4, 1989 reported on the action in an article entitled “WHY WE STEAL.” The article stated: “On March 24, 1989, 6,000 copies of The New York Times were wrapped in an alternative publication called the New York Crimes. Reports indicated that some people made it halfway to work before they realized they weren’t reading the real Times.”⁶¹ The article does not explain how these “reports” were obtained, but it seems likely that these were in fact small rumors that circulated among Gran Fury and ACT-UP, passed from member to member as a sort of celebratory tale. ACT-UP continued to explain that the reason New Yorkers were late to realize that they were not reading the real paper was because “(e)ven though ALL the news was about AIDS, it was presented in an acceptable and familiar way.”⁶² *The New York Crimes* was not simply an “art piece,” but mimicked the *New York Times* in order to endow their message with the look of authority. In the words of ACT-UP, “Because it looked like The

⁶⁰ Gran Fury, *New York Crimes*, 1989, Box 1, Gran Fury Collection, New York Public Library.

⁶¹ “Why We Steal”, *ACT-UP Reports* 4, June 1989

⁶² *Ibid*, 4.

New York Times, commuters all over the city trusted what was written there in a way that isn't possible when a stranger hands out flyers on a street corner.⁶³



Image 5, New York Crimes, Gran Fury, 1989.

⁶³ Ibid, 4.

Gran Fury's *New York Crimes* can then not be understood by solely artistic paradigms because its artfulness, or design, was utilized as a mechanism for dissemination, not for aesthetic enjoyment or consideration. Gran Fury's activism then lies, not in their aesthetic presentation, but in the power of information dissemination.

"WHY WE STEAL" continued:

Guerilla information is the seizure of the voice of authority. It is the speaking to the beast in its own language... The seductiveness of a well-turned phrase or good graphics can speak in some culturally genetic way, transgressing the boundaries of political debate. Imposing the "look" of authority... The *New York Crimes* took the indelible voice of printed media and used it to project a political spin untouched by the mainstream press. Working within the system does not necessarily mean wearing a suit and negotiating with our enemies...⁶⁴

By printing their own opinions as news stories in a format nearly identical to the *New York Times*, Gran Fury was seizing the "voice of authority" and thus committing an act of "guerilla information." By positioning their opinions in this format, the result was two fold. Gran Fury was able to bring their beliefs and their ideas to a wider, anonymous audience (who knows who picked up a *New York Crimes* that day?), but they were also able to gesture to the absence of this voice being heard in the mainstream press.

Statements such as "Experts claim that City Hall's recently unveiled plan to provide 840 beds over the next three years for homeless people with AIDS (PWA's) fall drastically—if not criminally—short of what will be needed"⁶⁵ appeared as news in the *New York Crimes*. This story subverted and attacked a *New York Times* article, printed on October 31, 1988 that had reported New York's Mayor Koch's plan for housing homeless AIDS patients. Koch announced the plan because he was "anticipating an acute need for

⁶⁴ *Ibid*,4.

⁶⁵ Gran Fury, *New York Crimes*, 1989.

housing for homeless people with AIDS,”⁶⁶ with no mention of the actual need faced by homeless PWA’s. The article featured in the *New York Crimes* continued “Current figures released by the Coalition for the Homeless put the number of PWA’s presently living on the street at 5,000. The Coalition, which unlike the city has attempted to verify the size of the homeless PWA population, predicts that by 1991 there will be upwards of 15,000 people with AIDS or HIV infection without homes.”⁶⁷ The *New York Crimes* ripped holes in the journalistic coverage of the day and inserted their own stories and agenda into the news.

Thinking of Gran Fury as “guerilla information” combatants removed the specter of the art world that hovers over much of their work. By working with visual media, Gran Fury (and thus ACT-UP) “transgress(ed) the boundaries of political debate.”⁶⁸ I argue that this transgression has been misunderstood. The revolutionary nature of such blatant media appropriation can be seen in the last sentence of “WHY WE STEAL”: “The phrase, “by any means necessary” refers to the use of violence when non-violence has failed, but it may also mean usurping the language of power.”⁶⁹ By comparing media appropriation to violent protest, ACT-UP placed itself in lineage with Malcolm X who famously uttered “by any means necessary.” This historical link is certainly not without problems burdened with identity politics, as ACT UP was largely composed of middle-

⁶⁶ Michel Marriot, “Koch Picks 8 Sites in 3 Boroughs To House Homeless AIDS Patients,” *New York Times*, October 31, 1988.

⁶⁷ Gran Fury, *New York Crimes*.

⁶⁸ “Why We Steal,” 4.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 4.

class, gay men,⁷⁰ but it does show the cultural force they were hoping to exert on the public and the power they invested in media output.

FROM BILLBOARDS TO THE BIANALLE

In fall of 1989, following *The New York Crimes*, Gran Fury decided to end its organizational ties with ACT UP and become a closed collective. As Gran Fury's work continued to develop, getting each image approved by the ACT-UP floor, a body of around 300 people on any given Monday, was frustrating and tedious. Michael Nesline remarks in his ACT-UP Oral History interview:

...it was just that we didn't want to have to listen to ACT UP's – why is it blue? Why shouldn't it be green? We don't want to have to listen to a conversation for 45 minutes about which is better, blue or green. We've already had that discussion, and we've decided it's blue, and we're not going to have the discussion again. And, we don't really need to justify it, too.⁷¹

Gran Fury decided it would “piggy back”⁷² on certain ACT-UP actions, but it would no longer ask for the General Body's approval. A key element of Gran Fury's partial separation with ACT-UP was that Gran Fury would receive 10% of the profits made from the ACT-UP merchandise that Gran Fury had made. However, as Nesline remembered, “That was the source of the tension. We never really got much money...So, we never really took ACT UP seriously, as a source of income.”⁷³ Without ACT-UP's funding stream as a reliable source, the collective needed to look elsewhere for money. Funding came to Gran Fury from the art world. Nesline continued, “The source of income became whatever art organization, like Creative Time or The Drawing

⁷⁰ Gould, *Moving Politics*, 144-145.

⁷¹ Michael Nesline, Interview with Sarah Schulman, *ACT-UP Oral History Project*, March 24, 2003, 35.

⁷² *Ibid*, 35.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 35.

Center or whoever wanted to give us money to produce a billboard, or post stickers or whatever it was that we decided we wanted to do.”⁷⁴

This funding did not come without strings or emotional baggage. For a collective committed to “guerilla information,” taking money from well-connected, cultural institutions was often a fraught decision. Gran Fury member Marlene McCarty explained, “There was always a lot of argument, as these offers would come in, of should we do them? Should we not? Are we preaching to the converted? Is there the potential that people who could actually benefit from some of this information, or from this discussion – will they actually be able – will someone besides art world people be able to see this work?”⁷⁵ These questions show a deep concern with the direction of the collective. To participate in art exhibitions was to get the word out, but to a select group of people with a fair amount of cultural capital.

In 1989, Gran Fury agreed to make four Billboards for the Whitney Museum of Art’s *Image World* show. In order to please the museum but stay committed to their own ethic, Gran Fury made billboards and placed them around the city.⁷⁶ By placing their work outside of the Whitney, Gran Fury was able to use funds from a major institution to spread information and opinions about AIDS throughout New York City. Gran Fury chose to present their material on billboards so that the greatest number of people could see it. This exposure could never happen inside the walls of a Museum, and like *Let the Record Show* and *The New York Crimes*, drivers and pedestrians, were forced to encounter the image whenever they passed the billboards. Unlike museum patrons who

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 35.

⁷⁵ Marlene McCarty, Interview with Sarah Schulman, *ACT-UP Oral History Project*, February 21, 2004, 19.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 25.

elect to see the work presented in the gallery space, Gran Fury's audience had no control whether they saw the image or not, only about how deeply to engage.



Image 6, *Welcome to America*, Gran Fury, 1989.



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Image 7, *We Need More than Magic*, Gran Fury, 1989.

The billboards for *Image World* utilized contemporary billboard imagery and copy to create visual interest, and then, subverted that very look by including political information about the AIDS crisis. One of the billboards read “Welcome to America, the Only Industrialized Country In The World Besides South Africa Without Healthcare” (Image 6) and another read “WE DON’T NEED MAGIC WE NEED GEORGE BUSH TO END THE AIDS CRISIS JUST DO IT.” (Image 7) The use of Nike’s trademarked catchphrase shows Gran Fury’s inclination to “speak to the beast in its own language.” However, this subversion of consumer culture made Gran Fury even more consumable to the art market, where appropriation art was already a well-established artistic practice.⁷⁷

Gran Fury quickly became the “flavor of the month”⁷⁸ in the New York art world.

In a 1989 New York Times article titled “Art Goes to War”, Michael Hodges wrote:

So successful has Gran Fury been, in fact, that some are beginning to worry about the perils of becoming fashionable. Some New York critics went so far as to complain that Gran Fury was not included in the Whitney Museum’s recent biennial exhibition of American Art. As one dismayed member of the group puts it, “Gran Fury is a hot consumer item now.”⁷⁹

Perhaps nothing in Gran Fury’s history would showcase them as “hot consumer items” so much as their selection to be in the 1990 Venice Biennale, the premier international showcase for contemporary art. When asked if they had wanted to be included in the project, Gran Fury (speaking as a collective) stated, “ We had asked them if we could have a public project, and they said that was not possible. So we decided, given the nature of the exhibition and the amount of public that would be circulating, that we would

⁷⁷ See Introduction.

⁷⁸ Kalin, *ACT UP Oral History*, 35.

⁷⁹ Michael Hodges, “Art Goes to War”, *The New York Times*, June 18, 1989.

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go ahead and do it at the Biennale.”⁸⁰ Some years later, McCarty reflected, “We finally decided we would do it because 1) it’s a big international situation – people come from all over the world to the Venice Biennial. And secondly, the whole Catholic Church thing was such an obvious target, that we just kind of couldn’t let go of it.”⁸¹

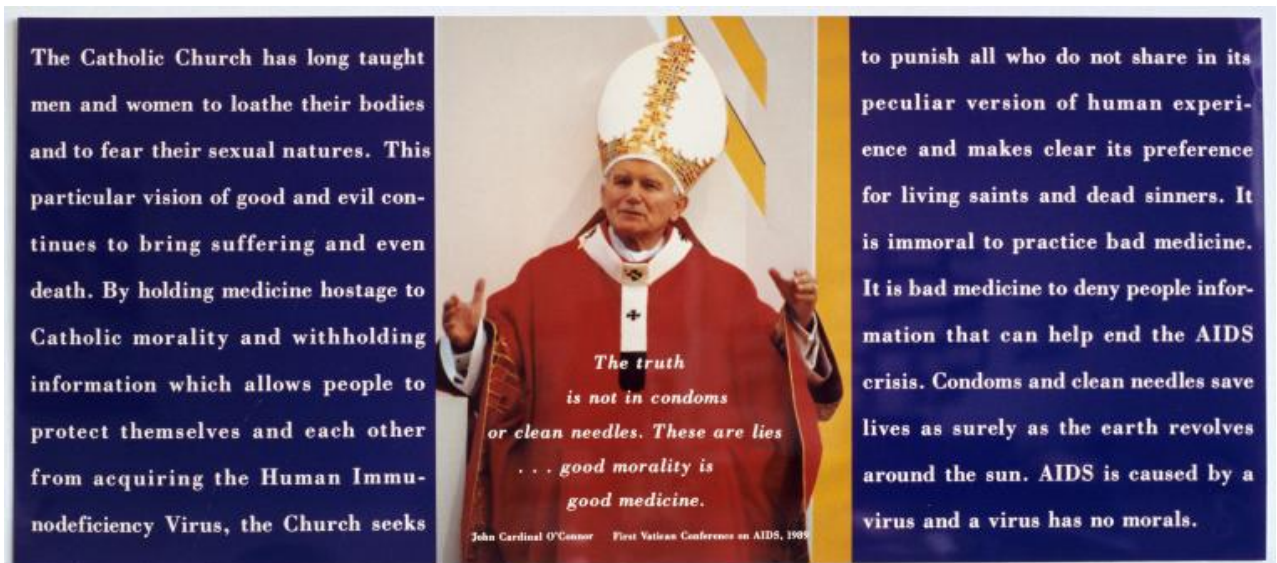


Image 8, *Pope Piece*, Gran Fury, 1990.

Since they were placing work inside a “rarified, gallery space,”⁸² Gran Fury decided to push boundaries in other ways; one of their billboards for the show contained a picture of Pope John Paul II (Image 8). Over the pope’s picture, Gran Fury placed a statement made by John O’Connor, the Archbishop of New York: “The truth is not in condoms or clean needles. These are lies...good morality is good medicine.” On the sides of the painting Gran Fury wrote over two blue columns, forming a triptych:

The Catholic Church has long taught men and women to loathe their bodies and to fear their sexual natures. This particular vision of good and evil continues to bring suffering and even death. By holding medicine hostage to Catholic morality and withholding information which allows people to protect themselves and each other

⁸⁰ Gran Fury, Interview with Robert Gober, *BOMB Magazine* 34, Winter 1991.

⁸¹ McCarty, *ACT UP Oral History*, 25.

⁸² *Ibid*, 31.

from acquiring the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, the Church seeks to punish all who do not share in its peculiar version of human experience and makes clear its preferences for living saints and dead sinners. It is immoral to practice bad medicine. It is bad medicine to deny people information that can help end the AIDS crisis. Condoms and clean needles save lives as surely as the earth revolves around the sun. AIDS is caused by a virus and a virus has no morals.⁸³

As they did in *Let the Record Show*, Gran Fury shifted the blame, and therefore the stigma of AIDS, from those who were suffering from the illness to those who let it continue. In the written portion of the piece, Gran Fury continually situated the Church in an active role in relation to the AIDS crisis; this is seen in the phrases “By holding medicine hostage...” and “the Church seeks to punish...” This rhetorical device reframed AIDS from a disease based on sin to a disease based around power; using the same strategies they employed to focus blame onto the political elite in the United State, Gran Fury shifted their attention to the papacy. Ultimately, Gran Fury called the Catholic Church immoral and antiquated.



Image 9, *Sexism Rears Its Unprotected Head*, Gran Fury, 1990.

⁸³ Gran Fury, *The Pope Piece*, 1990, Box 1, Gran Fury Collection, New York Public Library.



Image 10, Installation Photograph, Gran Fury, Venice Bienalle, 1990.

Situated next to the billboard with the pope was a related piece that stated: “SEXISM REARS ITS UNPROTECTED HEAD MEN USE CONDOMS OR BEAT IT AIDS KILLS WOMEN.”(Image 9) In the middle of the poster was a large erection. Gran Fury’s indictment of the Church, featuring a picture of the Pope situated next to a picture of an erection, predictably caused a controversy. (Image 10) Upon arrival, Gran Fury’s work was held at Customs until representatives from the Catholic Church could judge it as blasphemy.⁸⁴ McCarty recalled:

So, we all had to gather at the Arsenale early one morning, before they opened the

⁸⁴ McCarty, *ACT UP Oral History*, 35.

thing to the public. And they brought in our tubes, unrolled our tubes, and there were these guys there from the Church, walking around looking at the work... So the magistrates look at the work and finally they say to the Biennale people, “Well, we don’t know if this art. We don’t know if this very good art, but it’s not blasphemous, so they can hang it on the wall.” So, we hung it on the wall ... our goal was always to try and generate discussion, and generate discussion in the real world.⁸⁵

The controversy with the Catholic Church brought more attention to Gran Fury and their piece in the Biennale. McCarty continued:

The thing that happened was we started out that week of arguments with the Biennale people being like, “Why should we put this up? We don’t have AIDS in Italy. This is a New York issue. This is not our issue. We don’t have any of these problems. People won’t understand it.” You can’t believe, after the little stink that was made around that work, every newspaper in that part of Italy and in the *Express*, had huge articles on AIDS and how it was like, this un-talked about problem in Italy, and how people have to become aware of this. And we were like, yes, yes – because it leapt out of that, here’s a thing to look at in the art world.⁸⁶

The publicity caused by their piece in the Biennale, took AIDS out of the gallery and into international Newspapers and magazines. Gran Fury used controversial imagery to break free from the elite space of the Biennale. By targeting the Pope, Gran Fury gave Italians a new context in which to discuss AIDS. Gran Fury’s work was recognized for its artistic merit; it was well designed and subversive. Gran Fury’s dispersal of “guerilla information” remained intact, even when they were in perhaps the most prestigious of gallery spaces.

ART IS NOT ENOUGH

Gran Fury’s quick rise to popularity in the contemporary art world can be seen as logical in art historical terms when considered in the context of the institutional critique

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 35.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 35.

and Feminist Art of the 1970s.⁸⁷ However, many members of Gran Fury felt that their popularity in the art world was a way for that community to relieve itself of guilt. By including Gran Fury in a show, the institution in question had “done their part.” Nesline stated:

The art world wanted to do something about AIDS. Artists were dropping dead left and right, and the art world – which is, basically, a conservative world – didn’t know what to do. So, now they knew what to do. Here’s this little Cinderella group that makes art that can’t be sold, because it doesn’t exist, and they’ll give us money so that we can produce our art projects, which are actions, and the art world can feel really good about themselves, because they’ve now contributed to the AIDS crisis – to ending the AIDS crisis – and we can feel really good that we’ve taken their money. So, we’ve used them, and we’re not going to give them anything in return, because there’s not going to be any art product at the end of it that can be re-sold and could accumulate in value. So, our status as Cinderella was preserved.⁸⁸

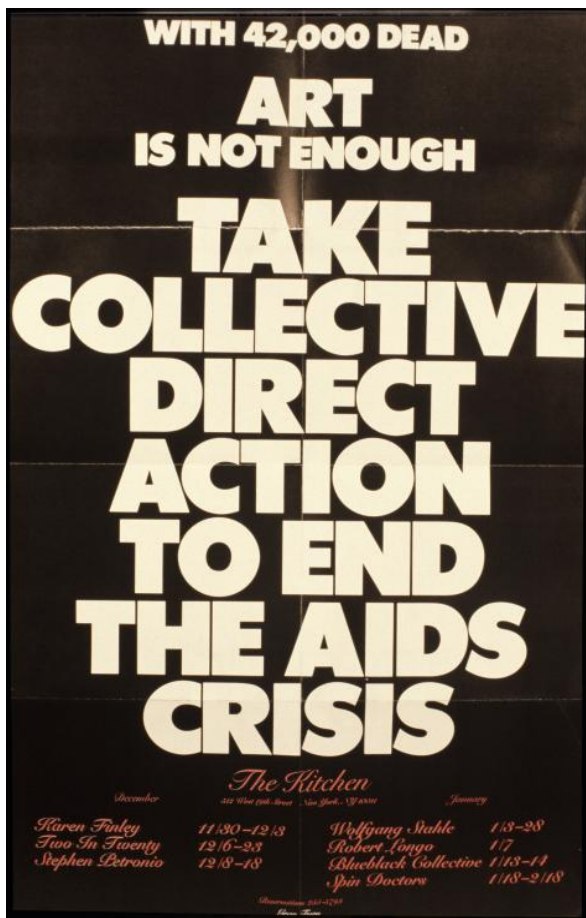
In his own analysis of Gran Fury’s placement, there is a palpable bitterness towards the art world and a diminishment of the real work of Gran Fury. It seems as if Michael Nesline had grown cynical to the group’s idealistic working practices when he recorded his interview in 2003. At the time however, Gran Fury wanted to be clear about their goals and ambitions as an activist organization engaged with artistic practice.

The symbiotic yet antagonistic relationship between Gran Fury and the New York art world can be seen in a calendar designed by Gran Fury in 1988 for The Kitchen, an avant-garde performance space in New York. ACT-UP Member, and Former Kitchen PR Director, Patrick Moore stated: “I was the PR director of The Kitchen, and I had just persuaded them to let me hire artists to design our public relations materials. So I had the idea right away that I would hire Gran Fury to do our poster that would be wheat pasted

⁸⁷ See Introduction

⁸⁸ Nesline, *ACT UP Oral History*, 30.

all over the city, and then it was mailed out to like, 10,000 people.”⁸⁹ Gran Fury’s calendar design was all black, with large white text that said “WITH 42,000 DEAD ART IS NOT ENOUGH TAKE COLLECTIVE DIRECT ACTION TO END THE AIDS CRISIS.” (Image 11) This simple yet bold statement was clearly directed at the arts community. The calendar reinforced Gran Fury’s position as an activist organization, and refused to allow the public to passively consume their material. The calendar also allowed members of Gran Fury to escape from their own criticism; because they were telling people “art wasn’t enough,” they allowed themselves to continue with their successful art-making career that eventually placed them at the Venice Biennale.



⁸⁹ Patrick Moore, Interview with Sarah Schulman, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, January 14, 2003, 6.

Image 11, *ART IS NOT ENOUGH*, Gran Fury, 1988.

The calendar did receive a fair amount of communal backlash from the performance artists represented on the calendar. Moore continued:

I later found that they (the artists on the poster) were not cool with it at all, and extremely upset and extremely angry. Because a number of the artists – the back of the poster advertised which artists were performing there at the time, and a number of these artists felt like they had kind of been co-opted into this message. Not that they necessarily disagreed with it, but they felt that it had been grafted onto them. The board of directors was very unhappy because basically it's saying that, you know, to be an artist is not enough. To – it's not an active way to participate in the AIDS crisis, to simply make work about it.⁹⁰

Gran Fury's judgment of the art world made all performers, and all artists, inadequate; art for art's sake was no longer permissible given the state of affairs in the country.

Ironically, it seems this piece, more than any other examined in this chapter, did the least amount of "activist work." The Kitchen calendar was mailed to 10,000 artistic patrons, and wheat pasted in areas that had the cultural capital to attend and enjoy avant-garde performance art; these were not the communities that Gran Fury claimed to be targeting. This piece did not disseminate "guerilla information," but forged an organizational identity. Because Gran Fury had stated, "art is not enough," their work was intended to be understood as political activism. Nothing they produced from that point on could, or should be understood as "simply art."

How, then, does one reconcile their trajectory within the confines of arts institutions? I argue that despite Gran Fury's successful efforts to perform activist acts within the context of the art world, these gestures were not enough to transcend the institutions they inhabited. The funding provided by these institutions and the cultural capital they bestowed upon the collective were too important for Gran Fury's mission

⁹⁰ Moore, *ACT UP Oral History*, 7.

and existence to separate entirely from them. As a result Gran Fury was never able to leave the cultural sphere of Museum Art. Gran Fury began in a museum, became international figures at the Venice Biennale, and as I will show in the last chapter, died in an art museum.

In his ACT-UP Oral History interview, Gran Fury member Loring McAlphin noted:

(I)n the opening of the New Museum, they included the neon sign, and the — I forgot this project — the “AIDS Isn’t Over for Anybody Until It’s Over for Everybody” poster, which they put in the stairwell. And they didn’t have that much — they had an installation opening of contemporary curated work. But there were very few numbers of other works they just had hanging. And they had put those up, which I thought was interesting. And indicated that there is some institutional memory at the New Museum about their relationship to Gran Fury, and the fact that they helped generate us, but in some way, they recognize that that was a defining moment for them, in terms of their history, which I think is interesting.⁹¹

Loring’s recollection of the opening of the new New Museum reinforces the importance that the museum had on Gran Fury, and the influence that Gran Fury had on the museums. The relationship between artistic practice and activism that occurred within Gran Fury is not simplistic, rather, it demonstrated that ways in which both can coexist successfully toward a common goal. Maintaining the notion of “guerilla information” allows us to look at the cultural production of Gran Fury in a new more politicized light. Through Gran Fury’s career, their commitment to shifting the public discourse around AIDS brought them artistic success, but that was secondary to them. Regarding the true mission of Gran Fury, Marlene McCarty said:

We never, ever, ever came together and said, “We’re going to make art.” We had a whole other mission. Our mission was to get out in as raw and rambunctious a

⁹¹ Loring McAlphin, Interview with Sarah Schulman, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, August, 18, 2008, 41.

way as we could – to get out certain messages that we felt like were not getting out into the mainstream world, which is why we adopted the mainstream look of advertising. So, that said, it was really more about wanting to engage discussion. It was more about wanting to bring issues to a head, or to at least put them out into particular spheres where then people could go at them. But, at least it gave particular issues a certain amount of weight.⁹²

Gran Fury might not have ever successfully avoided the art world, but that was never the point. They shocked, they offended, they informed. Their presence in New York and beyond in the late 80s and early 90s created a conversation about the role of arts in politics and of politics in art. It encouraged people to *do* something, to be skeptical of the media, and to fight. If silence equaled death, Gran Fury was not willing to go down without a fight.

⁹² McCarty, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, 19.

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CHAPTER TWO: (Re)presenting Safe Sex

Because unprotected anal sex was seen as an extremely risky activity for transmitting HIV, and thereby spreading AIDS, Gay sexual culture had to change. Groups like Gay Men's Health Crisis and the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence used humor and pornographic depictions of safe sex to encourage gay men and lesbians to engage in protected sexual practices. This chapter demonstrates the attempts of these organizations to define safer sex and its representation. As these organizations were among the first in the nation to promote safe gay sex, they also had the ability to set the standard for how its representation would be defined.⁹³ In taking a sex-positive approach, both the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence and the GMHC attempted to frame safe sex as something that could be exciting and stimulating, not something that decreased sexual pleasure. This chapter will focus on how these organizations affirmed gay sexuality through promotion of safe sex practices and how the government responded to sex positive sex education. As I will show, the United States Government limited the resources of organizations that attempted to inform gay constituent groups about safer sex in an affirmative manner. I will conclude this chapter by demonstrating the ways in which Gran Fury fought back against this form of governmental censorship and how they incorporated homoerotic imagery into their visual activism.

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence: *Play Safe!* and Drag Activism

One of the first representations of safe sex in the AIDS era was written and produced by a group, or order, of gay men who performed in drag as nuns, the Sisterhood of Perpetual Indulgence. The Sisterhood was formed in 1979 in San Francisco. The

⁹³ Andriote, *Victory Deffered*, 55 &72.

Sisterhood was formed to provide outreach in a variety of forms to the gay community in the city; as AIDS became a reality as the organization was still in its formational stage, the Sisterhood quickly took to advocating and supporting people with AIDS and educating the community about safe sex practices.⁹⁴ At a Ceremonial “Condom Mass” in 1993, Sister X, one of the Sisterhood’s most prominent figures described the early years of the Sisterhood:

And the Sisters rise sadly and unfortunately paralleled the AIDS crisis and when we were aware and it was very early for the sisters we anchored our convent in the fight against AIDS. We produced the first safe sex information in the world, a pamphlet called “Play Fair” in 1980. If you have hold on to it, its collector’s item, it was before the AIDS acronym. We produced the very first AIDS fundraisers in the world...⁹⁵



Image 12, The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, “Play Fair,” 1980.

⁹⁴ Cathy Glen, “Queering the (Sacred) Body Politic: Considering the Performance Politics of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence,” *Theory and Event* 7 (2001), 3.

⁹⁵ Sister X, “Condom Savior Mass,” Tape # 26, Phil Tarley Collection, AIDS Activist Video Collection, New York Public Library.

The Sisterhood's formation alongside the AIDS epidemic made them a valuable early ally for people with AIDS. The Pamphlet "Play Fair" (Image 12), actually produced in 1982, is an incredible document of pre-AIDS discussions of safer sexuality. The end of the introduction to the pamphlet states:

It seems that the Sisters are suffering from numerous **Sexually Transmitted Diseases**. In the dark as to their discomfort, many nuns had preferred to believe they had contracted unusually pesky colds that would sooner or later disappear. Unfortunately, the reality is that we are in for some harsh lessons in personal and social responsibility concerning health matters.

And the gay male community is sorely in need of such lessons. Gonorrhea, syphilis, herpes, scabies, intriguing forms of intestinal parasites and hepatitis (not to mention widespread warts and guilt) have all reached epidemic proportions in San Francisco. And a mysterious form of cancer is now lurking among us too. We are giving these diseases to ourselves and each other through selfishness and ignorance. We are destroying ourselves. Please read the pamphlet and become aware, become responsible, and share the knowledge with your friends."⁹⁶

This "mysterious cancer" was surely the onset of AIDS. From the beginning the Sisterhood took an approach that valued sex and sexuality in a smart and safe way. For the Sisterhood, safer sex was an issue of proper health. In the pamphlet, in a list of different STD's, the Sisters listed both Kaposi's sarcoma and guilt. The entry for Kaposi's sarcoma, discussed the strange "gay cancer" that has been appearing. The entry on guilt is much more telling about the sexual-emotional landscape of the time:

Guilt: This STD is subject to home remedies. Sister Rest Erection recommends putting your guilt in blender set at 'annihilate' for about five minutes, then flushing whatever's left down the toiler. Another recipe is to bake a large dose of care into a cake, having a big piece for yourself, and sharing the rest with people around you. Or, you can mail your guilt (in a plain brown wrapper) to the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, and we'll get rid of it for you. **SYMPTOMS:** Feeling bad after a trip to the baths, bushes, or tearooms; low self-esteem. Seldom asymptomatic. **SYMPTOMS APPEAR:** From birth to 3 years of age and persist in many cases throughout one's life. **IF UNTREATED:** Can result in loss of ability to be happy; loss of spontaneity; impotence, sexual

⁹⁶ Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, "Play Fair," 1982, Box 11, AIDS Collection, Yale University Library.

dysfunction; epidemics of sexually transmitted disease. **HOW YOU GET IT:** Judeo-Christian tradition of morality; Catholic schools; 3 to 4 hours of TV a day when young. **CURE:** Respect and love yourself and others.⁹⁷

By placing “guilt” in the context of other diseases, the Sisterhood reframed sexual shame as a cultural disease. While the passage is certainly tongue-in-cheek, it is also very revealing about the sexual practices and stigmas in this period. Engaging in sex at tearooms, baths, or in public (in bushes) often resulted in guilt, but they need not, the sisters suggest, if the person took proper precautions. The Sisterhood did not blame the act itself, but the tradition of Judeo-Christian values that placed those acts in a moral context. This subversion of Judeo-Christian values also occurred in the Condom Savior Mass, in which the audience bent down to take a communion from the sisterhood, and received condoms instead of wafers.⁹⁸ The substitution of condoms is highly symbolic and powerful; the Sisterhood replaces spiritual salvation with the physical salvation of safer sex practices. Instead of shaming sexuality, they embrace it and celebrate it as an important human act.

As the pamphlet represents an emerging discourse around safe sexuality, it is important that the sisterhood incorporated proper mental health alongside the more conventionally physical sexually transmitted diseases. This holistic approach would prove to be fundamental for many AIDS activist organizations attempting to educate a public about safe sex while embracing a sex-positive model.

GMHC, Safe Sex, and the Helms Amendment

In the summer of 1987, New York’s Gay Men’s Health Crisis released a comic book about safer sex, which featured graphic images of two men having sexual

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ “Condom Savior Mass,” Phil Tarley Collection.

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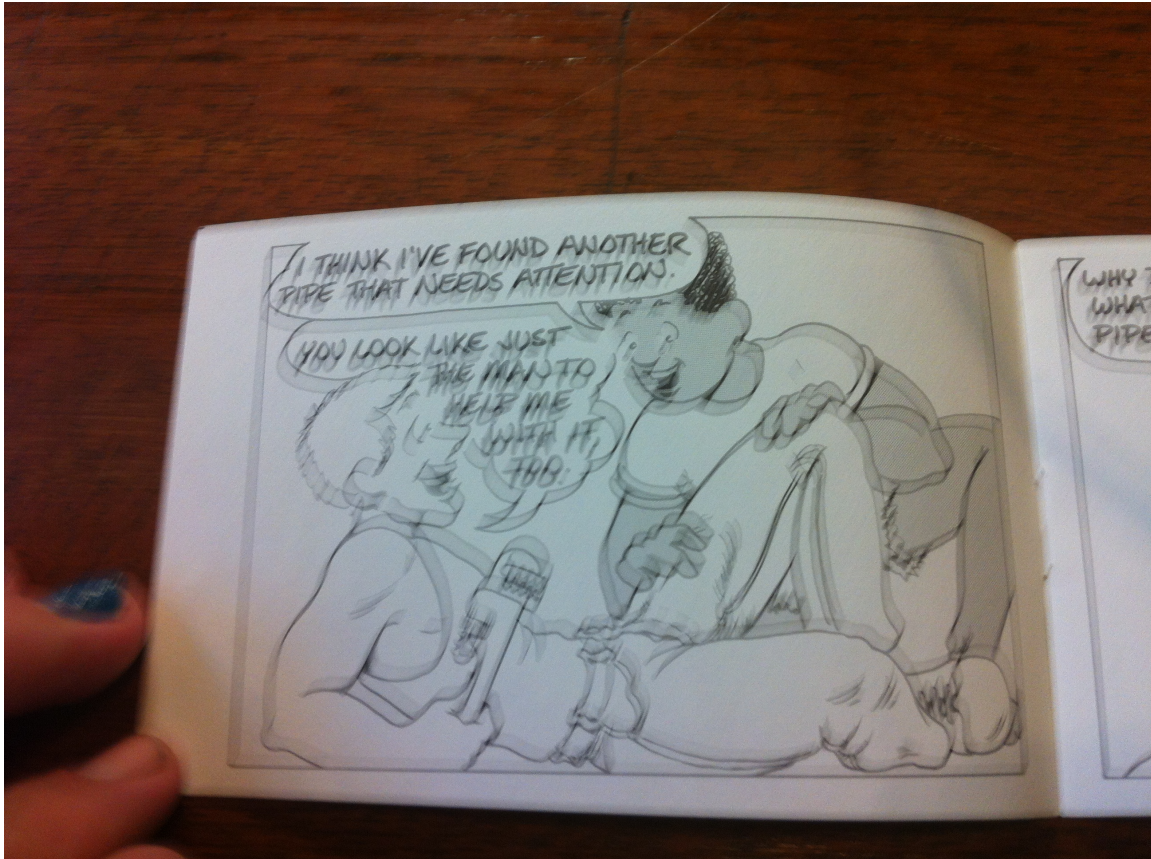
intercourse. The comic was meant to provide an entertaining, yet sexy, scenario that showed how the use of condoms could be inserted and normalized into sexual encounters for gay men, even ones that were random. *Safe Sex Comix # 4* tells the story of two men who engage in safe, and enjoyable anal sexual intercourse. (Image 13-21)

In a typical scenario from gay pornography, a plumber has just finished “fixing the pipes” of a gay resident.⁹⁹ After some suggestive flirting, the plumber tells the resident that he would like to have sex with him, but only with a condom. When the resident inquires what it is, the plumber explains, “I never go anywhere without my little plumber’s helper.” To which the resident replies “A rubber?” The plumber proceeds to show the resident how to put a condom on an erect penis and the couple begins to engage in protected anal sex. The comic’s graphic depiction of homosexual anal penetration is highlighted by exclamations “Oh geez! That feels good!” and “Oh baby! It’s great!” The last image of the comic shows the couple spooning; the resident eager for more states “I’d like to try a little pipe fitting myself...if you’ve got another plumber’s helper with you...”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Gay Men’s Health Crisis, *Safer Sex Comix # 4*, Box 7, AIDS Collection, Yale University Library.

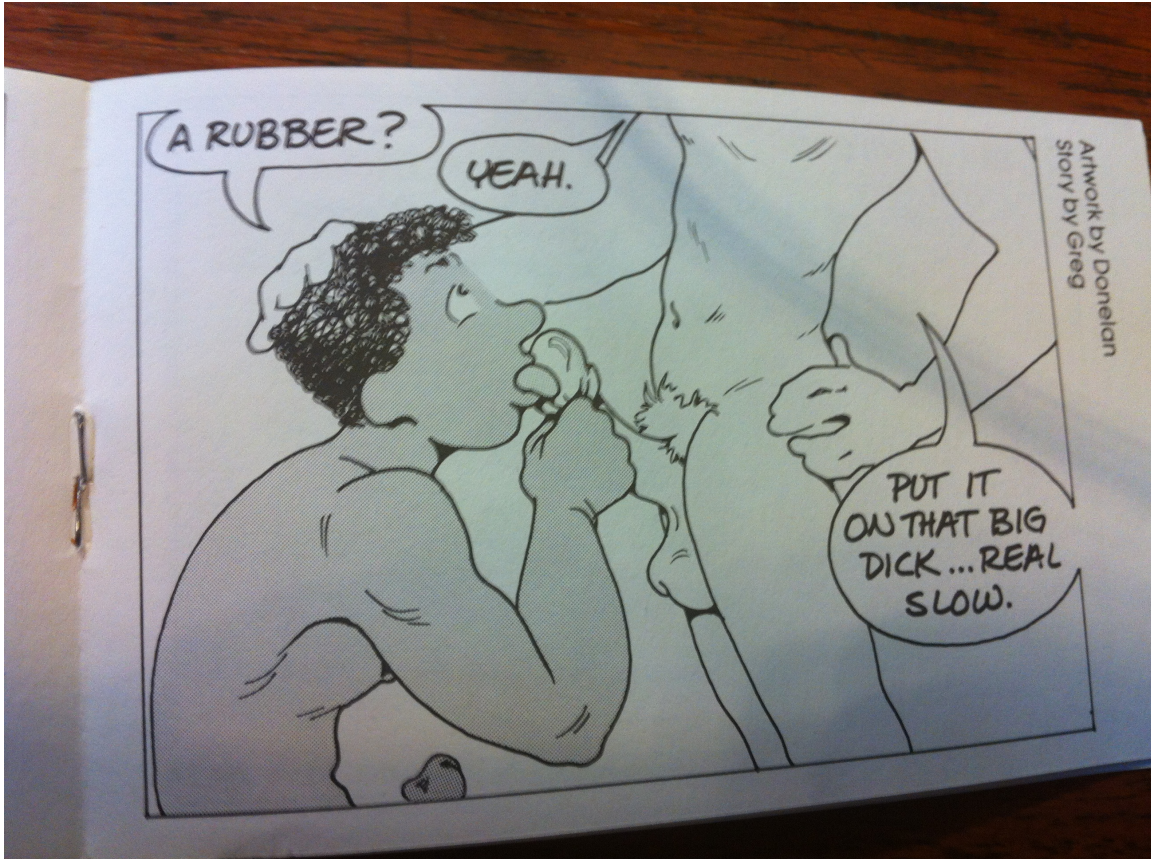
¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*















Images 13-21, *Safe Sex Comix #4*, Gay Men's Health Crisis, 1987.

The comic was a funny and sexy way for Gay Men's Health Crisis to inform their intended population about safer sex practices. The script of the comic would be easily recognizable as a common scene from gay pornography and the erotic images helped keep safer sex erotic; if someone looking at the comic got aroused, they were aroused by safer sex.

When Republican Senator Jesse Helms saw the comic he sent it to other senators in "brown sealed envelopes." Eventually he showed the comic to President Reagan who famously "pounded his fist against the desk."¹⁰¹ Why did a comic about safer sex stir such rage among Conservative politicians? The Gay Men's Health Crisis received

¹⁰¹ *Departments of Labor, Health, and Human Services, and Education, and Related Agencies Appropriations, Fiscal Year 1988, 100th Cong., 1st Sess., 133 Cong. Rec 133, (October 14, 1987), S14200.*

\$674,679 for AIDS education funding from the Center for Disease Control.¹⁰² Helms believed federal funding was being used to make pornographic cartoons that encouraged random, homosexual sexual intercourse.

On October 14, 1987 Jesse Helms addressed the senate in support of amendment no 956, now known as the “Helms Amendment,” “To prohibit the use of any funds provided under this Act to the Centers for Disease Control from being used to provide AIDS education, information, or prevention materials and activities that promote, encourage, or condone homosexual sexual activities or the intravenous use of illegal drugs.”¹⁰³ To gain support for his amendment, Helms gave a rousing speech on the floor of the senate in which he claimed, “Every AIDS case can be traced back to a homosexual act.”¹⁰⁴ Helms went on to say:

So it seems quite elementary that until we make up our minds to start insisting on distributing educational materials which emphasize abstinence outside of a sexually monogamous marriage -- including abstinence from homosexual activity and abstinence from intravenous use of illegal drugs -- and discourage the types of behavior which brought on the AIDS epidemic in the first place, we will be simply be adding fuel to a raging fire which is killing a lot of people. And, as with so many other things, Mr. President, this will take courage. It will force this country to slam the door on the wayward, warped sexual revolution which has ravaged this Nation for the past quarter of a century.¹⁰⁵

The rhetoric of Mr. Helms extended far beyond federal funding for AIDS, Helms declared war on the sexual revolution of the 1960s and the era of Gay Liberation that occurred after it. By “slamming the door” on homosexuality, Helms advocated for the reduced funding for educational materials that could reach queer people and drug users in

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

a real way. In framing his argument for the amendment in this manner, Helms made a clear connection between the fear of gay sex and the spread of AIDS. If homosexual intercourse were the cause of every case of AIDS, it was the government's responsibility to end those sexual activities. According to the New York Times, during the brief senate proceedings, "Mr. Helms initially proposed that no money may be used for material that promote, encourage, or condone homosexuality, illegal drug use or any sexual activity outside marriage. But opponents argued that the amendment would have a chilling effect on the Government's ability to stop the spread of AIDS."¹⁰⁶ Senate voted to pass the amendment 94 to 2.¹⁰⁷

In the congressional hearings, Jesse Helms refused to describe the cartoon¹⁰⁸, but his rhetoric was strong enough to convince 94 members of congress that funding needed to be cut, even though no federal funds were used to make the comic in question.¹⁰⁹

While the comic was clearly meant to be tongue-in-cheek yet informative, conservative politicians took it as a grave threat to the American people. The pornographic elements of the comic were seen as too morally destructive to justify the lives they could potentially save through increased condom usage. Without the funding of the CDC, activists groups had to get creative in how they would disseminate information about Safer Sex, as the government would not produce materials that catered to a gay audience.

The Helms Amendment had serious consequences for groups committed to safer sex education; the government would no longer fund organizations that depicted two men

¹⁰⁶ "Limit Voted on AIDS Fund," the *New York Times*, October 15, 1987, B12.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Congressional Record*, 1987, S14200.

¹⁰⁹ Meyer, *Outlaw Representation*, 219.

having sex. This meant activist organizations now had to rely on their own resources to deliver information about safe sex practices. In response, the Gay Men's Health Crisis enlisted the help of AIDS activists and film makers Gregg Bordowitz, Jean Calamusto, Charles Brack, Robert Huff, David Bronstein, and Richard Fung to make a series of pornographic shorts that featured gay and lesbian couples having hot, safe, and consensual sex. The shorts depicted "typical" sexual encounters of gay sexuality but with clear usage of safer sex.

In the 1989 short *Steam Clean*, a gay Asian man is seen wandering around a bathhouse looking for a sexual partner. The man looks into the first room and is rejected. He continues to another room where he sees a man who invites him in. The two drop their towels revealing their erect penises. The two then begin to have sex, but the short captures the process of putting on a condom and lubricating it with KY Jelly.¹¹⁰ It becomes clear that this short is much more about proper condom use than the arousing act of the two men having sex. The short is more realistic than the fantasy sexual world created by porn, conveyed in the rejection the protagonist first receives. This rejection is particularly interesting because of the narrative it provides about minority groups within the gay community. The Asian man is turned away, deemed not sexually attractive enough, but is then affirmed by the sexual interest of the man next door, his next sexual partner. The shame and stigma culturally mandated about gay sex, legislated through the Helms amendment rejected by these shorts, which are more explicit and pornographic than the comic strips.

¹¹⁰ Gay Men's Health Crisis, *Steam Clean*, 1989, Tape 1096, AIDS Activist Video Collection, New York Public Library.
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Another short, *Current Flow*, depicts a scene of two lesbians engaging in safer sex. The film begins with a woman waiting for her lover to come home. She begins to masturbate with an electric vibrator. When the woman's lover comes home, her lover unplugs the vibrator and performs oral sex on her with a dental dam. Again the safer sex implement, the dental dam is heavily eroticized; the woman moans, "Ooo these dental dams aren't bad at all!"¹¹¹ As in *Safer Sex Comic #4* and *Steam Clean*, the couple depicted by GMHC is interracial, showcasing the apparent diversity of the gay community at the time.

Other videos such as *Law and Order* featured a black construction worker who ties up a police officer before engaging in bondage and anal intercourse. In *Car Service* a businessman offers sexual gratification to a cab driver instead of paying his fair. In this short, the businessman signifies that offer by raising a condom up. The condom becomes representative of the sexual act.¹¹² By depicting safer sex in public areas and in the context of fetishistic practices, GMHC attempted to show that safe sex didn't have to be plain, it could be exhilarating and perhaps a little dangerous.

These shorts were made to target specific communities. While these videos do show relatable erotic material to educate members of the queer community about safer sex, they also show the deeply gendered view of sexuality even in the gay and lesbian activist community. All three shorts depicting sexual acts with gay men depict random, anonymous encounters; all occur in locations that were typical to dominant sexual practices of the 1970s or common in gay pornography. By contrast the lesbian couple are

¹¹¹ Gay Men's Health Crisis, *Current Flow*, 1989, Tape 1092, AIDS Activist Video Collection, New York Public Library.

¹¹² Barbara Osborn, "The Long and Short of Safer Sex Shorts," *In These Times*, April 11, 1990, 21.

already lovers, and their lovemaking occurs in a domestic space. By targeting communities, they also prescribed certain types of sex for certain types of people. In the rare depiction of lesbian sexuality from this period it is interesting that it occurs inside a home with a presumably monogamous couple, while gay men are featured having sex with strangers in public settings.

The graphic nature of the shorts was based in a belief that discussions of safe sex should come from a positive perspective. An article from 1990 quotes filmmakers Jean Carlemusto and Gregg Bordowitz as saying, “We take a hard line—no pun intended—that one doesn’t have to change one’s behavior to make sex safer. We advocate public sex as long as it’s safe public sex.”¹¹³ This view contrasted with the views expressed by conservative politicians like Jesse Helms who believed that gay sex “caused” the AIDS crisis. As politicians used homophobic and sex-negative rhetoric to reduce funding for AIDS education, AIDS activist organizations such as GMHC and Gran Fury took a sex-positive approach that celebrated sexuality. Bordowitz rebuked the beliefs of Helms and his fellow politicians stating: “(I)t’s impossible to institute behavior change. All you can do is render options and picture possibilities. As long as people are engaging in a specific practice, we have a responsibility to show them how they can do it safer.”¹¹⁴

GMHC’s method of dispersal matched this sex-positive approach; they distributed the shorts using the same techniques as commercial pornography. The same article reported:

Two porn theaters in New York City are currently showing the tape before their feature presentations, and the producers are negotiating with porn distributors to use the tapes as trailers on VHS cassettes. GMHC also plans to use the tapes as part of their education and outreach programs to lesbian and gay groups and AIDS service organizations, including a new education program, “Keep it Up,”

¹¹³ Quoted in *Ibid*, 21.

¹¹⁴ Quoted in *Ibid*, 21.

designed to prevent “relapses” (slipping back into unsafe sex practices) and foster lasting changes in sexual behavior.¹¹⁵

The duality of GMHC’s shorts is visible in their distribution methods. GMHC used the same distribution strategies as mainstream pornography, but also showed their work at Queer community spaces and at AIDS-specific programming. For viewers encountering the shorts when they intended to watch pornography at a theatre or at home on videotape, the films served as a firm reminder about the importance of safe sex; for those who encountered the films at a community meeting, they provided a sexy, if not graphic way of reminding participants about the importance of safe sex. For members of “Keeping it Up,” the films reminded participants why safe sex was important, and how sexy it could be.¹¹⁶

The films did receive criticism from anti-pornography feminists. Paige Melish, president of Feminists Fighting Pornography expressed her concern with GMHC’s distribution practices: “We are against the porn industry and against putting more money in their coffers. People think that gay and straight porn are separate industries, but they’re not. They’re the same companies. This project legitimizes the industry and makes them look like good guys.”¹¹⁷ Radical feminists felt that by using the same distribution networks as mainstream pornography, GMHC was supporting the pornography industry. As I will demonstrate in the coming pages, the conflicting philosophies of feminist ideologies and sex-positive depictions of homosexuality would be a continual issue for those trying to educate the public about safe sex,

Read My Lips, Kissing Doesn’t Kill: Gran Fury

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 21.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 21.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 21.

Gran Fury fought back against the assertions made by Helms by reclaiming images of the gay and lesbian past. By doing this, Gran Fury asserted that homosexual desire had existed long before the “quarter century” of sexual revolution that Helms targeted. In a poster, the image was taken from an old pornographic photograph of two navy sailors (Image 22). It was cropped to show the two sailors in an embracing kiss, with the text “READ MY LIPS,” a reference to President George H.W. Bush 1988 pledge “Read my lips, no new taxes.”¹¹⁸ (Image 23)

The poster was made for the first of the 1988 Spring AIDS Action Days, a series of nine days of concentrated AIDS activism in New York organized by ACT UP. Each of the days had a theme such as “AIDS and Prisoners,” “AIDS and Women,” and “All People with AIDS are Innocent.”¹¹⁹ The theme of the first day was “AIDS and Homophobia” and the key action for the day was a kiss-in, in which members of ACT UP would engage in a public act of homosexual affection and kiss. Reframed in this context, Gran Fury and ACT UP converted homosexual desire from a dangerous thing, needing to be eradicated, to a symbol of strength.

¹¹⁸ “Conversation: Kissing Doesn’t Kill,” *Gran Fury: Read My Lips*, 50

¹¹⁹ “AIDS Action Days,” Box 2, Gran Fury Collection, New York Public Library. 2012-2013 Andrew W. Mellon Undergraduate Research Fellowship, Final Paper, April 2013
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Image 22, Anonymous Photograph, Source Material for *Read My Lips*, c.1940-45.

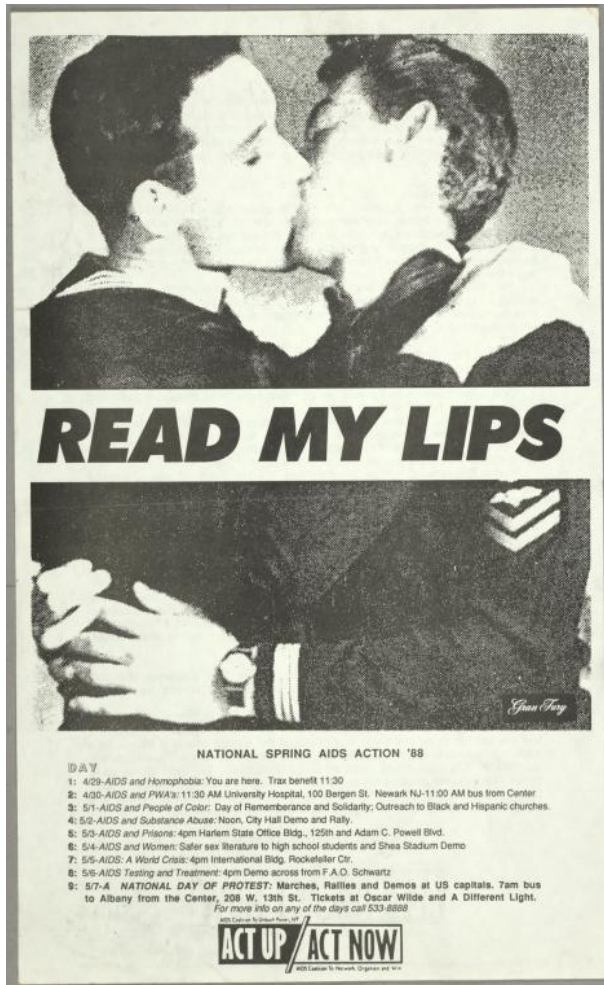


Image 23, Gran Fury, *Read My Lips* Poster, 1988

Due to complaints within ACT-UP about female representation, Gran Fury also made two posters featuring lesbians: one from the 1890s and one from the 1920s. However, as many women in ACT UP were quick to note, the women depicted in the image are neither kissing nor speaking so there is nothing to be read from their lips. Very much like the shorts from *Gay Men's Health Crisis*, the "Read My Lips" poster gave dramatically different visual expressions to gay men and lesbians. In the words of art historian Richard Meyer, "When displayed side by side (as they often were in 1988), the two posters imply that lesbianism is somehow less physically expressive, less passionately embodied—less sexually *active*—than male homosexuality. Even as Gran

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Fury sought to affirm both male and female homoeroticism in *Read My Lips*, the collective also—and unwittingly—desexualized lesbianism.”¹²⁰



Image 24, Gran Fury, *Read My Lips* Poster, 1988.

While the image of lesbian sexuality seems to make lesbian sexuality passive, as something to be gazed at, but not experienced, when understood in historical context, the photograph tells a different story. The picture was a publicity shot for a play from 1926 called *The Captive*, which was the first play on Broadway to include themes of lesbian desire. When it was originally produced, the play met with great resistance, culminating in a citywide censorship campaign. In February of 1927, *The Captive's* cast and

¹²⁰ Meyers, *Outlaw Representation*, 229.

producers were arrested and released the next day after the producers agreed to close the show. Following *The Captive*, the New York state legislature passed a statute that banned the production of any play “depicting or dealing with, the subject of sex, degeneracy, or sex perversion.”¹²¹ The image, rich with historical significance, was given to Gran Fury by the Lesbian Herstory Archive, an archive dedicated to preserving artifacts of all kind surrounding the lesbian experience.¹²²

Because of the controversy regarding the image, Gran Fury replaced the original image with a Victorian photograph of two women in the middle of a kiss. While this image is certainly more intimate than the image of the two women posed, the woman on the left with her eyes open mid-kiss makes this image still an awkward one. It was not until Gran Fury’s *Kissing Doesn’t Kill* campaign that an image of lesbian homoeroticism would match the sexual passion of the image of the sailors, and thereby please the lesbians of ACT UP, who had been asking for more equal representation.

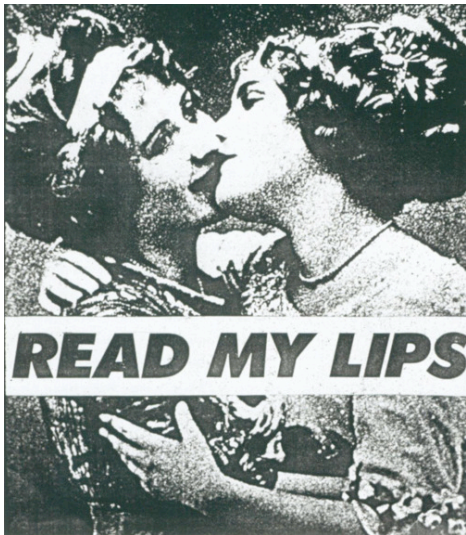


Image 25, Gran Fury, *Read My Lips* Poster, 1988.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 227-228

¹²² Gran Fury, *Read My Lips*, 53

The *Read My Lips* posters were for a Kiss-In, an event that was meant to be a visual and performative demonstration against the systematic homophobia that allowed the Helms amendment. On a flier passed out at the ACT-UP Kiss In entitled “Why We Kiss” the following facts were listed:

- We kiss in an aggressive demonstration of affection.
- We kiss to protest the cruel and painful bigotry that affects the lives of lesbian and gay men.
- We kiss so that all who see us will be forced to confront their own homophobia.
- We kiss to challenge repressive conventions that prohibit displays of love between persons of the same sex
- We kiss as an affirmation of our feelings, or desire, ourselves.
- One in ten lesbians and one in five gay men have been physically assaulted because of their sexuality.
- The Helms Amendment, preventing federal funding of any AIDS educational materials that could be construed to promote lesbian or gay sex, passed in the Senate by a vote of 96 to 2.
- The federal government has been unconscionably slow to react to the AIDS crisis, slowness tantamount to condoning the deaths of tens of thousands of gay men.
- The Civil Rights Commission is opposing legislation authorizing the gathering of bias-related crime statistics because it objects to the inclusion of sexual orientation as a bias category. This is despite its own admission that crimes against gay men and women, aggravated by perceptions about AIDS, are probably the most widespread hate-crimes today.¹²³

For ACT UP, it was a fear of homosexual desire that ensured the passage of the Helms amendment to pass and made gay men and lesbian so susceptible to violence. At the Kiss In, ACT UP encouraged to kiss men to kiss each other and women to kiss each other regardless of their relationship or orientation.¹²⁴ The Kiss In then should be understood not as an act of individual pride, but of collective action. It was, as Meyer has argued, a statement against “homosexual invisibility” and heteronormative social behavior. This act

¹²³ “Why We Kiss” quoted in Crimp, AIDS DEMO GRAPHICS, 55.

¹²⁴ Meyer, *Outlaw Representations*, 230.

of defiance is also seen in the Read My Lips posters, which show a long, and powerful history of homosexual desire, before Stonewall.

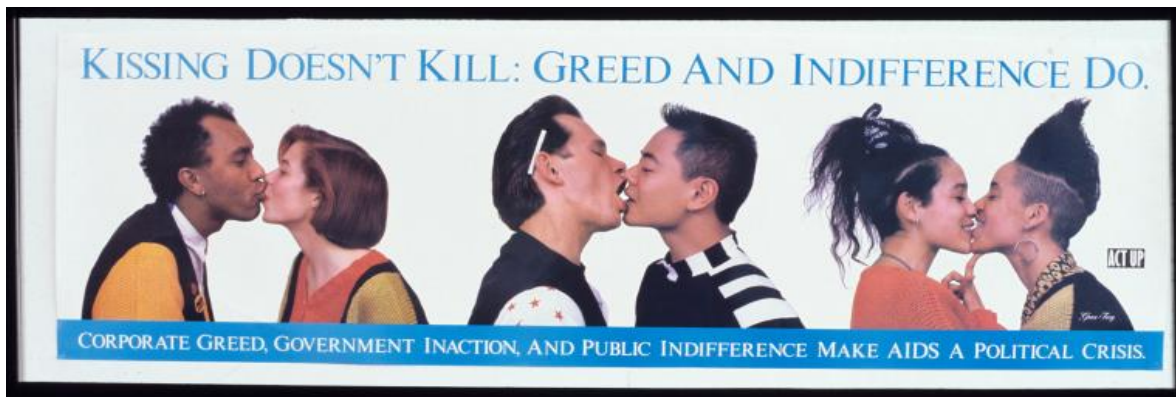


Image 26, Gran Fury, *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, 1989.

Gran Fury's most commercial project was also a celebration of sexuality. In what was arguably one of Gran Fury's most famous projects, the collective made a poster based on the aesthetics of a long-running advertising series from the clothing company The United Colors of Benetton. Featuring three multi-racial couples: one gay, one lesbian, and one straight, kissing, the text read: "KISSING DOESN'T KILL: GREED AND INFFERENCE DO. CORPORATE GREED, GOVERNMENT INACTION, AND PUBLIC INDIFFERENCE MAKE AIDS A POLITICAL CRISIS."¹²⁵ As in other pieces, the main phrase "Kissing Doesn't Kill" shifted the blame of AIDS from homosexuals to the government itself. This indictment can be understood as the antithesis to Jesse Helm's statement about AIDS in 1987.

The project was commissioned by Creative Time, an arts-based non-profit organization, for collaboration with the American Foundation for AIDS Research (AmFar) for a nation-wide project called "Art Against AIDS on the Road. When Gran

¹²⁵ Gran Fury, *KISSING DOESN'T KILL, GREED AND INDIFERENCE DO*, 1989, Box 1, Gran Fury Collection, New York Public Library.
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Fury submitted the design for the project, AmFAR refused to produce the piece with the second sentence on the bus poster. Gran Fury decided to edit their work so that their piece could be seen nationwide. Loring McAlperin conceded, “I think this was one of the few times where we had to make a compromise. And we thought that there was enough going on with just the imagery, and even just the tagline Kissing Doesn’t Kill, to put it out there. But that was a disappointment. And that’s just—that’s—that’s about advertising, about really getting access to public discourse. There are limits.”¹²⁶

McAlperin’s quote reveals that Gran Fury realized that compromise, on some level, was crucial to their form of successful public activism. However, Gran Fury was still able to produce their full, intended image in other ways. Before the bus posters toured America, Gran Fury ran a set of postcards with the kissing images and the phrase “CORPORATE GREED, GOVERNMENT INACTION, AND PUBLIC INDIFFERENCE MAKE AIDS A POLITICAL CRISIS” on the back.¹²⁷ The Whitney Museum of Art also included the poster with the full text in their 1990 exhibition *Image World*.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ McAlperin *ACT UP Oral History Project*, 29-30.

¹²⁷ “Kissing Doesn’t Kill; Greed and Indifference Do”, Creative Time, accessed October 25, 2012, <http://www.creativetime.org/programs/archive/1989/Kissing/Kissing.htm>.

¹²⁸ Meyer, *Outlaw Representation*, 261.



Image 27, Gran Fury, *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, Bus Sign, 1990.



Image 28, Photo taken by, *Kissing Doesn't Kill* Vandalized in Chicago, 1990.

As the bus poster toured around the country, residents in Washington D.C., San Francisco, and Chicago saw an altered version of the poster Gran Fury had intended to make. This edited message made the poster look less like a political indictment of the government and medical corporations and more about the freedom of homoerotic

expression. Conservative and religious leaders in Chicago were deeply offended by the poster and its message. A Chicago Tribune article from June 23, 1990 reported “On a 49-12 vote, the (State) Senate approved and returned to the House a measure that would prevent the CTA (Chicago Transit Authority) from displaying any poster `showing or simulating physical contact or embrace within a homosexual or lesbian context` where persons under 21 can view it.”¹²⁹ The bill did not pass through the state House of Representatives and on August 16, 1990, forty-five posters were placed on bus and subway stations around the city.¹³⁰ The shock caused by the image of two same-sex couples kissing is apparent in both the rhetoric surrounding the censorship of the posters and in the vandalism the posters that occurred. The poster’s most vocal opponent Alderman Robert Shaw told the Chicago Tribune that the posters had “nothing to do with AIDS. It has something to do with a particular lifestyle, and I don’t think that’s is what the CTA should be about the business of promoting.”¹³¹ In another article the Alderman is quoted as saying “This is a poster that advertises the homosexual and lesbian lifestyle. People are outraged. If the system fails us, I’m afraid people will take matter into their own hands and paint over this homo-erotic art.”¹³² Within a few days, people fulfilled the Alderman’s prophecy and the images of the couple’s kissing were defaced by globs of thick, black paint.

¹²⁹ Rick Pearson and Paul Wagner, “Senate Votes to Ban Posters from CTA,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 23, 1990.

¹³⁰ Gary Washburn and Robert Davis, “AIDS Poster Debuts, Fans Controversy,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 16, 1990.

¹³¹ “Kissing Doesn’t Tell Much About AIDS,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 15, 1990.

¹³² Fran Spielman and Ray Hannai, “AIDS Poster Needs New Look, Daley Tells CTA,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, August, 16, 1990.



Image 29, Photo taken by Avram Finklestein, San Francisco, 1990.

An act of vandalism also occurred in San Francisco, but with a much different tone. Documented by Gran Fury member Avram Finklestein, a poster on a bus in San Francisco was painted over in white paint except for the lesbian couple. This obstruction was performed by a group of lesbian activists.¹³³ This obstruction focuses on the image of the two lesbians kissing, which contrasts greatly from the previous image of lesbian homoerotic desire produced by Gran Fury. Following the disastrous reception of the *Read My Lips* poster from ACT UP's women, Gran Fury members made sure they were conscious of the different groups they were representing in their work. As Member Marlene McCarty remembered, *Kissing Doesn't Kill* "was focused on issues of the time surrounding AIDS activism, but that the first project where it really got into identity politics—it became about people telling their own stories, identifying themselves."¹³⁴

Gran Fury's shift in attitude about representation and sexuality is visible in the move from *Read My Lips* and *Kissing Doesn't Kill*. The all-white figures become a diverse cast

¹³³ Avram Finklestein, "Conversation: Kissing Doesn't Kill," *Read My Lips*, ed. Gran Fury et al, (New York, 80WSE Press, 2011), 54.

¹³⁴ Marlene McCarty, "Conversation: Kissing Doesn't Kill," *Read My Lips*, ed. Gran Fury et al, (New York, 80WSE Press, 2011), 54.

of various backgrounds, and the lesbian kiss is just as active, as sexually involved as the gay men's kiss.

By 1990, Gran Fury had placed images of gay, interracial couples kissing on busses across the country. Just 10 years before in 1980, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence made the first ever pamphlet about safe sex. During the decade in between these two moments, GMHC attempted to use comics and pornographic short film to get gay men and lesbians excited about safe sex. While the government used its leverage to limit the resources provided to organizations that "promoted" gay sex, activist networks used visual activism to promote a sex-positive approach to safer sex and AIDS prevention.

CHAPTER THREE: Mourning the Losses

I begin this chapter with a point so obvious it seems to not warrant its inclusion. By 1987 the AIDS epidemic had taken tens of thousands of lives. We know this, of course, but it is fundamentally important to realize that these were not the deaths of anonymous people. Those killed by AIDS were often young, vibrant people with a network of friends, families, and lovers. The experience of loss during the peak years of the AIDS Crisis, especially in densely populated urban areas like New York or San Francisco was devastating. About the experience of such massive loss, Douglas Crimp wrote:

Most people dying of AIDS are very young, and those of us coping with these deaths, ourselves also young, have confronted great loss entirely unprepared. The numbers of deaths are unthinkable: lovers, friends, acquaintances, and community members have fallen ill and dead. Many have lost upwards of a hundred people. Apart from the deaths, we contend with the gruesome illness itself, acting as caretakers, often for extended periods, making innumerable hospital visits, proving emotional support, negotiating our wholly inadequate and inhuman health care and social welfare systems, keeping abreast of experimental treatment therapies. Some of us have learned as much or more than most doctors about the complex medicine of AIDS. Added to the caretaking and loss of others is often the need to monitor and make treatment decisions about our own HIV illness, or face anxiety about our own health status.¹³⁵

The massive death toll struck a community unprepared for its emotional and social consequences. Illness and death consumed a large network of people who were not only sick, but also dealt with government and hospital bureaucracy, advocated on behalf of their ill and dying friends and lovers, and prepared these loved ones for imminent death.

¹³⁵ Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," *October* 51 (1989), 15.
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And as one person said: ““Who the hell would think that you’d go to 15 funerals in 19 months?””¹³⁶ The stream of people dying of AIDS was continual.

How does a community mourn this extent of loss? While many gay men and lesbians believed that organized mourning rituals, such as funerals and candlelight vigils, were an important part of coming to terms with AIDS and the deaths it caused, many queer activists understood mourning as a problematically passive reaction to AIDS. In his book, *Report from the Holocaust*, ACT UP founder Larry Kramer wrote:

I look at faces at countless memorial services and cannot comprehend why the connection isn’t made between these deaths and going out to fight so that more of these deaths, including possibly one’s own, can be staved off. Huge numbers regularly show up in cities for Candlelight Marches, all duly recorded for the television cameras. Where are these same numbers when it comes to joining political organizations...or plugging in to the incipient civil disobedience represented in ACT UP?¹³⁷

Kramer situated mourning as a passive force in opposition to activism. In his eyes, those in mourning needed to do more. ACT UP member and cultural critic Douglas Crimp agreed, writing in his 1989 landmark essay “Mourning and Militancy”: “Public mourning rituals may of course have their own political force, but they nevertheless seem, from an activist perspective, indulgent, sentimental, defeatist...”¹³⁸ Constructed through the criticism of Kramer and Crimp, it would seem that activists viewed public displays of grief as antithetical to political action.

In this chapter, I will argue that mourning was an integral part of the visual culture surrounding AIDS activism. I will begin my analysis of mourning in the art of

¹³⁶ Quoted in Christopher Capozzola, “A Very American Epidemic: Memory Politics and Identity Politics in the AIDS Memorial Quilt, 1985-1993,” *Radical History Review* 82 (2002), 93.

¹³⁷ Larry Kramer, *Reports from the Holocaust*, 264-265.

¹³⁸ Crimp, “Mourning,” 5.

AIDS activism with the NAMES Project AIDS Quilt, which at the time of its inception was often criticized by activists from ACT UP. Through my analysis, I hope to show that the quilt offers its viewers a political experience by naming the dead and encouraging participants to witness their passing. I will then use the last two works made by Gran Fury to demonstrate how mourning was incorporated into their activist project and was a crucial factor in the termination of their collective. I will end my chapter with a performance from a Radical Faerie gathering that eulogizes not the individuals lost to AIDS, but the sexual culture that occurred before it. In this chapter, I hope to demonstrate the different ways in which mourning was understood from 1987-1996: individually, collectively, and culturally.

What is in a NAME: The AIDS Quilt in Perspective

Perhaps no work of art made about the AIDS epidemic is more widely known or recognized than the NAMES Project AIDS Quilt. Conceived in 1985 during a candlelight vigil in San Francisco, the Quilt is a collection of patches made by people from all across the world that commemorated those lost to AIDS. NAMES Project founder Cleve Jones came up with the idea while attending the annual vigil for gay politician Harvey Milk. As part of the vigil, mourners placed cardboard signs with names of people who had died of AIDS-related causes. The image of the patchwork of names gave Jones the idea for a nation-wide quilt that could serve as a memorial to those who had died of AIDS.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Cindy Ruskin, *The Quilt: Stories from the NAMES Project*, (New York: Pocket Books, 1988), 9.



Image 30, NAMES Project, *AIDS Memorial Quilt*, Washington D.C., 1987

Jones, along with his collaborators Mike Smith and Ron Cordova, began working on Smith's back porch. There they sewed the patches together. The group of men displayed 40 panels at the 1987 Gay Pride Parade in San Francisco and announced a national NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. In order to accommodate the new scope of the project, the organization set up headquarters in the Castro district of San Francisco.¹⁴⁰ Two months later, at the National March for Lesbian and Gay Rights 2,000 panels were displayed along the National Mall.¹⁴¹ (Image 30) The quilt was shown again in Washington in 1988 with 8,000 panels; in 1989, 10,000; and in 1992 21,600 were displayed along the National Mall.¹⁴² The growth of the quilt demonstrated not only a growth in participation, but also the rising number of individuals who had been killed by AIDS.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ Peter S. Hawkins, "Naming Names: The Art of Memory and the NAMES Project AIDS Quilt," *Critical Inquiry* 19 (1993), 738.

¹⁴² Hawkins, "Naming Names," 738.

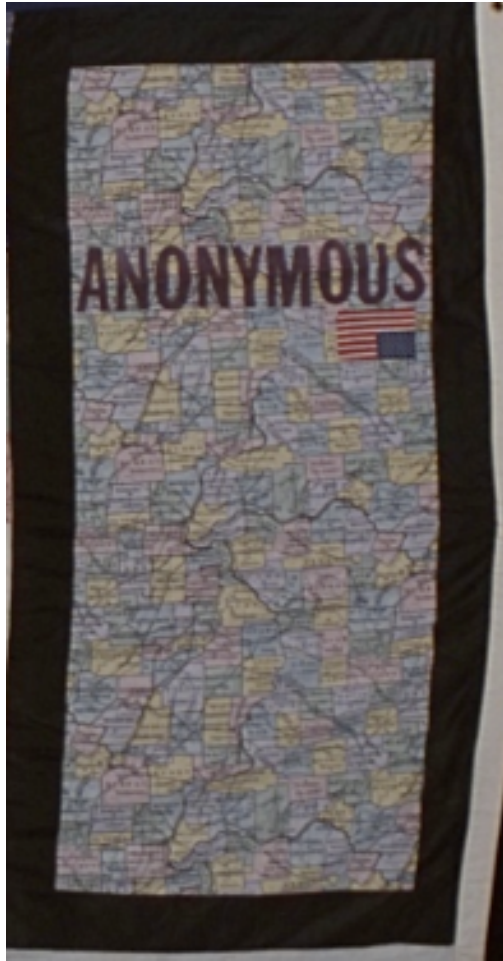


Image 31, NAMES Project, AIDS Quilt, Panel.

In order to resist the silence and stigma that was associated with AIDS deaths, the Names Project projected the names of all of those who had died of AIDS related causes across the National Mall while people walked around, touched, and read the panels of the quilt.¹⁴³ This act of speaking was inherently political as many families were forced into silence, as they did not want to identify their loved ones as homosexual, or as an AIDS victim.

¹⁴³ Eric J. Rand, "Repeated Remembrance: Commemorating the AIDS Quilt and Resuscitating the Mourned Subject," *Rhetoric and Public Action* 10 (2007), 659. 2012-2013 Andrew W. Mellon Undergraduate Research Fellowship, Final Paper, April 2013
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At the beginning of Simon Watney's 1987 classic *Policing Desire*, the author tells the story of his friend, Bruno, "a magnificently affirmative and life-embracing gay man"¹⁴⁴ who had died of AIDS, but whose family would not tell people. At his funeral no mention of AIDS was made. The story continued:

After the funeral we all retired to his parents' home, a group of relatives and old friends. It was evident that whilst his mother and father had been able, in private, to accept Bruno's sexual identity, they could not begin to handle the enormity, as they saw it, of Aids. They were thus unable to share his death with either with their relatives or nearest friends... They were afraid. Not of a virus, but of a scandal more terrible even than the fact of homosexuality. They had been condemned to silence, to euphemism, to the shame of guilt by association, in this the most devastating moment of their lives as parents... My friend was not called Bruno. His father asked me not to use his real name. And so the anonymity is complete. The garrulous babble of commentary on Aids constructs yet another "victim".¹⁴⁵

Watney's account demonstrates the damning effect that cultural shame and silence can cause. This silence is reflected in a panel made for the AIDS Quilt made for "Anonymous." (Image 31) It is unclear whether this panel was made for someone in particular or if the panel is made for all those who were forced into anonymity, either way it is a powerful acknowledgement to the power of silence throughout the AIDS Crisis. The anonymity of those who died of AIDS was a crucial component of maintaining that silence. As such, through speaking the names of those who had died of AIDS, the NAMES Project was committing a highly political act.

The panels were made by people from all across the country and sewn by volunteers at the NAMES Project Headquarters in the Castro district of San Francisco.¹⁴⁶ Panels were addressed to parents, children, neighbors, lovers, friends, and even strangers.

¹⁴⁴ Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the Media*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 7

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 7-8.

¹⁴⁶ Ruskin, *The Quilt*, 9.

The quilt embodied the diversity of loss that the AIDS crisis had caused. An informational book about the project stated: “The Project is not only a place of hard work, but of strong emotions. Every day someone walking by recognizes a name written on a panel, learning for the first time that a friend has died. A young man with AIDS comes in to make his own panel.”¹⁴⁷ The NAMES Project became a center for support. Through the process of making a quilt panel, AIDS patients could come to terms with their own mortality; friends and family members of the deceased could channel their motions into a constructive creative project.

The choice of a quilt as a symbol of memorialization is historically rich and symbolically potent. The use of memorial quilting has a long history in women’s and African American craft. 19th century American memory quilts often included pieces of the deceased’s belongings in order to create a material likeness of them.¹⁴⁸ However for much of the 19th and 20th century, quilting had been ignored as a serious artistic practice. In the decades before the AIDS Epidemic, however, quilting had rose to artistic prominence through new feminist art practices that revived older, historically feminine crafts,¹⁴⁹ and through new advances in academic feminist history that had placed quilting into narratives of female cultural production.¹⁵⁰ Jones admitted, “I was very conscious that quilting is a women’s craft.”¹⁵¹ The quilt occupied a peculiar cultural position as an

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 10.

¹⁴⁸ Hawkins, “Naming Names,” 766

¹⁴⁹ The use of quilting can be seen in the work of Faith Ringgold and Mariam Shapiro. For more information about quilting and feminist art practice visit the website for the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklym Museum: http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/womens_work.php

¹⁵⁰ Capozzola, “A Very American Epidemic,” 96

¹⁵¹ Quoted in Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 205
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object that was at once important in the history of African American and women's craft but also as a central piece of Midwestern Americana; the act of quilting spoke to a very American duality, as something seen as both subversive and mainstream.

By utilizing the quilt as a symbol of Americana, Jones was able to continue this tradition, by inserting the memory of gay men who had died of AIDS into a symbol associated with a more conservative notion of "Middle America." Jones stated: "We very deliberately adopted a symbol and a vocabulary that would be non threatening to non gay people... We mobilize heterosexuals; we mobilize the families that have been affected."¹⁵² By choosing an American symbol, the NAMES Project attempted to make AIDS less threatening. Because friends and relatives of those who had passed away made the AIDS Quilt, the project needed to be accessible and approachable to a wide array of people, not just urban, leftist activists.



Image 31, Detail, NAMES Project, *AIDS Memorial Quilt*, 1987.

¹⁵² Quoted in Hawkins, "Naming Names," 777.



Image 32, Detail, NAMES Project, *AIDS Memorial Quilt*, 1987.

The panels of the quilt reflect a wide range of relationships and emotions. In some panels, only the signifiers of the relationship identifies the person, as in the simple yet evocative “Goodbye Dad.”¹⁵³ (Image 31) Some quilt panels, demonstrated feelings of regret such as the panel for “Steven,” which contained only the inscription “hug me.” (Image 32) Along with the panel, Vicki Hudson, the person who made it, sent the following note to the NAMES Project:

Steven had AIDS when I met him in 1981. We were all frightened about his sickness. He had been deserted by his lover and family. He was a very lonely man. We knew only that body fluids probably spread the virus but we didn't know what fluids. Steven had his silverware, plates, and glasses separate, and he'd clean after himself. So much fear and ignorance then.

Once, he and I were dancing and when a slow song began to play, he begged for me to hold him and dance with him. To hug him. He was drenched in sweat, and he saw my fear in my face coming in such close contact with him. It's 1987 now and I know that holding an AIDS victim is not going to give me the virus.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ AIDS Quilt, Microsoft Research AIDS Quilt

¹⁵⁴ Ruskin, *The Quilt*, 45.

Hudson's note shows a dramatic shift between the early and late 1980s. The letter reads as a painful account of the isolation, both physical and emotional, AIDS patients were forced to endure due to scientific and societal ignorance surrounding the disease.

The letter above also indicates what members of ACT-UP and other queer organizations found problematic about the AIDS Quilt. The feelings expressed in the letter established a progress narrative. Hudson wrote, "So much fear and ignorance then..." and "It's 1987 now and I know that holding an AIDS victim is not going to give me the virus." To members of ACT UP and their supporters, statements like this reflected a false confidence, a false sense of satisfaction with the progress of the governmental and pharmaceutical response to AIDS. In a 1988 interview, Gregg Bordowitz discussed the quilt: "The Quilt is very political. I am one of the few people who likes the quilt actually. A lot of people don't. A lot of people think it creates a space for mourning that people can then go away from and then feel satisfied."¹⁵⁵ To discourage this sense of satisfaction, ACT UP made a poster in 1993 that read, "We Have Turned Our Anger Into A Piece of Quilt and Red Ribbons."¹⁵⁶ AIDS activists felt that the Quilt encouraged passivity, instead of encouraging the type of direct action typified by ACT UP and Gran Fury.

This critique of the Quilt distorts its function. The quilt fails as activist art, because it was never intended to be that. As Cleve Jones states in the introduction to a book about the quilt: "The loudest naysayers were the ACT UP people, a new generation of activists for whose identity AIDS was an explosive part. It's not enough to make a

¹⁵⁵ Gregg Bordowitz, Interview with Jim Hubbard, footage from *Speak for Yourself*, 1988, Tape 1146, AIDS Activist Video Collection, New York Public Library.

¹⁵⁶ Poster Quoted in Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 174.

quilt, they sneered; the Quilt is a passive thing. . . . I told them then, as I tell them now, that we never said the Quilt is enough. It's one response among thousands, not the final answer."¹⁵⁷ The Quilt's panels told stories of individual humanity, of lovers and friends. No two panels say the same thing. Because of this, there is no universal message surrounding the quilt except for the remembrance of individuals who had passed away.



Image 33, NAMES Project, AIDS Quilt, Panel.

Some panels however did encourage viewers to act. One panel read: “Paul Burdett: THE SAN DIEGO 50 HOUR PRAYER VIGIL WAS HIS CREATION PLEASE - MORE PRAYERS MORE FUNDING.”¹⁵⁸ Another panel for Kevin Flynn contained clothing with large pink triangles sewn over them, echoing the pink triangle on an ACT UP pin on one of his shirts. (Image 33) One panel stated simple “Give a damn.”

¹⁵⁷ Cleve Jones, “Prologue,” *Remembering the AIDS Quilt*, ed. Charles E. Morris III, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011), xxi.

¹⁵⁸ Ruskin, *The Quilt*, 24.

These panels are a small representation of the 48,000 that are now part of the quilt but they demonstrate that within the framework of the quilt, activist messages could be included. As discussed before, the quilt was also a powerful mechanism to get families to talk about the AIDS crisis and end the silence that plagued many communities, especially those outside of densely populated urban centers.¹⁵⁹

Furious Mourning: Gran Fury's *Four Questions* and *Good luck...miss you*

1993 proved to be a troublesome year for Gay and Lesbian AIDS Activists. Just months after President Bill Clinton, a vocal supporter of gay and lesbian rights on his campaign, took office, *The Nation* published a cover story titled "The Gay Moment," by Andrew Kopkind. The article stated:

The gay moment is unavoidable. It fills the media, charges politics, saturates popular and elite culture. It is the stuff of everyday conversation and public discourse. Not for thirty years has a class of Americans endured the peculiar pain and exhilaration of having their civil rights and moral worth—their very humanness—debated at ever level of public life.¹⁶⁰

While the gays and lesbians were receiving more media and political attention than ever before, the issues surrounding AIDS were slowly being left behind. The article later said, "The destruction of the closet is the most vital issue of gay life."¹⁶¹ This claim demonstrated a clear shift in the focus of mainstream gay and lesbian political forces. By May of 1993, President Clinton had budgeted some money towards AIDS education and research, but "nowhere near what the crisis demands," and had yet to appoint an AIDS Czar as he had promised to do during his presidential campaign.¹⁶² Many gays and lesbians were slow to react because as Kopkind wrote, "Clinton is failing to live up to his

¹⁵⁹ Jones, "Prologue," xxxiv.

¹⁶⁰ Andrew Kopkind, "The Gay Moment," *The Nation*, May 3, 1993, cover.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

promises, but at least he made them.”¹⁶³ The shift in attention away from AIDS was also noticeable at the 1993 Gay and Lesbian March on Washington, which occurred a week before “The Gay Moment,” was published. Gay Historian Neil Miller writes, “If AIDS had dominated the 1987 march, this time, not surprisingly, it was the military.”¹⁶⁴ Ironically, as more gays and lesbians became a more matter of fact part of political discussions, such as with 1993’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” Policy,¹⁶⁵ AIDS activists lost traction with their moderate gay and lesbian supporters.¹⁶⁶ In this fragile time, Gran Fury had to deal with not only the loss of their community members to AIDS, but also the loss of supporters.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ Miller, *Out of the Past*, 505.

¹⁶⁵ “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” allowed Gays and Lesbians to serve in the military as long as they remained in the closet. The policy also mandated that the military would stop investigating service members they suspected of homosexual activity. (Miller, 509)

¹⁶⁶ Gould, *Moving Politics*, 311-313.

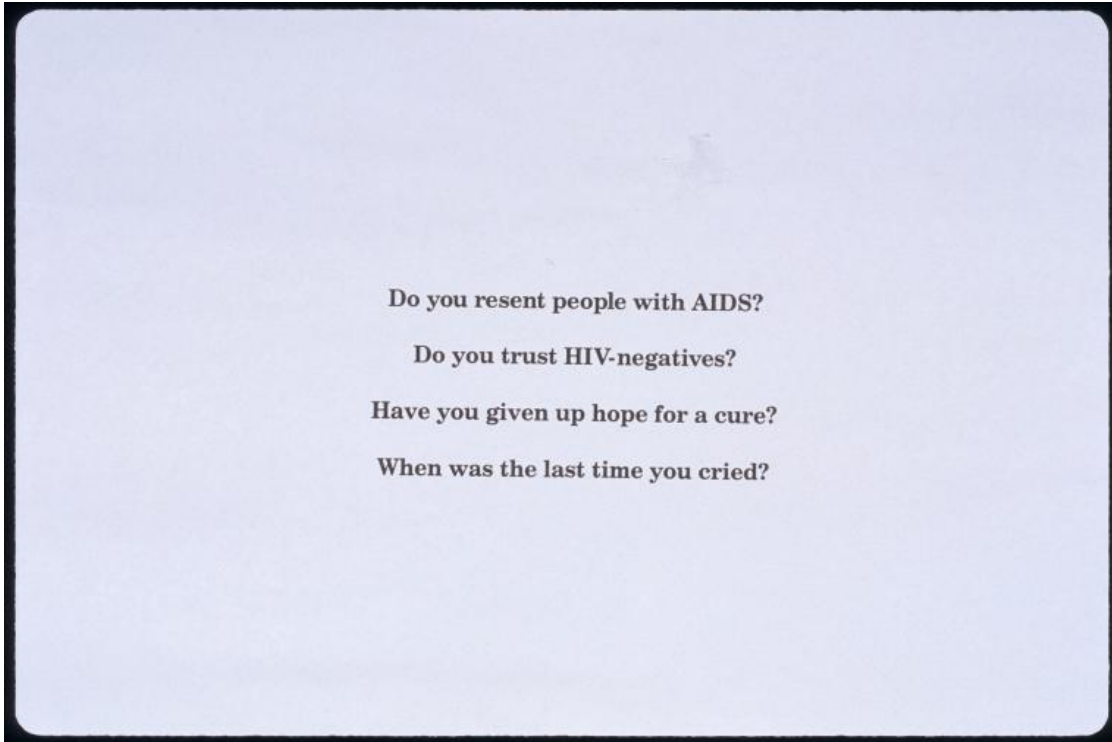


Image 34, Gran Fury, “Four Questions,” 1993, Ink on Paper.

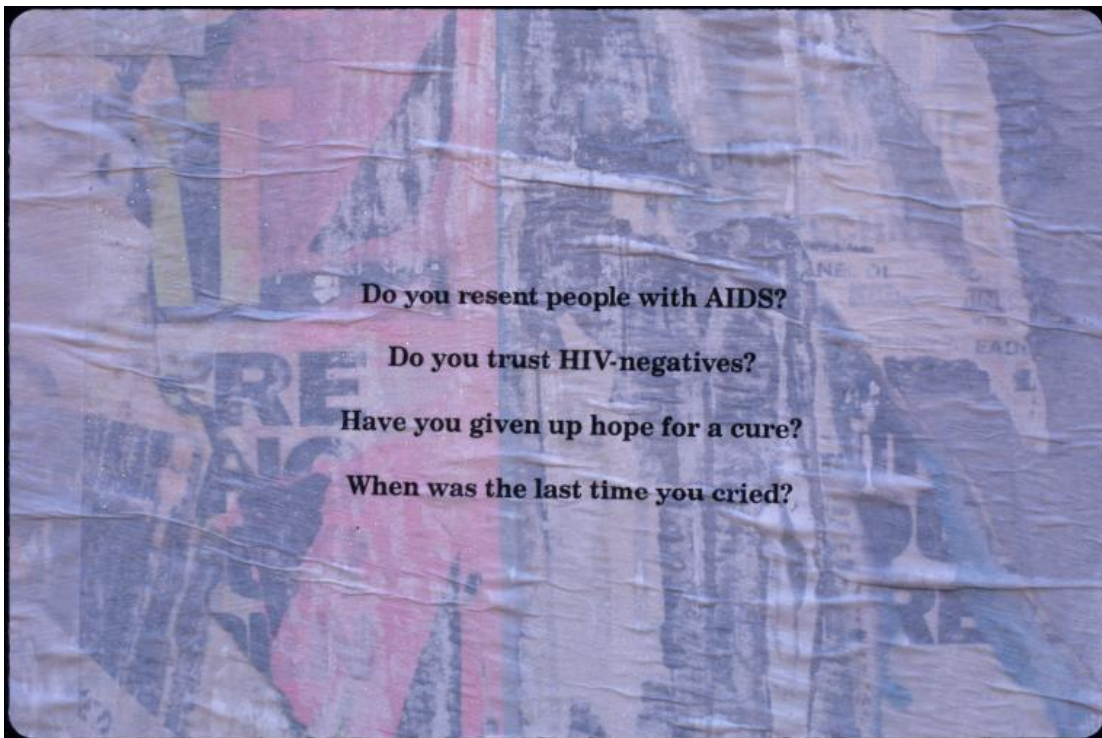


Image 35, Gran Fury, “Four Questions,” 1993, Ink on Paper Wheat pasted to a wall.

In 1993, a small group of Gran Fury members, created a new poster entitled “Four

Questions.” (Image 34) To distribute their work, the members of Gran Fury who created the piece wheat pasted it across New York City. Noticeably different from all previous Gran Fury projects, the white poster featured only black text and no images. The poster reads:

Do you resent people with AIDS?
 Do you trust HIV-negatives?
 Have you given up hope for a cure?
 When was the last time you cried.¹⁶⁷

This poster was a major departure from their other public poster campaigns such as “Read My Lips” and “Kissing Doesn’t Kill,” this poster did not attempt to disarm the viewer with wit or clever graphics, instead this poster interacted with the viewer by addressing him or her specifically, by using the second person. In many of their earlier works, Gran Fury used posters as a way to inform, educate, or incite an ambivalent or ignorant public. “Four Questions” attempted to provoke the viewer on an emotional level.

In the words of member Tom Kalin, this poster “took a completely different tack than every other piece of work that Gran Fury made. It was plaintive and emotional and small-scaled and completely humbled and non-visual, almost to an extreme.”¹⁶⁸ Rather than relying on strong visual impact, the effectiveness of this piece very much relied on the viewer’s willingness to engage with the text on an interpersonal and emotional level.

The questions reflect a hopelessness that was characteristic of AIDS activism in 1993. The poster was largely the pet project of Gran Fury founding member Mark Simpson. Kalin remarked in a 2010 interview, “... Mark was diagnosed with HIV and was dying; as the only member of the group that was sick, he operated with a different

¹⁶⁷ Gran Fury, *Four Questions*, 1993.

¹⁶⁸ Kalin, Interview, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, 40.

consciousness than a lot of us and had a very different emotional experience. The people who were involved in *Four Questions* all brought something to the table, but I think the raw emotional quality came from him.”¹⁶⁹ Simpson’s individual involvement with the emotional experience of HIV, of feeling that even in collective action there was a divide between those who were HIV positive and HIV negative prompted the content of *Four Questions*. In the words of member Finklestein: “The poster was made with a sense of abandonment in the HIV-positive/HIV-negative-divide. That was very much the core of Mark’s rage.”¹⁷⁰ “Do you resent people with AIDS?” and “Do you trust HIV-negatives?” represented the emotional baggage for activists with and with HIV or AIDS. By highlighting those questions, Gran Fury was not making a statement against larger systems of oppression, but instead, asked the viewer to examine their own internal prejudices, whether the viewer was HIV-positive or negative.

The second two questions reflected on the state of AIDS activism in 1993. The third question, “Have you given up hope for a cure?” demonstrated the sense of hopelessness that was present in 1993, even while Gays and Lesbians were making tremendous political and cultural gains. It also showed the growing impatience with the medical community to produce a cure for the disease. While impatience for a cure was the growing impetus for mainstream AIDS activism when it began in 1987, this question suggests a deflated sense of possibility. By 1993, the excitement, the anger, and the

¹⁶⁹ Tom Kalin, “Conversation: Four Questions,” *Read My Lips*, ed. Gran Fury et al, (New York: 80WSE Press, 2011), 70.

¹⁷⁰ Avran Finklestein, “Conversation: Four Questions,” *Read My Lips*, ed. Gran Fury et al, (New York: 80WSE Press, 2011), 70.

energy were gone. Between 1989 and 1993, the number of AIDS cases had more than tripled skyrocketing from 117, 508 reported cases to 360, 909.¹⁷¹

By 1993, scientists still had no major prospects for a cure. In April of that year European scientists released their study of AZT, which showed the drug to be minimally effective.¹⁷² Later that same year at the Ninth International AIDS Conference in Berlin, the consensus was that current medical attempts to fight AIDS had failed and that AIDS was a more complex disease than researchers had been thinking.¹⁷³ *New York Times* medical writer, Laurence Altman wrote about the conference:

Only an eternal optimist would have left the ninth international AIDS meeting here last week believing that new drugs will be available anytime soon to save the lives of the 14 million people now infected with the virus that causes AIDS...A realist, on the other hand would be heeding the one message sounded at the meeting: prevention is the only way to stop the alarming spread of the virus, H.I.V., throughout the world¹⁷⁴

As promise for a vaccine or a cure for AIDS dwindled, researchers and activists realized that more attention needed to be placed on education and other prevention models.

The final question of *Four Questions*, and perhaps the most personal, “When was the last time you cried?” cut to the core of the emotional impact of AIDS activism. This question broke down false assumptions of strength and stoicism from the warrior-like members of ACT-UP, Gran Fury, Queer Nation, and other activist organizations fighting

¹⁷¹ American Foundation for AIDS Research, “Thirty Years of HIV/AIDS: Snapshots of an Epidemic,” accessed November 30, 2012, http://www.amfar.org/about_hiv_and_aids/more_about_hiv_and_aids/thirty_years_of_hiv_aids_snapshots_of_an_epidemic/.

¹⁷² Gould, *Moving Politics*, 419.

¹⁷³ Andriote, *Victory Deferred*, 372.

¹⁷⁴ Lawrence K. Altman, “AIDS Conference Ends with Little Hope for AIDS Cure,” *New York Times*, June 15, 1993, C1-C3.

for political recognition. People involved with ACT-UP were often so involved with activism that they became numbed to the incredible loss that was surrounding them.

This poster aimed to break that numbness down. In the midst of staggering numbers of deaths and political setbacks, had the community of AIDS activists given themselves the space and the permission to cry, to understand the emotional severity of what was happening all around them? In a movement defined by so many young, passionate voices, was mourning and reflection given the social space that might be emotionally necessary. As activist and video artist Gregg Bordowitz stated in a 1988 interview,

I think ACT UP has a problem dealing with death, or I have a problem dealing with death in ACT UP. My experience with being part of that group and dealing with the deaths of people we've known has always somewhat to me somewhat like denial...¹⁷⁵

By 1993, five years after Bordowitz filmed that interview, the problem of proper mourning rituals in an activist context had not gotten easier. Having rejected the NAMES Project AIDS Quilt and candlelight vigils, many activists found themselves without a public space of mourning and grief for people with AIDS. The space of mourning was often a difficult one to negotiate when activists were expected to remain angry and militant. Douglas Crimp, proposed that the act of protest and activism was a type of mourning, as he stated in "Mourning and Militancy:"

The fact that our militancy may be a means of dangerous denial in no way suggests that activism is unwarranted. There is no question but that we must fight the unspeakable violence we incur from the society in which we find ourselves. But if we understand that violence is able to reap its horrible rewards through the very psychic mechanisms that make us part of this society, then we may also be

¹⁷⁵ Bordowitz, *Speak for Yourself*.

able to recognize—along with our rage—our terror, our guilt, our profound sadness. Militancy, of course, then but mourning too: mourning *and* militancy.¹⁷⁶

Crimp’s radical notion suggested that by fighting, participants in ACT UP and Gran Fury were able to work through their profound sadness, their profound loss. This idea became very common in activist circles and is mentioned in numerous interviews with ACT-UP members, including the Gregg Bordowitz interview cited above. It enabled ACT-UP to criticize spaces of ritual mourning like the AIDS Quilt, because they were “passive” forms of mourning. As I have noted above, considering the cultural work of the quilt to be a passive process is simplistic. The quilt provided a constructive outlet of grief for those who participated and created a visible monument of the diversity and scale of deaths caused by AIDS. To understand this work as passive is to minimize the cathartic nature of the quilt and to minimize the political nature of bearing witness to the loss of AIDS.

However, judging by the sentiments expressed in Gran Fury’s “Four Questions” it appears that neither the quilt nor the act of protest was enough of an outlet for the intense emotional strain of AIDS. In the words of Gran Fury members and AIDS activist Tom Kalin,

There was a lot of stuff of people sort of rebounding from the kind of cathartic anger of the first wave that I associate with ’87-’91, ’92. That was just dealing with —catching up a little bit, with the consequences of having so many people having died and, you know, having so much accomplished and yet, still, so much not accomplished.¹⁷⁷

A sense of halted accomplishment was certainly documented in “Four Questions.” The poster was powerfully indicative of the troubled emotional state of AIDS activism in

¹⁷⁶ Crimp, “Mourning and Militancy,” 18.

¹⁷⁷ Kalin, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, 41.

1993. Through the provocative questioning performed by the poster, one can see that this was a time, perhaps for the first time since 1987, in which the AIDS activist community had more questions than answers.

Like many previous Gran Fury projects, the poster was viewed on the street in the public sphere. Unlike pieces intended for consumption in a museum or gallery space, Gran Fury designed the poster to be actively engaged with. The act of wheat pasting recalls an earlier moment in Gran Fury's history. In a 2003 interview for *Art Forum* magazine, Tom Kalin recalled "In my memory, you all went out with buckets of wheat paste, just like we did in 1988 with 'AIDS: 1 in 61', the first work we did with the name Gran Fury."¹⁷⁸ It seems by returning to the act of wheat pasting in the streets, Gran Fury was symbolically returning to a simpler, more energized time in the career of the collective. Rather than dealing with curators and gallery organizers, this form of artistic presentation was controlled by the makers—Kalin invoked buckets and wheat flour as implements, kitchen staples available to all. The act of walking the streets of New York and physically pasting the posters up also recall a youthful exuberance that was no longer present. The gesture of wheat pasting recalled the early days of ACT-UP and the eager creativity of its members. The return to this gesture shows the organizational changes that had occurred in the five years between 1988 and 1993. The message of Gran Fury had shifted dramatically and the lives of the messengers had changed as well. Unlike the sleek posters of early Gran Fury, "Four Questions" was simple, yet evocative. It spoke to a changing culture around AIDS activism.

¹⁷⁸ "Gran Fury Talks to Douglas Crimp," 70.

In the same 2003 Art Forum interview, Gran Fury member Loring McAlpin stated,

Well, we were addressing a different audience. It was really directed toward our own community. We were trying to acknowledge something but not judge it, to ask, ‘What’s happening now? Where did our anger go? What are we going to do?’¹⁷⁹

Loring’s statements reveal the need for a self-reflective document; and that is what “Four Question” ultimately became; the poster urged AIDS activists to pause and reflect on their positions both in the AIDS community but in their own lives. The piece acknowledges something deep and very pervasive, that AIDS activism affected the personal lives of those who participated in it.

This reflective shift in Gran Fury’s audience demonstrates the nature of the early 1990s as a transitional moment in AIDS activism. The 1992 election of Bill Clinton left ACT-UP without an easy political figure to vilify and rally against. While this was certainly a political victory, members of ACT-UP quickly realized that the broad, general image campaigns of their past would no longer work in a new era of AIDS, in which the issues had become more nuanced, more complex, and more rooted in identity politics. Beyond that, many of the active members were “tired.” Gregg Bordowitz remembers:

We would talk amongst ourselves about how things had changed. We were tired...I think the election had changed. I really fooled myself into thinking that Clinton was going to make a difference, because it was the end of the Bush/Reagan years. It seemed like our kind of politics—the media stopped showing up to our demonstrations. They had enough file footage of ACT UP. They didn’t need any real footage of ACT UP. The most spectacular stuff that we had done had already happened. They didn’t need any more footage. And people were moving on. They were just trying to decide whether or not they were going to do this stuff for the rest of their lives professionally.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 70.

¹⁸⁰ Gregg Bordowitz, Interview with Sarah Schulman, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, December 17, 2002, 66.

ACT-UP's media relevance was dwindling, and the organization's momentum began to falter. This sense of exhaustion is present in many interviews. Answering why he quit, Gran Fury member Tom Kalin replied, "I think I had intense exhaustion and collapse...And also...feeling like we had accomplished a lot, but also, there was so much more to accomplish, and just nursing wounds a little bit." The wounds that Tom Kalin speaks of were both literal and metaphorical. They refer to the deaths of loved ones and the political setbacks faced by AIDS activists, but also the literal wounds of the body—the lesions that marked and stigmatized the body with AIDS. It seems that by the mid 1990s, the collective energy that was so essential to the success and power of ACT-UP had been drained from its members. After spending nearly a decade putting in countless hours fighting for increased medical and political attention, the main fighters were worn out, physically and emotionally. While AIDS activists were quick to dismiss the quilt as a passive art form, they too participated in artistic practices that incorporated cultural mourning into their messages.

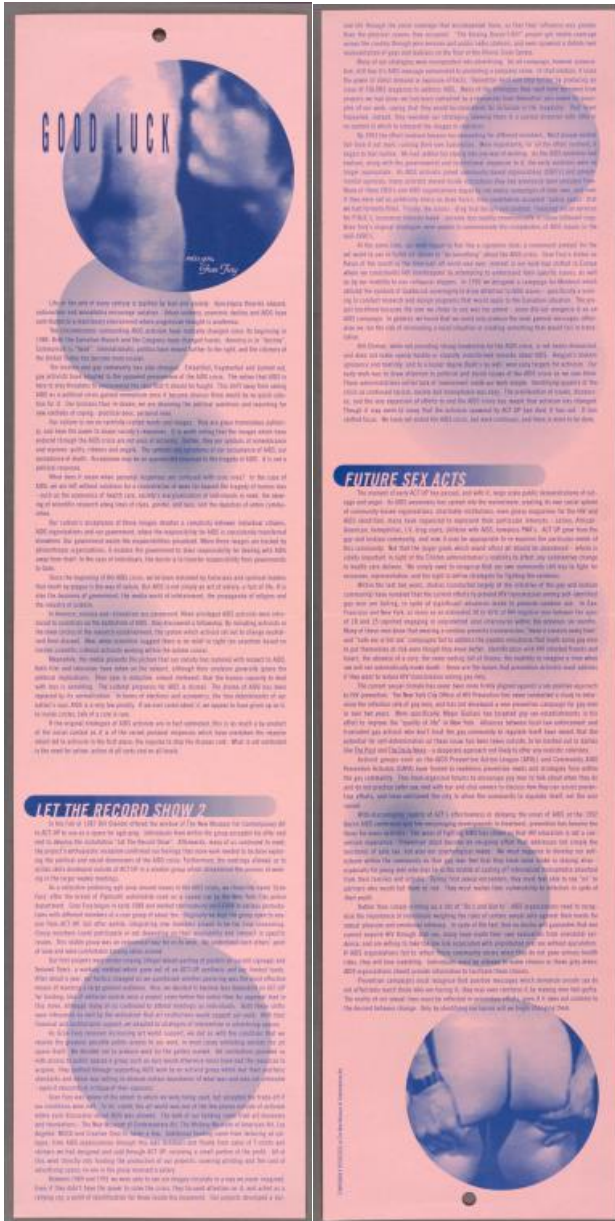


Image 36, Gran Fury, "Good luck... miss you," 1995



Image 37, Installaton, *Temporarily Possessed*, New Museum, New York, 1995

In 1995, Gran Fury decided it was time to end their existence as a collective. When asked to present a piece for the New Museum's *Temporarily Possessed* exhibition, the organization created a document of termination. Written on a large pink piece of paper, *Good luck... miss you* (Image 36) was Gran Fury's good-bye manifesto. The document was a double-sided broad side that could be collected in a small installation that featured some of Gran Fury's earlier works (Image 37). The document's two images included a grainy image of someone kissing a rear on the front and a picture of a naked rear on the back. These images referred to a level of intimacy, as if the letter was addressed to a lover. The images are grainy, contrasting with the more bright and polished photography of *Kissing Doesn't Kill*. The act of saying "good bye" wasn't one that is purely for the general public, but also a good bye to lovers and friends who are now deceased. In addition, the bubbles that appeared throughout the text seem to be a visual reference to the HIV virus. The document's presentation on pink paper was a visual pun as a "pink slip" which someone receives when they are fired or laid off.

Good luck...miss you was a long text-based document, an outlier in the cannon of Gran Fury. Recalling the *Good luck...miss you*, Marline McCarty stated, “we did our thing, it’s time to go, we don’t exist anymore. And I think at the end, there was a very sweet goodbye. From that point on the majority of us were like, Gran Fury does not exist anymore. We did it, it’s over, it’s done.”¹⁸¹ While *Good luck... miss you* clearly marked the end of Gran Fury as a producing collective, it is often overlooked or disregarded as a major work of AIDS art or literature. Upon closer reading however, the document demonstrates a reflective moment in AIDS activism, a time in which the “peak years” of ACT UP were ending and new strategies for AIDS education and advocacy needed to be established.

Good luck...miss you, just shy of 3,000 words long, was more of a manifesto than a work of art.¹⁸² The letter was separated into three sections: an untitled introduction, “Let The Record Show 2,” and “Future Sex Acts.” Within the three sections Gran Fury introduced the major problems facing the world of AIDS activism in 1995, discussed the general history of Gran Fury, and provided readers with a set of recommendations for future efforts to fight against cultural indifference to HIV and AIDS.

Gran Fury began *Good Luck...miss you* by situating the AIDS epidemic in the context of multiple phenomena: temporal change, global politics, and gay and lesbian culture. The introduction read:

Life at the end of every century is typified by fear and anxiety. Apocalypse theories abound: nationalism and xenophobia encourage isolation. Urban violence, economic decline and AIDS have contributed to a reactionary environment where progressive thought is anathema.

¹⁸¹ McCarty, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, 38.

¹⁸² Full text has been included in Appendix 1.

The circumstances surrounding AIDS activism have radically changed since its beginning in 1986. Both the Executive Branch and the Congress have changed hands. America is in "decline". Communism is "dead". Internationally, politics have moved further to the right, and the citizenry of the United States has become more insular.

The lesbian and gay community has also changed. Embattled, fragmented and burned out, gay activists have adapted to the apparent permanence of the AIDS crisis. The notion that AIDS is here to stay threatens to overpower the idea that it should be fought. This shift away from seeing AIDS as a political crisis gained momentum once it became obvious there would be no quick solution for it. Our horizons thus re-drawn, we are shunning the political questions and searching for new methods of coping: practical ones, personal ones.¹⁸³

If "Four Questions" was made to encourage an introspective look on the state of the AIDS activist community, *Good Luck...miss you* seems to be a reflection on what that looking might have revealed. From the beginning, it is clear that Gran Fury is not interested in placing AIDS, or the activism it inspired, in narrow narratives of progress. The almost cosmically large position they placed themselves in is reactive to "change at the end of the century" as well as dramatic shifts in International Politics that had occurred since the late 1980s, most notably the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Gran Fury's attempt to position themselves in the contexts of these myriad of geo-political events, speaks to a desire for the organization to capture the zeitgeist of the early 1990s, to explain what is happening to the culture that surrounded them. In describing the emotional realities of the gay activists, Gran Fury evoked the emotional nature of the failure of AIDS activism.

The fragmentation from within the gay and lesbian community discussed in *Good Luck...miss you* can be seen in a 1992 *Philadelphia Inquirer* opinion piece entitled "Why Doesn't Act Up Begin To Act Its Age? It's About Time To Wake Up, Act Up: You No

¹⁸³ Gran Fury, *Good Luck...Miss You*, 1995, Box 1, Gran Fury Collection, New York Public Library.

Longer Need To Shock People To Get Them To Listen.” The article, written by Donna Gallagher, “a lesbian member of the Philadelphia Mayor’s Commission on Sexual Minorities,”¹⁸⁴ expressed the belief that the time for ACT UP’s (and thereby Gran Fury’s) aggressive activism had come to an end. Gallagher stated:

The shock protests you pioneered in the ‘80s have grown not just tired and divisive in the ‘90s, but are increasingly damaging to the very people you purport to support...As a lesbian, I have a tremendous amount of pride in your history. You changed the world. And you did it under the most extreme opposition imaginable and within a society that at the time seemed to tolerate only one thing in our community—the deaths of our gay brothers. Tragically, many in society still do. Fortunately now, most don’t...Wake up, ACT UP: You no longer need to shock people to get them to listen...The image you chose to project to the world as self-anointed representatives of the gay and lesbian community is not just misleading, but selfishly and ultimately destructive.¹⁸⁵

Gallagher’s response is revealing of a gay community looking to separate itself from ACT UP’s politicized antics. ACT UP and Gran Fury began, in part, to change the way people with AIDS were represented in the mainstream media. By 1992, many gays and lesbians wanted to be free from the angry rhetoric that characterized ACT UP. In her book, *Moving Politics*, Deborah Gould, argues that the push against ACT UP from the Gay and Lesbian community in the early 90s stemmed from a desire to gain mainstream societal acceptance. Because ACT UP had fought to make gay and lesbian people politically important, these citizens want to be accepted without the continued radicalism of ACT UP offending heterosexuals.¹⁸⁶

In *Good Luck...miss you*, Gran Fury claimed that the lasting images of the AIDS crisis “are not ones of activism. Rather they are symbols of remembrance and reprieve: quilts, ribbons, and angels. The symbols and symptoms of our acceptance of AIDS, our

¹⁸⁴ Gould, *Moving Politics*, 325

¹⁸⁵ Donna Gallagher, “WAKE UP ACT UP,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 28, 1992.

¹⁸⁶ Gould, *Moving Politics*, 324-326

acceptance of death.”¹⁸⁷ As I have written earlier in this chapter activist criticism of the quilt, misrepresented mourning as passivity. By disparaging images of mainstream visual culture, such as the Red AIDS Ribbon, which was often donned by celebrities to increase awareness of AIDS, and Angels, from the Pulitzer-Prize Winning play *Angels in America*, Gran Fury alienated themselves from a mainstream culture that increasingly accepted gays and lesbians. To Gran Fury, “raising awareness” for AIDS wasn’t action, neither was seeing a play.

Gran Fury ended the introduction to *Good Luck...miss you* with a call to action that evades responsibility for their inconsistent success. Gran Fury wrote

If the original strategies of AIDS activism are in fact outmoded, this is as much a by-product of the social context as it is of the varied personal responses which have overtaken the impulse which led to activism in the first place: the impulse to stop the disease cold. What is not outmoded is the need for action: action of all sorts and on all levels.¹⁸⁸

Gran Fury did not apologize for its failures, or for its radical activist practices. While they did not accept responsibility for failing or unpopular strategies, the collective proposed that it was time for new strategies to encourage direct action.

“Let The Record Show 2” discussed the history of Gran Fury, from its inception to the creation of “Good luck...miss you.” What is revealing in reading this history of Gran Fury after reading hours of interviews with members of the organization is how this story has become the “official” history of Gran Fury. That is, the story the organization narrated for *Good Luck...miss you* has become the definitive narrative of Gran Fury. From their inception with “Let the Record Show,” to their wildly successful pieces and campaigns between 1988-91, to their termination, Gran Fury provided a satisfying

¹⁸⁷ Gran Fury, *Good Luck...Miss you*.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

narrative arc of their existence. In doing this, Gran Fury wrote their own art history. In consulting all the available *ACT UP Oral History Project* interviews from living Gran Fury members and recent interviews with the collective, it is clear that this history stuck. The narrative of Gran Fury within the group has remained cohesive and consistent.

Gran Fury also expressed the difficulties facing the collective and why they decided to stop operating. As the issues surrounding AIDS became more complicated, Gran Fury members found that they “were unable to communicate the complexities of AIDS issues in the mid-1990s.”¹⁸⁹ As identity politics came to the surface of many AIDS debates, as seen in the issues surrounding *Red My Lips*, Gran Fury members found it difficult to discuss the complicated racial, gender, and class based issues that were surrounding the AIDS crisis. In his ACT UP Oral History interview, Gran Fury member Loring McAlperin reiterated this point:

I think issues became too complicated, and that was a hard thing for Gran Fury, and for ACT UP. It’s one thing to try and hold the government accountable to addressing AIDS; and you can use broad strokes, like providing housing and healthcare. But when it gets to the level of designing protocols for experimental drugs, and you have issues that can’t be reduced to a billboard or a slogan, certainly for ACT UP, I think we just increasingly felt like we didn’t really know how to work in the same way.¹⁹⁰

The changing political landscape made it difficult for Gran Fury to produce exciting and attention grabbing campaigns. Gran Fury, in *Good Luck...miss you*, explained, “Bill Clinton, while not providing strong leadership for the AIDS crisis, is not easily demonized... Reagan’s blatant ignorance and hostility, and to a lesser degree Bush’s as well, were easy targets for activism.”¹⁹¹ Gran Fury very candidly acknowledged that the reason their early strategies were effective was because people in

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ McAlpin, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, 39-40

¹⁹¹ Gran Fury, *Good luck...miss you*.

power were easily vilified. When the problematic politics of Clinton became more nuanced, Gran Fury no longer possessed the visual vocabulary to make effective work that reflected the political and social realities of the time. This honest reflection of their own work can be seen not only as a critique to the conservative government of the late 1980s, but also as a self-directed critique at Gran Fury's own activist strategies.

By 1995, Gran Fury realized they had been dealt a rhetorically easy hand, that once the issues of AIDS had become more complex they could not make effective and snappy images to accompany them. To put it in other words, the issues got too large for the frame they put around them. In *Let the Record Show*, Gran Fury proved they could use visual practice to bring politics into the public sphere, by 1995, the political issues were too nuanced for visual representation.

In "Future Sex Acts," Gran Fury reflected on what the next decade of AIDS activists should consider in terms of future strategies for effective activism. The section began, "The moment of early ACT UP has passed, and with it, large scale public demonstrations of outrage and anger."¹⁹² While Gran Fury positioned the future in opposition to the spectacle of early ACT-UP, it also seems that this letter was not only a goodbye letter to the public, it seems to almost be mourning the passing of an era.

As I discussed earlier, by 1993, AIDS activists had come to realize that there was no easy way for a cure to be developed, even with increased funding. In light of this, "Future Sex Acts," performed a dramatic paradigm shift in the way activists had been thinking about AIDS from large scale-political change to smaller scale initiatives that encouraged individual responsibility and self-care. Gran Fury focused on the importance

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

of safe sex, HIV prevention, and the responsibility of the individual. Gran Fury connected the performance of safe sex with psychological well being:

Prevention must become an on-going effort that addressed not simply the mechanic of safe sex, but also our psychological needs. We must organize to develop our self-esteem within the community so that gay men feel that they have some stake in staying alive...¹⁹³

By focusing on prevention, this new model of AIDS activism and HIV prevention was much more focused on the needs of the individual rather than large scale needs of communities along the lines of identity. Adopting the strategies earlier used by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence and GMHC, Gran Fury rallied against moralizing campaigns for safe sex, saying “Prevention campaigns must recognize the punitive messages which demonize unsafe sex do not effectively reach those who are having it; they may even reinforce it by making men feel guilty.”¹⁹⁴ This strategy revealed a dramatic move from the large scale to the intimate. According to “Future Sex Acts,” if change was going to come from within the gay community, its members needed to feel enabled to make smart, healthy decisions. In this manner, Gran Fury’s final words were a reframing of safer-sex education.

Good luck...miss you was a complex piece of art that blurred the line between fine art, performance art, and rhetorical text. It was at once a critical analysis of the state of AIDS activism in 1995, a history of Gran Fury, and a plan of attack for the then future of AIDS activism. While all of these things were communicated it was also meant to serve as a sign off. *Good luck...miss you* ended with the future of AIDS activism and not with something that would have provided more closure because Gran Fury resisted the notion

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

that the work was done. Gran Fury as a collective unit might have been over in 1995, but AIDS activism would continue, and the individuals in Gran Fury would continue fighting in their own, independent ways.

There was closure however, in the site of the New Museum to present this piece. As seen in the image above, *Good luck...miss you* was presented alongside an artifact of Gran Fury's first major project *Let the Record Show*, which also took place in the New Museum. The illuminated "Silence=Death" neon sign stands as a symbol for that proud history. This sign served as a reminder that Gran Fury's birthplace and resting place was in the museum. This context was important as this letter was not released in a public newspaper, but handed out in an exhibition at an artistic institution. This might be a primary reason why it has been overlooked as an important document in the history of AIDS activism. Its ephemeral nature resisted being taken seriously. In this respect, *Good luck...miss you* counters the monumental status of an object like the AIDS Quilt. While the AIDS Quilt image has loomed in the American imagination for the last two and a half decades,¹⁹⁵ "Good luck...miss you" has largely been forgotten, rarely included in academic discussions of Gran Fury, or AIDS activism.

Four Questions and *Good luck...miss you* represented the last two projects of Gran Fury and are representative of declining years of ACT UP. For the reasons of I have discussed: exhaustion, medical setbacks, and changing political landscapes, AIDS activists had to come to terms with a crisis that was larger and more complicated than

¹⁹⁵ This can be seen in the numerous publications written about the quilt, the inclusion of the quilt in major works of pop-culture (including Soap Operas), and the 25th Anniversary Celebration of the Quilt held in Washington, D.C. in the Summer of 2012.
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Joshua Herren, College '13, University of Pennsylvania

they had even imagined.¹⁹⁶ These works of art documented a type of cultural mourning that was not represented in the AIDS quilt: mourning of the end of a period of passionate, community activism.

RADICAL MOURNING: The Radical Faeries and the Mourning of Sexual Culture

The loss caused by AIDS was not just measurable in the numbers of human lives it took, but in a sexual culture that it took away. As I discussed in Chapter Two, AIDS created a market for safe sex, and therefore, forced certain sexual practices to be deemed unacceptable, or “unsafe.” In “Mourning and Militancy,” Douglas Crimp wrote anecdotally about a group of ACT-UP members who went to see a film from the early 1970s at the Gay and Lesbian Experimental Film Festival. Crimp explained,

“The young man was very excited about what seemed to be a pretty ordinary sex scene in the film; but then he said, ‘I’d give anything to know what cum tastes like, somebody else’s that is.’ That broke my heart for two different reasons: for him because he didn’t know, for me because I do.”¹⁹⁷

As swallowing semen was considered to be an unsafe sexual practice, many young men who had come of sexual age during the AIDS crisis had no idea about sexual practices that were normal during the 1970s and before. AIDS caused a generational divide and created a binary around deviant sexual acts. Young men felt a dangerous desire to perform sexual acts that had been deemed unsafe, perhaps deadly; for the older generation their participation in these acts created a sense of deep shame.¹⁹⁸

The change of sexual norms in the gay community was not simply about sexual gratification and pleasure; AIDS had changed a culture based around sex. Douglas Crimp

¹⁹⁶ For more information on the decline of ACT-UP and the emotional fall out it caused, Deborah Gould’s *Moving Politics* is essential.

¹⁹⁷ Crimp, “Mourning and Millitancy,” 10.

¹⁹⁸ Patrick Moore, *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 48.

not only explained what had been lost, but where it had been lost. “Alongside the dismal toll of death, what many of us have lost is a culture of sexual possibility: back rooms, tearooms, bookstores, movie houses, and baths; the trucks, the pier, the ramble, the dunes.”¹⁹⁹ These were all spaces of sexual activity, but they were also spaces of community and identity and formation.²⁰⁰ These were spaces where sexual politics and possibilities were explored and negotiated.²⁰¹ As city officials fought to close these spaces, the gay community was left with a need to re-center itself to change the way it was socially organized.

A performance given by Wayne Karr at a Radical Faerie gathering demonstrates a response to this type of cultural loss. Karr was a prominent Los Angeles AIDS activist who was heavily involved with Queer Nation and founded the Queer AIDS Zine *Infected Faggot*.²⁰² Karr and his fellow activists used the term queer to embrace the edgy, strange, and socially unacceptable behavior as something to be valorized. Karr fought back not just against AIDS but also a heteronormative culture that deemed certain types of relationships and sexual encounters (monogamous, heterosexuality) acceptable and others not.

Karr was a Radical Faerie. The Radical Faeries were an organization of men founded in 1979 who sought to connect their sexuality and gender expression with something profoundly spiritual.²⁰³ The founders of Radical Faeries based their beliefs of

¹⁹⁹ Crimp, “Mourning,” 11

²⁰⁰ Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States*, 228.

²⁰¹ Andriote, *Victory, Deferred*, 21-22.

²⁰² “W. Wayne Karr; Activist on Gar Rights,” Obituary, *Los Angeles Times*, February 27, 1995.

²⁰³ Scott Lauria Morgensen, “Arrival at Home: Radical Faerie Configurations of Sexuality and Place,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15 (2009), 77.

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the spiritual nature of gay sexuality on indigenous societies that felt that gay men had a unique and important perspective about the world around them.²⁰⁴ The Radical Faeries organized through “gatherings” or large meetings that occurred in the woods or other rural locations. The point of these events was to escape the urban world, and spiritually connect with other Faeries through rituals and events that often involve psychedelic drugs and sex.²⁰⁵

Karr’s performance occurred at a 1992 gathering and was captured on film by Phil Tarley for his unfinished documentary *The Year of the Queer*. Other performances occurred during this Faerie talent show in which faeries performed skits, songs, and dances. Karr’s eulogy was delivered on an empty stage. It began:

We have lost more than our fathers, brothers, lovers, and friends to AIDS. We have lost more than a generation of beautiful faggots. We have lost more than the promise of a radically new and ancient way of being. We have lost much more than the revolution.²⁰⁶

Karr’s understanding of contemporary AIDS rhetoric is evident in his listing of the different community members that had been lost to AIDS. Karr’s listing of relationships echoes the listing of names and the types of associations drawn by the NAMES Project AIDS Quilt. By suggesting that there is more to be lost, Karr was acknowledging a gap in AIDS activism and AIDS mourning, pointing to the loss of a queer sexual culture.

Karr’s language may have shocked the audience, but it was used to call to mind cultural experiences that had been lost. “Beautiful faggots” called to mind the radical Gay Liberation Front (GLF) magazine *the Fag Rag*, of the 1970s, which promoted “fagly”

²⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 68.

²⁰⁵ Mark Thompson, “The Gay Tribe: A Brief History of Faeries,” in *Gay Spirit: Myth and Meaning*. Ed. Mark Thompson, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987), 274-275.

²⁰⁶ Wayne Karr, Performance, Footage for *Year of the Queer*, Tape #25, Phil Tarley Video Collection, New York Public Library.

acts of revolution.²⁰⁷ The repeated use of the word “Fag” subverted a traditional slur. While many organizers in the gay community, such as Donna Gallagher, were attempting the gain political clout and acceptance through a strategy of normalization, Wayne Karr and his supporters believed that it was their difference and deviation from society that made the queer community important. By calling his “gay brothers” “fags,” Karr placed them in a narrative of sexual deviance that is crucially important for a radical understanding of the queer past.

Karr continued:

Those fags who have come of age during the AIDS epidemic have no idea who or what we were since the beginning of time until a few years ago. Look into their eyes and you will see something hollow, something hallow, something unsure that cannot be tossed off to AIDS or lack of experience. Now what we have lost, they have lost too.²⁰⁸

Karr’s performance made a break between the past and the present. In the logic of the performance, AIDS changed everything. The performance demonstrated how deeply AIDS resonated. Karr’s cultural understanding connects his “fagness” with something deeper, something stretching back to an “ancient way of being.”²⁰⁹ Just as the Radical Faeries associate their queer sexuality to be in line with the teachings of traditional Native American beliefs, Karr connected gay sexual culture with an invented history that goes back indefinitely. Part of Karr’s understanding stems from an expanded queer focus in the academy throughout the 1970s and 80s that aimed to find gay roots in both non-Western Historical narratives, and to uncover parts of Western narratives that had simply

²⁰⁷ Moore, *Beyond Shame*, 8.

²⁰⁸ Karr, Performance.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

been ignored.²¹⁰ AIDS was seen as disruptive force, rupturing a newly uncovered heritage and narrative of continuity in the midst of construction.

This performative gesture is a eulogy, a eulogy for a sexual culture lost to AIDS. “We have lost our fag spirits. We have lost our fag soul. We have lost the essence of cock-sucking male queerness.”²¹¹ Karr placed sexuality as the crucial element of gay culture. This change in sexual culture also forms a break in the generational lineage of urban queer men. Young men moving into gay urban spaces post-AIDS, had no way of experiencing the spaces gay men just 10 years prior did. Karr believed in a hidden history of homosexuality yet to be uncovered, and in a powerful lineage that connected members throughout its history. AIDS was viewed as a traumatic break in that lineage, one that could not be easily recovered.

What was radical about Wayne Karr’s performance was the way in which queer male sexuality was valorized. At a time when the “cock-sucking” of the 1970s was seen as dangerous and shameful, Karr claims that it is something to be remembered, something to be mourned. His performance urged the audience to look at the larger picture, to place the present into a larger historical narrative of sexuality. For Karr, the loss of AIDS could not be understood in an additive way, as in patches on a quilt; it was too complex to be reduced to the numbers of the death toll. The performance demonstrates the ways in which the sexual freedom of the 1970s was understood to be lost to AIDS, and how that loss was mourned.

²¹⁰ This academic trend can be seen in: John Boswell, *Christianity Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). & David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love*, (New York: Routledge, 1990).

²¹¹ Karr, Performance.

Mourning occurred in a variety of ways between 1987 and 1996. The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt encouraged families and friends from across the United States to collectively mourn the loss of their loved ones. In so doing, the Quilt broke the silence of anonymity and allowed a nation to bare witness to the loss caused by AIDS. Gran Fury's *Four Questions* and *Good Luck...miss you* mourned the end of powerful collective AIDS activism and the loss of members within the organization. Finally Wayne Karr's performance eulogized and valorized the sexual exploration that occurred in the gay community until the onset of AIDS. Through craft, posters, and performance, collectives and individuals utilized artistic practice to express their grief at the tragedy of the AIDS Crisis.

Conclusion

By 1996, ACT UP was in decline in terms of both membership and political action. The year before, Gran Fury had been terminated by its members with the release of *Good Luck...miss you*. It is tragically ironic then that 1996 is the year in which a few medical breakthroughs finally happened. In late 1995, the Food and Drug Administration had approved a drug, 3TC, a protease inhibitor that when taken with AZT was shown to block HIV reproduction. By the end of March, the FDA approved two additional protease inhibitors, astonishingly, only 72 days after the manufacturer sought approval.²¹² For the first time since the early days of the AIDS Crisis, researchers were hopeful about the medical prospects for AIDS. In 1996 deaths from AIDS dropped by twenty-six percent and another forty-eight percent in 1997.²¹³ From these findings, it is clear that the incredible work and passion of groups like ACT UP, GMHC, Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, and Gran Fury paid off. In 2012, the AIDS Crisis is still not over, but the medical prospects for those with HIV and AIDS in the United States keep looking better and better and the disease has become a top priority of the United States Government and transnational organizations like the United Nations.²¹⁴

However, given a 2010 exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, it is clear that our country is still divided in terms of artistic representations of the AIDS Crisis. “Hide / Seek: Desire and Difference in American Portraiture” at the National Portrait Gallery was

²¹² Andriote, *Victory Deferred*, 373.

²¹³ Miller, *Out of the Past*, 551.

²¹⁴ American Foundation for AIDS Research, “Thirty Years of HIV/AIDS: Snapshots of an Epidemic,” accessed November 30, 2012, http://www.amfar.org/about_hiv_and_aids/more_about_hiv_and_aids/thirty_years_of_hiv_aids_snapshots_of_an_epidemic/.

the first comprehensive museum survey of the queer presence in American Art.²¹⁵ The exhibition featured a video by the artist David Wojnorowicz, which showed clips of ants crawling on top of a crucifix. Less than a month into the exhibition following continual attacks from conservative politicians, including Speaker of the House John Boehner, the Smithsonian removed the video from the exhibition. This act of censorship is a painful reminder of the Helms amendment. It shows that as a nation, we don't value controversial works of art that incorporate queer sexuality. While the Wojnorowicz piece is a painfully beautiful representation of the suffering he endured before he died of AIDS in 1992, it was deemed too controversial by the Smithsonian institute, bowing to pressures from conservative politicians.

The issues of cultural production and AIDS activism are as relevant and as raw as ever. The problems of representation, privilege, and political access that were at the heart of the fights around AIDS are still left partially unresolved. It has been an incredible honor to look into the ways in which AIDS activist groups utilized and subverted conventional forms of artistic and cultural production to start a public conversation about AIDS. Using video, graphic design, performance, and photography, these organizations shifted the political discourse around AIDS, educated the public about safer sex practices, and mourned the incredible loss caused by the epidemic.

The 15-year span explored in this thesis is rich with artistry and political agitation. Gran Fury emerged from ACT UP at the peak of the AIDS Crisis and utilized smart graphic design to become an international art sensation and change the public discourse around the AIDS Crisis. Through their method of “guerilla information,” they attempted

²¹⁵ Brian Logan, “Hide/Seek Too Shocking for America,” *The Guardian*, December 5, 2010.

to “speak to the beast in its own language,”²¹⁶ by using images made popular by large corporate advertising campaigns. GMHC used popular media like cartoons and pornographic shorts to encourage their constituency to practice safe sex and to demonstrate that latex could, in fact, be sexy. The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence used performative drag activism to valorize and promote safe sex and fought back against shame fueled by a “Judeo-Christian tradition of morality.”²¹⁷ The NAMES Project ignited thousands of people to remember their loved ones and used traditional methods of craft to create an immense, and portable, memorial for those who were lost to AIDS. Finally, Wayne Karr’s performance at a Radical Faerie gathering reminded his community that AIDS did not simply take lives, it changed a culture previously fueled by sexual liberation. The art of AIDS activism did not adopt one form any more than it attempted to tackle one issue. By utilizing a diversity of artistic practices to engage with a range of topics related to the crisis caused by the AIDS epidemic, activists made sure that their voices were not only heard, but seen.

²¹⁶ “Why We Steal,” 4.

²¹⁷ Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, *Play Safe*.

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Appendix 1: *Good luck...we'll miss you* by Gran Fury, 1995
Good Luck...Miss You- ~ -Gran Fury

Life at the end of every century is typified by fear and anxiety. Apocalypse theories abound: nationalism and xenophobia encourage isolation. Urban violence, economic decline and AIDS have contributed to a reactionary environment where progressive thought is anathema.

The circumstances surrounding AIDS activism have radically changed since its beginning in 1986. Both the Executive Branch and the Congress have changed hands. America is in "decline". Communism is "dead". Internationally, politics have moved further to the right, and the citizenry of the United States has become more insular.

The lesbian and gay community has also changed. Embattled, fragmented and burned out, gay activists have adapted to the apparent permanence of the AIDS crisis. The notion that AIDS is here to stay threatens to overpower the idea that it should be fought. This shift away from seeing AIDS as a political crisis gained momentum once it became obvious there would be no quick solution for it. Our horizons thus re-drawn, we are shunning the political questions and searching for new methods of coping: practical ones, personal ones.

Our culture is run on carefully crafted words and images. They are given tremendous authority, and have the power to shape society's responses. It is worth noting that the images which have endured through the AIDS crisis are not ones of activism. Rather, they are symbols of remembrance and reprieve: quilts, ribbons and angels. The symbols and symptoms of our acceptance of AIDS, our acceptance of death. Acceptance may be an appropriate response to the tragedy of AIDS. It is not a political response.

What does it mean when personal responses are confused with civic ones? In the case of AIDS, we are left without solutions for a constellation of woes far beyond the tragedy of human loss - such as the economics of health care, society's marginalization of individuals in need, the skewing of scientific research along lines of class, gender, and race, and the depletion of entire communities.

Our culture's acceptance of these images denotes a complicity between individual citizens, AIDS organizations and our government, where the responsibility for AIDS is consistently transferred elsewhere. Our government wants the responsibilities privatized. When these images are backed by philanthropic organizations, it enables the government to steer responsibility from governments to Gods.

Since the beginning of the AIDS crisis, we've been reminded by historians and spiritual leaders that death by plague is the way of nature. But AIDS is not simply an act of nature, a fact of life. It is also the business of government, the media world of infotainment, the propaganda of religion and the industry of science.

In America, science and rationalism are paramount. When privileged AIDS activists were introduced to scientists on the battlefield of AIDS, they discovered a fellowship. By including activists in the inner circles of the research establishment, the system which activist set out to change neutralized their dissent. Now, when scientists suggest there is no relief in sight (an assertion based on limited scientific criteria) activists working within the system concur.

Meanwhile, the media presents the picture that our society has matured with respect to AIDS. Both film and television have taken on the subject, although their analyses generally ignore the political implications. Their spin is reductive, almost irrelevant: that the human capacity to deal with loss is ennobling. The cultural prognosis for AIDS is dismal. The drama of AIDS has been replaced by its normalization. In terms of elections and economics, the true determinants of our nation's soul, AIDS is a very low priority. If we ever cared about it, we appear to have given up on it. In inside circles, talk of a cure is rare.

If the original strategies of AIDS activism are in fact outmoded, this is as much a by-product of the social context as it is of the varied personal responses which have overtaken the impulse which led to activism in the first place: the impulse to stop the disease cold. What is not outmoded is the need for action: action of all sorts and on all levels.

Let The Record Show 2

In the fall of 1987 Bill Olander offered the window of The New Museum For Contemporary Art to ACT UP to use as a space for agit-prop. Individuals from within the group accepted his offer and met to develop the installation "Let The Record Show". Afterwards, many of us continued to meet; the project's enthusiastic reception confirmed our feelings that more work needed to be done exploring the political and social dimensions of the AIDS crisis. Furthermore, the meetings allowed us to utilize skills developed outside of ACT UP in a smaller group which streamlined the process of working in the large weekly meetings.

As a collective producing agit-prop around issues in the AIDS crisis, we chose the name 'Gran Fury' after the brand of Plymouth automobile used as a squad car by the New York City police department. Gran Fury began in early 1988 and worked continuously until 1994 in various permutations with different members of a core group of about ten. Originally we kept the group open to anyone from ACT UP but after awhile, integrating new members proved to be too time consuming. Group members could participate or not depending on their availability and interest in specific issues. This stable group was an economical way for us to work. We understood each other's point of view and were comfortable tossing ideas around.

Our first projects were poster sniping (illegal wheat-pasting of posters on vacant signage), and Xeroxed flyers, a working method which grew out of an ACT UP aesthetic

and our limited funds. After about a year, our tactics changed as we questioned whether posterage was the most effective means of reaching a large general audience. Also, we decided to become less dependent on ACT UP for funding; loss of editorial control once a project came before the entire floor for approval led to this move, although many of us continued to attend meetings as individuals. Both these shifts were influenced as well by the realization that art institutions would support our work. With their financial and institutional support, we adapted to strategies of intervention in advertising spaces.

As Gran Fury received increasing art world support, we did so with the condition that we receive the greatest possible public access to our work, in most cases exhibiting outside the art space itself. We decided not to produce work for the gallery market. Art institutions provided us with access to public spaces a group such as ours would otherwise never have had the resources to acquire; they profited through supporting AIDS work by an activist group which met their aesthetic standards and which was willing to observe certain boundaries of what was and was not allowable—explicit obscenity or critique of their sponsors.

Gran Fury was aware of the extent to which we were being used, but accepted the trade-off if our conditions were met. To its credit, the art world was one of the few places outside of activism where such discussion about AIDS was allowed. The bulk of our funding came from art museums and foundations -- The New Museum of Contemporary Art, The Whitney Museum of American Art, Los Angeles' MOCA and Creative Time to name a few. Additional funding came from lecturing at colleges, from AIDS organizations (though this was minimal) and finally from sales of T-shirts and stickers we had designed and sold through ACT UP, receiving a small portion of the profit. All of this went directly into funding the production of our projects, covering printing and the cost of advertising space; no one in the group received a salary.

Between 1989 and 1991 we were able to see our images circulate in a way we never imagined. Even if they didn't have the power to solve the crisis, they focused attention on it, and acted as a rallying cry, a point of identification for those inside the movement. Our projects developed a second life through the press coverage that accompanied them, so that their influence was greater than the physical space they occupy. "The Kissing Doesn't Kill" project got media coverage across the country through wire services and public radio stations, and even spawned a debate over representation of gays and lesbians on the floor of the Illinois State Senate.

Many of our strategies were incorporated into advertising. An ad campaign, however provocative, still has its AIDS message subservient to promoting a company name. In that relation, it loses the power of direct demand or exposure of facts. Bennetton went one step further by producing an issue of *COLORS* magazine to address AIDS. Many of the strategies they used were borrowed from projects we had done; we had been contacted by a researcher from Bennetton who asked for examples of our work, saying they would be considered for inclusion in the magazine; instead, they reworked our

strategies, skewing them in a surreal direction with little or no context in which to interpret the images or statistics.

By 1993 the effort involved became too demanding for different members. Most people worked full-time if not more, running their own businesses. More importantly, for all the effort involved, it began to feel routine. We had settled too clearly into one way of working. As the AIDS epidemic had evolved, along with the governmental and institutional responses to it, the early solutions are no longer appropriate. AS AIDS activists joined community based organizations (CBO's) and governmental agencies, many activists moved inside institution they had previously been excluded from. Many of these CBO's and AIDS organizations began to run media campaigns of their own, and even if they were not as politically sharp as Gran Fury's, they nonetheless occupied "public space" that we had formerly filled. Finally, the issues-drug trial design and protocol, financing social services for P.W.A.'s , insurance industry fraud-became less readily communicable in sharp billboard copy. Gran Fury's original strategies were unable to communicate the complexities of AIDS issues in the mid-1990's .

At the same time, our work began to feel like a signature style, a convenient product for the art world to use to fulfill its' desire to "do something" about the AIDS crisis. Gran Fury's status as flavor of the month in the American art world was over; interest in our work had shifted to Europe where we consistently felt handicapped by attempting to understand their specific issues, as well as by our inability to use colloquial slogans. In 1992 we designed a campaign for Montreal which utilized the symbols of Quebecois sovereignty to draw attention to AIDS issues -- specifically a warning to conduct research and design programs that would apply to the Canadian situation. The project backfired because the icon we chose to use was too potent -- some did not recognize it as an AIDS campaign. In general, we found that we could only produce the most general messages, otherwise we ran the risk of misreading a local situation or creating something that would fail in translation.

Bill Clinton, while not providing strong leadership for the AIDS crisis, is not easily demonized, and does not make openly hostile or stupidly misinformed remarks about AIDS. Reagan's blatant ignorance and hostility, and to a lesser degree Bush's as well, were easy targets for activism. Our early work was to draw attention to political and social issues of the AIDS crisis as we saw them. Those administrations initial lack of involvement made our work simple. Identifying aspects of the crisis as continued racism, sexism and homophobia was easy. The proliferation of issues, discourses, and the very expansion of efforts to end the AIDS crisis has meant that activism has changed. Though it may seem to many that the activism spawned by ACT UP had died, it has not. It has shifted focus. We have not ended the AIDS crisis, but work continues, and there is more to be done.

Future Sex Acts

The moment of early ACT UP has passed, and with it, large scale public demonstrations of outrage and anger. As AIDS awareness has spread into the mainstream, creating its own social sphere of community-based organizations, charitable institutions, even glossy magazines for the HIV and AIDS identified, many have organized to represent their particular interests -- Latino, African-American, hemophiliac, I.V. drug users, children with AIDS, homeless PWA's. ACT UP grew from the gay and lesbian community, and now it may be appropriate to re-examine the particular needs of this community. Not that the larger goals which would affect all should be abandoned -- reform is vitally important in light of the Clinton administration's inability to effect any substantive change in health care delivery. We simply need to recognize that our own community still has to fight for resources, representation, and the right to define strategies for fighting the epidemic.

Within the last two years, studies (conducted largely at the initiative of the gay and lesbian community) have revealed that the current efforts to prevent HIV transmission among self-identified gay men are failing, in spite of significant advances made to promote condom use. In San Francisco and New York, as many as an estimated 30 to 45% of HIV negative men between the ages of 18 and 25 reported engaging in unprotected anal intercourse within the previous six months. Many of these men know that wearing a condom prevents transmission; "wear a condom every time" and "safe sex is hot sex" campaigns fail to address the psychic resistance that leads some gay men to put themselves at risk even though they know better. Identification with HIV infected friends and lovers, the absence of a cure, the never ending toll of illness, the inability to imagine a time when sex will not automatically evoke death -- these are the issues that prevention activists must address if they want to reduce HIV transmission among gay men.

The current sexual climate has never been more firmly aligned against a sex positive approach to HIV prevention. The New York City Office of HIV Prevention has never conducted a study to determine the infection rate of gay men, and has not developed a new prevention campaign for gay men in over two years. More specifically, Mayor Giuliani has targeted gay sex establishments in his effort to improve the "quality of life" in New York. Alliances between local law enforcement and frustrated gay activists who don't trust the gay community to regulate itself have meant that the potential for self-determination on these issues have been taken outside, to be hashed out in dailies like The Post and The Daily News -- a desperate approach not likely to offer any realistic solutions.

Activists groups such as the AIDS Prevention Action League (APAL) and Community AIDS Prevention Activists (CAPA) have formed to readdress prevention needs and strategies from within the gay community. They have organized forums to encourage gay men to talk about when they do and do not practice safer sex; met with bar and club owners to discuss how they can assist prevention efforts, and have petitioned the city to allow the community to regulate itself, not the vice squad.

With discouraging reports of AZT's effectiveness in delaying the onset of AIDS at the 1992 Berlin AIDS conference and few encouraging developments in treatment, prevention has become the focus for many activists. Ten years of fighting AIDS has shown us the HIV education is not a conversion experience. Prevention must become an on-going effort that addressed not simply the mechanic of safe sex, but also our psychological needs. We must organize to develop our self-esteem within the community so that gay men feel that they have some stake in staying alive -- especially for young men who may be in the middle of casting off internalized homophobia absorbed from their families and schools. During first sexual encounters, they must feel able to say "no" to partners who would put them at risk. They must realize their vulnerability to infection in spite of their youth..

Rather than simply printing up a list of "Do's and Don'ts", AIDS organizations need to recognize the importance of individuals weighing the risks of certain sexual acts against their needs for sexual pleasure and emotional intimacy. In spite of the fact that no doctor will guarantee that one cannot acquire HIV through oral sex, many have made their own evaluation from anecdotal evidence, and are willing to take the low risk associated with unprotected oral sex without ejaculation. If AIDS organizations fail to reflect these community norms when they do not pose serious health risks, they will lose credibility. Individuals must be allowed to make choices in those grey areas; AIDS organizations should provide information to facilitate these choices.

Prevention campaigns must recognize the punitive messages which demonize unsafe sex do not effectively reach those who are having it; they may even reinforce it by making men feel guilty. The reality of our sexual lives must be reflected in prevention efforts, even if it does not conform to the desired behavior change. Only by identifying our lapses will we begin changing them.

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