Let The Record Show: Mapping Queer Art and Activism in New York City, 1986-1995

Tara Jean-Kelly Burk

Graduate Center, City University of New York

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds

Part of the History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons, and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/534

This Dissertation is brought to you by CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact deposit@gc.cuny.edu.
LET THE RECORD SHOW: MAPPING QUEER ART AND ACTIVISM IN NEW YORK CITY, 1986-1995

By

TARA BURK

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2015
This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Art History in satisfaction of the Dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

___________________  ______________________________________
Date  Professor Kevin D. Murphy
       Chair of Examining Committee

___________________  ______________________________________
Date  Professor Claire Bishop
       Executive Officer

___________________
Professor David A. Gerstner

___________________
Professor Sally O’Driscoll
THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

ABSTRACT

LET THE RECORD SHOW: MAPPING QUEER ART AND ACTIVISM IN NEW YORK CITY, 1986-1995

Advisor: Kevin D. Murphy

Although scholars increasingly scrutinize late twentieth-century American art produced in relation to social movements organized around feminism, anti-racist politics, health activism, and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) identity, scholars usually fail to address the importance of printed ephemera as a medium of artistic expression. Ephemeral materials, such as posters, are cheap to make and print. They are typically distributed illicitly via un-commissioned wheat-paste campaigns in urban public space. Collectives tend to make their designs copyright-free to encourage wide distribution. Particularly in the era before digital social media, these materials were central to the ways in which communities coalesced in urban spaces and created networks nationally though mail distribution. Within art history scholars tend to focus on the formal properties of design and the content of posters. This oversight of the structural capabilities of ephemera (i.e. its different modes of recirculation, its impact on the mobilization of activist projects, and the ways in which its placement and distribution can transform spaces) makes it difficult to grasp the full scope of artists’ contribution to social movements and broader social moments such as the culture wars. My dissertation counteracts the privileging of video art in accounts of AIDS activist art and introduces visual ephemera as an innovative and influential medium by examining three art activist collectives. Whereas video camcorders, a newly available technology in the 1980s,
became a key tool for the documentation of confrontational activism and empowering depictions of people with AIDS, posters were used as a means of communication – within communities impacted by HIV/AIDS and between marginal and mainstream publics. The use of printed materials to address the exigencies of AIDS activism was central to the reinvention of queer art activism in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

This dissertation systematically discusses three art collectives that represent distinct phases of artistic expression and modes of address. First, the Silence=Death Project, which created an eponymous poster in 1986 to unify and mobilize an activist response to the AIDS crisis. Second, Gran Fury produced sex positive imagery and changed media representations of people with AIDS, and homosexuals in general. The work of these two collectives contributed to the groundswell of sex positive, confrontational activities that emerged around the AIDS activism of ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power formed in New York in 1987). As a result in the early 1990s activism focused more broadly on sexuality, rather than exclusively on HIV/AIDS, emerged in the groups Queer Nation and Dyke Action Machine, explored in chapter 3. The lesbian public art collective fierce pussy, discussed in chapter 4, offered a feminist and lesbian critique of both queer and mainstream representational politics in the 1990s. Finally, the concluding chapter serves as an epilogue and looks at the individual practices of two artists associated with these groups (Gregg Bordowitz and Zoe Leonard) and a late work by fierce pussy. By placing the output of these collectives within the socio-historic, cultural, and aesthetic contexts of New York in the 1980s-1990s, this dissertation is a case study of political art during the divisive culture wars of the late twentieth century.
My focus on the role of printed ephemera, as a practice of embodied collectivity, foregrounds the importance of an urban context to the development of queer art activism in the late 1980s and early 1990s. A prime example of ephemera art and its re-engagement of aesthetics and the political is the collective the Silence=Death Project (1986-1987), which created the poster $SILENCE=DEATH$ in 1986. This work became associated with the rise of “direct-action” activism as ACT UP New York. Visual ephemera were central to the means and ends of direct-action activism, and $SILENCE=DEATH$ is a prime example of this phenomenon. The emblematic poster galvanized gay men and lesbians into a politicized and self-empowered, self-identified queer generation. On the heels of the Silence=Death Project, the collective Gran Fury (1988-1995) organized and became known as the “propaganda ministry” of ACT UP at the height of the ACT UP’s influence (1987-1993). Through commissioned projects Gran Fury expanded cultural activism towards mainstream publics with an array of ephemeral works including billboards and posters. The controversial reception of sexually explicit posters provides a means to examine the political and aesthetic effects of ephemeral reproduction and distribution. Through the slick graphics of AIDS cultural activism, as represented by the Silence=Death Project and Gran Fury, ACT UP’s signature style was created. Yet, these graphics were ultimately challenged on aesthetic and political grounds: conflating AIDS with gay men, too male-focused, too dogmatic, and/or too closely connected with capitalist advertising. In contrast, fierce pussy (1991-1994), asserted the issue of sexual difference through form, with the visual and conceptual rhetoric of its posters, which highlighted the androcentrism associated with Gran Fury.
By the mid-1990s most direct-action activist art collectives, such as the Silence=Death Project and Gran Fury, had disbanded. Artists from these groups began exploring themes related to their singular experiences of AIDS in individual projects. I argue that the development of two bodies of work – one collectively produced activist body of work, and one individually produced studio-based body of work – is paradigmatic of the generation of queer artists who emerged during the AIDS crisis.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my friends and lovers for their unending support, affirmation, and encouragement: Adi Zolotov, Diana Gibaldi, Jenny Salerno, Shauna Salustri, Bill Green, Terence Adams, Blair Doroshwalter, Giovanna Chesler, Lanita Ward-Jones, Rakiyah Tobias Jones-Ward, Katrina Raben, Ryan Clarke, Kelly Greenfield, Maria Russo, Bridgette Ricketts, Julia Regan, Joey Coldcuts, Michelle Wacker, Mary Beth Romeo, Kelly Komenda, Heath Williams, Ollie Walker, Irit Reinheimer, Thomasin, Lauren Miller, Mariko Wirth, Lauren Talarico, Greta LaFleur, Marian Gibfried, J. Cronin-Connolly, Caitlin Barry, and Sarah Green.

Thank you to my family for encouraging me to do well in school and pursue every opportunity to further my education and for supporting me along the way: Dad, Mom, Mary, Tommy, Adrienne, Billy, Johnny, Jackie, Dominic, Nicole, Nana, and Aunt Joanne.

Thank you to my mentors, professors, and colleagues at Stony Brook University and CUNY Graduate Center for your generosity and support and intellectual motivation, especially: Andrea Appel, Carol Lees, Kevin D. Murphy, Claire Bishop, Sally O’Driscoll, David Gerstner, Cynthia Chris, David Harvey, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Peter Hitchcock, Rhonda Cooper, Jonathan D. Katz, and Christa Erickson.

This dissertation is dedicated to the sexual outlaws and artists who comprise the generation (old and young) of AIDS and queer activists examined in these chapters.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................v

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....................................................................................ix

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS ................................................................................xii

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................1

**CHAPTER 1**  FORM FOLLOWS FEELING: THE ROLE OF VISUAL EPHEMERA IN THE RISE OF DIRECT-ACTION AIDS ACTIVISM, 1986-1987 ........40
  - HIV/AIDS in American Socio-Cultural History ..................41
  - Fear into Anger: The Rise of Direct-Action AIDS Activism ..........49
  - SILENCE=DEATH .................................................................53
  - Form Follows Feeling: the Design of SILENCE=DEATH ........59
  - SILENCE=DEATH within the Art Historical Context of the 1980s.....69
  - Let the Record Show ..............................................................75
  - Contextualizing SILENCE=DEATH within other Visual Responses to AIDS .........................................................84
  - Conclusion .................................................................................89

**CHAPTER 2**  RADICAL DISTRIBUTION: COMPLEXITY INTO SLOGANEERING, GRAN FURY 1988-1989 ...........................................94
  - Contextualizing Gran Fury within an Emergent Visual Culture of AIDS Activism .......................................................96
  - The Formation of Gran Fury .......................................................103
  - Gran Fury Projects ................................................................109
  - The Socio-Cultural Context of AIDS Cultural Activism ..........135
  - Conclusion .................................................................................139

**CHAPTER 3**  STREET POLITICS OF VISIBILITY: QUEER NATION TO DYKE ACTION MACHINE, 1990-1992 ........................................141
  - Queer Cultural Activism: Contestations over Space ..............145
  - Dyke Action Machine .............................................................167
  - Conclusion .................................................................................175

**CHAPTER 4**  STREET POLITICS OF DIFFERENTIATION: FIERCE PUSSY, 1991-1993 .................................................................177
  - fierce pussy ...........................................................................180
  - Toward a New Strategy of Queer Lesbian Representation ..........196
  - Conclusion .................................................................................204
# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1.1  The Silence=Death Project, *SILENCE=DEATH*, 1986  
1.2  *We Were Here*, 2011  
1.3  New York City Department of Health, *Bang! Your Dead*, 1980s  
1.4  Pam Mitchell, ed., *Pink Triangles: Radical Perspectives on Gay Liberation*, 1980  
1.5  Button, Toronto, 1981  
1.7  ACT UP Ad Hoc Working Group, *Let the Record Show ...*, 1987  
1.8  ACT UP graphics committee, *SHAME!* poster, 1988  
1.9  ACT UP Ad Hoc Working Group, *Let the Record Show ...*, 1987 (detail)  
1.10  *October*, “AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism,” 1987  
1.11  San Francisco AIDS Foundation, *Dress For the Occasion*, n.d.  
1.12  Robert Mapplethorpe, Bob Love, 1979  
1.14  Cleve Jones, *AIDS Memorial Quilt*, 1987-  
1.15  ACT UP New York, Post Office Demonstration, 1987  
2.1  The Silence=Death Project, *AIDSGate*, 1987  
2.2  ACT UP, *Quarantine Camp* float, 1987  
2.3  Gran Fury, *AIDS: 1 in 61*, 1988  
2.4  Gran Fury, *AIDS: 1 in 61*, in situ, 1988  
2.5  Richard Deagle and Victor Mendiola, *Know Your Scumbags*, 1989  
2.6  Gran Fury, *All People with AIDS Are Innocent*, 1988  
2.7  Gran Fury, *Read My Lips* (male version), 1988  
2.8  Gran Fury, *Read My Lips* (female 1st version), 1988  
2.9  Gran Fury, *Read My Lips* (female 2nd version), 1988  
2.10  Gran Fury, *AIDS Behind Bars*, 1988  
2.11  Gran Fury, *Sexism Rears its Unprotected Head*, 1988  
2.12  Gran Fury, *Men Use Condoms or Beat It*, 1988
2.13 Gran Fury, *Kissing Doesn’t Kill: Greed and Indifference Do*, 1989
2.14 United Colors of Benetton advertisement, c. late 1980s
2.15 Gran Fury, *Women Don’t Get AIDS. They Just Die From It*, 1992
3.1. Pink Panther stencil, 1990
3.10 The Gap, Inc., *Individuals of Style* (Whoopi Goldberg), 1989
4.1 fierce pussy, *I am a ... and proud!* 1991
4.2 fierce pussy, *I am a ... and proud!* 1991
4.3 fierce pussy, *I am a ... and proud!* 1991
4.4 fierce pussy, *Re-Naming the Streets*, 1992
4.5 fierce pussy, *What is a Lesbian*, 1993
4.6 fierce pussy, *Political Greeting Card Campaign*, 1992
4.7 Gang, *Read My Lips*, 1992
4.11 Vanity Fair, cover, August 1993
4.13 Gran Fury, *Thank God for AIDS. This Is To Scare You*
4.14 fierce pussy, *She Had Recurring Dreams About the Girl Next Door*, 1991
4.15 fierce pussy, *Are You a Boy or A Girl?*, 1991-2
4.16 fierce pussy, *We Just Really Enjoy Each Other*, 1991-2
5.1 Red Ribbon Project, 1991
| 5.2  | Gran Fury, *Four Questions*, 1993 |
| 5.3  | Gran Fury, *Four Questions* (installation photograph) 1993 |
| 5.4  | Gran Fury, *Four Questions* (in situ), 1993 |
| 5.5  | fierce pussy, *fierce pussy mobile*, 1994 |
| 5.6  | fierce pussy, *DYKE: The Final Frontier*, 1994 |
| 5.7  | United Colors of Benetton advertisement, 1992 |
| 5.8  | Therese Frare, *David Kirby on his Deathbed (Ohio)*, 1990 |
| 5.9  | United Colors of Benetton, *HIV Positive* campaign, 1993 |
| 5.10 | Gran Fury, *Good Luck, Miss You*, 1995 |
| 5.11 | Zoe Leonard, *Strange Fruit (For David)*, 1992-1997 |
| 5.12 | David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled*, 1990 |
| 5.15 | fierce pussy, *Get Up Everybody and Sing*, 2010 |
INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines the strategies of three art collectives, the Silence=Death Project (1986-1987), Gran Fury (1988-1995), and fierce pussy (1991-1994). It looks to these collectives as a means of tracing the development of queer art activism in New York City, as well as the significance of ephemera, an artistic medium that has gone relatively unstudied.¹ These collectives, in different ways, were creative and influential within their environment, and strove to maintain activist integrity while probing the boundaries of art and politics. They largely relied upon low-tech resources such as xerox-machines and wheat paste to create un-commissioned text-and-image based ephemeral projects that addressed the AIDS epidemic, in particular, and queer sexuality, more broadly. Each collective developed distinct and innovative modes of address towards its activist aims. Each was influential within the fields of political activism, contemporary art, and/or corporate advertising, for the development of visual strategies (such as using the syntax of advertising) to create highly stylized and effective modes of activism. By focusing on these collectives and their eventual dissolution, I illuminate the historical, political, social, cultural, geographic, and stylistic factors that shaped the broader development of identity-based political art. My particular contribution is to trace the development of printed ephemera as a queer activist art practice in the late 1980s and early 1990s and argue for its role in the reconfiguration of both artistic and political activity in the American culture wars of the late twentieth century.

¹ Although the art history of political collectives has expanded in recent decades, issues concerning the medium of ephemera have been largely overlooked. Since protest materials are often anonymous and frequently reproduced, they do not tend to wind up on display in art galleries and museums, where the singularity and authorship of objects is an implicit mandate.
Between 1986 and 1995 the proliferation and distribution of AIDS cultural ephemera was extensive and varied. This dissertation, therefore, is not a comprehensive study or catalog of AIDS cultural activism; the emblematic works I discuss represent only a small percentage of the total output of the period. While other collectives or artists could have been chosen, the primacy of these groups within the queer activist milieu that developed around ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) in New York justifies their inclusion and signals their influence, especially since key players from ACT UP created and used printed ephemera. The Silence=Death Project, Gran Fury and fierce pussy works are in the public domain, and collections of the latter two are held in the Manuscripts and Archives Division of the New York Public Library.²

The scope of this work is limited to New York partly to avoid general and totalizing assessments of AIDS cultural activism, but also in order to achieve a more thorough understanding of the relationship between printed ephemera, the formation of queer art activism, and the urban environment. My access to the ACT UP Oral History Project (AUOHP), an online database of interviews (over 200 and counting) with activists involved in ACT UP New York, was a primary factor that led me to work on this dissertation topic. AUOHP was founded in 2001 by ACT UP members Sarah Schulman and Jim Hubbard, and made its public debut in 2009 in association with the exhibition


---

² Additionally, I consulted archive collections of AIDS activist ephemera at the New York Public Library, the New York Historical Society, the Lesbian Herstory Archives, Visual AIDS, and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Community Center in New York City.
Throughout this research and writing process, I continuously mined this source for information about the role of art within ACT UP, as well as the political and socio-cultural context in which the group flourished and eventually declined. These archives include interviews with many artist-activists including Avram Finkelstein, Tom Kalin, Marlene McCarty, and Michael Nesline, as well as cultural workers and theorists including Ann Philbin and Douglas Crimp. These interviews offer a retrospective discussion of the heyday of ACT UP and typically feature a reassessment of strategies that were effective, and those that were not. Many of these conversations touch upon the role of cultural and ephemeral materials in AIDS activism. However, there are limitations to the AUOHP. For example, some participants in the collectives I examine are not part of the AUOHP and the interviews began in the early 2000s and some are thus dated. Personal interviews with artists would have likely provided clarity to points lacking in this dissertation, namely information about and perhaps photographic documentation of the specific urban display locations of printed ephemera. These are issues to be addressed in the next phase of this research project, which will be a book manuscript. This is the first art history dissertation to make such extensive use of the AUOHP; as such the information contained in this project is an important contribution to the field.

The creation and distribution of printed ephemera must be understood within the context of graffiti and street art, two predominant public art forms in New York in the 1980s. In a sense the illicit dissemination of printed ephemera by AIDS and queer ACT UP New York: Activism, Art, and the AIDS Crisis, 1987-1993 was organized by Helen Molesworth and Claire Grace in 2009 at the Carpenter Center for Visual Arts at Harvard University, and in 2010 the exhibition traveled to the art gallery White Columns in New York City. In each instance the exhibition featured three main parts: a newly commissioned installation by fierce pussy; a presentation of the ACT UP Oral History Project, and the display of cultural activist materials, including t-shirts and posters, drawn from the personal collections of ACT UP veteran activists.
cultural activists throughout the streets of New York was similar to the ways in which graffiti “writers” would sneak into subway train yards and spray paint entire train cars. Both were public methods to represent identity and assert presence. The practice of “tagging” property with one’s signature was an important spatial practice during an era of extreme disparity in New York City, between lower and upper classes. In the 1970s graffiti emerged as a cultural movement alongside hip-hop in the Bronx and uptown sections of Manhattan. Graffiti is an illegal practice. Under the tenure of Mayor Edward Koch, New York City transit police took aggressive measures to stop graffiti. The meaning of graffiti murals, signatures, and tags is typically limited to people who are also members of the graffiti or artistic community or gang culture referenced. By the early 1980s, however, the aesthetics and style cachet of graffiti art became popularized, and the medium became institutionalized through the burgeoning East Village art scene. Before the art market crash of 1987 so-called “graffiti on canvas” works by street writers such as Lady Pink, Crash and Daze were very successful. Artists such as Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Kenny Scharf rose to prominence in this period with graffiti-derived painting styles. As it was created by and for the gay community, early printed ephemera (such as *SILENCE=DEATH*) had a similar function to graffiti in that it entailed multiple levels of address. In fact, each of the artist collectives under consideration in this

---

4 The intersection between graffiti and contemporary art is exemplified in the 1983 documentary film *Wild Style* by Charlie Ahearn, a 1974 graduate of the Whitney Museum of American Art Studio Program and a co-founder of the artists’ group Colab (Collaborative Projects) in 1977. Colab organized many exhibitions in members’ studios or else temporary sites such as Times Square (*The Times Square Show* in June 1980).

dissertation mined this aspect of printed ephemera’s multivalent address: it was designed to speak to marginal as well as mainstream publics, in different ways.

Why was graffiti and street art so prevalent in New York City in the 1980s? In the 1970s and 1980s, New York City was characterized by crime and fiscal crisis. This engendered certain opportunities for artists, such as cheap rent and empty buildings on which to post art. During this period, street violence was a frequent occurrence due to crack and heroin epidemics and high rates of poverty; in 1980 there were 1,814 homicides in New York City and in 1990 the number of annual homicides was at an all-time high of 2,245. Due to industrial decline there was a loss of economic opportunities and this plus high crime rates led to “white flight,” the movement of mostly middle-class white populations from the city to the suburbs. New York City lost nearly a million residents over the course of the 1970s, and throughout the next decade there were many abandoned and neglected properties throughout New York. Artists capitalized upon such spaces in areas including the East Village, where they established squats to live in and display art, such as Bullet Space on East 3rd Street. Nearby in what is now known as Tribeca, Lucy Lippard was responsible for the curation of windows at Printed Matter, at its original location on Lispenard Street. In the late 1970s and early 1980s Lippard commissioned artists to create topical displays on issues such as anti-nuclear activism and

---


7 Ibid.

8 Printed Matter was founded in 1976 by artists as a for-profit art space and in 1978 it became a nonprofit organization focusing on artists’ publications. Its original location was in Tribeca and in 1989 it moved to SoHo, and Chelsea in 2001.
poverty. The ubiquity of urban blight and poverty in New York City during the period fostered an emphasis on cultural projects dealing with socio-political issues.

In the 1980s New York was in transition, from the recession of the 1970s towards the gentrification that would characterize the city in the later 1990s and 2000s. The decade was marked by fluctuations in urban development, due to a volatile stock market. It was also shaped by a reactionary moral attitude among city council members and developers, who sought to “clean up” the seedy and dangerous (read: queer and/or of color) areas of the city, such as Times Square, to make them safe for families and tourists. As it emerged in New York, AIDS and queer art activism took advantage of the structural possibilities for public protest art, and it also inserted sex positive queer imagery into the urban landscape at a moment of great ideological divisiveness. This dissertation considers the ephemera archives of AIDS and queer cultural activism with regard to these urban issues. For example, the development of advertising-derived aesthetics in illegal public art projects by the collectives the Silence=Death Project and Gran Fury can be understood in part as a canny strategy to avoid the attention of the police, since illegal corporate advertisements were typically left alone, as opposed to the so-called vandalism of graffiti and other forms of street art.


In recent years the remarkable achievements of the AIDS activist movement, particularly during the 1980s, began to receive greater attention, after a period of neglect in conventional media and scholarship. Several exhibitions, one with an accompanying catalog, as well as several documentary films and newly commissioned public art projects by activist art collectives involved with ACT UP, have brought increased attention to the subject. Though Gran Fury has attained a degree of recognition within the art world, the Silence=Death Project and fierce pussy remain relatively unknown. This is also the case for the majority of cultural producers who contributed to the AIDS activist movement, with the exception of participants who have gone on to successful careers as individual artists, including Zoe Leonard, Marlene McCarty, and Carrie Moyer. Several publications were produced within the context of the crisis by activist-participants, namely Douglas Crimp who in 1987 edited a special issue of the art journal October entitled “AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism.” This issue featured essays on the representation of AIDS in discourses of art, media, culture and science. Crimp’s distinction in this essay between elegiac and activist responses to AIDS is problematic in that it elides the possibility of more nuanced approaches to art activism. This dissertation utilizes these primary sources but expands upon them to create a more

12 In fact since the 2009 ACT UP New York exhibition there has been a spate of films, exhibitions, and cultural events examining the objects and legacies of AIDS cultural activism in the 1980s and 1990s. They include: fierce pussy (2008, Printed Matter, Manhattan); Straight to Hell: Twenty Years of Dyke Action Machine (2012, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn); Gran Fury: Read My Lips (2012, New York University 80WSE Gallery, Manhattan), Why We Fight (2013, New York Public Library, Manhattan), AIDS in New York: The First Five Years (2013, New York Historical Society, Manhattan) as well as in the documentary films United in Anger: A History of ACT UP (Directed by Jim Hubbard, Los Angeles, The Film Collaborative, 2012) and How to Survive a Plague (Directed by David France, 2013, New York, IFC Films).
comprehensive approach to the history of AIDS and queer cultural activism in New York. In 1990 Crimp co-authored, with Adam Rolston, *AIDS DEMO GRAPHICS*, a small book providing documentary photography and reproductions of graphics used by AIDS activists, along with descriptions of the protests at which they were utilized. While this holistic approach (the connection between graphics and demonstrations) is noteworthy, the overly politicized tone of the manifesto-like pamphlet detracts from its usefulness as a thoroughly researched work of scholarship (for example, the essays are written in first-person). Other accounts of AIDS cultural activism, notably by Alexandra Juhasz, Gregg Bordowitz, and Ann Cvetkovich, have tended to focus on video rather than printed ephemera. In this sense the exhibition *ACT UP New York: Activism, Art, and the AIDS Crisis, 1987-1993* was a significant event; it also generated new examinations of the ephemera of AIDS activism primarily in the form of exhibition reviews. Several essays have been devoted to Gran Fury and interviews with the collective were recently published in the catalog accompanying the retrospective exhibition *Gran Fury: Read My Lips* at New York University in 2012. A recent contribution to the field is Tommaso Speretta’s book *REBELS REBEL: AIDS, Art and Activism in New York, 1979-1989*. This is a well-illustrated chronological survey that combines an art historical and curatorial approach to the topic, with an afterword by Loring McAlpin of Gran Fury. The book is

---


14 A retrospective of Gran Fury at New York University and the accompanying catalogue featuring reprinted and newly commissioned interviews with the collective is notable.
largely affirmative and has been critiqued on the grounds of inaccuracies regarding the history of the AIDS epidemic. Speretta does not address the shifts in queer activism during the 1990s, which is a central contribution of this dissertation. Whereas Speretta focuses on the contribution of art and activism to the fight against AIDS, the primary focus of this dissertation is to argue for the centrality of printed materials produced by the Silence=Death Project, Gran Fury, and fierce pussy, to the development of queer art activism.

Despite a relative lack of attention towards AIDS cultural activism, within contemporary art history the practice of art activism has generated productive scholarship and debate. AIDS-centered cultural activism and the feminist and queer-art collectives it inspired have recently received curatorial attention, yet there is often no critical scrutiny of the work produced and how it intervened in its public context. While there have been several dissertations, articles and exhibitions published on New York-based


activist art collectives such as Group Material (1979-94), there are no book-length studies of queer or feminist art activism of the period.\textsuperscript{17}

Beyond this literature, and more generally with regards to urban public space, several important thematic studies have addressed the intersection of aesthetic practices and social and political criticism in the public sphere. In her influential book \textit{Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics}, Rosalyn Deutsche wrote about debates concerning urban space in New York in the 1980s.\textsuperscript{18} More recently, curatorial attention to the art history of the 1980s, much of it aimed towards promoting New York as a major center of art in that decade, provides important context to the work under consideration in this dissertation.\textsuperscript{19} Particularly concerning the work of Group Material, historians have discussed politicized posters in terms of their relationship to urban context. This is a notable departure from the general art history of posters, which has tended to emphasize aspects of graphic design. More recently, scholars including Kevin Murphy and Sally O’Driscoll have argued that activist ephemera are highly contingent and should be considered as such.\textsuperscript{20}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item Taking account of debates regarding the politics of urban space in the 1980s, Rosalyn Deutsche calls for a democratic spatial critique marked by conflict, rather than consensus. She focuses on individual artists such as Krzysztof Wodiczko. See Deutsche, \textit{Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics} (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998).
\end{thebibliography}
This dissertation builds upon the work of aforementioned scholars to argue that ephemeral materials should not be considered as isolated examples of graphic design, but rather situated as constellations of embodied collectivity. In other words, I focus not only on the relationship of ephemera to space, but also on the uses of ephemera by people who congregate within space. While recent trends in literature on AIDS cultural activism have focused on affect and archives, I seek to provide — without jettisoning concepts of affect and the archive — an art historical approach that takes into account issues of space and embodiment.  

My aim is to create a complex understanding of the relationship of this art to its urban context. I do so by focusing on the imbrications of ephemeral printed materials with the performative events that constituted AIDS and queer activism — direct actions, including mass rallies, the infiltration of institutions, and creative public spectacles such as Die-Ins and Kiss-Ins.

This dissertation is primarily a social history of activist graphic design, yet it also emphasizes the ways in which the placement and distribution of printed matter contributed to the development of a “sexual geography.” As I argue in each chapter, AIDS and queer cultural activism were characterized by an intersection of sexual and

---


22 Conventionally, the city’s spatial characteristics are neutralized as an inspirational backdrop. For a recent example, see Douglas Crimp and Lynne Cooke, eds., Mixed Use Manhattan: Photography and Related Practices, 1970s to Present (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, in association with MIT Press, 2010).
political spheres. This is reflected in the sex positive printed materials used to publicize the movement. Depending on the location of posted ephemera these materials served different functions. For example in neighborhoods such as the East Village or West Village with large LGBTQ populations, they were affirmative and informative and contributed to movement building. In other areas of the city, for example near City Hall in lower Manhattan, such materials served as an enduring protest statement, as they remained posted to walls and other surfaces long after demonstration crowds dissipated.

Within the discipline of art history ephemera occupies a paradoxical position. On the one hand it is a key concept, if not named as such, for a generation of conceptual artists who emerged in the late 1960s and pursued dematerialization as a post-minimalist aesthetic. This occurred historically at the same time as the social upheaval of the New Left movement of the 1960s and its countercultural emphasis on posters and other forms of ephemera. However, rarely did the two realms meet, as the former was developed within the realm of contemporary art and the latter within the realm of populist visual culture. On the other hand ephemera (namely, posters) typically receives a rote examination, if at all, within the disciplinary realm of material culture including social movement studies, graphic design, or cultural studies. What is interesting about AIDS activist art is that it emerged within a context that seemingly fused these two realms: contemporary art and populist visual culture. Thus, one reason that ephemeral materials
have been overlooked is that the category does not fit neatly within disciplinary concepts of either “art” or “politics.”

The subject of art and politics is foundational to modern and contemporary art history. Within the context of New York in the 1980s, political art was taken out of the galleries and into new spaces of engagement such as city streets, by activist-minded collectives such as the Guerrilla Girls, Gran Fury, and Group Material, who utilized provocative slogans and imagery to take on topical issues such as gender discrimination in the art world, the AIDS crisis, and U.S. foreign policy (respectively). This was a different conception of political art, indebted more to the do-it-yourself spirit of the New Left rights movements for identity-based causes such as feminism, civil rights, and gay liberation, that it was to earlier historical models of agitprop wherein graphics were made in service of government parties or unions. “Agitprop” is a term associated with political propaganda, typically in service of the Communist party. Agitprop cultural materials were central to the dissemination of the October Revolution of 1917 that led to the creation of Soviet Russia. Commentators on AIDS activist printed ephemera sometimes utilize the term “agitprop” to describe the striking graphics and bold legibility of these materials. In this dissertation I use the terms “political art,” as described above to convey the importance of text-and-image campaigns as a strategy of the 1980s, or else “activist art” or “cultural activism.” The latter is a term devised by Douglas Crimp to describe the importance of text-and-image based ephemeral materials within ACT UP; it is discussed at length in Chapter 1.

---

23 For example Deborah Gould’s history of ACT UP employs a sociological perspective, and focuses on the role of emotion in political activism. There is a minimal acknowledgment of the role played by SILENCE=DEATH and other AIDS activist ephemera, yet the emblem is used on the cover of the book.
This dissertation focuses on the creation of new urban spaces through the dissemination and display of posters. As such it utilizes a spatial concept of the “public sphere,” which is derived from the work of Jürgen Habermas, that entails the formation of “the public” through the distribution, articulation, and contestation of ideas in social sites, such as salons or coffee houses, distinct from the spheres of government or the domestic realm.24 AIDS and queer cultural activism utilized ephemeral forms of communication to relay information and create new publics. Ephemeral materials, as they were disseminated on city surfaces such as building walls, telephone poles and subway cars, also created new public spaces wherein LGBTQ people felt empowered rather than oppressed.

Beyond the strategic utility of ephemera as a space-making project, there was also a potent symbolic charge, as a review of *ACT UP New York* emphasized: “The movement’s reliance on cheap, ephemeral media was not solely tactical, but bore a certain pathos […] literalizing […] the prevalent view that HIV-infected populations were expendable.”25 In other words, ephemeral materials in the public sphere metaphorically referenced those disposed of and disappeared by the AIDS crisis. Much of the material produced within the context of AIDS activism has been lost, or else it is held

---

in personal archives of participants.\textsuperscript{26} The fact of ephemera’s partial archives underlines a sense of historical memory as partial, even contested, rather than totalizing.

This project approaches the task of historicizing AIDS cultural activism with a critical awareness that any endeavor to do so is inevitably forestalled by the fact that so much historical memory has been lost due to the deaths of its participants and the ephemerality of the artwork. Any consideration of the ephemeral production of movement politics is a project to reconstruct the circulation of discourse that constitutes the spatial, epistemological, and politicized experience of urban space. In terms of the ways in which histories of dissent are written and understood, there are significant parallels in the treatment of ephemera as singular and the theory of revolutions as spontaneous. Just as AIDS activists distributed troves of ephemera unrecoverable in their magnitude, radical uprising occurs due to the confluence of many factors rather than a singular event, as one might encounter it in journalistic and less-rigorous historical accounts.\textsuperscript{27}

The formation of ACT UP in New York City in 1987 was less a singular moment than the culmination of months of rising anger among gay men and lesbians due to government inaction regarding the AIDS crisis as well as the 1986 U.S. Supreme Court ruling \textit{Bowers v. Hardwick} that maintained the illegality of sodomy. ACT UP, a self-described “diverse, non-partisan group of individuals united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis,” drew upon extant groups including the Gay Men’s


Health Crisis, an AIDS service organization founded in New York in 1982, and the Lavender Hill Mob, radical gay AIDS activists working in New York in the mid-1980s. My project develops a concept of “radical distribution” to foreground this topic as an art history of resistance, one that is part of a groundswell of collaborative art and activist practices in New York City that seized public display opportunities opened by the city’s post-industrial status from the early 1970s through the early 1990s.

In considering the formal and symbolic properties of cultural ephemera and the ways in which these materials functioned defensively and offensively in the public sphere, I hope to provide a historical understanding of shifts in urban space in New York in the 1980s and 1990s. In other words, how and in what ways did activists produce and distribute posters and other ephemera? Where and for how long did this work remain? How did conditions of display change under the policies of different mayors (Edward Koch, David Dinkins, Rudolph Giuliani)? Did activists merely appropriate and take on the conventions of advertising and street art display in the public sphere, or did they invent new modes of presentation? Whatever the case, it is clear that aesthetic and political fatigue set in. Whereas AIDS- and queer- activism in the late 1980s and early 1990s is often described in terms of a “transformative experience that freely mixed politics with art, Eros, and underground sociability in a New York that feels poignantly distant,” the mid-to-late 1990s have been characterized as a time in which frequent direct actions gave way to exhaustion and despair. The efflorescence of identity-based activist

---

28 Edward Koch (Democrat) served three terms as mayor of New York City, from 1978-1989; David Dinkins (Democrat) was mayor of New York City for one term, from 1990-1993; Rudolph Giuliani (Republican) served as mayor of New York City for two terms, from 1994-2001.
art collectives that formed in the wake of ACT UP could not sustain itself for more than a few years, with most groups nearly or totally defunct by 1994.

**Toward a Taxonomy of AIDS Cultural Activism**

ACT UP and its affiliated collectives orchestrated a shift in the ways in which the U.S. news media covered HIV/AIDS and American publics understood it. Activist graphic designers developed campaigns reinforcing ACT UP’s goals of publicity and attention to the AIDS crisis. The resulting body of work can be categorized in five ways, in terms of function: mobilization, AIDS visibility, safe sex education, accountability politics, and queer culture building.

Mobilization is an important goal for movement building. As I will detail in Chapter 1, the shift between 1986 and 1987 from individual to collective responses and from feelings of guilt and shame towards cathartic anger was a turning point in the history of AIDS activism. The poster *SILENCE=DEATH* was instrumental to this shift. As such it can be understood in terms of mobilization. It was designed to draw in, incite, and direct its audiences towards meetings and demonstrations. Sold and distributed as buttons and t-shirts, *SILENCE=DEATH* became an important fundraising and consciousness-raising tool. As stated by Avram Finkelstein, one of the creators of *SILENCE=DEATH*, the poster “was designed by six individuals who felt alone, but raised their voices anyway and discovered they were surrounded by a community.”

---

innovative strategy of drawing viewers in with a compelling image and then relaying concrete information via text in smaller print was influential on subsequent AIDS cultural activism, such as Gran Fury’s 1988 poster *Read My Lips* (discussed in Chapter 2). Beyond the enigmatic appeal of *SILENCE=DEATH* as a work of street art, the sleek aesthetics of *SILENCE=DEATH* became a signature of ACT UP demonstrations.

The clout of mass-produced graphics, as opposed to hand-written signs, was significant. Crimp underscores this in the introduction to *AIDS DEMO GRAPHICS*:

> Having well-prepared visuals at such quickly arranged demonstrations is especially disarming to our opponents, who begin to fear our ubiquity. Protest movements have always had all-night poster-painting parties to prepare for such eventualities; ACT UP’s innovation is to get the wheels of mechanical reproduction turning on equally short notice.  

Crimp’s comment indicates a level of self-awareness that was crucial to the success of ACT UP. Ephemeral materials were routinely blitzed into the public sphere to prioritize information and agitation. While AIDS activist ephemera were distributed throughout the five boroughs of New York City, most were posted in downtown Manhattan south of Fourteenth Street. This is because such materials were used to recruit new activists, mixed in with the quotidian ephemera of social movements and publicity materials for sex clubs, bars, and concerts. This area included the city’s established gay neighborhood in the West Village and the new queer scene in the East Village, as well as the contemporary art district south of Fourteenth Street. AIDS cultural activist ephemera

---

31 Crimp and Rolston (1990), 22.
contributed to a vibrant print culture of locally produced newspapers and magazines.\textsuperscript{32} As Gran Fury described it, “We recognized our ‘propaganda’ had a role in the group identity. Having graphics that made our demands not only visible but also to some extent pleasing gave ACT UP a stronger sense of itself.”\textsuperscript{33} The effect of so many posters visible in the public sphere was an increased number of people participating in demonstrations and a newfound confidence to be out as a queer person and move through urban space. This contributed to the development of an activist queer culture.\textsuperscript{34}

AIDS visibility was crucial within an American context that sought to stigmatize and marginalize people with AIDS and reassure “normal” (read: heterosexual) Americans that they were safe from risk of infection. AIDS visibility entailed changing the language of AIDS, as in The Denver Principles that promoted the term “people with AIDS” as opposed to “AIDS victims.”\textsuperscript{35} In an age before the research resources of the Internet, a


\textsuperscript{34} As discussed at length in Chapter 3, in the late 1980s-early 1990s “queer” was reclaimed from a derogatory slur and repurposed as a sexual identity that refused to segregate individuals based on gender or sexual preference, as terms such as “lesbian,” “transgender,” and “gay” do.\textsuperscript{34} Instead it marked a new collectivism, as well as a shift in emphasis towards performativity – in other words, a contingent, experimental notion of identity that was more about who you do than who you are.\textsuperscript{34} The etymology of queer speaks to the values of activists during this period, as does the ways in which it was used to designate not only a sexual identity, but also a sexual politics and a new school of academic thought. Because of its origins as a pejorative slur, violence was embedded within the term; indeed it remains to this day offensive when used as an epithet.

crucial task of AIDS activism was compiling accurate statistics and information about the disease. The fact-sheets distributed at ACT UP demonstrations became a vital source of information for both mainstream publics and the media. AIDS activists sought to underscore the continuing emergency of AIDS. A key example is the crack-and-peel sticker *THE AIDS CRISIS IS NOT OVER*, made in 1988 by the collective Little Elvis. The sticker features large bold all-caps sans serif type: “The AIDS Crisis is Not Over.” This is at once a declarative statement and a rather enigmatic one. It was made in response to instances in the mainstream media (including reputable papers such as the *New York Times*) to diminish the crisis of AIDS and assure white heterosexual audiences that AIDS was not and would not become their problem. *THE AIDS CRISIS IS NOT OVER* addressed this “racist, homophobic tactic” by insisting otherwise.\(^\text{36}\)

Safe sex education was essential since AIDS is a sexually transmittable disease. Activists sought to promote sex positivity rather than moralizing sexual shame. Within gay and lesbian communities this entailed a re-imagining of the visual culture of sex and desire, to include the eroticization of protection measures such as condoms and dental dams. It also entailed addressing the specific needs of constituencies at high risk for HIV infection, such as heterosexual women of color living in poverty.

A major tactic of AIDS cultural activism was accountability. ACT UP-affiliated cultural activists in New York made localized protest ephemera. Targets included NYC Commissioner of Health Stephen C. Joseph (*Deadlier than the Virus*, Richard Deagle, people with AIDS as “victims” and called upon people with AIDS to “practice self-empowerment and self-reliance, and to take an active role in the formulation of decisions that affected their lives.”

\(^{36}\) Crimp and Rolston (1990), 43.
subway advertising poster, 1989); Mayor Edward Koch (Invest in Marble and Granite, Ken Woodard, newspaper advertisement, 1989; How’ m I Doin’ ?, Richard Deagle, subway advertising poster 1989); and Catholic Cardinal John O’Connor (Know Your Scumbags, Richard Deagle and Victor Mendolia, subway advertising poster, 1989; Public Health Menace, poster, 1989). In a 2007 interview Douglas Crimp retrospectively called this tactic the “faces strategy.” Referring to Let the Record Show ... and other AIDS cultural activist works made between 1986 and 1991, Crimp noted that focusing on “bad guy(s), because they’re doing the wrong thing with regard to AIDS… was a lot easier to do than to take on structural inequality, the larger, more complex analysis of politics.”

This practice of “complexity into sloganeering,” as Crimp termed it, was crucial to the success of ACT UP in wresting (at least partial) control of the discourse surrounding the AIDS crisis. It was a new take on the political and didactic work of protest graphics, successful designs that informed passersby and the media about the purpose of demonstrations. These placards were accompanied by fact-sheets that succinctly reduced the overall message of the protest into press-ready sound bites. For example, Let the Record Show... used this tactic. At the LGBT Pride Parade in June 1988, ACT UP made a “Hall of Shame,” which featured photographs and statements by “AIDS

---

37 Speaking from the perspective of a white gay man in ACT UP in the late 1980s, Crimp continued, “We could just suspend thinking about the huge complexity of the problems of this society, and think more myopically about the urgencies of what we were confronting with regard to things like the drug approval process, or the fact that the president hadn’t said the word ‘AIDS.’” Crimp quoted in Sarah Schulman, “Interview with Douglas Crimp,” ACT UP Oral History Project May 16, 2007 (http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/crimp.pdf), (accessed June 1, 2013): 38.

38 Ibid.

39 Let the Record Show ... is discussed at length in Chapter 1.
Four activists carried a large sandwich board featuring a photograph of then-presidential candidate George H.W. Bush, accompanied by the headline “GUILTY,” spray-painted in large type, and a caption identifying Bush along with his quote, “Testing is more effective than treatment.”

While direct actions and demonstrations focused on specific issues – access to experimental drugs, participation in drug trials, housing and hospital beds for people with AIDS – cultural activism aimed to create awareness, galvanize support, and change dominant representations of AIDS. ACT UP member Amy Bauer, a seasoned feminist activist with experience in the Women’s Pentagon Action Group, estimates that she trained over a thousand people in civil disobedience during her tenure at ACT UP, where she worked as a marshal at many demonstrations. She described the requirements of graphic legibility as such:

I think the most important thing is the clarity of why you’re there and what you’re demanding and that that was to be really simple and crystal clear – both to you and to – using props or signs or banners or whatever, to make that crystal clear, to the people you’re confronting and the people walking by you. If that’s what you want.

The fact of myopia relates both to the crisis of AIDS in the 1980s and to the fact that “poverty wasn’t the dominant issue in the lives of many of the people in leadership in ACT UP.” Crimp quoted in Douglas Crimp, interview by Sarah Schulman, New York, NY, May 16, 2007, ACT UP Oral History Project May (http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/crimp.pdf), (accessed June 1, 2013): 39. In other words, it is a marker of privilege not to focus on broader issues. This is an important component of AIDS activist success, since a nearly singular focus kept the movement in momentum and led to concrete achievements. Between 1988 and 1990 the landscape of activist engagement broadened: ACT UP membership expanded there was an increased consciousness to issues of difference as well as debates over the utility of singular versus comprehensive approaches to the AIDS epidemic.

Media coverage of the protests, such as an account in the New York Times of an ACT UP protest at City Hall, on March 28, 1989, often used descriptions of posters to relay the overall message of the demonstration:

Dozens carried banners and posters calling for more money, expansion of overcrowded hospitals, and housing for homeless people with AIDS… many signs and chants specifically criticized Mayor Edward Koch. One placard bearing his photograph said ‘10,000 AIDS Deaths, How’m I Doin?’ [and] a poster with a dripping red palm print said the Mayor had ‘blood on his hands.’ Another asked, ‘How many more must die?’

ACT UP demonstrations were sensational and created a national consciousness of the AIDS activist movement for those who would never witness or attend a demonstration first hand. Journalists often relied upon photographs of demonstrations and descriptions of protest graphics to characterize ACT UP. In this way, as one ACT UP member put it, “t-shirt graphics, hilarious signage, and visual puns on posters, often puncture the cruelest oversimplification in the layout of a mainstream newspaper. ACT UP is a media organization and these images can themselves feed the protest.” As such, ACT UP represented itself through the reproduction of its graphics, even if it could not prevent biased reporting.

One of Gran Fury’s most successful activist graphics was Bloody Hands (1988), which was devised in terms of instant legibility and widespread distribution. Bloody Hands had various iterations in New York City and elsewhere. This graphic appeared on city property as a red handprint, on demonstration placards, posters, and t-shirts worn by

---


activists. There were localized versions (mentioning NYC Mayor Ed Koch) and more generalized ones (*The Government Has Blood On Its Hands: One AIDS Death Every Half Hour*). (As such *Bloody Hands* was a signifying practice, meant to engender an association with the presence of activists). *Bloody Hands* came to signify the directed rage of collective action, as its appearance on city streets was coincident with a series of controversial and well-publicized ACT UP demonstrations, such as the 1988 “Seize Control of the FDA” action. *Bloody Hands* was a variation of the indictment practices outlined above. It re-routed AIDS cultural activism away from personal expressions and indictment of individuals and towards the violence of political scandal (i.e., “blood on your hands,” or “caught red handed.”) Notably, the vast majority of AIDS cultural activist ephemera did not engage in the representation of people with AIDS. Rather the focus was on the representation of AIDS.

In addition to urban public space, the realm of culture was a crucial forum for the dissemination of AIDS information. As discussed thus far in this Introduction, this included the activist distribution of cultural ephemera in the urban public sphere, which was a visibility tactic to publicize the crisis, recruit and mobilize new activists, and spread life-saving information about HIV/AIDS. Due to the fact that in the media AIDS was either marginalized or addressed in a sensational manner, such activist gestures were vitally important.44 The creation of empowered and sex positive depictions of people living with AIDS as well as, more broadly, of queer people, was all the more significant

due to the dearth of adequate representations of AIDS in commercial entertainment.\textsuperscript{45} 

Steven C. Dubin, in his 1992 book \textit{Arresting Images: Impolitic Art and Uncivil Actions}, explains the important role of visual arts in the AIDS crisis:

\ldots much of the most powerful and controversial work [about the AIDS crisis] has surfaced in the visual arts. Visual artists who incorporate AIDS as a theme into their work have helped to reorient the field in recent years. Whether they primarily emphasize the human dimensions of the disease or directly address social or political issues, visual artists have become key manufacturers of AIDS images.\textsuperscript{46} 

While it is beyond the scope of this study to examine visual arts and AIDS more broadly, it is important to acknowledge the wide range of artwork – activist and otherwise – produced within this context. Because the stakes were so high, there were contentious debates within the arts about how best to respond visually to the AIDS crisis.\textsuperscript{47} As Dubin suggested, following Crimp, the two main forms of artistic response to the AIDS epidemic were elegiac and activist. These two forms had diverse purposes – memorial and didactic, respectively – but notably in both cases, art was created largely without regard for the market.\textsuperscript{48} 

By the late 1980s some gay men and lesbians charged that the model of AIDS cultural activism, as exemplified by the image-and-text based public sphere interventions of ACT UP (the Silence=Death Project, Gran Fury, Richard Deagle and others) was

\textsuperscript{45} This was partially because it was very difficult to secure funding for such projects. See Steven C. Dubin, “AIDS: Bearing Witness” in \textit{Arresting Images: Impolitic Art and Uncivil Actions} (New York: Routledge, 1992), 197-225.

\textsuperscript{46} Dubin (1992), 205.

\textsuperscript{47} Dubin (1992), 197-225.

\textsuperscript{48} One exception to this is the fact of fundraising, which is a major function of art created in response to AIDS.
increasingly more prescriptive than progressive. These debates over art and politics surfaced curatorially.⁴⁹ For example the exhibition “Against Nature: A Group Show of Work by Homosexual Men,” organized in 1988 by Richard Hawkins and Dennis Cooper for LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions), was a show of art by gay male artists, which was intended to address the AIDS crisis. As Hawkins described it, his vision was to interface with AIDS in a different way:

[we planned to] …include art from every medium in which homos were working out their shit…This was the late ’80s, and the only contemporary gay-related exhibition had concentrated on social realist art which subsumed individual expression in favor of activist sloganeering. In short, we couldn’t relate. Every artist we knew or liked was depressed, horny, and confused, not necessarily in that order. So we devised a showcase for personal albeit highly aestheticized expressions of homosexual identity, whether AIDS was referenced or not. Prominent art collectives of the period like Testing the Limits, Group Material, Gran Fury and ACT UP were out from the beginning, although several members of ACT UP were asked to participate.⁵⁰

The early date (1988) of this exhibition demonstrates the immediate impact of what Hawkins described as “contemporary art-hating activism, the kind heralded by such critics as Douglas Crimp and entrenched in a kind of ‘put down your paintbrushes, this is war’ production.”⁵¹ Hawkins undoubtedly refers to Crimp’s aforementioned 1987 essay

---

⁴⁹ There were challenges mounted to these activist modes of production, primarily in the form of exhibitions such as “Against Nature: A Show by Homosexual Men,” (organized by Dennis Cooper and Richard Hawkins, LACE – Los Angeles Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1988) and “Erotophobia” (Simon Watson Gallery, New York, 1989). See Nayland Blake et. al., eds., In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1995).


⁵¹ Hawkins continues, describing AIDS cultural activism as “a practice which we perceived as growing progressively more pervasive, more conservative, more essentialist, more predictably arid and photo-text based, more dependent on the conveyance of supposed hard fact and indisputable truth, and more and more
“AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism,” which was a polemical defense of agitprop against elegiac responses to AIDS that relied upon allusion, illusion, and memorial. The work showcased in “Against Nature” was neither agitprop nor elegiac, rather it sought to “emphasize the transgressive potential of personal expression and unfettered sensual indulgence.”52 Works by George Kuchar, Michael Tidmus, Arnold Fern and others engaged in aesthetics that were variously campy and grotesque. “Against Nature” provides important aesthetic alternatives to the strategies of collectively produced political sloganeering and didacticism pursued in ACT UP-based AIDS cultural activism. From either side of the ideological spectrum (right or left), the policing of images was a dangerous endeavor in light of the socio-political conservatism that led to so-called culture wars against obscenity in art – be it sexually explicit agitprop or decadent sexuality-themed studio based work.53

Gran Fury was part of a larger cohort of graphic design-producing collectives and individuals affiliated with ACT UP. In a 2002 conversation with Gran Fury, Douglas Crimp observed:

My memory is that other artists and graphic designers in ACT UP became resentful of the status Gran Fury had attained in the art world. And in the end it is certainly unjust that ACT UP’s graphic style is very often credited to Gran Fury accusatory to the point that all work outside of such prescribed practices was condemned as phobic, unengaged and removed from social significance or import.” Hawkins quoted in Blake (1995), 57.


53 During the culture wars over obscenity in the public sphere the expression of non-normative sexuality in the public realm was an act of resistance. The stakes of both queer activism and art were high. In the summer of 1989 there were congressional debates over the definition of “obscenity” and “indecent” art. See Richard Bolton, Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts (New York: New Press, 1992).
alone, when in fact many others who were never members of Gran Fury contributed to the invention of that style.\textsuperscript{54}

Perhaps because Gran Fury formed from the ad hoc ACT UP working group responsible for Let the Record Show... Gran Fury assumed a particular status within the art world. In fact Crimp was integral to the documentation of the graphic production of many individuals and collectives, through his “AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism” essay as well as his role in the publication of AIDS DEMO GRAPHICS. Gran Fury was actualized within a context of an emerging discourse of activist cultural responses to AIDS, which included the October magazine special issue. As Stevin Dubin observed “… the AIDS epidemic has … invigorated an uncommon artistic species, the guerilla-type arts collective.”\textsuperscript{55} Dubin traced the phenomenon to the formation of the Silence=Death Project in 1986, and the activist success of SILENCE=DEATH as a ubiquitous symbol of resistance. Gran Fury exemplifies the traits Dubin identified as characteristic of such collectives: anonymous membership, cooperative production, appropriated imagery, confrontational tactics, and a social change mission. Crimp, too, focuses on SILENCE=DEATH and Let the Record Show … as exemplary “engaged, activist aesthetic practice(s).”\textsuperscript{56}

AIDS- and queer cultural activist artworks were “nothing-to-lose cultural formations” made rapidly with an economy of means.\textsuperscript{57} Just as “queer” was reclaimed by


\textsuperscript{55} Dubin (1992), 220. He lists the Silence=Death Project, Gran Fury, Art+Positive, Boy with Arms Akimbo, Helm’s Angels, and Stiff Sheets.

lesbians and gay men during this period, and thus transformed from a pejorative slur to a self-affirming identity, so too did cultural activist projects retain the symbolic violence that characterized the experiences of sexual outlaws in the public sphere. Violence was often formally embedded in these projects, for example, in the pink triangle of \textit{SILENCE=DEATH}, which was partially a reference to the pink triangle badges assigned to homosexual inmates in Nazi concentration camps during the Second World War.\textsuperscript{58} In the context of AIDS activism, “queer” asserts self-empowerment; it is a smart conceit for gays and lesbians to “strike first.” Like “The Denver Principles,” queer identity and its visual culture of protest refused a victimized stance and adopted one that was defiant and at times aggressive.\textsuperscript{59} This dissertation examines the ways in which from 1986 onwards, amidst the unrelenting crisis of HIV/AIDS and in the wake of the \textit{Bowers v. Hardwick} decision, AIDS activism became a battle about sexuality waged in the streets. Being queer, as activists would proclaim in 1990, was “not about the right to privacy, but the right to be public.”\textsuperscript{60}


\textsuperscript{58} Violence is underscored in the bloody handprints of a 1988 Gran Fury campaign and in the bomb logo and slogan (“Be the Bomb You Throw”) of the Lesbian Avengers (projects that will be discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively).

\textsuperscript{59} “The Denver Principles” is a manifesto written and adopted in 1983 at the National Lesbian and Gay Health Conference’s Second National AIDS Forum, held in Denver. The Principles condemned passive and disabling descriptions of people with AIDS as victims and promoted self-empowerment instead.

Radical Distribution

Activist graphics are not stable cultural objects; they are transient, functional instruments often conceived for a specific event or, at least, in terms of topicality. As Eileen Myles noted in her review of the exhibition ACT UP New York: Activism, Art and the AIDS Crisis, 1986-1993:

Surprisingly – and maybe, when you think about it, a little ecstatically – very little material is still extant out of the enormous output of ACT UP’s many individual artists and groups. So much work by these artists virtually disappeared into the very environment that spawned it. Their production was absorbed by the world of their time. In terms of radical distribution, that’s an utter coup.61

In order to consider the “radical distribution” of ACT UP graphics, and the ways in which they did (or did not) function in terms of resistance in the public contexts of their display, it is helpful to situate this visual archive in terms of “dark matter,” defined by Gregory Sholette as “the bulk of the artistic activity produced in our post-industrial society,” a form of “shadow creativity” that is “essential to the functioning of the institutional and elite art world” yet remains largely “invisible.”62 Although the ACT UP-affiliated art collective Gran Fury has received a measure of critical recognition and material support from art institutions (while consistently negotiating the risks and benefits of increased visibility and funding) the bulk of AIDS cultural activism remains more firmly within the realm of cultural dark matter. This art/history of resistance is part of a groundswell of collaborative art and activist practices in New York City that seized public display opportunities opened by the city’s post-industrial status and transformation, from the


early 1970s through the early ‘90s. It includes the multiple and overlapping affinity groups, committees and collectives of ACT UP New York, such as Little Elvis, Metropolitan Health Association, Gang, and the Silence=Death Project, as well as those who produced political posters individually: Donald Moffett, Richard Deagle, and Vincent Gagliostro, among others. Although beyond the scope of this dissertation, video was a crucial medium for AIDS cultural activism, produced in New York by collectives such as Testing the Limits, DIVA TV, and House of Color.

Any consideration of the ephemeral production of movement politics is a project to reconstruct the circulation of discourse that constitutes the spatial and epistemological experience of urban space. Myles’ observation about ephemera’s multiplicity and obsolescence is crucial, since when we encounter surviving materials today they often exist as singular objects, yet posters and other ephemera were always produced in multiple copies, intended for far-ranging distribution. In fact, one could substitute “ephemera” for “dark matter” as the answer to Sholette’s riddle: “What is invisible, has great mass, with an impact on the world that is everywhere in plain sight?”

In addition to appropriation from the spheres of art history and advertising, activist-artists drew from each other. An abortion rights poster by the ACT UP-affiliated collective Gang paired a close-up photograph of a hairy vagina with the all-caps phrase “READ MY LIPS BEFORE THEY’RE SEALED” (a decidedly feminist appropriation of the slogan “Read My Lips” used by Gran Fury and President George H.W. Bush). As discussed in Chapter 4, this image also appeared in a fierce pussy campaign protesting

homophobic and misogynistic policies that sent greeting cards to New York City Cardinal John O’Connor and New York Senator Alfonse D’Amato during the election season of November 1992 (Zoe Leonard, a member of Gang and fierce pussy, used these images in her well-received installation at Documenta IX in 1992). To raise awareness and show support for the female defendant in a highly publicized rape trial at St. John’s University in Queens, WAC placed an advertisement in St. John’s student newspaper featuring the heading “Stop Rape at St. Johns” over a large hand pushed out with “No Means No” printed over its palm. This echoed Gran Fury’s bloody handprints graphic, which itself directly recalled, as art historian Richard Meyer has pointed out, the poster John Heartfield made for the Communist party in 1928, which featured the large outstretched palm of a worker’s hand. As Crimp and Rolston stated in *AIDS DEMO GRAPHICS*, “what counts as activist art is its propaganda effect; stealing the procedures of other artists is part of the plan – if it works, we use it.”

Ephemeral materials displayed in the urban environment of downtown Manhattan were central to the ways in which “the AIDS movement, like other radical movements,

---

64 Zoe Leonard described Gang as a “rough and tumble response to Gran Fury,” an activist art collective formed by ACT UP members after Gran Fury became a closed group: Suzanne Wright, Zoe Leonard, Adam Rolston, Martin McElheny, Loring McAlpin, Wellington Love and others. Wright enlisted Leonard to Gang in order to push for more women’s issues. Leonard and Wright spearheaded *Read My Lips* (c. 1992) but the entire collective worked on it at Loring McAlpin’s apartment (McAlpin was also a member of Gran Fury). Most of Gang’s projects were akin to Gran Fury since they mined the graphics of commercial advertising. This poster was an anomaly in terms of style and is more akin to the work of fierce pussy, the collective Wright and Leonard cofounded with others in 1991 that is discussed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation. See Sarah Schulman, “Interview with Zoe Leonard,” *ACT UP Oral History Project*, January 13, 2010, http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/leonard.pdf [accessed June 1, 2013]: 51.


66 Crimp and Rolston (1990), 15.
creates itself as it attempts to define itself.”67 The intertextuality of AIDS cultural activism and its offshoots demonstrate that public political art projects in New York City constituted a vibrant field of reference, wherein slogans became “deeply seated in downtown queer fashions and New York City’s landscape, tight shirts on taut bodies and stickers in every corner phone booth.”68 We should consider the art history of these ephemeral materials in spatial and embodied terms of collective agency and representation. Because of their ubiquity and range, activist graphics in lower Manhattan not only discursively rendered the queer activist community but also came to signify the presence of activists to the broader public, particularly because of the frequency and size of demonstrations in the area. The contingency of activist ephemera is lost when these materials are considered in isolation as examples of graphic design, rather than as constellations of embodied collectivity. In the former category of reception, the aesthetic dimensions of agitprop seem less complex than studio-based artworks touching on similar themes.

Radical distribution is perhaps the best way to understand the important takeaway from these materials. This concept combines three significant aspects of ephemeral printed materials: its provocative content, its illicit status, and its different modes of (re)circulation. Perhaps the greatest legacy of ephemeral works is their reproducibility. Activist designs were a form of style-conscious publicity, and were displayed across the

67 Bordowitz (1987), 197.

68 Navarro and Saalfeld (1991), 347. As Navarro and Saalfeld discuss in their essay, in the photo-based artworks of ACT UP member Lola Flash, for example, this ephemera-filled urban environment becomes the stage for a critique of ACT UP aesthetics with regards to issues of race, ethnicity and gender exclusions.
country in kitchens and dormitories and worn as t-shirts. As Richard Meyer has argued, “long after a collective’s dissolution, campaigns and posters still circulate;” in other words because Gran Fury encouraged the “use, re-use, reproduction” of its posters, “the works went on to have a life of their own.”

In a panel discussion in 2012, Gran Fury members cited this recirculation as a primary achievement and described it as a “public service announcement.”

Gran Fury member Loring McAlpin emphasizes the importance of this distribution with his recollection that “most people saw these pieces in their afterlife as postcards and posters, put up in a cubicle or an office.”

Importantly, this was also a counter-politics of display and ubiquity in a society over-determined by partisan politics and beleaguered by divisive battles in the public sphere over culture wars.

Activist graphics were not only displayed in public but also inhabited a larger public domain, since they were intended for reproduction and distribution beyond the specificity of their posted locations. The reproducible and fragmentary nature of ephemera was key to the impact of these works. Beyond New York City, posters by ACT UP New York’s visual collectives enacted micro-demonstrations when displayed in public and institutional settings. At Yale University in 1992, controversy erupted when a student hung Gran Fury’s *Sexism Rears its Unprotected Head* poster on a wall reserved for student comments in a hallway of the law school. After one of the Deans posted an

---


objection to the poster’s depiction of an erect penis, a two-hour debate about free speech between the Dean and more than twenty-five students took place in front of the poster. One second-year law student observed, “It was like Plato’s Republic!” Another said, “it’s just a penis – you only have to go over to Woolsey Hall to see lots of naked women in stone.”

At Carnegie Mellon University in 1994, a gay professor brought harassment charges against a Catholic student after a disagreement about the professor’s display of *Know Your Scumbags*, a 1989 poster by Richard Deagle and Victor Mendolia that morphologically compares archconservative Cardinal O’Connor to a condom (this image is discussed in Chapter 2). Interestingly, there were protests concerning this image as late as 2009, by members of MassResistance and the Catholic League in Massachusetts, when Harvard University organized the exhibition *ACT UP New York: Activism, Art and the AIDS Crisis, 1987-1993*. One reviewer from the Catholic League called ACT UP a “homosexual urban terrorist group” and the exhibit a “sick display.” Brian Camenker of MassResistance characterized the exhibit as “a window into what the homosexual movement thinks of you, your children, religion, and America,” as it “involves sexual perversion, child pornography, and anti-Catholic bigotry.” Such reactions demonstrate the lasting power of these images.

---


Dissertation Outline

This dissertation utilizes archival research and oral history interviews to analyze collective activist art practices as well as individual studio projects. It takes into account the dense field of production and reception that characterized public art in New York City in the 1980s. Its methods include art historical comparison and interpretation and theoretical approaches drawing on feminism, critical geography, and queer and lesbian theories of representation. A major contribution of this dissertation is its reconstruction of the circulation of cultural ephemera by activist art collectives and its demonstration of the ways in which these practices radically undermined the reactionary image politics and conservative urbanism that characterized the American culture wars. The interdisciplinary methods of the dissertation remedy a gap in literature by addressing the spatial and ephemeral status of public art activism.

Chapters are organized chronologically so that political, aesthetic, and social developments can be considered in relation to the urban environment. The dissertation’s three chapters each comprise a case study of an activist art collective (the Silence=Death Project, Gran Fury, and fierce pussy). In these chapters central themes include: debates about aesthetic form and politics, the negotiation of visibility in public space by socially marginalized groups, and fractiousness within social movements based on conflicts of gender, race, and sexuality. The final chapter of the dissertation examines the dissolution of the aforementioned collectives in the mid-1990s and uses the studio projects of several artists concurrently or formerly involved in activist art collectives to examine issues of form, affect, and political representation.
Chapter 1 will examine the first wave of AIDS cultural activism in the public sphere, from 1986 to 1988. It focuses on the collective the Silence=Death Project, which six gay men formed in 1986 in New York as a consciousness raising group in order to deal with AIDS. I trace the design and distribution of SILENCE=DEATH and its subsequent role in the rapid rise of radical street activism during the period, though several events including the formation of ACT UP in March 1987 and the window installation Let the Record Show ... I demonstrate that the content and form of SILENCE=DEATH was central to the organization of gay and lesbian individuals into a community of radical AIDS activists. I argue that the stark aesthetics and terse message of SILENCE=DEATH, along with the formation of ACT UP, re-defined marginalized communities as angry yet empowered in the face of their insistent characterization as pathological and, even, in the face of death.

Chapter 2 considers the rise of Gran Fury between 1988 and 1989, a collective formed from the ACT UP working group that created the New Museum installation in 1987. This chapter deals with issues of institutional versus activist contexts of art production and reception. It also traces the increasingly dense visual terrain that public sphere activists had to contend with. I focus particularly on debates over race, gender, and sexuality that emerged concerning certain Gran Fury projects. This chapter examines the question: how did Gran Fury communicate messages about AIDS and sexuality to broader, mainstream publics and in so doing, impact the discourse of HIV/AIDS in the U.S.?

Chapters 3 and 4 examine the rise of queer and lesbian art activist collectives in New York in early 1990s. Significantly, these collectives wed the formal toolkit of AIDS
cultural activism to the “in-your-face” figurative styles of contemporary feminist art. Addressing the insistent marginalization of queer women within AIDS activism and mainstream feminism, artist collectives such as fierce pussy (f. 1991) and Dyke Action Machine (f. 1991) disseminated un-commissioned street art across lower Manhattan in which the politics of lesbian visibility was moved front and center. The aesthetics of fierce pussy departed from the style of Gran Fury and even other queer and lesbian activist art in that, I argue, the collective asserted the issue of sexual difference formally with the visual and conceptual rhetoric of its posters, in order to counter the masculinist impulses behind the gay-male projects associated with the AIDS movement.

Chapter 5 considers the dwindling of oppositional AIDS, queer and feminist art activism in the mid-1990s, by examining the duality of art and activism that shaped the creative life of most artists who were involved in these collectives. This chapter examines the final projects of Gran Fury and fierce pussy. It concludes with a consideration of the relationship between collective and individual art practice in the work of Gregg Bordowitz and Zoe Leonard. Together, these five chapters create a narrative of political public art in New York City that foregrounds the role and impact of cultural ephemera. They also explore the history of political graphics within New York and its relation to the structural and ideological constraints of urban development.

The art history of ephemeral cultural activism is still in an inchoate stage. This dissertation aims to provide the reader with a preliminary understanding and contextualization of the development of several types of cultural activism through the projects of the Silence=Death Project, Gran Fury, and fierce pussy. By tracing the development of public political art in New York City, as well as the significance of
ephemera, an artistic medium that has gone relatively unstudied, this study sheds light on the urban history of New York more broadly. In order to meet the demands of research topics that are interdisciplinary, such as this study of political graphics, art historians need to address the spatial and ephemeral status of public art activism. This research productively expands the literature on art and dissent in the public sphere, and should play an important role in shaping debates on queer and lesbian aesthetics and new media in coming years.
Chapter 1

Living with AIDS is like living through a war, which is happening only for those people who happen to be in the trenches. Every time a shell explodes, you look around and you discover that you’ve lost more of your friends, but nobody else notices. It isn’t happening to them. They’re walking the streets as though we weren’t living through some sort of nightmare. And only you can hear the screams of the people who are dying and their cries for help. No one else seems to be noticing.

Vito Russo, “Why We Fight” (1988) ¹

Introduction

The quote above by AIDS activist Vito Russo (1946-1990) largely encapsulates the issues that frame this dissertation. At the heart of the HIV/AIDS struggle, vividly articulated by Russo, are the two nearly unprecedented factors that activists faced when confronting the crisis of HIV/AIDS from its first appearance in 1981. ² First, the fact that people with AIDS (PWAs) were stigmatized by the press, because the disease quickly became associated with homosexual acts and intravenous drug use. Second, as sexual identity became more politicized, more gay people publically identified themselves as


² HIV refers to Human Immunodeficiency Virus, which causes the condition of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). The HIV virus disables the immune system, making the body susceptible to diseases known as opportunistic infections. A person has AIDS if they are HIV positive and have an illness associated with AIDS, or a white blood cell count lower than 200. Early AIDS deaths are considered those before June 18, 1981, when medical professionals declared (what would, in 1982, become known as) AIDS an epidemic in the U.S. There are several probable AIDS deaths in the 1970s. Gay men were among the first Americans to exhibit symptoms of AIDS-related illnesses, such as Kaposi’s Sarcoma. The first newspaper articles about AIDS in the U.S. focused of gay men. See for example Lawrence K. Altman, “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals” New York Times, July 3, 1981.
such. Russo was part of a new wave of direct-action activism that emerged in the middle of the 1980s, when ideological issues regarding the representation of AIDS were staged in the public sphere: discussed in the media and protested in the streets.\(^3\) Central to Russo’s activism was the importance of images. Taking Russo’s cue about the significance of images in cultural politics we can ask, what role did the visual arts play in the rise of radical AIDS activism in the United States?

The first part of the chapter establishes the context of HIV/AIDS in the U.S. My aim is to characterize the experiences of people with HIV/AIDS, primarily concerning the socio-political conservatism of the 1980s and the rise of direct-action activism as a result. The second half of the chapter is dedicated to the creation, distribution and impact of the AIDS activist poster, *SILENCE=DEATH* (figure 1.1). In short, the ultimate goal of the chapter is to argue that visual ephemera were central to the means and ends of direct-action AIDS activism, and that *SILENCE=DEATH* is a paradigmatic example of this phenomenon.

**HIV/AIDS in American Socio-Cultural History**

Although reports of mysterious illnesses began circulating informally among some gay men in the late 1970s it was not until the summer of 1981 that the first news reports of “an exotic new disease” occurring among young previously healthy gay men appeared. Some of the earliest AIDS cases were signaled by the presence of a rare and unusually aggressive cancer, Kaposi’s Sarcoma (KS), which was caused by viral

infection and recognizable by cutaneous lesions. On July 27, 1981 the gay newspaper *The New York Native* published the first feature article about the disease, “Cancer in the Gay Community,” written by Lawrence D. Mass.4 “Gay Cancer” was an early moniker for what would become known, in 1982, as “AIDS” (acquired immune deficiency syndrome). 5 Due to the breadth of AIDS’ impact, public space became a central forum for communication. Gay men relied on community networks such as local newspapers and bulletin boards to share information about this mysterious yet increasingly ubiquitous phenomenon. But the dissemination of information was not only presented as data-driven pamphlets or high-pitched rhetoric on posters. In the 2011 film *We Were Here*, Ed Wolf recalls his indelible first encounter with AIDS, in 1981 (figure 1.2):

> I remember looking in the window of Star Pharmacy (on Castro Street in San Francisco) and there were these little Polaroid photographs that this young man had made of himself. There were maybe three or four. The first one [depicted the interior of the man’s mouth] and inside, these big, purple splotches. And then there was another picture, he had taken his shirt and pulled it up … on his chest, big purple splotches. They (the Polaroids) were just on the window and underneath was a handwritten note that said something like, “Watch out guys, there’s something out there,” something like that. And, Oh My God it made a huge impact on me.6

Encounters with KS became a common occurrence in gay bathhouses, the commercial saunas and steam baths where men went to have sex with other men. In the early 1980s,

---


6 *We Were Here*, DVD, directed by David Weissman and Bill Weber (Red Flag Releasing, 2011).
bathhouses were a $100 million dollar industry, a thriving culture of public anonymous sex that many considered a spoil of the battles waged during the gay liberation movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. In the early 1980s as more and more gay men became visibly sick, a contentious issue within the community press was whether or not to close bathhouses. By 1983, the medical community determined that HIV infection is likely caused by an infectious agent, either transmitted sexually or through exposure to blood. A discourse of “safer sex” began to emerge within the gay community, focused on measures that could prevent the transmission of HIV through sexual contact, specifically the use of condoms during anal intercourse and fellatio. The pamphlets How to Have Sex in an Epidemic: One Approach, published by Richard Berkowitz and Michael Callen in New York in 1982, and Play Fair by the activist group Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, published in San Francisco in 1982, are considered the first safe sex manuals. How to Have Sex in an Epidemic was written in consultation with medical doctors and drew upon guidelines for safe sex already circulating informally among activists across the country. These guidelines included using condoms, avoiding sharing bodily fluids and changing

---

7 For information on bathhouses see Rodger Streitmatter, Unspeakable: The Rise of the Gay and Lesbian Press in America (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995), 243 and Sarah Schulman, My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life During the Reagan/Bush Years (New York: Routledge, 1994), 100-120. “Gay Liberation” refers to the radical social movement to end legal and social discrimination against homosexuals. Gay liberation is typically dated to 1969 because of the violent Stonewall Riots that happened on June 28, 1969 at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village. The Stonewall Riots were a watershed moment within modern gay history: gay, lesbian, and trans people fought back against police oppression. In fact the movement began in the mid-1960s when a generation of homosexuals radicalized by the countercultural ethos and civil rights battles of the era rejected the conservative homophile movement that was predominant since World War II. Gay liberation activists embraced the word “gay” rather than homosexual or homophile, and people were encouraged to “come out” and publically declare gay and lesbian identity rather than remain closeted. Gay liberationists used direct action and consciousness raising and embraced sexual experimentation. In the mid-1970s as the national political climate became more conservative, the gay and lesbian movement in the U.S. became more formal and advocated for civil rights.

8 Ibid.
sexual behaviors rather than merely reducing the number of sexual partners. This was a “sex positive” approach that was an important antidote to contemporary responses – within both mainstream and gay contexts – that took a punitive approach towards sexuality by associating sex with death and using frightening visual tactics to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS. For example, a poster by the New York City Health Department from the 1980s that depicts a heterosexual couple in bed with the caption “BANG! YOUR DEAD” (figure 1.3).  

In the early years of the epidemic the response to AIDS was uneven, even within the gay press, wherein coverage was often characterized by confusion and skepticism. 

Some gay papers argued against restricting bathhouse sex, and continued to promote unsafe sex – i.e., sex without the use of a condom and/or with multiple partners – despite warnings that such activities were spreading the disease. Rodger Streitmatter, regarding the tacit responsibility of the gay press for thousands of early AIDS deaths, argued, “it is difficult to indict the papers. Information about how AIDS was being spread was uncertain, and, after years of enduring government-sanctioned discrimination gay Americans had good reason to be skeptical of public health officials and government-

---


10 For many gay men, public sex was an important and fulfilling part of their lives; debates over sex positivity that continued into the 1990s indicate how high these stakes were perceived even amidst a public health crisis. This issue was central to the history of AIDS. See Douglas Crimp, Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002) and Dangerous Bedfellows, ed., Policing Public Sex: Queer Politics and the Future of AIDS Activism (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2008).
supported researchers.**11 Yet in the early years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic these gay publication networks were vital routes of information and communication for a marginalized population besieged by the disease.**12

From the first reports of illness, particularly in hard-hit cities such as San Francisco and New York, gay men came together to take care of the sick, develop and publicize safe sex education, obtain treatment, fund research, and advocate on behalf of people with AIDS. Informal networks of individuals seeking participation in experimental drug trials and holistic treatments were formed. The Gay Men’s Health Crisis was founded in 1982 in New York City as the first community-based AIDS service provider in the U.S.13 Also in 1982, the West Coast organizations San Francisco AIDS Foundation and the Shanti Project developed the “San Francisco Model of Care” emphasizing home- and community-based service provision.14 These efforts were

---

11 Gay Americans had valid cause to be wary of institutions in the decades following the postwar persecution of homosexuals led by Senator Joseph McCarthy and on the heels of efforts by Anita Bryant and others in the late 1970s who campaigned to ban homosexuals from teaching positions. Before (and after) gay liberation many gay men and lesbians faced incarceration or institutionalization for living an open, “out,” gay life. In response to these conditions gay men and lesbians developed survival strategies including coded behavior, discrete public sexual cultures and ephemeral networks of communication, for example magazines such as *The Ladder* (the first national lesbian publication, published monthly from 1956 to 1970). See Streitmatter (1995), 245.


13 GMHC was founded in 1981 when six gay men and their friends gathered informally at the home of Larry Kramer to discuss the mysterious new illness circulating among gay men and to raise money for support services.

14 In San Francisco, city officials eventually utilized the San Francisco Model of Care to develop its own response. This did not happen in New York City where the Catholic Church was particularly influential and as such an abstinence-only message was promoted. For an overview of the history of activist service provision in the gay community in the early 1980s (and a critique of the professionalization of AIDS services from the mid-1980s on) see Cindy Patton, *Inventing AIDS* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991).
necessary because there is an incontrovertible trajectory of informed neglect on the part of the US government in response to AIDS.

AIDS activism developed in two directions: first, in terms of tangible services such as fundraising and healthcare and second, it also necessitated a fight for representation. Because of its association with homosexuality, AIDS was instantly stigmatized within a homophobic society; this led to misinformation and denial, which exacerbated the spread of AIDS in the United States. Many Americans assigned gay men a level of sexual and moral culpability for becoming HIV infected. Gay men, male and female prostitutes and intravenous drug users were the first populations of people with AIDS; they were not considered “innocent victims” (as were, for example, babies infected with HIV by their mothers). AIDS prejudice was socially sanctioned by homophobia and impacted the ways in which the media, the government, and the medical establishment responded to the epidemic. For example, many written and oral memoirs recount tales of hospital staff leaving meals outside the doors of AIDS patients for fear of contagion, and families refusing to acknowledge cause of death in obituaries and at funerals due to the homophobic stigmatization of AIDS.15

---

15 For example, Robert Vazquez-Pacheco recalls, “I was angry … I went through those early days of the orderly leaving the food tray – the few times that he [Vazquez-Pacheco’s lover] was hospitalized – on the floor outside his room, or the nurse putting on the space suit to come talk to him.” Robert Vazquez-Pacheco, interview by Sarah Schulman, New York, NY, December 14, 2002, ACT UP Oral History Project, http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/vazquez.pdf [accessed August 1, 2014]:45. For more on the homophobia of early responses to AIDS see Cindy Patton, Sex and Germs (Boston: South End Press, 1983).
In the 1980s, many U.S. citizens learned about AIDS in a manner thoroughly mediated by social prejudice against gay people. In many cases, HIV/AIDS was presented as “nothing to worry about” for the “general population,” presumably straight readers. The degree of vitriol leveled against AIDS, and gay men by association, is evident in the conscription measures proposed in the mid-1980s that many AIDS activists characterized as a means to force HIV-positive people into quarantine. This was not an unreasonable conclusion, as shown by a December 1985 Los Angeles Times poll that indicated 51% of Americans surveyed favored the quarantine of people with AIDS. Proposition 64 in the state of California (1986) would have added AIDS to the list of communicable diseases, making it possible to corral people with AIDS. In March 1986 the New York Times printed an op-ed by the conservative pundit William F. Buckley Jr. that called for a mandatory “AIDS tattoo” on the upper-arm and buttocks of people with AIDS, to prevent the infection of intravenous drug users and gay men.

Thus gay men and other AIDS activists had to, in addition to providing vital health care services, shift the conversation about HIV/AIDS and take control of the representation of people with AIDS. “The Denver Principles” is a manifesto written and

---

16 The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 initiated a new era of reactionary U.S. politics, which is evident in the clear divide between mainstream and gay responses to HIV/AIDS in the first years of the crisis. After the social upheaval of the 1960s and the liberal pluralism of the 1970s there was a marked shift towards conservatism among the so-called “moral majority” of mainstream Americans. For a feminist perspective on this period, see Susan Faludi, Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women (New York: Crown, 1991).

17 See Kinsella (1989).


adopted in 1983 at the National Lesbian and Gay Health Conference’s Second National AIDS Forum, held in Denver. The Principles condemned passive and disabling descriptions of people with AIDS as “victims” and called upon people with AIDS to “practice self-empowerment and self-reliance, and to take an active role in the formulation of decisions that affected their lives.”

On the heels of the forum, the People with AIDS Coalition of New York was founded in 1985 to further this mission of dignified and purposeful lives with AIDS, “thus shifting the emphasis away from the high risk of fatality associated with the disease.”

Because major media focused on the “general population,” gay people were forced to intervene with the media to insist on the terms in the spread of information.

From its inception, HIV/AIDS was a battleground of representation. The divided climate in the U.S. fueled the types of accounts that exposed the ostensibly neutral realm of disease as deeply partial and politicized. Beyond activist responses to HIV/AIDS as outlined above, there were intellectuals and artists who explored the ways in which HIV/AIDS and its social responses were discursively constituted. In other words, from AIDS’ first appearance the scientific “facts” of the illness were mitigated by social factors. Scholars sought to demonstrate that “AIDS does not exist apart from the practices

---

20 Museum label for Why We Fight: Remembering AIDS Activism, New York, New York Public Library, April 1, 2014.

21 Museum label for Why We Fight: Remembering AIDS Activism, New York, New York Public Library, April 1, 2014.

that conceptualize it, represent it, and respond to it,”23 with activist intellectual projects
dedicated to deconstructing the representational politics of AIDS. These included Stuart
Marshall’s documentary Bright Eyes, which premiered on British television in 1984 and
addressed the media hysteria surrounding AIDS, and Simon Watney’s book Policing
Desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the Media, which was published in 1987 and focused on
the ways in which U.S. media reported on AIDS and non-normative sexualities.24

As the decade progressed, the epidemic only intensified; to many, the ways in
which activists had been responding to HIV/AIDS (service provision, fundraising, and
informal “buyers clubs” for experimental treatments) seemed increasingly futile. It is
within this context of desperation that Vito Russo’s wartime metaphor must be
understood. The climate of fear, insecurity, and isolation that characterized the early
years of HIV/AIDS was, by mid-decade, increasingly one of triage and relentless death.
During this period, homophobic and racist responses to the AIDS epidemic from right-
wing media, religious, and political leaders only mounted. As critical as the fight was to
stem the disease, the battle over representation – the images of AIDS activism – was as
crucial.

Fear into Anger: The rise of direct-action AIDS activism

The year 1986 has been described by Deborah Gould as a period marked by

“shifting feelings among lesbians and gay men as well as an expanding sense of political


24 Simon Watney, Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and the Media (Minneapolis: University of
possibilities.” In other words, individuals transformed these complex feelings and excoriating conditions into a more radical and collective form of activism. A breaking point occurred on June 30, 1986 when the United States Supreme Court issued its ruling in the Bowers vs. Hardwick case. Gay men and lesbians took to the streets in mass numbers: 3000 gathered in Sheridan Square in the West Village on July 1, and three days later on July 4, 7000 marched from Battery Park to Greenwich Village. In the context of the ongoing AIDS crisis, many people experienced Bowers vs. Hardwick as a moral shock and incontrovertible proof that the government considered gay people to be expendable. As such, the event and its aftermath were central to the development of more confrontational forms of AIDS activism, namely direct action.

Direct action is a topical form of activism that utilizes space and time in an immediate manner. Bodies and ephemera are central components of direct action, as Urashi Vaid has described it:

Pickets, sit-ins, small demonstrations, rallies, speak-outs, leafleting, carrying a sign into a meeting, risking arrest by committing civil disobedience, writing chants and using a bullhorn, spray-painting, wheat-pasting, preparing placards for a march through city streets.

In other words, direct action entails people coming together in space. Visual ephemera were central to the ways in which people re-imagined themselves and formed new


27 Gould (2009), 137.

communities in the context of AIDS direct-action activism. In the fall of 1986 the Lavender Hill Mob, a radical and co-ed AIDS activist group informally comprised of a dozen members including Stonewall Riots veterans, formed. Founding member Marty Robinson revived the militant tactics of gay liberation such as the “zap,” which he defined as “a dramatic, attention-getting action…to put gay people out in public view.”

These included the unfurling of a “Lavender Hill Mob” banner inside St. Patrick’s Cathedral on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan at the beginning of a sermon by Cardinal John O’Connor, to protest the influence of the Catholic Church on the NYC Health Department AIDS policies, and the occupation of Senator Alfonse D’Amato’s office on November 20, in which ten Mob activists plastered the Senator’s walls with mock arrest warrants, charging him with complicity in 15,345 AIDS deaths for his silence.

Several months later, on March 12, 1987, nearly 300 people gathered at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center in the West Village of Manhattan to form ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, a “diverse, nonpartisan group united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis.” The first ACT UP direct action, “No More Business As Usual,” took place on Tuesday March 24, 1987. It was a concerted effort with multiple activist prongs put in service of a unified aim. Over 250

---

29 Robinson paraphrased in Kahn (1993), 5. Other members of the Lavender Hill Mob included Bill Bahlman and Buddy Noro. “Lavender Hill Mob” signals a gay threat and is a tongue-in-cheek referenced to the eponymous 1951 film. This combination of rage and caustic wit was hallmark of AIDS cultural activism. The violent Stonewall Riots that took place on June 28, 1969 at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village. The Stonewall Riots were a watershed moment within modern gay history since it represents gay, lesbian, and trans people fighting back against police oppression.

30 See Kahn (1993).

activists gathered at the intersection of Wall Street and Broadway to interrupt “business as usual” and publicly critique the collusion of the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) with the pharmaceutical industry.\textsuperscript{32} A traffic jam was created and seventeen people were arrested for civil disobedience. An effigy of FDA commissioner Frank Young was hung in front of Trinity Church. The day prior, ACT UP member and co-founder Larry Kramer published an op-ed in \textit{The New York Times} that scathingly enumerated bioethical concerns about the government’s response to AIDS.\textsuperscript{33} On Wall Street, thousands of copies of the op-ed as well as an ACT UP fact sheet were distributed to people on their way to work in the financial district. The demonstration garnered local and national media attention, and a few weeks later when the FDA hastened its AIDS drug approval process, CBS anchor Dan Rather credited ACT UP with the political change on national television.\textsuperscript{34} The media now took notice of both the Lavender Hill Mob and ACT UP based upon their deliberate and theatrical use of symbolic locations, media-savvy public relations, and multi-pronged approach to AIDS activism.

\textsuperscript{32} For a full account of this demonstration see Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston, \textit{AIDS DEMO GRAPHICS} (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990).

\textsuperscript{33} Kramer lists examples of FDA intransigence due to bureaucratic hurdles and government indifference to the AIDS epidemic, including: long waiting periods for access to experimental drugs, the promotion of prohibitively expensive and toxic AZT and the withholding of more promising drugs, the FDA’s insistence on double-blind studies, and the lack of cooperation among federal AIDS-monitoring agencies. See Larry Kramer, “The F.D.A.’s Callous Response to AIDS,” \textit{New York Times}, March 23, 1987.

\textsuperscript{34} Crimp and Rolston (1990).
Silence=Death

In March 1987, the month that ACT UP was founded, the poster SILENCE=DEATH debuted on the streets on New York City. Six gay men collaboratively designed it: Avram Finkelstein, Brian Howard, Oliver Johnston, Charles Kreloff, Chris Lione, and Jorge Soccaras. Although some of the men had professional and educational backgrounds in graphic design and the visual arts, none were practicing artists. They created SILENCE=DEATH under the auspices of the informal AIDS support group they formed in 1986, which was eventually reconstituted as the art collective the Silence=Death Project. This collective functioned for one year and produced two posters – SILENCE=DEATH and AIDSgate – before disbanding. The creation of SILENCE=DEATH and the formation of ACT UP were distinct yet related events. Some of the members of the Silence=Death Project were present at the formation of ACT UP and soon thereafter granted unrestricted permission to the organization to use the emblem.

SILENCE=DEATH eventually became synonymous with the form of direct-action AIDS activism that emerged through ACT UP in 1987, yet it is important to distinguish its autonomous origins and emplacements as a poster on the streets of New York. The

---

35 In 1986 Finkelstein (a graduate of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston) was the art director for Vidal Sassoon. Jorge Soccaras studied painting at the School of the Visual Arts in New York and transitioned after graduation to interdisciplinary projects including performance art. He then became a successful singer-songwriter in the later 1970s and 1980s. Soccaras and Finkelstein were part of the art-music No Wave scene in New York City. Jorge Soccaras worked with producer Patrick Cowley (1975-1979) and played in the band Indoor Life (1980-1987). In the 1970s he was also an extra in some porn films and avant-garde films and in the 1980s worked as a doorman at several NYC nightclubs. Oliver Johnston moved to New York after graduating high school in North Carolina in 1970. He was a graphic designer with the firm Chermayeff & Geismar before starting his own business in the 1980s.
design for *SILENCE*=*DEATH* consisted of a neon pink triangle superimposed on a black background, atop the text “SILENCE=DEATH” written in white, in all caps sans serif type. Urban audiences in New York City would have encountered *SILENCE*=*DEATH* in the form of unsigned posters that were serially displayed on temporary blue construction walls, multiple copies side by side. This anonymous mode of presentation amplified the striking economy of design by enabling a row of upright neon pink triangles. With its stark presentation, pithy slogan, clean geometric design and coolly garish 1980s color palette (neon pink, black and white), passersby might have questioned the purpose of this poster: commercial advertisement or political sloganeering? Only upon closer inspection would one learn the purpose of *SILENCE*=*DEATH* as it contains explanatory text in small print at the bottom of the poster:

> Why is Reagan silent about AIDS? What is really going on at the Center for Disease Control, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Vatican? Gays and lesbians are not expendable … Use your power … Vote … Boycott … Defend Yourselves … Turn anger, fear, grief into action.

Although declarative, *SILENCE*=*DEATH* is also steeped in ambiguity, both formally and textually. This is because the poster, as one account described it, “does its work with a metaphorical subtlety that is unique, among political symbols and slogans, to AIDS activism.”

*SILENCE*=*DEATH* both confronts and reverses the concept “homosexuality=death” that was implicit in the early years of AIDS. In other words, the equation of illness and death with the gay community naturalized those deaths as

36 Crimp and Rolston (1990), 14.

37 Gould (2009), 60.
inevitable or the result of vengeance, as the conservative rhetoric of right-wing religious leaders and politicians would have it. In the first years of the crisis “bad feelings,” which Deborah Gould listed as shame and ambivalence as well as often-contradictory sentiments and affects such as pride, sadness, and anger, often prohibited gay people from mounting a politicized, anger-driven response to the AIDS epidemic. All of these emotions were in play during this period. One of the unexpected side effects of the Bowers v. Hardwick decision was that it catalyzed a structural analysis of the causes of homophobia and gay shame as well as the fact that AIDS was increasingly recognized as a political crisis as well as a public health crisis. As we shall see, SILENCE=DEATH evokes this by making an analogy between AIDS deaths and the Holocaust. Amidst a public health crisis, the SILENCE=DEATH poster made use of a charged symbol, the pink triangle, which conveyed persecution and resistance in equal parts. During the Second World War Nazis used the pink triangle to identify by homosexual inmates in concentration camps. During the 1970s gay activists appropriated the inverted pink triangle and used it as a symbol of unity as well as victimization, well into the 1980s (figures 1.4, 1.5, and 1.6). Particularly after Bowers v. Hardwick and in response to


39 Gould (2009), 59.


well-publicized contemporary arguments such as William F. Buckley’s call for mandatory tattooing of people with AIDS, this analogy was intended as a “call to action” that would mobilize those who encountered it from personal to collective action.

If the emotional shifts that occurred following the escalating AIDS crisis, as well as *Bowers v. Hardwick*, created a “new imaginative space” for AIDS activism, what did that entail? Primarily, it entailed a shift from liberal rights-based appeals and community service provision towards confrontational direct action. Gould and others have argued that “anger” is an emotion that is about social construction, as it denaturalizes shame. An examination of *SILENCE=DEATH* demonstrates the specific rhetorical note of anger required in this period shortly after the *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision, in which the gay and lesbian community experienced a shift, in Gould’s phrase, in its “prevailing emotional habitus and its accompanying political horizon.” That is, there was a shift from a politics of gay respectability (including frequent positive commentary on the stoic efforts of the community in responding to AIDS, and a reluctance to criticize political leaders for inaction, including New York Mayor Edward Koch) toward confrontational street activism that recalled the radical tactics employed by gay liberation activists in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Despite the marked shift in play at this time, there were

---

42 Gould (2009), 163.

43 Gould (2009), 170.

44 Gould (2009), 146.
contradictory feelings within gay and lesbian communities, not the least of which was the constant reality of ever-escalating sickness and death among gay men.\textsuperscript{45}

The Silence=Death Project began within this context, during the winter of 1986 in New York City when Avram Finkelstein, Brian Howard, Oliver Johnston, Charles Kreloff, Chris Lione, and Jorge Soccaras formed a support group to talk about HIV/AIDS. The men meet weekly for potluck dinners and took turns hosting. The impetus for the group began when Jorge Socarras introduced Oliver Johnston to Avram Finkelstein at a dinner, wherein as Finkelstein recalls:

We started talking about AIDS, and it became very obvious that we all needed a place to be to continue this conversation, so we decided to form a group. None of us had been in a group therapy situation, so we didn’t feel like that’s what we were talking about, and we didn’t know at the time, but we formed a consciousness-raising group. We didn’t know how big it needed to be, but we decided we would all start by each bringing a person that the other people didn’t know and see how it went. We were going to talk about issues of being gay in the age of AIDS. That was the idea behind it.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{45} Indeed, Gould has argued, “the emergence of confrontational AIDS activism occurred within the structure of lesbian and gay ambivalence.” See Gould (2009), 163. For example, she cites evidence of anxiety about confrontational actions such as the Sheridan Square rally after \textit{Bowers vs Hardwick}. See Gould (2009), 159-160. For criticisms of ACT UP by mainstream gay activists see Vaid (1995). Gregg Bordowitz recalls, “I didn’t quite know how to deal with that kind of anger. Actually, I was upset that people were shouting ‘You could get it too, You could get it too.’ I thought it was politically bad. I thought it would be politically alienating.” Gregg Bordowitz, interview by Sarah Schulman, New York, NY, December 17, 2002, ACT UP Oral History Project, http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/bordowitz.pdf, [accessed July 1, 2014]: 7-8.

Finkelstein invited Chris Lione, Socarras invited Brian Howard, and Johnston invited Charles Kreloff. Each of the men had a personal connection to HIV/AIDS.  

Brian Howard recalls:

I remember one of our weekly meetings we found ourselves all looking at each other. There was a shared thought balloon over all of us at that moment … wondering who was going to be the first to go. It was tabled with a bit of nervous laugh[ter] but we knew that it could’ve been any one of us.

Each week the group began discussing “fears of dating and loneliness and being gay and AIDS” but inevitably, wound up talking about the politics of AIDS. That is, the ways in which the fact of AIDS was largely ignored or else marginalized in mainstream press accounts, when numbers of infections and deaths continued to rise, and the ways in which institutional responses tended to be punitive and reactionary, rather than focused on research and treatment.

Although the group did not intentionally set out to do consciousness-raising, in fact that is what transpired. Consciousness-raising (CR) is a political organizing technique that was central to the women’s liberation movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. It entails the formation of a group wherein members sit in a circle and each person takes a turn addressing a shared topic. As personal experiences are shared, the group

\[\text{References}\]

47 Avram Finkelstein met Chris Lione through Yoll. Jorge Socarras was in a band, Indoor Life, and met Finkelstein and Don through the “music and club scene.” Socarras introduced Oliver Johnston to Finkelstein at a dinner. Each of the men had lovers and/or friends who had died from AIDS-related illnesses, and as homosexuals the men were living under the constant fear of potential infection and death. Finkelstein’s partner Don Yoll, a musician, had died from HIV/AIDS in 1984.


50 For one account of responses to AIDS in mainstream journalism, see Randy Shilts, And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987).
synthesizes them to derive knowledge from common experiences (as the feminist slogan went, “the personal is political.”) Within the context of women’s liberation, feminist artists used CR to generate political consciousness as well as artistic content and form.\textsuperscript{51}

This was true for the AIDS support group as well. As members became more politicized over the course of several months, the group decided to make a series of posters. The group choose to make a poster for several reasons, including the precedence of posting visual ephemera as a means of polemic in New York City, a knowledge of the history of political art, and finally, because posters were an important method of communication among lesbians and gay men. Chris Lione recalled that the aim of the group’s poster was to “get the message out to people, why aren’t you doing something?”\textsuperscript{52} Remarkably, the group devised the form and content of \textit{SILENCE=DEATH} in sync with its CR process, over eight months during the spring, summer, and fall of 1986.

\textbf{Form Follows Feeling: the Design of \textit{SILENCE=DEATH}}

From the summer of 1986 to the winter of 1987, between the \textit{Bowers v. Hardwick} protests and the formation of ACT UP, there was an escalating climate of desperation. The poster’s ambiguous address seems to tap into this ferment; it is as though the phrase “silence equals death” aims to harness this inchoate energy. It is declarative but not totalizing call to action. The group decided to remain anonymous in order to be able to speak freely but also in order to remain mysterious and appear to be a bigger group than

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
it actually was. Like a CR group, the poster did not privilege a singular voice; rather the voice of the poster is the manifestation of a shared consciousness that emerged from conversations among individuals. Avram Finkelstein has retrospectively described SILENCE=DEATH as “designed by six individuals who felt alone, but raised their voices anyway and discovered that they were surrounded by a community.” Writing from within the context of AIDS activism, Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston addressed the dialogic power of SILENCE=DEATH in a 1990 essay:

As historically problematic as an analogy of AIDS and the death camps is, it is also deeply resonant for gay men and lesbians, especially insofar as the analogy is already mediated by the gay movement’s adoption of the pink triangle. But it is not merely what SILENCE=DEATH says, but also how it looks, that gives it its particular force. The power of this equation under a triangle is the compression of its connotation into a logo, a logo so striking that you ultimately have to ask, if you don’t already know, ‘What does it mean?’ And it is in the answers we are constantly called upon to give to others – small, everyday direct actions – that make SILENCE=DEATH signify beyond a community of lesbian and gay cognoscenti.

Just as the text at the bottom of the poster calls upon gay men and lesbians for an empowered collective transformation, so too does the pink triangle. Some who encountered the SILENCE=DEATH poster on the street would recognize its iconography as a reference to Nazi persecution of homosexuals as well as gay liberation.

In the mid-1980s many gay men and lesbians of a particular age identified the pink triangle with the gay liberation movement of the 1970s. Activists in the US as well


54 Crimp and Rolston (1990), 14.

55 Jensen (2002) explains that the “relatively late emergence” of the pink triangle after the Second World War is due as much to the repression of the Holocaust as the fact that there was no mass collective public
as West Germany appropriated the inverted pink triangle and transformed it from a symbol of humiliation into one of solidarity and defiance. It constructed gay identity according to an ethnicity model as well as one based on shared victimization. As early as 1973 it appeared on posters held at Gay Pride Parades.\(^{56}\) While activists in the 1970s used the pink triangle to draw comparisons between the persecution of gay people’s civil liberties and the Nazi treatment of homosexuals, in the context of HIV/AIDS the analogies took on a different valence.\(^{57}\) Comparisons between the AIDS crisis and the Holocaust were at play not only within the gay and lesbian community but mainstream America as well. Indeed by 1985-1986 it was not uncommon in mainstream and gay contexts to draw parallels between the treatment of people with AIDS and the Holocaust. Comparisons between government neglect of AIDS deaths and the mass murders of the Holocaust were present as early as 1983, for example in gay activist Larry Kramer’s infamous call-to-arms “1,112 and Counting”\(^{58}\) or in 1985 during a rally protesting the gay movement until the late 1960s. Some early gay usages of the pink triangle include: the February 1974 issue of the gay journal *body politic*, which featured a full-size pink triangle on its cover, to accompany the article by James Steakley “Homosexuals and the Third Reich”; in August 1974 in New York City, gay and lesbian activists organized by David Thorstad (president of Gay Activists Alliance 1975-1976) wore a pink triangle at a protest against the city’s Orthodox Jewish groups which had opposed a gay rights bill, before the city council; Ira Glasser, “The Yellow Star and the Pink Triangle,” *New York Times*, September 10, 1975.

\(^{56}\) Erik N. Jensen, “The Pink Triangle and Political Consciousness: Gays, Lesbians, and the Memory of Nazi Persecution,” in “Sexuality and German Fascism, special issue, *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11, no. 1-2 (Jan. – Apr., 2002): 319-349. As stated by Jensen, “activists in the U.S., more so than in West Germany, tended to direct the memory of Nazi persecution outward in order to secure the support of broader society... American gays, in general, never doubted the omnipresent hostility of the society in which they lived.”

\(^{57}\) For example, at a June 1977 protest regarding Anita Bryant’s campaign against homosexual teachers gay activists held signs comparing Bryant to Adolf Hitler. Gay politician Harvey Milk used the Holocaust-gays metaphor in speeches. In fact Jensen (2002) argues by the late 1970s there was a “growing trend in the American gay community of using the Jewish Holocaust as a model for conveying and understanding of the Nazi persecution.”
closing of yet another New York City gay bathhouse wherein protestors chanted “Out of the Baths, into the Ovens,” a play on the Stonewall Riots chant “Out of the Closets and into the Streets.”

The representation of visibility in non-figurative terms of resistance (the pink triangle), was a significant departure from conventional depictions of people with AIDS. First, it rejected the mainstream media depiction of people with AIDS as passive victims. Beyond its political utility as a symbol that simultaneously referenced two important historical markers that were resonant in terms of the AIDS crisis, the pink triangle also provided the Silence=Death Project members with a resolutely abstract symbol. The non-figuration of SILENCE=DEATH is key. Abstraction enabled the rerouting of particular circuits of reference, namely those of sexuality and representation. As previously mentioned, the impact of “bad feelings” on the lesbian and gay community was immense, particularly feelings of shame that arguably derived from the non-recognition of the federal government of the AIDS epidemic due to its association with gay men. Within the gay and lesbian community, the issue of sexuality was fraught. This impacted aesthetic choices, since an effective poster would need to negotiate the complexity of issues at hand.

The Silence=Death Project mined the complexity of an abstract symbol (the pink triangle), instead of drawing upon a more familiar figurative image, such as the raised clenched fist (used first in the Black Power movement and in gay liberation as well). At


59 For info on Stonewall chants, such as “Out of the Bars into the Streets,” see David Carter, Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution (New York: Macmillan, 2004).
the height of misinformation about HIV transmission, this symbol would not work within the gay community since a raised clenched fist could plausibly call to mind the sexual practice of fisting, recognized as a possible mode of HIV-transmission. Because they were wary of excluding demographics based on race and gender, the Silence=Death Project decided not to use portraiture of PWAs or figurative imagery.\(^6^0\) The image is declarative, but not totalizing.

However, appropriating the Nazi symbol for homosexuals was not without concern; group members were wary of a Holocaust metaphor seemingly agreeing with right-wing pundits calling for quarantine and mandatory tattoos of people with AIDS, as well as lessening the historical fact of the Holocaust through a comparison.\(^6^1\) Even those responsible for its creation were uncertain about the historical connection. The English cultural theorist and filmmaker Stuart Marshall, in “The Contemporary Political Use of Gay History: The Third Reich,” criticized the use of the pink triangle by AIDS activists.\(^6^2\) Marshall characterized the pink triangle as a negative symbol and argued that activist symbols should be positive.\(^6^3\) In the 1970s, gay liberation activists appropriated the pink

\(^{60}\) Finkselstein: “Bill Buckley had done his tattoo recommendation, so for a couple of weeks we tossed around what that poster might be like. It [a poster featuring a tattooed butt] seemed startling, it harkened to the camps where people were up in arms about it, it was controversial enough, we thought this would be a good issue for a poster, but as we began to really look at it, we realized, okay, well, so it’s a photograph of a tattoo on somebody’s butt. Okay, well, whose butt is it? Is it a man’s butt? What about the women? It is a white butt? What about people of color? The issues surrounding representation made it impossible for us to pursue that. We just thought it wouldn’t be inclusive enough, and discarded it.” Finkselstein (2010): 23.

\(^{61}\) Finkselstein (2010).


\(^{63}\) Ibid.
triangle as a means of creating a group identity for homosexuals, a group that, as Marshall points out, is a construct. In Marshall’s view, the “mythical genocide” of homosexuals by Nazis during World War II provided gay men and lesbians in the 1970s with a group identity modeled on ethnicity (i.e., on Jewishness). Thus, the pink triangle is a problematic gay symbol because it expresses commonality in terms of victimization. Marshall argued that this formulation was as inadequate for gay liberation in the 1970s as it was for the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, although he conceded that the pink triangle had a symbolic resonance in light of the health crisis, alluding to annihilation due to government neglect. Ultimately, according to Marshall, the problem with the pink triangle was that it sought political solidarity at the cost of lost differences.

In a different context, art historian Johanna Burton has contributed to the reevaluation of 1980s art practices in her call for a reconsideration of the role of affect and identity in appropriation art practices. In other words, she rethinks the relationship of an image-maker to the image he or she appropriates. Appropriation, as Burton posits it and beyond its status as a critical gesture to complicate notions of authenticity and originality, has much to do with the desire of the artist and that has a direct impact on audiences. The pink triangle revived a specific genealogy of gay liberation, one based

---

64 The notion of sexuality as a social and historical construct rather than an innate quality is central to post-structuralist theories of sexuality, and is indebted to the pioneering work of Michel Foucault. See Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Volume 1 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

in radical street activism and oppositional identity. So too did the Lavender Hill Mob and ACT UP. These endeavors counter-posed assimilationist models of political engagement favored by mainstream AIDS activists in the early-to-mid 1980s; they also presented a distinct notion of “gay pride” that was not about gay responsibility (i.e. the community self-commending itself for bravely facing the AIDS crisis in the face of overwhelming trauma) but gay rage.66 Thus, by explicitly reviving a symbol of gay liberation (effectually familiar to many lesbians and gay men from an earlier generation), SILENCE=DEATH participated in the re-routing of affective circuits in the period following Bowers v. Hardwick and propelled activists into street protest. An important visual gesture was thus necessary.

The precision of this gesture is indicated by the fact that the group considered several liberation-era symbols. These included the Greek symbol lambda, which had been used as a symbol by the Gay Activists Alliance in New York in 1970 and was declared the international symbol of lesbian and gay rights by the International Gay Rights Congress in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1974. The Silence=Death Project decided: “we thought it was kind of antiquarian. Younger gays and lesbians might not even know what it was…it wasn’t universal enough.”67 Another contender was the labrys, a symmetrical double-headed axe that was an ancient symbol of Greek civilization and, in the twentieth century was appropriated by movements including Greek fascism as well as lesbian feminism, as it connoted matriarchal (female) power: “we loved [it], but wasn’t specific enough and men wouldn’t know what it was. We felt like it had the right attitude for what

---

66 Gould (2009), 90.

we were about to talk about, but it didn’t seem appropriate.”\textsuperscript{68} The rainbow flag, invented by Gilbert Baker as a symbol of gay pride and first debuted at the San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Parade in June 1978, barely made the list of finalists: “we hated it. It was ugly… it intoned something celebratory.”\textsuperscript{69} The group discussed designing a new symbol for the gay and lesbian community but “people were dying, and we didn’t feel comfortable doing that.”\textsuperscript{70} Initially the pink triangle was discounted because of its association with Holocaust, and therefore victimhood, but ultimately it was chosen because:

\begin{quote}
It seemed like it might have the most chance of being clear enough to the lesbian and gay community, more clear than the other images we were discussing that were abstract, and graphic enough to be intriguing, interesting, compelling, to people outside of the community who didn’t know what it was.\textsuperscript{71}
\end{quote}

The evolution of the pink triangle is key here. It appears on \textit{SILENCE=DEATH} in a different form than the Nazi symbol it was appropriated from.

\textit{SILENCE=DEATH} clearly references the Holocaust, not only in its appropriation of the pink triangle used by Nazis to mark homosexuals in concentration camps but also in its deployment of the word “Silence.” There is a distinct moral tone to the poster’s circuits of reference. As the statement “silence equals death” implicates those who would ignore AIDS in its continued escalation. Although this statement suggests institutional targets, namely the media and the government, it also implicates individuals \textit{within} the

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{70} Finkelstein (2010): 27.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.
Three of the six members of the Silence=Death Project came from Jewish backgrounds (as such, they had personal ties to the legacy of the Holocaust) and this resonated in the group’s manifesto: “silence about the oppression and annihilation of gay people, then and now, must be broken as a matter of our survival.” A critical reappropriation was necessary. The response? Invert the triangle. Hence, by inverting it, the creators of SILENCE=DEATH signaled a significant difference from previous incarnations. Facing upward, the triangle that once marked the victim now became a symbol of empowerment.

The design of SILENCE=DEATH thus had the impact of creating community where one did not necessarily exist. This is because not all audiences (particularly younger audiences) recognized the genealogy of the pink triangle and found themselves on something of a learning curve. The intergenerational nexus of SILENCE=DEATH was reflected in the membership of ACT UP, which featured coalitions of many sorts: between different generations, between lesbians and gay men, between different socio-economic backgrounds, between uptown and downtown Manhattan residents, between Manhattan and the boroughs. The pink triangle as a symbol of gay and lesbian identity

---

72 Additional links between the AIDS epidemic and the Holocaust include the number of deaths as well as the emaciated visage of people with AIDS, which was previously seen in photographs from the Holocaust.


74 It appears that collective responsible for SILENCE=DEATH was unaware of this since they have claimed the invention of this gesture. Brian Howard gave credit to Oliver Johnston for the idea to invert the triangle, turning it into a symbol of power and ascendancy. Clark Harding, “AIDS/LifeCycle, Day Four: ‘Hand Me Downs,’” Queerty, June 6, 2013, under “Ride With Me,” http://www.queerty.com/photos-aidslifecycle-day-four-hand-me-downs-20130606/ [accessed July 20, 2014]. As described by Finkeslstein, the upright triangle was “our little caveat, our redesign, we inverted it, a little New Age-y, but a little gesture towards action, not passivity.” Finkeslstein (2010): 40.
remained vexing into the 1990s and was even discussed independently from AIDS activism, proving the multivalent power of the symbol within a gay consciousness.\textsuperscript{75} \textit{SILENCE=DEATH} did not assume a victimized status. Nor did it make a grandiose or didactic statement, as much political art tends to do. Importantly, \textit{SILENCE=DEATH} contains both urgency \textit{and} complexity. Unlike others who conjured up comparisons between AIDS and the Holocaust, it didn’t deploy a “hectoring and hyperbolic” style.\textsuperscript{76}

It is certainly the case that the visual culture of contemporary advertising, and several members’ graphic design backgrounds, influenced the stark and cool aesthetic of \textit{SILENCE=DEATH}. As many commentators including Douglas Crimp and Richard Meyer have argued, the advertising-influenced aesthetic of \textit{SILENCE=DEATH} contributed to its success as a political artwork. In other words, “the slick visual style of \textit{SILENCE=DEATH} imbued it with a particular kind of cultural power, a power usually reserved for mass-market advertising.”\textsuperscript{77} The design and distribution of \textit{SILENCE=DEATH} was as much a practical matter as it was a conceptual feat, as Finkelstein detailed:

In order to define our space in that context, which was full of movie posters and fashion ads and stuff like that, we realized we had to create a dead zone. We had to make a vacuum for ourselves. A lot of commercial concerns use the strategy wheat pasting a series of posters, which has become much more popular now but was a new idea then. But we realized that we couldn’t really afford that many posters…so we had to figure out a way to define our space discretely with one poster, and that’s how we ended up with black, to neutralize the context. It was

\textsuperscript{75} Jensen (2002).

\textsuperscript{76} Gould used this phrase to describe the rhetorical style of Larry Kramer. Unlike Kramer’s \textit{hot} rhetoric, \textit{SILENCE=DEATH} was decidedly \textit{cool}. See Gould (2009), 94.

\textsuperscript{77} Meyer (1995), 62.
meant to be seen in that context, but it was meant as an intervention into that context, clearly.\textsuperscript{78}

In the 1980s New York was an urban context amendable to wheat-pasting posters on buildings, many of which were vacant, and temporary construction walls. In the heavily pedestrian city these surfaces were vital pre-Internet networks of communication. 

\textit{SILENCE=DEATH} mined the tropes of 1980s commercial advertising including capitalized sans serif type, economical design and serial presentation. \textit{SILENCE=DEATH} influenced subsequent activist designs. In the words of artist-activist Adam Rolston, “appropriating the institutionally empowered format for the institutionally disempowered message,” became the “core idea … consistent throughout the graphics of ACT UP.”\textsuperscript{79} This strategy was designed to reach a wide audience by drawing in unassuming viewers and then relaying politicized information.

\textit{SILENCE=DEATH} within the art historical context of the 1980s

\textit{SILENCE=DEATH} can also be contextualized within contemporary postmodern art of the 1980s. In his 1983 essay “Subversive Signs,” Hal Foster described a new phenomenon of appropriation art in the public sphere that treated the public sphere as “both a weapon and a target.”\textsuperscript{80} Foster cited the practices of artists such as Barbara

\textsuperscript{78} Finkelstein (2010): 26.

Kruger and Jenny Holzer as exemplary of critical postmodernism because they utilized strategies of appropriation, engaged in a dialogue with mass media, advertising and popular culture, and created text-and-image based works for public audiences, which often had a subversive feminist component. Although in these terms \textit{SILENCE=DEATH} may be considered a “subversive sign,” the work cannot be fully explained within the parameters of Foster’s theory. This is because for activist artworks created to intervene, \textit{literally}, in the violence of mass HIV/AIDS deaths and hate crimes perpetrated against non-normative bodies in the public sphere, the stakes were too high.

Within the history of art \textit{SILENCE=DEATH} is notable in the sense that it was an artwork within a climate of desperation rather than within the context of the art world. It was fundamentally a project born from crisis. As such it was entirely pragmatic, every detail considered with regard to its overall purpose. It was a work intended for the urban public sphere of New York City, smartly designed for multiple viewing platforms, as it was accessible both to pedestrians and people in cars. The radically stark design of the poster was experienced as a singular and a compound aesthetic, since posters were displayed in multiple copies alongside each other on building walls. The seductive lure of the poster’s enigmatic image-text is paired with a straightforward political message in smaller type, on the bottom register of the poster. This model would prove influential on subsequent AIDS activist posters.

Members of the Silence=Death Project were as influenced by the contemporary visual culture of Manhattan in the 1980s as they were by the visual culture of 1960s urban protest, particularly the ubiquity of posters. While the formal distinction of \textit{SILENCE=DEATH} from the aesthetics of 1960s political posters is notable, the poster
medium *itself* was a means of signaling affiliation with a broader history of ephemeral protest art. Finkelstein described the inspiration as his memories of the antiwar activism of the 1960s in Greenwich Village:

> Eighth Street was literally papered with posters, manifestos and posters and diatribes. It was literally like a billboard, the entire corridor between the East and West Village, and I remember that as a very vital way that people communicated in the street. It was free. Everyone did it. I remember it as part of my adolescence. So I thought, well, this would be a good strategy for us, where we feel like we’re in a raft in the middle of the sea. I didn’t know whether other people felt the same way about it, but there really was no outlet for it, and we wanted to be heard and to see also if we could stimulate some conversation about it.\(^{81}\)

As Finkelstein recalls, he came up with the idea to make a poster: he offered to pay for the printing of the poster, if the group would split the cost of having it distributed.\(^{82}\)

For many of Finkelstein’s generation the visual culture of social movements of the 1960s was indelible. The impact of Sixties visual culture upon the group is partly generational: Finkelstein (born in 1952) and the other group members came of age during the 1960s and 1970s. Like the Lavender Hill Mob, the consciousness-raising group turned toward the legacy of liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s for inspiration. With the exception of Finkelstein, who came from a left-leaning family, the group members had little political experience. As a teenager, Finkelstein was introduced to student strike posters of the 1960s and began silk screening posters due to his extracurricular involvement with the Friends World College, a Quaker school in Westbury on Long Island.\(^{83}\) He recalls, “during the student strikes in France, people

---


\(^{82}\) Finkelstein (2010): 23.

\(^{83}\) He recalls visiting the Museum School in Boston: “I went up with my mom to look at the school, and it was configured very different from how it is now. It was basically an old industrial warehouse. I think it
came back with posters, and we started reproducing them there. So I learned how to silk screen, and I was silk screening posters while I was still in high school.”

During the social movements of the 1960s art collectives flourished; these efforts were fueled by new technologies including xerox reproduction and inexpensive offset lithography, “collaborative publishing networks” proliferated. The liberation movements of women and gay men in the 1970s, for example, found success in large part due to the creation and distribution of political ephemera including pamphlets, posters and broadsides. As Steven Heller describes, this was because the 1960s was a time of varied aesthetics:

… not only a period when major issues of war, peace, gender, and race were coming to the fore, but every conceivable tool of propaganda was marshaled into service- print, buttons, banners, film, radio, records, performance art, and demonstration. In the United States all media (even mass media) were available to the opposition.

---


85 In a 1977 issue of the journal Heresies: A feminist publication on art and politics, Charlotte Bunch argued for the importance of feminist media to the women’s movement and lesbian feminism (“even when I was ‘straight’ in the women’s liberation days of 1968-69, some of our most erotic times were spent around the mimeograph machine … Before we could admit to sexuality between women, it was there in our work together.”) Bunch quoted in Heresies 1, no. 3 (September 1977): 25.


As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, from the beginning of the AIDS crisis, ephemeral print networks were a vital form of communication and information. The ACT UP generation of activists (both young and old) courted popular media attention to cultivate a national reputation for sensational, anger-driven politics “imagined on the street.” Towards this end, the group was strategic in its use of graphic signage at demonstrations and its development of press liaisons and alternative media.

ACT UP is part of a broad history of ephemeral materials deployed in service of social and political upheaval, from the role of print in the Protestant Reformation to the banners used in support of women’s suffrage, to the counterculture of the 1960s including imagistic posters, sloganeering buttons, informational leaflets, and polemical broadsides. Activists commonly evoke these historically charged materials in descriptions of their first encounters with ACT UP. Arriving at the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) Community Center at 208 West Thirteenth Street in the West Village of Manhattan, one would walk along “narrow, skinny hallways peppered with all those leaflets of every single kind, seeking roommates, substance abuse, you name it, size 12 pumps for drag queens, everything” until arriving at the meeting room, where “you’d walk through a table of different literature about events and issues you needed to know about.”

---


...was like every fantasy I ever had of 1930s New York, socialist, communist meetings... it reeked of it. It was like the ‘60s again. I was in SDS [Students for a Democratic Society]. Oh my God. It had that romantic whiff to it, because it seemed utterly urgent, completely improvised, totally responsible and nimble in that early stage.\(^{91}\)

As Heller has described, “the sixties were also a time of cultural scavenging. The graphic language of sixties’ protest was an amalgam of new and old – borrowed and stolen images from history – mainly because it was free.”\(^{92}\) Kalin’s observations reaffirm Heller’s point by relating to the spirit in which the Silence=Death Project poster was designed and conceptualized.

Yet there was a clear sign that this poster was thoroughly of its time (the 1980s): the group met with a lawyer early in the production stage in order to make sure that SILENCE=DEATH would be open to all, and that those who sought to use it would not be subject to copyright violation.\(^{93}\) Much of the literature on SILENCE=DEATH has described the emblem as a “logo,” because of its graphic legibility and its visual approximation of advertising.\(^{94}\) Yet there is an important distinction between copyright-free anonymity and “logo,” as Finkelstein has emphasized:

The word logo also intones ownership. The Silence=Death collective set up their work product to be open source. Having been advised by an attorney to copyright the image before someone else did, potentially barring ACT UP from using it, they did, but never prevented any use of it, not even by an anti-abortion group that appropriated it. The collective adhered to the institutional parameters of

---

\(^{91}\) Kalin (2004): 25. Students for a Democratic Society (c. 1962-69) was an influential student activist organization, representative of the New Left political movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

\(^{92}\) Heller (1992), 6.

\(^{93}\) Finkelstein (2013).

\(^{94}\) See Crimp and Rolston (1990) and Heller (2012).
intellectual property so that they might stand outside of it. They copyrighted it in order to give it away.\(^5\)

The anonymity of the unsigned posters and their accessibility for all is unusual within the capitalist framework of the art world and ground the project within the realm of activism.\(^6\)

*Let the Record Show* …

In the fall of 1987 the art world responded to the groundswell of radical AIDS activism of ACT UP and the Silence=Death Project, with an invitation to create a “visual demonstration” at the New Museum of Contemporary Art then located at 583 Broadway, between Prince and Houston streets, in the SoHo neighborhood of New York City.\(^7\) The resulting installation, *Let the Record Show*… (November 20, 1987 – January 24, 1988) was a conceptually sophisticated representation of AIDS as a political crisis (figure 1.7). It built upon familiar ACT UP strategies including the indictment of public officials (carrying placards bearing their visages and yelling “Shame!” at demonstrations) as well as comparing AIDS to the Holocaust (figure 1.8). As in the consciousness-raising group that produced *SILENCE=DEATH*, the form of *Let the Record Show* … “developed in the same collaborative way. The issues unfolded, and the form followed.”\(^8\) The title *Let the

---


\(^6\) This conceit of manipulating copyright law in order to ensure that a creative work is free to distribute and manipulate by others is nearly contemporaneous to the “copyleft” practice developed by Richard Stallman in 1985 with regard to licensing (and used for computer software and art). The artist Ray Johnson (1927-1995) also used a similar concept with regards to his mail art.

\(^7\) Douglas Crimp, “‘80s Then: Gran Fury talks to Douglas Crimp,” *Artforum*, April 2003.

\(^8\) Crimp (2003).
*Record Show* … indicates the informative component of the show. The installation utilized the AIDS activist grassroots practice whereby individuals did scores of their own research – compiling data about infection rates, transmission, and treatment – and shared it with the broader community. 99

Upon his encounter with the ubiquitous *SILENCE=DEATH* posters in the summer of 1987 William Olander, an out gay man and then Senior Curator at the New Museum, contacted ACT UP to commission an installation that became *Let the Record Show*…

Olander was a visionary curator who championed overt political content and collaborative art practices. 100 As such he was a good fit for the New Museum, an institution then known for its commitment to socially and politically engaged art. On November 20, 1987 the New Museum published a handout containing a description of *Let the Record Show*… Perhaps because the artwork was created by ad hoc committee members of the nine-month old AIDS activist organization ACT UP, Olander’s remarks conveyed a defensive tone, as if he was at pains to demonstrate why an activist work, posted anonymously in the urban public sphere, mattered in the realm of art:

> I first became aware of ACT UP, like many other New Yorkers, when I saw a poster appear on lower Broadway with this equation: “SILENCE=DEATH.” Accompanying these words, sited on a black background, was a pink triangle –

99 People would bring news clippings to ACT UP meetings from publications such as the *New York Times*. Much of the information (quotes and statistics) in “Let the Record Show…” was derived from this collaborative compilation practice. See Crimp (2003).

100 With the advent of the AIDS epidemic in the early 1980s, politics became personal for many gay men, including William Olander, who found they were vulnerable to infection and stigmatized as a result. Olander came to New Museum in 1985 from Oberlin College, Ohio. He organized a Group Material show at New Museum in 1986. He died from AIDS in March 1989. For more information see: Gayle Rodda Kurtz, *William Olander: The Practice of an Activist Curator* (master’s thesis, Hunter College, City University of New York, 1991).
the symbol of homosexual persecution during the Nazi period and, since the 1960s, the emblem of gay liberation. 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.\footnote{William Olander, “The Window on Broadway by ACT UP,” \textit{On View At the New Museum}, 1987 http://archive.newmuseum.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/7910 [Accessed March 1, 2013].}

The SILENCE=DEATH emblem appeared among other elements in \textit{Let the Record Show...} in a neon version, displayed in the curved portion of the Window on Broadway. To passersby, the installation, which occupied a street-facing window on Broadway in lower Manhattan, may have appeared as a form of street demonstration. In fact, as the title \textit{Let the Record Show...} suggests:

The piece presents a trial or official hearing. It includes a large photomural of the Nuremberg trials, referencing the concept of “crimes against humanity,” in front of which is placed cardboard cutouts of six public figures from the United States as if they are an additional row of defendants. Below each figure is a concrete plinth into which is placed statements for which she or he is to be held accountable. These figures and their records, literally “cast in stone,” are illuminated in turn so that viewers see the face of each defendant and read the record of their statements in turn … The sixth accused is President Ronald Reagan, and before him is placed a blank slab of concrete, referencing his notorious seven-year public silence on the epidemic. Interrogating this silence from high above this scene is a version of the SILENCE=DEATH slogan rendered in bright pink neon. Below the neon sign, an LED displays running text that presents statistics, information on government inaction, and elaborations on the defendant’s records.\footnote{Robert Sember and David Gere, “‘Let the Record Show . . .’ Art Activism and the AIDS Epidemic,” in \textit{American Journal of Public Health} 96, no. 6 (June 2006): 967-969.}

ACT UP was given carte blanche to create a display for the south Broadway window of the New Museum. This was announced in early fall at a weekly ACT UP meeting and interested members met in the corner at the end of the meeting to discuss. Mark Simpson spearheaded the group, which quickly decided to focus on “who are the really bad guys
who’ve said bad things,” including politicians, religious leaders, and medical professionals. The project was realized over the course of several weeks. The idea was to “put them on trial” and “cast their words in stone” literally, in concrete tombstones (figure 1.9). Volunteers used x-acto knives to cut out small rubber letters, which were later cast in concrete. The skills of participants determined the shape of the installation.

To quote one contemporary review, Let the Record Show... “was made for an art-world location, and it appears to have been made largely for an art-world audience.” That is, certain formal aspects of the installation – appropriation, LED displays, an emphasis on language – recall tactics of contemporary “political postmodernism” such as the work of Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, and Hans Haacke. As previously discussed, there are significant distinctions between the activist-minded SILENCE=DEATH and contemporary postmodern art. Yet, perhaps because the installation was created by an activist organization rather than a singular artist, Olander’s handout preempted


104 Marlene McCarty recalls that this was “total gofer work…but it was exciting … this was cool.” Marlene McCarty, interview by Sarah Schulman, New York, NY, February 21, 2004, ACT UP Oral History Project, http://www.actuporalhistory.org/beta/interviews/images/mccarty.pdf (accessed August 1, 2014): 15.

105 Don Ruddy was an artist who worked in concrete. Many work sessions were held in the offices of Terry Riley and John Keenan (Keenan & Riley Architects) and the Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program meeting space (Tom Kalin was in the program shortly before joining ACT UP and working on “Let the Record Show…”). Kalin had utilized mural photographs sourced from World War Two events including the Nuremberg Trials for his MFA thesis project at the Art Institute of Chicago and he contributed these to “Let the Record Show…”


naysayers’ “But is it art?” questions by comparing SILENCE=DEATH and Let the
Record Show... to Jacques-Louis David’s La Mort de Marat (1793) and the achievements
of the Russian Constructivists among others; for him, “throughout history, all periods of
intense crisis have inspired works of art whose functions were often extra-artistic.”

The fact that Olander’s critical assessment of SILENCE=DEATH was not universally
accepted is evident by the fact that the poster was omitted from inclusion in the 1988
Museum of Modern Art exhibition “Committed to Print,” a survey of political prints and
works on paper of the late twentieth century.

If “art lives on forever,” as Elizabeth Taylor put it at an “Art Against AIDS”
fundraising gala, then activist ephemera aimed for immediacy, topicality, and
anonymity. It is remarkable that these qualities were retained in the adaptation of an
activist poster into a museum installation. The tactic of calling out high profile figures
was central to the anger-fueled political theater developed by ACT UP and formed the

---

108 Olander (1987): 1. The fact that Olander’s critical assessment of SILENCE=DEATH was not universal is
evident by the fact that the poster was omitted from inclusion in the Museum of Modern Art exhibition
“Committed to Print,” a survey of political graphic art organized by Deborah Wye (January 31 – April 19,
1988). This exhibition featured 108 artists and 16 collectives and included work from the 1980s by Vito
Acconci, Robert Arneson, Jonathan Borofsky, Bruce Nauman, Robert Morris, Nancy Spero, Leon Golub,

109 In her ACT UP Oral History Project interview Ann Philbin discusses ACT UP protests of this exhibition
at the Museum of Modern Art, and the complicated fact that some MOMA-affiliated ACT UP members
were reluctant to participate. Ann Philbin, interview by Sarah Schulman, New York, NY, January 21, 2003

conceptual framework for *Let the Record Show*... The installation is an effective public AIDS activist artwork in terms discussed by AIDS activist and scholar Jan Zita Grover:

Public art about AIDS demands to be evaluated above all for its topicality and timeliness and it’s capacity to incite a sense of urgency, outrage, and to call for action and understanding, even as it makes knowing use of high art strategies, of its power to challenge or move, to make one see something anew – a particularly indispensable tool of communication in an image-hyper saturated environment.

In fact *Let the Record Show* ... was so rousing that a photograph of the installation was featured on the cover of a special issue of the interdisciplinary journal *October* entitled “AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism,” published in the winter of 1987/1988 (figure 1.10).

In the eponymous introductory essay, the issue’s editor Douglas Crimp described the recent spate of activist projects in the public sphere that, in conjunction with the direct actions of ACT UP, he identified as crucial cultural interventions in the AIDS epidemic that had previously been lacking. In this essay, “AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism,” Crimp introduced the term “AIDS cultural activism” to distinguish elegiac from didactic visual artworks. “AIDS cultural activism” describes the special quality of

---

111 In addition to statistics concerning federal spending on AIDS research and new drug trials, among other information, “Let the Record Show…” focused on the following public officials: US Senator Jesse Helms (“The logical outcome of testing is a quarantine of those infected”); Presidential AIDS Commission member Cory Servaas (“It is patriotic to have an AIDS test and be negative”); “Anonymous Surgeon” (“We used to hate faggots on an emotional basis. Now we have a good reason”); televangelist Jerry Falwell (“AIDS is God’s judgment of a society that does not live by His rules”); columnist William F. Buckley (“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”); President Ronald Reagan (a blank slab to indict his reticence on AIDS).

ACT UP style tactics recognized by many as a new form of activism.\textsuperscript{113} These rejected the idealist conceptions of art as transcendent and universal and insisted that that “art does have the power to save lives, and it is this very power that must be recognized, fostered, and supported in every way possible.”\textsuperscript{114} Due to the fiscal conservatism that impacted government funding, a major task of AIDS activism was fundraising. Crimp acknowledged the necessity of fundraising but critiqued the ways in which art was used to compensate for the failure of neoliberal funding structures to step up to the AIDS crisis.\textsuperscript{115}

Crimp was also directly impacted by the AIDS crisis as a gay man; he became a participant in ACT UP while preparing this issue.\textsuperscript{116} In fact Crimp, through this essay and his subsequent association with ACT UP-affiliated artist-activists, would prove highly influential on the intellectual development of AIDS cultural activism. Crimp’s thesis – that AIDS does not exist apart from the language used to describe it, and that cultural activist practices must be formulated in the very forms of representation at issue


\textsuperscript{114} This statement is hyperbolic and suited to the manifesto-like tone of the essay overall. It is important within the context of the reception of Let the Record Show … in the sense that this installation was explicitly conceived as a street-facing intervention. The notion of art as a weapon for the greater cause of AIDS activism was central to the ways in which these visual interventions were conceived. As discussed in the introduction of this dissertation there were in fact many responses to AIDS from the arts community. Douglas Crimp, “AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism,” in AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988): 7.


\textsuperscript{116} Crimp is an art critic and theorist, best known for organizing the seminal postmodern exhibition Pictures in 1977, which featured the artists Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and Philip Smith. As such he was well poised to edit an issue devoted entirely to the ways in which AIDS is mediated through representation. At the time of this special issue he was a co-editor of October, the most influential contemporary art and theory publication of the 1980s in the U.S.
– is characteristic of postmodern discourse. Although *Let the Record Show*... had formal affinities with the language-based feminist and critical art of the 1980s, it and the activist art it signified was a significant departure from this (rarified) postmodern aesthetic discourse. Due to the characteristics of AIDS cultural activism, which included anonymity, ephemerality, and functionality, Crimp had to make a case for such visual work typically dismissed as agit-prop.\(^{117}\) As signaled by the journal’s subtitle, analysis and activism encompass the conceit of post-structuralism as well as the exigencies of representation in the age of AIDS: cultural work is just as important as conventional activism due to the exigencies of the AIDS crisis, and the critical tools of the period could be utilized towards this effort. Whereas many works of critical postmodernism had social justice themes, few were intended to actually do anything.\(^{118}\) Against this, Crimp tempers purely theoretical analysis of AIDS representations by pairing it with the material effects of cultural activism – foregrounding the crisis and the imperatives at hand. This is precisely the means through which AIDS activist strategies were developed. For example, *Let the Record Show*... re-contextualized quotes towards activist ends.

Crimp’s manifesto-like opening tract is suitably prescriptive.\(^{119}\) He cited *SILENCE=DEATH* as a prime example of cultural activism, because it is a “critical,

\(^{117}\) Michael Hunt Stolbach discusses the lack of interest in artists engaged in social topics such as AIDS and homosexuality. See Michael Hunt Stolbach, “A Day Without Art,” *Social Text* 24 (1990): 182-186.


theoretical, activist” cultural response to HIV/AIDS rather than a “personal, elegiac” one.\(^{120}\) Crimp maintained the anonymity of the Silence=Death Project by not listing their names in his essay, and argued that it is exemplary of cultural activism because it is a collaborative (as opposed to individual) endeavor, and because its practices were developed within the context of activism, not the art world.\(^{121}\) Importantly, Crimp noted the spatial aspects of activist art – it “involves questions not only of the nature of cultural production, but also of the location, or the means of distribution, of that production.”\(^{122}\) He observed that this entailed cultural specificity as well – such as bilingual posters, or idiomatic language. Beyond the Silence=Death Project, Crimp cited other ACT UP-affiliated collectives including the Metropolitan Health Association, a group that created unambiguous public campaigns about HIV/AIDS transmission and illegally posted them over extant subway advertisements, and Testing the Limits, a collective of video activists that documented AIDS activism and produced safe sex videos and films.

From the onset of the epidemic cultural theorists and public health workers developed an analysis of AIDS as a signifying practice. The graphic design of \textit{SILENCE=DEATH} provided a similar analysis of AIDS representation. It also inverted Keywords”), media (Simon Watney, “The Spectacle of AIDS,” Martha Gever, “Pictures of Sickness: Stuart Marshall’s \textit{Bright Eyes}”), iconography and representation (Sander L. Gilman, “AIDS and Syphilis: The Iconography of Disease;” Suki Ports, “Needed [For Women and Children]); gay sex and AIDS (“Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?”; Douglas Crimp, “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic”) All of the essays are linked by their emphasis on the \textit{public} – the street, the media, television – and the \textit{real} effects of representations of AIDS.

\(^{120}\) Crimp (1988): 7.

\(^{121}\) Crimp correctly attributes \textit{SILENCE=DEATH} to the Silence=Death Project, and notes that the group and its design of the poster preceded the formation of ACT UP.

the gay blame and shame that debilitated mass confrontational action earlier in the decade. *SILENCE=DEATH* did that work formally and rhetorically. We can understand the formal strategies in play in *SILENCE=DEATH* – including historicity, morality, approachability, publicness, open-source imagery, multiplicity, ephemerality, abstraction, and ambiguity – as important political decisions that would help shape the visual culture of AIDS activism well into the 1990s. Due in part to Crimp’s stature and the reputation of *October*, this issue facilitated art world recognition and funding of AIDS cultural activism. On the heels of this issue in the spring of 1988 Gran Fury produced a number of highly visible projects (discussed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation).

**Contextualizing *SILENCE=DEATH* within other visual responses to HIV/AIDS**

*SILENCE=DEATH* is best understood as one of many posters and other forms of cultural ephemera mobilized by gay men and their allies in response to HIV/AIDS. Many of these posters were educational and created as a means of safe sex outreach. Since HIV can be transmitted through certain types of sexual intercourse, in the 1980s sex had to be re-imagined. The distribution of condoms and other forms of protection became a matter of life and death. Carol Queen has discussed the centrality of safe sex posters as a mode of gay “community-sourced communication.” For example, safe sex posters would be wheat-pasted on city walls as well as left in stacks of 20 or more at gay bars, for patrons to take home and display elsewhere. Queen describes the “San Francisco Model” of posters as follows:

Partly because HIV emerged in the US (largely) in San Francisco, but partly because San Francisco has always been a horse of a different color, the San Francisco Model developed explicit (I mean *sexually* explicit), community-
focused, inclusive, and responsibility-centric messages about HIV/AIDS. Because information about and support around this disease did not come first from official sources – the government, the medical world – but from the community, and queer community at that, AIDS interventions in the San Francisco Model are often sexual, sometimes cheeky, mostly identity-focused and always plainspoken. They are imbued with sexual politics. When the basis of San Francisco Model was distilled into visuals and slogans on the posters of the time, they represented gay love and lust, commitment and ‘the love of comrades’ (as Walt Whitman would say), hope and struggle, anger and resistance. Some of them were catchy and cute, but more often they were compellingly sexy.¹²³

For example, the poster *Dress For the Occasion* (figure 1.11) by San Francisco AIDS Foundation depicts the muscled body of a white man, rendered anonymous due to the fact that the photograph is cropped just above the mouth and below the knees. The title refers to the fact that the only thing the man is “wearing” is a condom. The tenebrism and symmetry of the composition recalls the sexually explicit photography of Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs of male nudes (figure 1.12). The model, set against an inky black background, is presented as a figure of erotic desire. The title, its font and its form (a declarative sentence), make the poster look like a contemporary advertisement.¹²⁴ In fact the small type is suited to the fact that this was intended for close-up reading, as it was a hand-held flier distributed at bars.

In a sense, *SILENCE=DEATH* was a visual manifestation of AIDS activism that complemented the San Francisco Model. It was “cool” rather than “hot”; it was angry


rather than sexually explicit. *SILENCE=DEATH* was also distinct from contemporary examples of AIDS activist ephemera already in circulation in New York City, such as the safe sex poster “Gay Men’s Health Crisis” (1987) (figure 1.13). The “Gay Men’s Health Crisis” poster features bilingual text “A Rubber Is a Friend in Your Pocket” and provides a phone number for the GMHC hotline. The illustration by Michael Sabanosh features the male backside of a “gay clone,” built and dressed in the style of the 1970s. His teal shirt is tucked into snug fit denim jeans with a condom impression visible in the back pocket. Like the black-and-pink palette of *SILENCE=DEATH*, the pastel colors of *Gay Men’s Health Crisis* reflect the style of the decade. Like *Dress for the Occasion*, the tone the work attempts to re-imagine the visual imagery of cruising and gay male desire to include condoms.

*SILENCE=DEATH* was markedly different from safer sex campaigns as well as other contemporary AIDS public art activist projects. The point is not to establish a hierarchy of value, but rather to acknowledge there was a wide range of visual responses to AIDS, activist or otherwise. For example, its tone is distinct from the overall feeling of the *AIDS Memorial Quilt*, a project by Cleve Jones, which debuted at the March on

---


126 In New York, there were other AIDS-related visual campaigns besides *SILENCE=DEATH* in the urban environment, for example the AIDS posters displayed throughout Manhattan in late 1987 created by the Canadian art collective General Idea. This was a politically ambivalent appropriation of the famous Pop Art image *LOVE* by Robert Indiana. Some critics of AIDS critiqued it as a judgmental statement of causality, associating sexually transmitted cases of HIV/AIDS with the legacy of “free love” in the 1960s. Other important AIDS-related works of the period include the collective Group Material’s *AIDS Timeline*, an installation comprised of scientific, journalistic, and artistic characterizations of the AIDS crisis that debuted in Berkeley, California in 1990, and the documentary film *SILENCE=DEATH* focused on New York AIDS activism by the German director Rosa von Praunheim (1990).
Washington in October 1987 (figure 1.14). At its debut the *AIDS Memorial Quilt* was comprised of over 1920 panels commemorating people who died from AIDS, each one made by family and friends of the deceased and sent to Jones from around the world. *SILENCE=DEATH* operates on a different affective register than the *AIDS Memorial Quilt*. Both were collaboratively produced but referenced different traditions: advertising versus a feminist-inflected craft practice. While *AIDS Memorial Quilt* focused on individual portraits and remembrances of people who died from AIDS, *SILENCE=DEATH* focused on mobilizing political anger to direct action. However, both aimed to extend the experience of AIDS from individual to collective consciousness.

What did *SILENCE=DEATH* do differently than other posters and projects? It politicized the crisis with its interrogative text. *SILENCE=DEATH* addressed multiple constituencies at once. It was less a ground-level intervention, as in providing information about safer sex or community resources, than it was a meta-critique, as it addressed AIDS as a politicized crisis of representation. The poster posed questions in order to foster a public conversation about AIDS; it was less didactic than it was open-

---

127 Jones was a long-time gay activist based in San Francisco (he organized the annual candlelight vigil and march for slain gay politician Harvey Milk. The quilt began in 1985 as a way to mark over 1000 deaths from AIDS in the city. Jones organized people to write the names of the dead on placards, which were then hung on the walls of the San Francisco Federal Building. The resulting formation resembled a quilt. The quilt began as such in 1986 with a panel for Marvin Feldman, to whom the entire project is dedicated. After the NAMES Project Foundation was created in 1987 people from around the world began making panels for people who died from AIDS and sending them in. At the time of its first display in October 1987 the Quilt had 1920 panels. See Jonathan Weinberg, "The Quilt: Activism and remembrance," *Art in America* (December 1992): 37-39, and http://www.thebody.com/content/art14040.html.

128 The bottom of the poster reads: “Why is Reagan silent about AIDS? What is really going on at the Center for Disease Control, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Vatican? Gays and lesbians are not expendable … Use your power … Vote … Boycott … Defend Yourselves … Turn anger, fear, grief into action.”
ended. It drew people towards it with a seductive and enigmatic design and statement, and then relayed information via text on the bottom register.

The two-part reveal of the poster worked in the context of a street as well as a political demonstration. The poster was used for the first time in this context at ACT UP’s second direct action, which occurred on the evening of April 15, 1987 at the General Post Office in New York City on Eighth Avenue and 33rd Street. ACT UP knew there would be a large crowd gathered at the 24-hour post office mailing last minute tax returns. The group decided to capitalize upon this and staged a demonstration about how much tax money went to AIDS research. ACT UP handed out a press release to journalists already at the Post Office for tax-day reporting and distributed a pre-written letter to President Reagan for people to sign and mail to the White House. Although some participants described the Post Office demonstration as unsuccessful because it was difficult to reroute the media from its pre-planned story on people filing last minute tax returns, it resulted in an important observation that would influence the direction of ACT UP and AIDS activism. This was the first appearance at an ACT UP demonstration of the SILENCE=DEATH placard (figure 1.15). As evident in photographs, the striking legibility of the design was different than the sea of individuated, handmade signs usually held at protests. Recalling this demonstration, Michael Nesline observed,

What the media was impressed by was the uniformity of our presentation … all of the posters are black posters with big pink triangles. It looked really organized. That was not a completely conscious strategy at that point. It quickly became a conscious strategy, because we realized that it worked, for the media.129

129 Nesline (2003), 15.
Mounted on foamcore and held as placards by demonstrators, the signs caught the attention of news journalists. Just as the sophisticated public relations blitz accompanying ACT UP protests indicated a level of professional experience, in media if not in activism, *SILENCE=DEATH* was visually powerful as a political artwork because it was more akin to an advertisement than a conventional agitprop poster.

**Conclusion**

*SILENCE=DEATH* and the visual ephemera it engendered were central to the spatial and visual formation of AIDS activism and queer consciousness. ACT UP’s momentum spread and between 1987 and 1991 more than 100 ACT UP chapters formed in the U.S. and around the world. The impact of ACT UP and the success of the group in changing the face of AIDS in the U.S. led Jeffrey Edwards to argue that by the end of the decade the “AIDS street activism of lesbians and gay men had become one of the most vital sites of progressive, radical-democratic, feminist, pro-sex, and anti-racist political organizing in the US.”¹³⁰ The radical activism of Lavender Hill Mob and ACT UP engendered a shift from the singular act of “coming out” as gay or lesbian (in theory, if not in practice, a one-time event) towards a collective stake in “visibility,” which entailed continuance in time. Visibility necessitates the *sustained* representation of sexuality. It is collective, public and self-empowered. As Ann Cvetkovich has explained, visibility has “played a distinctive and prominent role in gay and lesbian culture and politics because, unlike gender or race, sexual identity is not so easily assumed to be marked on the body

or to be something one is born with.”¹³¹ As Jen Jack Gieseking has argued, “as the epidemic spiraled further out of control, a politics of visibility came to outweigh all other aims [of LGBTQ people] and offered strategies and tactics of response.”¹³² Because AIDS was, at least initially, not treated as a disease impacting the majority of Americans, in the 1980s and early 1990s many gay men and lesbians came to prioritize issues of representation and visibility.

How was visual ephemera used towards the activist ends of visibility?

“Ephemera,” rather than the categories of “object” or “artwork,” is an effective framework to address the particularities of the function, display, and afterlives of SILENCE=DEATH. This is because of the intended location of the poster as well as the position of its creators outside of the art world. “Ephemeral object” is a necessary qualifier to “art work” when discussing a copyright-free poster, intended for wide reproduction and distribution in order to galvanize people into action concerning the HIV/AIDS crisis. A “both/and” distinction between ephemera and art object is more productive than any oppositional construction. Ephemera, defined as “items designed to be useful or important for only a short time,” refers to objects that are functional and impermanent – the opposite of traditional works of art. Kevin Murphy and Sally O’Driscoll have devised “ephemeral intervention” as a conceptual model to address the


spatiotemporal complexity of visual ephemera in urban space.\textsuperscript{133} This term contends with the contingency that results from urban contexts of reception that are sometimes spectacular (as in a banner drop from a building) but often unremarkable (as in posters that are covered up or torn down, if not ignored completely). As is often the case with activist uses of visual ephemera, graphics are produced in multiple and become animated as constituent parts of demonstrations, as do aural (chanting) and tactile (crowd) elements. “Ephemeral intervention” locates meaning in the production and distribution of such materials along with, rather than exclusively in, aesthetic reception. Activists describe the creation and dissemination (often illegally, at night by wheat-pasting to city walls) of visual ephemera as central to their affective experience of collective political activism, since it is nearly impossible to gauge the impressions of multiple and anonymous public audiences of posters and stickers.\textsuperscript{134}

“Ephemeral intervention” helps explain the visual and rhetorical play with ambiguity that is one of the key reasons why \textit{SILENCE=DEATH} is now considered one of the most significant political artworks of the twentieth century. Then and now, \textit{SILENCE=DEATH} signified the confrontational activism that emerged from New York in the late 1980s. It looked different than other political posters, if not from contemporary advertisements. Its very design signaled a new moment and audiences responded to that. The emblem was central to the perception of ACT UP by other AIDS activists as a new, radical “wave of brilliant young artistic New Yorkers … they were political, but they

\textsuperscript{133} Kevin D. Murphy and Sally O’Driscoll, “Introduction,” \textit{Space and Culture} 18, no. 2 (2015).

were political artists.”

This is captured by Patrick Moore’s description of his first encounter with the poster:

Arriving in New York, I sought connections to the gay world but could find none … it is all the more amazing to me that, out of this rigid and isolated experience, I could have been forever changed by something as simple as a poster. In 1987 I began seeing a remarkable poster on the streets of downtown New York. The poster seemed to resonate with a new kind of energy, with its glossy black field interrupted by a pink triangle, and, near the bottom, large letters reading ‘SILENCE=DEATH.’ In small type at the bottom of the poster, readers were questioned … Suddenly, though I knew nothing about it, I felt intuitively that there was in fact a gay world that I could not only identify with but aspire to join.

Cultural ephemera is worn and held as much as it is displayed on walls or stacked in piles waiting to be read. In the context of AIDS activism, ACT UP deployed SILENCE=DEATH for radical visibility. It appeared on posters as well as buttons, t-shirts, demonstration placards, banners and elsewhere. As such it became a means of recruitment, fundraising and publicity: a multivalent method for communicating to the world-at-large, as well as signaling membership among a community of socially marginalized individuals directly impacted by HIV/AIDS. Importantly, since it became associated with the radical direct actions of ACT UP and soon became ubiquitous in the urban landscape of New York, the poster established an activist presence and visibility of AIDS in New York City. Building upon the momentum of SILENCE=DEATH during the late 1980s and early 1990s many cultural activism groups formed to work in affiliation

135 As one San Francisco AIDS activist described it in We Were Here, DVD, directed by David Weissman, Bill Weber (Red Flag Releasing, 2011).

136 Patrick Moore, Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 121-122.
with ACT-UP including the Metropolitan Health Association, Gran Fury, Women’s Action Coalition, Queer Nation, fierce pussy, and Dyke Action Machine treated the public sphere as “both a weapon and a target,” to use Hal Foster’s phrase.137

Taking SILENCE=DEATH as a point of departure, 1987 can be positioned as a turning point in AIDS activism. The aesthetic device of appropriation acted as a bridge between different generations of gay men and lesbians who were “united in anger” by the AIDS crisis; it was also a means for underscoring the historical magnitude of the AIDS crisis. ACT UP affiliated cultural activists positioned themselves against predominant representations of AIDS (and critical postmodern art), but more importantly, they used ephemeral interventions to create public dialogues within a beleaguered population in order to galvanize and transform it. It worked on the ground – in urban spaces. SILENCE=DEATH emerged from a groundswell of activism and was integral to the establishment of a community of AIDS activists, as well as the visibility of the AIDS crisis. However as previously indicated, in this chapter as well as the introduction, this community was not monolithic, demographically or aesthetically. Chapter 2 explores debates over issues of identity and representation that surfaced with the rise of Gran Fury as the preeminent visual collective in support of AIDS activism in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

---

137 Foster (1982).
Chapter Two

RADICAL DISTRIBUTION: COMPLEXITY INTO SLOGANEERING, GRAN FURY
1988-1989

*SILENCE=DEATH* was designed by six individuals who felt alone, but raised their voices anyway and discovered they were surrounded by a community. Gran Fury came out of this community and was *anointed* spokesperson by an institutional framework hungering for a voice on this issue.¹

- Avram Finkelstein

Introduction

Avram Finkelstein, a founding member of both the Silence=Death Project and Gran Fury, eloquently describes the role of visual ephemera within the changing landscape of AIDS activism between 1986 and 1988 while highlighting the group’s “anointed” place in the art world. While the Silence=Death Project was a relatively scrappy collective, which began as a consciousness-raising group and only produced two posters in its brief existence, Gran Fury was a self-styled communard organization that became known as the “graphic design and advertising arm” of ACT UP.² Building upon the politicized aesthetics of the Silence=Death Project but expanding upon them to

---


incorporate the identity politics of race and queer sexualities, Gran Fury achieved as much renown as infamy between its founding in 1988 and its dissolution in 1995. Chapter 1 explored how the content and form of SILENCE=DEATH organized gay and lesbian individuals into a community of radical AIDS activists. This chapter examines this question: How did Gran Fury communicate messages about AIDS and sexuality to broader, mainstream publics and in so doing, impact the discourse of AIDS?

Between 1987 and 1989 over one hundred ACT UP chapters formed worldwide, and in the U.S. social networks coalesced around AIDS activism. These communities were essential to people with AIDS and their allies, who were marginalized due to the stigma of AIDS. Gran Fury formed in 1988, at this moment when there was an increased awareness of the AIDS epidemic, yet there were few public art activist responses to AIDS. Several of the individuals in Gran Fury were involved in the contemporary art world and the collective, as a result of this as well as its association with ACT UP New York, benefited from institutional recognition and financial support for some of its public art campaigns. In spite of Gran Fury’s status within the art world, which included representing the United States at the 1990 Venice Biennale, its members strove to maintain activist integrity. This was especially true between 1988 and 1989, when collective members refused to be photographed, strove to maintain anonymity, kept an

---

4 Eight years into the epidemic, many people previously unaffected by HIV/AIDS knew at least one person impacted by the disease and felt compelled to do something.

5 Gran Fury’s display of two billboards at the 44th Venice Biennale (1990) in the ‘Aperto’ section garnered a great deal of controversy in Italy due to its blatant critique of the Catholic Church. One billboard featured a picture of Pope John Paul II that criticized the Catholic Church’s position on condom use for AIDS prevention, the other an image of an erect penis and statements demanding men use condoms in order to prevent the spread of the AIDS virus.
open membership, and made designs in dialogue with the broader membership of ACT UP New York.

This chapter begins with an overview of the AIDS activist art context in New York in which Gran Fury formed. This is followed by a study of several Gran Fury projects, including *AIDS: 1 in 61* (1988), the *Nine Days of Action* campaign (1988), and *Kissing Doesn’t Kill* (1989). The second half of the chapter situates Gran Fury within a broader socio-cultural context, placing particular emphasis on the importance of sexuality-based aesthetics in the public sphere during the AIDS crisis and the culture wars. The ultimate goal of this chapter is to provide a conceptual framework for understanding the importance of text-and-image based cultural ephemera during the highly divisive period of the late 1980s in the US.

**Contextualizing Gran Fury within an emergent visual culture of AIDS activism**

Chapter 1 argued for the specific achievement of *SILENCE=DEATH* – that it formed an inter-generational community of activists where one did not previously exist. However Nancy Stoller, among others, has criticized the gay-and-lesbian address of *SILENCE=DEATH* for its implication that other populations of people with AIDS including sex workers, urban poor people of color, and drug users, were “expendable.” On the one hand, *SILENCE=DEATH* was exclusionary because it specifically addressed “gay men and lesbians” rather than “people with AIDS” more broadly. On the other hand,

---

6 Nancy Stoller interprets the message of the text at the bottom of *SILENCE=DEATH* as follows: “The only cultural groups affected by AIDS deemed worth mentioning are gays and lesbians. Everyone else, presumably, is expendable.” Nancy E. Stoller, *Lessons from the Damned: Queers, Whores, and Junkies Respond to AIDS* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), 126.
the inclusion of lesbians is important because it signaled a new coalitional politics between the two historically disparate groups (gay men and lesbians). Although by 1987 gay men were not the sole or even prime demographic with HIV infections, the poster clearly addresses gay men specifically. The intent of its creators was to gather together sexual outlaws and create the “gay world” Moore referred to.7

Indeed SILENCE=DEATH proved to be a powerful, if somewhat ambiguous, symbol. It was distributed throughout the urban public sphere of New York City and beyond, and through its association with ACT UP became inextricable from the self-stylization of this new breed of radical street activism. Despite its eventual ubiquity, its original function was to make an intervention locally, among gay men and lesbians, and to create an activist network to confront HIV/AIDS with anger rather than acquiescence. In New York City in the 1980s there was a well-established precedent of posting bills on city surfaces. Not only did artists use walls to communicate, New Yorkers looked to walls for information. Gregg Bordowitz explained his first encounter with ACT UP in these terms:

At that time, I looked to the city’s walls for direction. I recall exiting the Christopher Street subway station when a small eight-and-a-half by eleven-inch Xeroxed flyer, wheat-pasted to the wall, caught my attention. It advertised an upcoming protest. I knew then and there that I would go. That’s how I attended ACT UP’s first demonstration, on Wall Street on March 24, 1987.8

Particularly before the advent of the Internet, the public sphere was a tangible phenomenon, meaning it literally entailed the spaces and surfaces of public space as

---

7 The phrase “sexual outlaws” is Deborah Gould’s, and is used here because it aptly demonstrates the range of sexualities and identities present within the queer community. See: Gould (2009).

venues for communication. As a social movement that emerged before the digital age
AIDS cultural activism made use of the public sphere for its goals of visibility,
information and recruitment. As the aforementioned quote by Bordowitz describes,
ephemeral materials were signposts in a landscape that facilitated new connections and
experiences.

AIDS activists came to rely upon the symbol’s ubiquity as a measure of
achievement and as an “organizing tool.”9 Douglas Crimp characterized the success of
ACT UP at The Fifth International AIDS Conference in Montreal in June 1989 in part
due to the fact that “by the end of the conference perhaps one-third of the more than
12,000 people attending were wearing SILENCE=DEATH buttons.”10 Interestingly, early
on within ACT UP there was dissention among membership as to the utility of such a
capitalist-derived strategy of “branding” ACT UP through the distribution and
consumption of paraphernalia. Michael Nesline recalled early discussions within the
group about the efficacy of making t-shirts with the SILENCE=DEATH emblem:

… [We] discussed whether or not to make T-shirts for upcoming Gay Pride
parade. “So in the middle of this painful conversation about whether or not it’s
appropriate to make T-shirts, Larry Kramer jumps up and screams, you sissies –
people are dying, and you’re talking about T-shirts. So, we just tabled the
conversation and just decided that we should make T-shirts. I actually believe that
that’s the only independent decision that the Coordinating Committee ever
took…we had a table at Gay Pride (Karl Soehnlein and Alan Klein tabled), while
the rest of us marched. And then, afterwards, people took turns selling T-shirts
from the table, until, by the end of the day, Larry Kramer had elbowed everyone
out of the way and was thrusting T-shirts in people’s faces and demanding that

9 Crimp and Rolston (1990), 34.
10 Crimp and Rolston (1990), 14.
they buy them and… I was thinking, Larry, you big sissy, you’re selling T-shirts and people are dying…\textsuperscript{11}

By the summer of 1987 the emblem was ubiquitous – wheat-pasted to walls, worn as buttons and t-shirts, and held at demonstrations – and signified the new radical street activism by gay men and lesbians.

One of the most important achievements of AIDS cultural activism in the mid-1980s was to insist upon the dignity of people with AIDS. This was done through the demands for fair access to treatment and it also entailed the promulgation of new representations of people with AIDS and their allies as empowered and angry citizens, rather than morally wretched and emaciated victims. The Lavender Hill Mob, \textit{SILENCE=DEATH} and ACT UP’s demonstrations did not represent AIDS in terms of a plea for the humanity of its victims. Rather, each insisted upon AIDS as a political crisis, one that was preventable or at least could be responded to with adequate resources.

The second and final poster by the Silence=Death Project represented AIDS as a political crisis in these terms. \textit{AID$S$gate} was created for ACT UP protests at the Third International Conference on AIDS in Washington D.C. on June 1, 1987 (figure 2.1). The poster featured a large image of President Reagan’s head, rendered in a graphic style reminiscent of Andy Warhol’s pop portraiture, an effect amplified by the garish palette of the image – neon green and pink, and black. Like \textit{SILENCE=DEATH}, the poster utilized a two-part approach: an arresting and seductive image to lure viewers, and small text at

\textsuperscript{11} Nesline (2003), 15. Nesline: [soon after the second ACT UP demonstration] “we began to have a discussion about whether or not we should make buttons, because the [Gay Men’s Health Crisis] AIDS Walk was coming at the end of May … [ACT UP] made and sold 600 buttons with SILENCE=DEATH logo at this march, earned $600.”
the bottom of the poster that relayed a specific message. It is not about the representation of people with AIDS, but about the framing of AIDS as a political crisis, and the indictment of the President for his role in the crisis. The title AIDSgate makes direct reference to Watergate, the political scandal that tarnished the 1970s presidency of Richard Nixon. In this reading, AIDS is Reagan’s Watergate, grounds for impeachment.

At the Gay and Lesbian Pride Parade in Manhattan on June 28, 1987, ACT UP used SILENCE=DEATH to recruit new members to ACT UP and inspired the group’s “Quarantine Camp” float (figure 2.2). This idea addressed the most pressing issue of the gay community with a somewhat outrageous gesture that underscored the historical analogy between AIDS and the Holocaust. As such it was akin to the political imagery established by SILENCE=DEATH. Planning began in the spring of 1987 at ACT UP meetings; the idea of coffins was touted but based on current events the concentration camp float won out. The float responded directly to threats by American public officials to quarantine of people with AIDS. It entailed a barbed wire encased structure atop the flatbed of a rented truck driven by a person wearing a Ronald Reagan mask. ACT UP activists stood inside the float, many wearing SILENCE=DEATH insignia. “Guards”

---

12 The text reads: “This Political Scandal Must be Investigated! 54% of people with AIDS in NYC are Black or Hispanic … AIDS is the No. 1 killer of women between the ages of 24 and 29 in NYC … By 1991, more people will have died of AIDS than in the entire Vietnam War … What is Reagan’s real policy on AIDS? Genocide of all Non-whites, Non-males, and Non-heterosexuals? … SILENCE=DEATH”

13 Crimp and Rolston add, “it was the summer of congressional hearings about secret diversions to the Nicaraguan contras of funds from illegal arms sales to Iran – a series of events variously referred to as Iranagate or Contragate, ‘the ‘gate’ of Watergate having become the colloquial suffix for scandal.” Crimp and Rolston (1990), 33.

14 Nesline (2003), 16.

15 Within the gay community these threats were routinely discussed, for example in 1986 a cover of the gay weekly newspaper New York Native ran several covers regarding the threat of quarantine and mandatory testing, and used imagery such as photographs of World War Two Japanese-American internment camps.
wearing gas masks and yellow gloves surrounded the float on the street. While the gas
masks were a reference to World War II concentration camps, the yellow gloves
referenced the yellow rubber gloves worn by police in Washington D.C. as they corralled
protestors at the Third International Conference on AIDS on June 1, 1987. This gesture
fueled “America’s already fever-pitch hysteria about ‘catching’ AIDS through casual
contact.” At the march activists carried SILENCE=DEATH and AIDSgate posters
enlarged and printed on foamcore. Michael Nesline recalled:

  ACT UP made a big impact on the Gay Pride Parade that year – a huge impact. And, if we started off with, like, 60 or 100 people behind the quarantine truck, we ended up with I don’t know how many hundreds and hundreds of people who joined the parade behind us. And so, by the time we got down to the village, we were huge. And we were really motivated and were chanting our chants … and, the next Monday meeting after that, the whole nature of ACT UP had changed. Hundreds of people were in the room and what had been a sort of insular and a familial kind of thing, became a lot more complicated… good, but complicated. That’s really – I sort of mark, like, before the Gay Pride thing and after the Gay Pride thing. 

This was a powerful gesture of appropriation that connected past to present. It was also a
very queer one, as it entailed a campy recreation of concentration camps. Camp can be
understood as a queer survival strategy of parodic identification; the reclamation of
something (in this case, the threat of quarantine) defangs it of the power it has against
you. Although pride parades are intended to celebrate the cultural accomplishments of

16 Crimp and Rolston (1990), 33.
17 Nesline (2003), 16-17.
lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, the events typically take place in June to commemorate the violent Stonewall Riots that happened on June 28, 1969 at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village. The Stonewall Riots were a watershed moment within modern gay history: gay, lesbian, and trans people fought back against police oppression. As such ACT UP placed itself squarely within that legacy by foregrounding anger and defiance against the structures of oppression.

… during ’87, there was this constant buzz that was building. I went to the Gay Pride parade, and I saw this concentration camp float. It wasn’t real clear what the message was from the float. I don’t think they had signage. You knew something was going on, and you knew there was somebody with a Reagan mask, and you saw people with gloves and bloody hands and that kind of stuff, but the message for me wasn’t real clear what that was about. But, you started seeing ‘SILENCE=DEATH’ stuff, and there was this buzz, and in the gay press there was this buzz. And, finally, …I decided to go see what it was all about.19

As discussed in Chapter 1, in 1987 the threat of quarantine of people with AIDS was a significant topic of conversation in national media. Although not all parade-goers immediately understood the “message” of the ACT UP float, there was an undeniable sense that something important was happening within the community. Many people joined in the ACT UP contingent to march alongside the float. ACT UP shirts bearing the SILENCE=DEATH symbol sold out at the group’s table along the parade route, and ACT UP members recall that they couldn’t hand out promotional literature fast enough to interested passersby.20 “If you were wearing … [a SILENCE=DEATH t-shirt], you could

---


be sure to be asked countless times, ‘Who is that group?’”21 The next ACT UP meeting was the following day and it was filled to capacity.22

**The Formation of Gran Fury**

Nearly a year after the formation of the Lavender Hill Mob and ACT UP, Gran Fury coalesced in January 1988. The collective formed from the ad hoc working group of approximately thirty individuals who collaborated on *Let the Record Show*..., the ACT UP exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art.23 At the exhibition’s opening reception, Mark Simpson suggested the ad hoc working group form a collective in order to continue making “agitprop around issues in the AIDS crisis.”24 Simpson later hosted a potluck at his home where the group had its first meeting. Approximately 20-25 people were in the group’s initial formulation, all of whom were affiliated with ACT UP or had worked on *Let the Record Show*...25 Between 1988 and 1989, membership in Gran Fury

21 Crimp and Rolston (1990), 37.

22 Maxine Wolfe, “there is always this tension in the Gay Pride March in New York because the majority come to it for a celebration and they do not want it to be anything political at all. And this was 1987: We’re already five years into the crisis, loads of people had died, the community was in a state of shock, and Gay Pride was supposed to be a way to get away from all this. And ACT UP had the chutzpah to build a concentration camp float. When I came to the meeting the next night, there were three hundred people in that room.” Laraine Sommella and Maxine Wolfe, “This is about People Dying: The Tactics of Early ACT UP and Lesbian Avengers in New York City” in *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance*, edited by Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter (Seattle: Bay Press, 1997), 320.

23 The exhibition was on view from November 20, 1987 to January 24, 1988. As discussed in Chapter 1, this street-facing window installation was commissioned by Bill Olander, the contemporary art curator at the New Museum and an ACT UP member.

24 Simpson was a founding member of ACT UP. See: Gran Fury, *Good Luck, Miss You* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995).
was open to anyone from ACT UP. As the art historian Richard Meyer observes, “the heterogeneity of the group’s constitution underscored its activist – rather than expressly artistic – commitments.” Indeed Gran Fury was a motley crew of professional, commercial and amateur artists as well as people with no background in the visual arts.

For its early projects Gran Fury was closely aligned with ACT UP, as indicated by the collective’s self-description: “a band of individuals united in anger and dedicated to exploiting the power of art to end the AIDS crisis.” The name Gran Fury was chosen in the spring of 1988 to represent the mission of the group as an urban subterfuge presence in plain sight. As Loring McAlpin recounts, “we thought the name of the NYC [police] squad car described nicely our anger and urgency, with humor, a slightly camp sensibility, and a nod to the ordinary – a mid-range Plymouth [automobile].” Gran Fury’s first projects entailed subterfuge: illegal wheat pasting of posters on buildings and subway platforms, and the distribution of xeroxed fliers. As Loring McAlpin put it,

---

25 People involved in this initial group included: Richard Elovich, Avram Finkelstein, Tom Kalin, John Lindell, Loring McAlpin, Marlene McCarty, Donald Moffett, Michael Nesline, Don Ruddy, Amy Heard, Anthony Viti, Todd Haynes, and Terry Riley. The sole exception is Avram Finkelstein, who indirectly contributed to “Let the Record Show …” as one of the creators of SILENCE=DEATH (1986), the activist graphic that was central to the installation.


28 McAlpin quoted in Heller (2012).

29 One of its first projects was independent of ACT UP and involved Tom Kalin, John Lindell, Donald Moffett, and Marlene McCarty. This included slides of safe sex pornography and napkins with relevant information. It was held inside the bar at King Tut’s Wah-Wah Hut, at the corner of Avenue A and 7th Street in the East Village. McCarty described the experience as follows, “it was so exciting to suddenly realize that all these things I knew how to do, could be put to use in a way that I felt was really positive and had a really positive effect upon the social landscape.” This group – Kalin, Lindell, Moffett, and McCarty –
“You need to seize authority … if you’re angry enough and have a xerox machine and five or six friends who feel the same way, you’d be surprised how far you can go with that.”

Gran Fury took its organizational cues from ACT UP, and held weekly meetings with rotating facilitators. Members took turns hosting meetings at their homes (Mark Simpson, Michael Nesline, Loring McAlpin) and workplaces (John Lindell’s office at Madeline Speer Associates Inc.). Michael Nesline described the brainstorming process as follows: “we would consider what issues were topical, and how could we [sic] boil something down into a succinct little slogan that then could be turned into a billboard or poster.”

Participation in various projects was based on the availability, experience, and interest of members. The group ambitiously brought each design decision to the floor of weekly ACT UP meetings. As Meyer explains, “revision was characteristic of Gran Fury’s working method: the group’s graphics, placed in dialogue with the larger AIDS activist movement, were open to the criticism and creative input of that movement.”

However, this eventually proved unwieldy and by 1989 Gran Fury had assumed a fixed membership: Richard Elovich, Tom Kalin, Michael Nesline, John Lindell, Marlene

---


31 Nesline (2003), 30.

McCarty, Donald Moffett, Robert Vazquez-Pacheco, Mark Harrington, Avram Finkelstein, Loring McAlpin, and Mark Simpson.  

The permanent membership of Gran Fury included one woman, Marlene McCarty, and one person of color, Robert Vasquez-Pacheco. Like ACT UP, Gran Fury was comprised of a majority of white gay men. All were in their late twenties or early thirties. Mark Simpson, a landscape painter whom Michael Nesline described as a “frustrated artist,” had been an active member of ACT UP since the group’s first meeting. Nesline, a nurse and an artist, had also been with ACT UP since March 1987. Tom Kalin moved to New York in the early summer of 1987 at the age of 25 for the Independent Study Program of the Whitney Museum of American Art. He worked on Let the Record Show ... and assumed a leadership role within Gran Fury. Loring McAlpin was a formally trained artist who joined ACT UP in the fall of 1987 and helped with the de-installation of Let the Record Show.... Marlene McCarty and Donald Moffett were

---

33 In addition there were affiliate members who joined on later projects such as Four Questions (1994), namely Charles Kreloff and Richard Deagle.

34 Nesline (2003), 30.


36 McAlpin moved to New York in 1984 after studying photography at The Art Institute of San Francisco and Princeton University.
graphic design professionals. Avram Finkelstein had not been a major contributor to *Let the Record Show*... but eagerly joined Gran Fury since by 1988 the Silence=Death Project had disbanded. In the 1980s Richard Elovich was a writer and performance artist. Mark Harrington, an AIDS researcher, and Robert Vazquez-Pacheco, Director of Education at the Minority Task Force on AIDS, joined Gran Fury in 1988 and 1989, respectively.

In Gran Fury, all members worked together to complete whatever tasks were necessary. Tom Kalin described Gran Fury’s collaborative design process as follows:

---

37 Donald Moffett studied art at Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas. Marlene McCarty studied graphic design at the University of Cincinnati, College of Design, Architecture and Art, and Schule für Gestaltung, Basel, Switzerland. After moving to New York from Basel in 1983 McCarty worked in the graphic design department at the Museum of Modern Art and for the graphic design firm M & Company. She met John Lindell through shared architecture and design social circles. Lindell introduced McCarty to Moffett and invited her to work on “Let the Record Show...” See McCarty (2004): 15.

38 Finkelstein: “[The Silence=Death Project] did two posters [SILENCE=DEATH and AIDSgate] and then basically the group disbanded a bit, and after Oliver [Socarras] died, it became more of a group of friends. We weren’t meeting collectively about this type of work.” Finkelstein (2010): 54.

39 Debbie Levine was a member of ACT UP and worked at Creative Time. She approached the Minority Action Committee (a people of color affinity group within ACT UP) to do a project on HIV/AIDS at El Museo del Barrio in the East Harlem neighborhood of Manhattan. Vazquez-Pacheco was a primary participant in this project, which was an installation about safe(r) sex information. He was later invited to be on a panel organized for the exhibition *AIDS: The Artists’ Response* at Ohio State University in Columbus in 1989, where he met co-panelist Tom Kalin. In a conversation with Kalin, Vazquez-Pacheco criticized Gran Fury for its lack of members of color. Upon his return to New York, Kalin invited him to join Gran Fury. Vazquez-Pacheco became a permanent member of the now-closed group. See Robert Vazquez-Pacheco, interview by Sarah Schulman, New York, NY, December 14, 2002, ACT UP Oral History Project, http://www.actuporalhistory.org/beta/interviews/images/vazquez.pdf (accessed August 1, 2014): 55-56 and Robert Vazquez-Pacheco, interview by Karen J. Summerson, New York, NY, April 22, 2013, http://creatingandrecreatinggranfordy.blogspot.com/ [accessed July 10, 2013).

40 The group was tight-knit and members called each other “furies.” Interviews in the ACT UP Oral History Project with individuals such as Richard Deagle recall the cliquishness of Gran Fury members, who would sit together at meetings with other art world personalities such as Ann Philbin and Robert Gober. See Ann Philbin, interview by Sarah Schulman, New York, NY, January 21, 2003, ACT UP Oral History Project, http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/philbin.pdf [accessed 1 July 2014] and Deagle (2003). Although Gran Fury assumed a closed membership after 1989, its members participated in other ACT UP-affiliated visual arts collectives. For example Mark Harrington was involved with Wave III [along with Kayton Kurowski, Richard Deagle, Jim Eigo, Marvin Shulman, Brian Damage, Russell Pritchard, Pam Earin, Gary Kleinman, Deborah Gavito, and others]; Loring McAlpin worked with Gang.
… it’s like writing comedy when people do it as a group. You’re just throwing stuff out … the group would have these organic connections between people, that would – 2, 3, 4 – sometimes all 10 or 11 or 12, would talk and it would either – and then, there would be smaller sessions where they would get pasted up. We would agree what we were doing, then we’d print them and post them.41

After 1989 Gran Fury projects were typically printed at Bureau, the transdisciplinary design studio formed by members Marlene McCarty and Donald Moffett.42 Because of their professional training and resources, McCarty and Moffett would typically handle the mock-ups for individual posters. Other Gran Fury members, particularly those without formal art training such as Robert Vazquez-Pacheco, Michael Nesline and Mark Harrington, would focus on research. Artists in the group such as Avram Finkelstein and Tom Kalin had a particularly strong influence on the aesthetic composition of posters.

While all projects were signed “Gran Fury,” at no point did the collective attribute design decisions to individual members. In fact, because the group was focused on the primary goal of AIDS activism, Gran Fury avoided public recognition: “when we did interviews, the very few that we did, we never allowed photographs and would speak as a single voice. No one would be identified.”43 Nevertheless, the group signed its projects because it knew it would not receive media attention without authorship.


42 Marlene McCarty and Donald Moffett formed Bureau in 1989 in New York as a multidisciplinary design studio. Between 1989 and 1999 Bureau worked on a range of projects, from movie posters to book designs to trade advertisements, and public relations. Bureau also did design work for social justice organizations including Gay Men’s Health Crisis, Future Safe, Women’s Action Coalition, Art Against AIDS, and American Civil Liberties Union, among others).

Gran Fury Projects

The activist ethos of Gran Fury is indicated by the topicality and speed of its first project, *AIDS: 1 in 61* (figure 2.3) completed within weeks of the collective’s founding in January 1988. This poster addressed the issue of pediatric AIDS cases. It was wheat-pasted by Gran Fury members in Manhattan and in the Bronx in tandem with a related ACT UP demonstration in midtown Manhattan. Both events addressed the problematic ways in which influential publications, such as *Cosmopolitan* and the *New York Times* reported on the subject of AIDS. For example, the *Cosmopolitan* article “Reassuring News about AIDS (A Doctor Tells Why You May Not Be At Risk)” sought to reassure heterosexual women they were not at risk for HIV infection as long as they had “ordinary sexual intercourse.” 44 *AIDS: 1 in 61* is an offset lithograph poster (22 x 17 inches) with the following copy (in English and Spanish):

One in every sixty-one babies in New York City is born with AIDS or born HIV antibody positive. So why is the media telling us that heterosexuals aren’t at risk? Because these babies are black. These babies are Hispanic. Ignoring color ignores the facts of AIDS. STOP RACISM: FIGHT AIDS.

by Tom Kalin, Mark Simpson, Donald Moffett, Avram Finkelstein, Michael Nesline, Robert Vazquez-Pacheco, Loring McAlpin, Richard Elovich, Amy Heard, and John Lindell.

44 See Robert Gould, “Reassuring News About AIDS (A Doctor Tells Why You May Not Be At Risk),” *Cosmopolitan* (January 1988). Gould, a psychiatrist, sought to reassure heterosexual women they were not at risk for HIV infection based on racial prejudice and scientific ignorance. Gould accounted for high HIV rates in Africa with racist explanations, e.g. ‘Many men in Africa take their women in a brutal way, so that some heterosexual activity regarded as normal by them would be closer to rape by our standards.’. Gould quoted in Crimp and Rolston (1990), 39. At the time of publication, AIDS was the leading cause of death in New York City among women aged 25 to 34. A Women’s Committee soon formed within ACT UP to organize against such dangerous promulgation. On Tuesday January 18, 1988 a crowd of approximately 150 people gathered in front of the Hearst Magazine Building on West 57th Street in Manhattan, home of *Cosmopolitan* offices. At the lunchtime protest, timed for maximum pedestrian traffic, activists handed out condoms and fact-sheets to passersby, shouted “SAY NO TO COSMO,” and called for a boycott of the magazine. See Rossi, “Cosmo Confessions” *POZ.com*, June 1998, http://www.poz.com/articles/228_7133.shtml (accessed January 1, 2015).
The poster foregrounds a statistic about pediatric AIDS cases made all the more alarming by media reports that perpetuated the notion of AIDS as an exclusively gay disease.  

In this poster we can discern an inchoate formulation of the Gran Fury aesthetic that would be fully realized in subsequent projects. *AIDS: 1 in 61* utilizes a large amount of text to relay its message. This text is straightforward. It is not the typically patronizing copy of a state-sponsored public service announcement. Rather, it is a call to action. In subsequent Gran Fury projects text and image elements are more even. *AIDS: 1 in 61* features an image of a baby doll; this lifeless, legs akimbo object appears to be white or white passing. Perhaps more effectively than a social realist portrayal (such as a photograph or figurative drawing of a mother and child) the doll graphic seems to signify a lost life – there’s no child to hold the toy. It is also an effective means of signaling content about young children to passersby before they read the text.

For Gran Fury the stakes of representation were high, for two major reasons. First, the crisis of AIDS was literally a matter of life-and-death. The purpose of AIDS agitprop was to get information about transmission and prevention into the public sphere. Second, within the ACT UP community, from the group’s formation in 1987, there was quickly

---

45 This was particularly acute in conjunction with “SAY NO TO COSMO.” In fact Dr. Mathilde Krim, an officially sanctioned expert on AIDS, wrote an open letter to the author of the Cosmopolitan article that said the following. “The ‘You’ to whom Dr. Gould addresses his article are obviously not – in his mind – any of those young minority-group women who give birth to HIV-antibody-positive babies at the rate, now, of 1 out of every 61 births occurring in New York City.” Crimp and Rolston (1990), 40.

46 In very small print at the bottom of the poster it says, “ACT UP AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (phone number). ACT UP is a “diverse non-partisan group of individuals united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis / Gran Fury “Gran Fury is band of individuals united in anger and committed to exploiting the power of art to end the AIDS crisis.” This is a call to action as well as an attribution.
dissent about who was being represented and how. A similar process occurred within Gran Fury, as the collective described it:

Initially, ACT UP was primarily made up of middle-class white gay men who for the most part weren’t accustomed to being victimized by society in this new and deadly way. As issues of race, class and gender became increasingly visible within the group, consciousness was raised as members realized, for example, that in order to be denied insurance coverage you must first have access to it.\(^47\)

This process played out in the formal composition of posters in interesting ways. Despite the varied professional backgrounds of Gran Fury members, the collective’s homogenous demographic composition arguably impacted the design and reception of its works.

Is there a default subjectivity evident in the graphic design of Gran Fury posters? While ACT UP has been criticized as an essentially homogenous group of mostly middle- and upper-middle class white gay men in their 30s and 40s (at least initially), in fact from its beginnings the membership of ACT UP was continually diversifying along lines of race, class, gender.\(^48\) Within the history of social movements it is certainly remarkable that many of the people who became activists under the auspices of the AIDS crisis came from privileged backgrounds and had no prior political experience. However there was a degree of critical self-awareness from the beginning of ACT UP.\(^49\) This poster is thus important as one of the first ACT UP-affiliated projects to engage these questions. It is characteristic of ACT UP because it represents and contextualizes AIDS


\(^{49}\) Avram Finkelstein recalls writing “AIDS does not equal white fags” in his notes from the first ACT UP meeting. Sarah Schulman, Finkelstein (2010): 54.
as a political crisis. As part of a broader critique of the racist construction of mainstream audiences, it links the fight against AIDS to the fight against racism.\textsuperscript{50}

Gran Fury was able to rectify media misreports that heterosexual women didn’t have to worry about HIV infection through sex and underscore the damage of such misinformation with the jarring statistic that one out of sixty-one babies being born in New York City were HIV-positive. As one member put it,

When we got together to do that piece, we had no idea that it would end up being a ‘racism’ poster. We were able to articulate something that no one else – or very few people – were really aware of at that time, by drawing two statements together to articulate something as it hadn’t been before.\textsuperscript{51}

The poster thus functioned in a particularly contingent way as a means of raising awareness in a geographically specific manner. The feedback from audiences was mostly affirmative.\textsuperscript{52} However, one passerby vandalized an \textit{AIDS: 1 in 61} poster with the inscription “SCARED FAGS’ CRAP” (figure 2.4). This inscription, which seemingly conflates AIDS with gay men, actually underscores the poster’s urgent task, which was to break the widespread stigma of AIDS as a “gay plague” and to publicize life-saving information about HIV transmission in women and heterosexuals.\textsuperscript{53} In another context a

\textsuperscript{50} This is discussed at length in Crimp and Rolston (1990).


\textsuperscript{52} Vasquez-Pacheco: “The reaction that I got from Latino people who read it was that it was a kind of rallying call. They said, it’s good that someone is saying this and that this crisis is being acknowledged.” David Deitcher (1989): 40.

\textsuperscript{53} Sean Strub recalls that \textit{SILENCE=DEATH} posters in Manhattan were sometimes defaced with the handwritten text “GAY = AIDS.” Sean Strub, \textit{Body Counts: A Memoir of Politics, Sex, AIDS, and Survival} (New York: Scribner, 2014), 196.
Gran Fury member described it in terms of irony—“a bunch of faggots trying to educate heterosexuals about safe sex practices.”  

Throughout its career the collective grappled with difficult issue of translation: how to formulate a message for constituencies other than those of its members? Tom Kalin described *AIDS: 1 in 61* as “a very self-conscious attempt to extend our work outside what some of us perceived to be a very narrowly defined, primarily white gay male audience, and try to sort of see what happened.” Robert Vasquez-Pacheco was not yet a member of Gran Fury at the time *AIDS: 1 in 61*, but his roots in the Spanish-speaking communities of the Bronx informed his minority perspective on identity issues and AIDS; he occupied a singular status within Gran Fury as the sole person of color. Vasquez-Pacheco described the issue of addressing people living with AIDS besides white gay men:

For a lot of people [in ACT UP] it was a new way of thinking – realizing that there were different people within the AIDS community that were not necessarily white heterosexual men, and that you had to reach these people. The next question was: how do you reach them in the most culturally sensitive way?  

While Gran Fury was arguably hindered by its lack of diversity, Vazquez-Pacheco recalls *AIDS: 1 in 61* as a relatively well-received intervention in the Bronx.

---

56 As Tom Kalin put it, “Robert, obviously, I think, brought concern about this in a very personal sense. He grew up in the Bronx and felt like this was his home and community that was being devastated, along with his other chosen home and community of the gay world – trying to bring these things into dialogue.” Kalin (2004): 56.
In her 1998 book *Lessons From the Damned: Queers, Whores, and Junkies Respond to AIDS*, Nancy E. Stoller argued that since most of the individuals and collectives making activist art within ACT UP were “predominately gay, white, male work groups [and] ... many of the best graphics represent a predominately gay, white, and male [sic] approach to the issue presented.”\(^{58}\) She continues,

> When one examines ACT UP graphics, zaps, actions, and rhetoric, the salience of discourse on race, sexism, and sexuality becomes clear … The presumably democratic decision-making processes and a biased system of access to resources fostered maintenance of racial domination by giving a greater weight to white, male, and gay values in the graphic representations of the organization. This is ironic since it was clearly *not* the intent of ACT UP to support white or male hegemony.\(^{59}\)

These stakes are encapsulated in *AIDS: 1 in 61*. In fact, Stoller cites *AIDS: 1 in 61* as a prime example of the default white, gay subjectivity of ACT UP-affiliated graphics, claiming that the aesthetic used for poor people and people of color in *AIDS: 1 in 61* is problematic:

> [it is less] eye-catching or pleasing than that used for the ‘neutral’ unmarked category of a person with AIDS (primarily the interests, sensibilities, and priorities of middle-class white gay men and only secondarily the interests of people of color, women, or the poor.)\(^{60}\)

Stoller compares it to the poster *Know Your Scumbags* (figure 2.5), made in 1989 by ACT UP New York-affiliated artist-activists Richard Deagle and Victor Mendiola. *Know Your Scumbags* (22 x 21 inches) is an unsigned offset lithograph poster that morphologically equates two “scumbags” (slang for condom and for a contemptible

\(^{58}\) Stoller (1998), 126.

\(^{59}\) Ibid.

\(^{60}\) Ibid.
person): a mitre, the tall folding cap worn by the New York City Catholic Archbishop John O’Connor, and a condom. The poster refers to the Catholic Church’s controversial ban on contraceptives and its advocacy of abstinence. Cardinal O’Connor is indicted for his actions in the face of the gravity of the AIDS epidemic in New York City. The condom is captioned “THIS ONE PREVENTS AIDS.” “KNOW YOUR SCUMBAGS” is displayed in large all-caps red type, which signals the urgency of the directive. This is an effective activist poster because it represents AIDS as an ideological crisis. The message is that AIDS must be confronted with knowledge: of safer sex practices and the oppressive religious mechanisms that have compounded the epidemic. The tongue-in-cheek humor – both the caustic slogan and the visual pun – is a hallmark of AIDS cultural activism. Stoller uses this comparison to support her argument:

…What these very different styles of graphic representation say is that life as a gay white man is energetic, confrontive [sic], and zippy. It is colorful, and humorous and filled with the power of resistance. But life as a person of color is presented as depressing, black and white (and maybe a little red), wordy, dull, hard to read (in both the traditional and post-modern senses of the word), and small.61

This comparison is problematic for several reasons. First, AIDS: 1 in 61 is the inaugural effort of a collective and thus is aesthetically inchoate. It looks different from subsequent Gran Fury projects. Also, AIDS: 1 in 61 (January 1988) predates Know Your Scumbags (December 1989) by nearly two years. The text-heavy composition of AIDS: 1 in 61 is due both to its bilingual status as well as its purpose as an informative poster to be displayed and read at close range by pedestrians on city streets. Know Your Scumbags was distributed illegally, in slots reserved for subway-advertising posters and it was also

61 Stoller (1998), 126.
used as a placard at ACT UP demonstrations. Its strong graphic legibility relates to its function as a sign to be read from a distance.

Stoller’s critique, however, is not without merit. Regardless of the wide applicability of condom usage as a safe sex measure, among people of many sexual orientations, perhaps the adversarial quality of *Know Your Scumbags* can be understood in terms of the boldness of speaking from one’s own subject position (gay men). In contrast the tepid quality of *AIDS: 1 in 61*’s underwhelming visual presentation might indicate the hesitancy experienced by Gran Fury members in crafting a message for a demographic other than its own. A major difference is the uninspired illustration in *AIDS: 1 in 61*, which is all the more apparent when compared to the centrality of graphic designs to the legibility of *SILENCE=DEATH* (the ascendant pink triangle) and *Know Your Scumbags* (the visual condom puns). Although *AIDS: 1 in 61* doesn’t have the sloganeering quality key to the impact of other AIDS cultural activist works such as *Know Your Scumbags* and *SILENCE=DEATH*, it is notable within the broader history of AIDS cultural activism in that it addresses the issue of structural racism and AIDS. *Know Your Scumbags* is a paradigmatic work of AIDS cultural activism because it employs an accountability strategy of calling attention to the wrongdoings of a particular individual.

While Gran Fury projects tend to have a uniform presentation and univocal voice, the posters made for *Nine Days of Action* reveal the particular strengths and weaknesses of individual members. *Nine Days of Action* was the first nationally coordinated action for AIDS activist groups under the auspices of ACT NOW (AIDS Coalition to Network, Organize, and Win). From April 29 to May 7, 1988 across the U.S. AIDS activist groups
determined which issues were pressing and addressed a different one on each day. Gran Fury created demonstration graphics for different events in the form of posters that became placards and fliers that publicized these events in New York. Different members were primarily responsible for each poster, often working in teams of two, although they were all realized collaboratively.

John Lindell spearheaded the design of a poster intended as an “overall call to action” entitled *All People with AIDS Are Innocent* (figure 2.6). This offset lithograph (16-1/4 x 10-1/2 inches) poster utilizes an economical design. It consists of a black horizontal band on the top and bottom of the image and the text “ALL PEOPLE WITH AIDS ARE INNOCENT” in black, sans serif, all caps type, against a white background. The bottom half of the poster features a caduceus – two snakes wrapped around a staff, an image derived from Greek mythology that is a symbol of modern medicine – encased in a laurel wreath. This pointed reference directs specific attention to the ethical obligation on the part of doctors and nurses to treat all patients with AIDS equally. As Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston have noted, the poster was meant to “combat the mainstream media’s division of people with AIDS into ‘innocent victims’ – infants, hemophiliacs, and transfusion-related cases – and by implication, guilty victims – gay people, IV drug users, sex workers, and so on.” In 1988 *All People with AIDS Are Innocent* was a radical assertion. It built upon the conceptual work of *AIDS: 1 in 61 by

---

62 ACT UP New York focused, on consecutive days, on homophobia, people with AIDS, people of color, substance abuse, prisons, women, the worldwide crisis, and testing and treatment, and ... went to Albany for ACT NOW’s national day of protest at state legislatures.’ Crimp and Rolston (1990), 53.

63 Crimp and Rolston (1990), 54.

64 Crimp and Rolston (1990), 53.
challenging the racist, classist, sexist, and homophobic ways that people with AIDS were characterized.

To address the issue of homophobia and AIDS, ACT UP organized a same-sex “Kiss-In.” This event had two aims: first, to dispel prevailing notions that AIDS could be transmitted through kissing and second, to flaunt queer sexuality in a public spectacle that would counter homophobic responses to AIDS at institutional and street levels. The hour-long Kiss-In was held at 10:30pm on Friday, April 29 at the intersection of 6th Avenue and 8th Street, in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of Manhattan well known for its gay history. The Kiss-In was part of a sequence of events including a 9pm march from Christopher and West Streets, a 10pm rally at Sheridan Square, and an 11:30pm fundraiser at Tracks bar. Radical AIDS activism prioritized sex positivity in the face of the epidemic, on a par with the fight for political and civil rights. Due to heavy rain participants carried black umbrellas; these, along with pink balloons referenced the colors of SILENCE=DEATH.

The Kiss-In was a prime example of an action designed to destabilize hegemonic and naturalized heterosexuality by queering normative culture’s key public sites. Hundreds of same-sex couples gather to kiss in public, recuperating the street theater tactics used by gay liberationists in the 1970s. As such it was a marked departure from the assimilationist imperatives, such as monogamy, promoted by conservative gay and lesbian activists in the 1980s. Building upon the work of the Lavender Hill Mob, the

---

65 Greenwich Village home to several bars important within gay history of New York, namely the Stonewall Inn (51-53 Christopher Street), site of infamous riots in 1969 between LGBTQ patrons and police, and Julius (159 West 10th Street), a restaurant-bar known for its gay patronage since the late 1950s. Sheridan Square, a small triangular green space in Greenwich Village, is a historically popular site for gatherings and protests relating to the LGBTQ community, such as those concerning the Bowers v. Hardwick ruling in 1986.
radical activist group founded by veterans of the Stonewall Riots in the mid-1980s, ACT UP mobilized a confrontational politics of infiltration. For many gay people the AIDS crisis engendered a spatial imaginary of containment, marginalization, and quarantine. Rather than an appeal to privacy AIDS activists demanded a right to public life. Another tactic was street advertisements that subversively replaced heterosexual couples with queer ones in street advertisements. Gran Fury’s posters promoting the Kiss-In were crucial in this regard.

Gran Fury produced two posters, both titled READ MY LIPS, to advertise the Kiss-In event. The poster was in two versions, one featuring two men and one featuring two women (figures 2.7 and 2.8). The male version of the poster utilizes a vintage photograph of two World War Two-era sailors passionately kissing, accompanied by the text “READ MY LIPS.” This version was also printed and sold as a T-shirt. Mark Harrington worked at a stock photography company and found the source photograph there. In its complete, original, version the photograph depicts the two sailors holding each other’s exposed penises (Gran Fury cropped the photograph so that the sailors are seen from the waist-up). Tom Kalin came up with the forceful “Read My Lips” slogan because he was “looking for aphorisms,” influenced by Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer. Kruger’s influence is perhaps most evident in the use of Futura Ultra Bold typography. The Gran Fury poster predates, by several months, the phrase “Read My Lips: No New Taxes” that George H.W. Bush famously delivered in his acceptance

---

speech as the Republican Presidential Candidate at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans on August 18, 1988.67

While there was apparently no shortage of male pornographic models, it was harder to find archival sources for sex positive images of lesbianism to use for the female version of READ MY LIPS. The women’s version was a 1920s photograph of two women gazing into each other’s eyes. Once the male version was printed as a t-shirt, women in ACT UP began to critique the disparity between the posters on the grounds that “the women’s graphic for Read My Lips was troubling insofar as it reduced lesbian eroticism to a gaze, a fixed distance, a refined delicateness: while the sailors smooched, the flappers just looked.”68 Based on feedback from the broader ACT UP membership, Gran Fury members set out to find a more suitably erotic image of desire between women. With help from the staff of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, Gran Fury members found a replacement image (figure 2.9). However, members recall still being dissatisfied.69 This was an image from the Victorian era, depicting two women embracing and kissing. The image is somehow still desexualized, based on the distracted manner in which the women are kissing: their mouths are half-open and are not fully synced up, which one woman

67 Speechwriter Peggy Noonan (b. 1950) coined the phrase that many cited as a key to Bush’s election. There are conflicting reports on which “Read My Lips” came first. In a 2010 interview Marlene McCarty stated that “‘Read My Lips’ was a direct reference to a George [Herbert Walker] Bush comment.” McCarty quoted in Gran Fury, “Conversation: Kissing Doesn’t Kill...” in Gran Fury: Read My Lips, edited by Gran Fury and Michael Cohen (New York: 80WSE Press, 2011), 50.


69 In a 2010 conversation Gran Fury members recalled: “they gave us the photo and we thought, ‘oh well, we guess it’s okay.’” Gran Fury (2011), 53.
looking off into the distance with a distracted expression. Why was it so hard to find an image of desire between women that is sexy and looks like two women are actually lovers? Because too often the images themselves are not inherently lesbian – that is, made by and for women.

In a sense, the posters of kissing were as shocking as the event since at that time there were no representations of same sex desire in the public sphere. Thus the poster campaign was an incendiary “act of defiance because it is projected, with style and activist bravado, into the public sphere.” In fact some versions of the poster without informative text were displayed on streets, proving its utility beyond publicity. In this

---

70 The invention of photography in England and France in 1839 enabled the promulgation of erotic imagery to mass audiences. With the advent of photography in the nineteenth century, for the first time in history pornography became comparatively easy to make and consume. It became industrialized and, through the medium of postcards, became available to the average citizen. The first female pornographic nude photographs, including lesbians, appeared soon after photography’s invention in 1839, in the 1850s. However, men controlled the production and circulation of these images.

71 As Marlene McCarty explained it, “Historically female desire has been represented by-men-for-men thus rendering autonomous female desire invisible. Rare was the instance when female desire was represented solely for its own pleasure or for other women. This is the predominant reason why Gran Fury was unable to locate or identify a sexy lesbian image. Gran Fury (2011), 52.

72 Due to gender inequity issues of resources and access, more often historically there have been gay men who make gay male pornography and erotic imagery, for example Bob Mizer (1922-1992), then women making imagery for women. The first lesbian-made films about lesbian sexuality are generally credited to Barbara Hammer (1939-). The disparity between male and female pornographic images becomes apparent in the following anecdote, regarding the vintage photograph used for the male version of Read My Lips. Avram Finkelstein recalls, “After we did the t-shirts somebody called ACT UP and left a message that they wanted to speak with someone who was involved in this, so I returned the call. The guy who answered said, ‘I just want you to know that I’m one of the guys in that photograph.’ I thought there was a lawsuit coming, but he said, ‘my boyfriend and I were the sailors. We were on leave in San Diego and a photographer asked if he could photograph us. We went back to his studio and got a little carried away; I didn’t think anyone would ever see the pictures. I’d never seen them until I saw someone with this t-shirt. I just want you to know that it makes me proud to think that I could have done anything good for any other gay people.” Gran Fury (2011), 51-2.

73 One exception is the promotional ephemera used to publicize gay bars in Manhattan, which was distributed in the urban public sphere.

74 Meyer (1995), 68.
context the declarative, even demanding force of the text “READ MY LIPS” is significant.

The stark dynamism of Gran Fury’s Read My Lips posters is conveyed through the “shock” of the image as well as through the sans serif, bold type; both convey proximity to the art of Barbara Kruger, which is itself akin to contemporary advertisements. The jarring design of these Gran Fury posters enhances its social message. This is in contrast to the Gran Fury poster AIDS Behind Bars (figure 2.10), primarily designed by Loring McAlpin, for “day 5” of Nine Days of Action. This offset lithograph poster (16-1/8 x 10-3/8 inches) features a black background punctured by a headline in all caps, bold sans serif white text that reads “25% TEST POSITIVE.” Below this is a small prison window with bars, the eyes and face of a person of color barely visible behind it. Underneath this graphic is the subheading “People with AIDS in prison live ½ as long as those treated outside. Let’s put AIDS education and treatment behind bars.” In smaller white type below there are instructions for further action.75 The underwhelming graphic design is an apt representation of Stoller’s thesis, as it once again addresses racial issues with less graphic flair than those dealing with gay sexuality.

More controversy ensued for day 6 of Nine Days of Action, devoted to issues surrounding women and AIDS.76 As evident from AIDS: 1 in 61, a key task of AIDS cultural activism at this time was disproving misconceptions about women’s vulnerability

75 The poster included an exhortation to “send a condom” to the Deputy Director of Program Services, N.Y.S. Department of Corrections (address provided), and details about a protest on Tuesday May 3, 1988 at the offices for the New York State Department of Correction in Harlem.

76 Even the Women’s Day actions primarily focused on reaching male audiences – ACT UP members organized an action at Shea Stadium during a Mets game. See Crimp and Rolston (1990), 62-64, and Sommella and Wolfe (1997).
to infection by expanding the understanding of AIDS as more than “a gay plague.”

However, the ways in which Gran Fury approached this issue were met with some resistance. There were two designs made for this occasion: *Sexism Rears Its Unprotected Head* (figure 2.11), an offset lithograph poster (16-3/8 x 10-3/8”) and *Men, Use Condoms or Beat It* (figure 2.12), a silkscreen crack-and-peel sticker (7-1/8 x 8-5/8 inches), which was also printed in t-shirt and button form. Both of these works approach the issue of women and AIDS by exhorting men to use condoms during intercourse. This information is vital, but it is also problematic since its male-focus does not foreground the experiences of women, and it elides lesbians entirely.77

Donald Moffett was primarily responsible for the graphic design of *Sexism Rears Its Unprotected Head*; he and Loring McAlpin did the paste-up for the poster. It is a sex positive image that features a very large, erect penis jutting on an upward diagonal across the composition. The epidermal texture of the penis is amplified by its contrast with the matte black background. In the mid-left portion of the poster it says: “MEN: Use Condoms or Beat It” and in the lower left corner it says “AIDS KILLS WOMEN.” The image of the penis was sourced from a pornographic magazine. This was a point of contention among some members of Gran Fury who thought the image was too explicit and thus anti-feminist.78 However it was certainly effective in terms of shock value. As one commentator observed, “Women are so sexualized that seeing an erect cock is rare,

77 Lesbians and their susceptibility to HIV transmission through lesbian sex is a historically vexed issue within the ACT UP community. In fact in the 1980s women were the fastest growing demographics of new cases of HIV infection, primarily through heterosexual sex. For first-person narratives see more information see Ines Rieder and Patricia Ruppelt, eds., *AIDS: The Women* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1988) and for a more comprehensive, resource-based approach to the subject see ACT UP NY / Women AIDS Book Group, *Women, AIDS, and Activism* (Boston: South End Press, 1990).
78 Kalin (2004).
and even in New York those penis posters were torn down as soon as Gran Fury members put them up.” 79 Thus, the poster directly addresses men. Maxine Wolfe described the purpose of the ACT UP Women’s Day of Action at Shea Stadium in terms that are helpful for understanding the male-centricity of *Sexism Rears Its Unprotected Head*:

> We wanted to get the message out that heterosexual men are responsible; that they’re the only people being let off the hook in this epidemic by the media. Gay men are being put down; prostitutes and women are being told they have to take condoms along. What is anyone asking from straight men in the world? Nothing. 80

Does *Sexism Rears Its Unprotected Head* compound the marginalization of women? If so, the title of the poster is ironic. One benefit of the poster is that it is relevant for multiple constituencies: heterosexuals as well as gay men. In fact Gay Men’s Health Crisis paid for a different version of *Sexism Rears Its Unprotected Head* to be printed as a sticker and a button. This simply featured the tagline “MEN USE CONDOMS OR BEAT IT” in black, all caps bold type against a neon yellow background. Like other works of AIDS cultural activism, this graphic makes use of word puns.

In *Kissing Doesn’t Kill: Corporate Greed and Indifference Do* (figure 2.13) Gran Fury members took it upon themselves to create new, sexy and empowered images of erotic desire. This project is significant within Gran Fury’s oeuvre because it represents the mature expression of what became known as “activism as style.” 81 The project, which

---


80 Sommella and Wolfe (1997).

one Gran Fury member described as “probably the sexiest and most fun project we ever did,” entailed several versions of the same image: three multi-racial couples (two men, two women, and a man and a woman) kissing in profile against a white background. The composition of the photograph as well as the style of the models (contemporary haircuts and brightly patterned clothing) directly recalls advertisements for the Italian sportswear clothing company United Colors of Benetton, which were widespread in the late 1980s (figure 2.14). However, a major difference is that the banner on top of the couples reads “Kissing Doesn’t Kill: Greed and Indifference Do,” while in smaller type on the right side of the sign it says, “Corporate Greed, Government Inaction, and Public Indifference Make AIDS a Political Crisis.” With this tagline Gran Fury successfully re-routes the message about HIV infection away from individual responsibility towards “larger social forces and constituencies – the government, the corporate culture, the mainstream public – that ignore, remain silent about, or profit from the pandemic.” Yet the large poster, like the Kiss-In action, also touches upon the issue of transmission of AIDS through salvia. It seeks to dispel rumors that kissing was a high-risk behavior for AIDS.

Kissing Doesn’t Kill was one of several artist projects made for “Art Against AIDS On the Road,” a 1989 public art project that entailed commissioned projects and auctions of contemporary art to benefit AMFAR (the American Foundation for AIDS

---

82 Gran Fury (2011), 58.


84 Within charged climate of the time, people were getting arrested for spitting at cops at demonstrations. Gran Fury (2011), 53.
The institutional clout of “Art Against AIDS on the Road” led to the widespread distribution of the poster in cities beyond New York, including Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Washington D.C. Gran Fury took advantage of funding to extend the reach of the project beyond what meager resources the collective could provide, but had to compromise with AMFAR’s demand to censor the work’s text as a condition of funding. Outside of New York the work ran without the phrase “corporate greed,” which was deemed too controversial for AMFAR sponsors. The group rationalized this decision to censor as follows:

“We decided the image itself had some value alone, and agreed to participate in spite of this. That alone proved provocative enough to generate press, extended the reach of the project. In general, we tried to remain aware of what was permitted in public space. If our message was too radical, we risked both access as well as a broader public perception.”

Gran Fury later observed that they “strategically self-censored.” This project circulated in public space in several iterations: it was a twelve-foot long bus sign, a postcard, a poster, newspaper insert, and a music video as well. This multi-pronged approach to distribution was important because it extended the visibility of the project.

---


86 Philbin (2003).

87 Gran Fury quoted in Heller (2012).

88 Gran Fury (2011), 58.

89 In New York the Public Art Fund paid for the buses that did contain the full tagline and Creative Time financed a poster that also included the full tagline. There were 8000 postcards, which featured an in situ photograph of the poster on the bus. These were financed by the Whitney Museum of American Art and distributed as part of the first Day Without Art in 1989. Kalin spearheaded the video component of this project since he was a filmmaker. It was broadcast on American public television as a public service announcement and European MTV. The postcard received an award from then-Manhattan Borough
*Kissing Doesn’t Kill* reveals the limits of advertising-based activist strategies in the public sphere. It was also met with a range of ideological responses, from both radical and conservative audiences. First, due to the self-censorship of the “corporate greed” tagline in Chicago, some viewers did not understand the safer-sex message and merely thought it was an appeal for homosexual rights. The advertising strategy sometimes encountered difficulty, particularly regarding censorship and the interests of capital in the public sphere, when it sought to insert itself into the spaces of advertising with a blatantly anti-capitalist message. Loring McAlpin described this strategy in terms of desperation: “we are trying to fight for attention as hard as Coca-Cola fights for attention.” He continued:

> There was not really a self-conscious ‘conceptual strategy.’ The press, government and the medical establishment were not delivering information or countering stigma; we wanted our activist voice to fill that void. Therefore, we tried to insert our message seamlessly into those spaces that were normally occupied by authority, and we used whatever we could to grab attention. It didn’t matter to us if that was a borrowed strategy or not.

Another risk of this strategy was a failure of the “eye test,” as Gran Fury described the measure of legibility of a public activist artwork. In other words, is the activist message adequately conveyed, or obfuscated by a slick presentation? Robert Vazquez-Pacheco,

---


91 As Nesline recalls “very few people actually saw [*Kissing Doesn’t Kill*]. It was on buses very briefly.” Nesline (2003), 31-32.

92 Interestingly, there were nuanced layers of defacement. In Chicago all three couples were defaced with black paint. In San Francisco there was a lesbian activist emendation – the gay male and straight couples were covered in white paint, only the lesbians were left visible.


94 Gran Fury quoted in Heller (2012).
who modeled for the *Kissing Doesn’t Kill*, recalls that his cousin called him after seeing the poster on a bus in the Bronx; rather than ascertaining the activist purpose of the work, she wanted to know why he was in a Benetton ad.\(^{94}\) The interesting thing about this anecdote is that it reveals the gambit of advertising-derived cultural activist aesthetics. On the one hand they lure viewers in who may be drawn to the slick visual appeal of the presentation. It widens audiences and undercuts expectations of political art. It also makes activism chic and desirable, analogous to a commodity. On the other hand this privileging of the image may or may not be successful in relaying an activist message to audiences.

Some Gran Fury members were familiar with advertising strategies used by other politically engaged artists and collectives and certainly drew upon these influences.\(^ {95}\) Yet in interviews Gran Fury maintains its activist rather than artistic identity as a group, and describes the motivations for particular strategies based solely on functionality. As Marlene McCarty put it,

> Our mission was to get out in as raw and rambunctious a way as we could – to get certain messages that we felt like were not getting out into the mainstream world, which is why we adopted the mainstream look of advertising … it was really more about wanting to engage discussion. It was more about wanting to bring issues to a head or at least put them out into particular spheres where people could go at them.\(^ {96}\)

---

\(^{94}\) Vazquez-Pacheco (2013).

\(^{95}\) In her ACT UP Oral History Project interview Marlene McCarty recalls conversations within Gran Fury about Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Group Material, the Situationist International, Soviet art. See McCarty (2004): 19.

For this project Gran Fury built upon the queer identity politics it explored in *Read My Lips*. The very fact that the photographs used in *Read My Lips* were decades-old and, in the case of the lesbian image, not ideal representations, speaks to the dearth of imagery of same-sex desire. In *Kissing Doesn’t Kill: Greed and Indifference Do*, Gran Fury decided to create its own imagery. ACT UP members were enlisted as models, including Vazquez-Pacheco, Julie Tolentino, Lola Flash, Heidi Dorow, Peter Bowen and one other. The diversity of models reveals that Gran Fury strove to be inclusive in its representation. Gran Fury members were all involved – setting up props, doing hair, managing the participants, etc. It was a very “DIY” (do-it-yourself) effort. And an appealing one: “The image was super sexy, super engaging and radiated ‘the new’ because such images didn’t exist in our everyday world.”

This project makes an important intervention in the history of lesbian representation. Whereas previous projects were sourced from archives and pornography, Marlene McCarty observes that *Kissing Doesn’t Kill: Greed and Indifference Do* “was the first project that really got into identity politics – it became about people telling their own stories, identifying themselves.” The project also speaks to the sexual culture that thrived within ACT UP. As Richard Meyer put it, *Kissing Doesn’t Kill* “affirms the power of queer desire in the face of an ongoing epidemic, insisting that lesbians and gay men fight the efforts of the larger culture to render their sexuality – their desiring bodies

---

97 Gran Fury (2011), 52.

98 Gran Fury (2011), 53.
Sex positivity and the representation of queer desire were central to the cultural activism of ACT UP – evident in *Read My Lips*, Kiss-Ins, and the sexual culture of ACT UP as well. In fact if this work “sought to shock [viewers] into a new awareness of – and new activity about – the AIDS crisis” it also was a self-aware announcement of queer activism as style.100

While *Kissing Doesn’t Kill* was notable for its multi-racial inclusion, the issue of whether or not Gran Fury’s default subjectivity (white, gay, male) led to design biases re-surfaced in a later work concerning women and AIDS. *Women Don’t Get AIDS. They Just Die From It* (figure 2.15), a bus shelter poster, was distributed in 83 locations in the Los Angeles metropolitan area during the spring of 1991.101 Gran Fury came up with the powerful and provocative slogan as a result a broader campaign by the Women’s Caucus of ACT UP in its drive to get the Center for Disease Control to expand the definition of HIV and AIDS symptoms to include those pertaining to women.102 As a reviewer in the *Los Angeles Times* noted, “Utilizing a common advertising strategy, the poster grabs

99 Meyer (1955), 52.

100 Meyer (1995), 54. Paradoxically, though, queer activist style had been co-opted by mainstream clothiers such as Benetton and Gap (as discussed in Chapter 3). The political impact of Gran Fury’s bus poster was its message and its visual promotion of multiple sexualities. It is best situated within a genealogy of détournement, the strategy used by the Letterist International (1950s) and Situationist International (1960s), later adapted by punk subculture in the 1970s and culture jamming anti-capitalist movement in the later 1980s.

101 Gran Fury members Tom Kalin and Mark Simpson discussed the project at LACMA with critic/art historian David Deitcher March 1991.

102 In 1992 women in the U.S. were the fastest growing demographic of new HIV infections, yet infections were underreported. Women were not being diagnosed with HIV due to ignorance of the symptomatic differences in HIV in men and women (conditions in women include pelvic inflammatory disease, for example). See Alexis Shotwell, “‘Women Don’t Get AIDS, They Just Die From It’: Memory, Classification, and the Campaign to Change the Definition of AIDS,” *Hypatia* 29, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 509-524.
attention by posing a perplexing riddle: How can a woman not get AIDS, yet still die from the disease?" As in other AIDS cultural activist works, the poster has a two-part reveal. Under the pithy slogan there is a clear explication of the issue at hand.

However, the image used to illustrate the poster distorts the facts, since it features three white women despite the fact that AIDS deaths were disproportionately higher among women of color. The poster’s background is a stock photograph of three white contestants in the Miss America Beauty Pageant, cropped just above their mouths so they are rendered anonymous. Robert Vazquez-Pacheco recalls a conversation during the design process in which he said, “You know, I hate to tell you this, but I don’t think an African American Woman or Latina looking at this is immediately going to identify with a white beauty queen … they will read the text, but the image will not resonate for them.” In fact over half the posters were printed in Spanish and distributed in working class neighborhoods primarily populated by people of color in order to reach minority communities disproportionately impacted by HIV/AIDS. Vazquez-Pacheco’s point was eventually well taken: in a retrospective conversation one Gran Fury member described his “disappointment” in the image politics of this work.


104 The poster reads: “65% of HIV positive women get sick and die from chronic infections that don’t fit the Center for Disease control’s definition of AIDS. Without that recognition women are denied access to what little healthcare exists. The CDC must expand the definition of AIDS.”

105 The poster credits Michael Baytoff and Blackstar for the image.

106 Vazquez-Pacheco (2013).

Women Don’t Get AIDS. They Just Die From It was funded by the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, and on the East Coast it was funded by the Public Art Fund and in 1991 appeared in a New York Times advertisement. The institutional support and critical recognition of this project indicates the stature of Gran Fury by 1991 and the collective’s increasing profile within the art world. The Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art funded Women Don’t Get AIDS. They Just Die From It, and sponsored a panel discussion between Tom Kalin and Mark Simpson and critic and art historian David Deitcher at the museum about this project during its exhibition. One reviewer in the Los Angeles Times described Gran Fury as having “produced the most substantive and successful political graphic art of the postwar era in the United States” and praised the ingenuity of its advertising-derived strategy. Yet despite this critical praise, Gran Fury struggled to maintain its activist success and integrity as it achieved broader visibility in the art world and among mainstream publics. As Tom Kalin recalls,

We went from being wheat-pasting hooligans to suddenly having real resources and opportunities and a platform from which to speak. This brought about a crisis of conscience in discussing how to articulate the group because the stakes had been raised.

108 The slogan “Women Don’t Get AIDS. They Just Die From It” appeared in 1990 on a poster used for ACT UP protests in Washington D.C. at the Department of Health and Human Services and in Atlanta at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The poster, designed by the ACT UP/DC WoMen’s Committee re-imagines the caduceus staff as a women’s symbol, with two snakes wound around it. The simple design, in light grey on a white background, is a powerful visualization of the demonstrators’ demands: that the conditions for diagnosis of AIDS expand in order that women are included (in order to access resources of prevention, treatment, and care). This is a more strident graphic than the slick pageant women one used on the west coast in billboards by Gran Fury. Unlike the bus billboard, which was text-heavy, this version featured minimal text since it was used as a demonstration placard.


110 Crimp (2003).
Despite the fact that the collective officially disbanded in 1995, Michael Nesline has called *Women Don’t Get AIDS. They Just Die From It* the final project of Gran Fury because “it was the last snappy one-liner we came up with.”

Although Gran Fury began within the context of ACT UP and became associated with the group, eventually Gran Fury distanced itself from ACT UP because of the protractedness of group decision-making. Michael Nesline described the process as follows:

What began to happen was, is that we would take our projects to ACT UP, and we would have to, like, listen to ACT UP do a declension of our work, and it became so tedious. And we resented it…. 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 were not going to have the discussion again…. Well just do what were going to do, and if ACT UP is doing something, and we feel like piggybacking onto that, we’ll piggyback onto that. And, if we feel like doing something on our own, we’ll do it on our own.

During 1988 there was a “very porous relationship between what went on the floor of ACT UP [planning demonstrations] and what went on in Gran Fury… a kind of direct relationship.” This is evident in the design and revision processes for several Gran Fury projects concerning women and AIDS, which were critiqued by women and lesbians within ACT UP. After the dramatic and frustrating revision process of *Read...*

---

111 Ibid. Gran Fury officially disbanded in 1995, shortly before the death from AIDS of member Mark Simpson on November 10, 1996. However, from 1992 on the group worked in partial formation on intermittent projects. As discussed in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, the group disbanded because of overwhelming affective conditions, professional obligations, and a creative crisis based upon a belief that its strategies had ceased to be effective as a means of activism in the public sphere.

112 Nesline (2003), 32.

113 Kalin (2004), 56.

114 Stoller (1998), 128.
My Lips, Gran Fury became a closed group. By 1989, ACT UP members interested in art and graphic design were no longer directed to Gran Fury; they formed new groups such as Gang. The contestation of graphic design is an important part of the history of these images and their different iterations. Beginning in 1989, however, the debates shifted to the public realm, as Gran Fury took on more ambitious commissions.

The close affiliation with ACT UP became cumbersome for Gran Fury, as design decisions could not productively be discussed at weekly meetings (at its height in 1988 ACT UP meetings drew approximately 800 people). This decision to become a more closed and autonomous group was based on several factors. First, a change in tactics, from xerox sniping to officially sanctioned commissions. Gran Fury began to question whether posters were the most effective means of reaching large audiences. In 1989 the group moved beyond mere advertising-based aesthetics towards the actual insertion of agitprop into the spaces of advertising, such as billboards and bus shelters. This ambitious expansion of its intervention methods was partly based on changes in funding. Gran Fury was able to successfully brand itself as the AIDS activist movement’s

---

115 Richard Deagle describes coming a new member orientation at ACT UP New York in 1988 and being directed to Gran Fury. Deagle had experience in screen-printing and graphic design and recalls saying, “I’ve been seeing graphics around town involved with ACT UP – where would be a good place to me [to go]?” Deagle (2003), 29. But after a certain point Gran Fury became a closed group and at that point new art collectives formed, such as Gang.

116 For example, representing the U.S. at the Venice Biennale in 1990 and attempts at collaboration with other activist groups including the Guerrilla Girls and PONY (Prostitutes of New York).


118 Gran Fury, Good Luck, Miss You (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995).
communard organization and as such became less dependent on ACT UP for funding and began to accept money from art institutions and universities.

The Gran Fury projects examined thus far indicate the range of its production, from non-commissioned posters wheat-pasted on city surfaces to commissioned large-scale public art projects. Gran Fury developed successful agitprop strategies, namely shock tactics (in the form of sexually explicit material, depictions of homosexuality, or the reiteration of incendiary statements made by public officials concerning the AIDS crisis) and advertising-derived aesthetics and modes of presentation that reached wide audiences. Rather than address an insular art world audience or target communities of people with AIDS, Gran Fury sought to break apart notions of the “general population.”

The success of these projects led to Gran Fury’s reputation as the preeminent example of what became known as the ACT UP style of graphic agitation. However as this chapter has examined, these projects also met with criticism based upon their uneven representation of minority populations.

The Socio-Cultural Context of AIDS Cultural Activism

The significance of Gran Fury’s strategies becomes intelligible within the conservative socio-political climate of the 1980s wherein prejudicial responses to AIDS were conditioned by news media and popular culture. If AIDS was addressed at all it was typically done so in a manner that appeased heterosexual audiences with reassurances that AIDS was not a threat to them. The majority of people with AIDS were social outcasts – homosexuals, drug users, and poor minority populations – and constructed as “other.” The brilliance of Gran Fury’s advertising strategies was that they inserted the
“other” into the spaces of commerce, using the tools of capitalism to challenge it and make the logic through which it functioned more inclusive. In so doing works of AIDS cultural activism exploded the lie that the general public is homogeneously heterosexual and exposed the homophobia of the government and the medical industry’s biases. ACT UP and its affiliated art collectives and artist-members prioritized radical visibility as a means to wrest control of AIDS discourse, change public opinion, and effect change regarding the epidemic. However this was a complicated and uneven terrain of representation, as this dissertation aims to demonstrate.

Unlike SILENCE=DEATH, which addressed gay and lesbian audiences specifically, the majority of Gran Fury projects were aimed towards a broader public audience. Cultural ephemera by the Silence=Death Project, Gran Fury, and others were central to the expansion of the AIDS activist message between 1988 and 1989. This argument is made formally in AIDS DEMO GRAPHICS, a book that juxtaposes ACT UP graphics with photographs of them in use at demonstrations, and descriptions of the events including transcriptions of particular chants used and polemical and informational fliers distributed. Written in 1990 by ACT UP members Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston, AIDS DEMO GRAPHICS is essentially a manifesto that foregrounds ACT UP’s innovative use of graphic interventions in demonstrations. Both authors (Crimp, an influential art historian and critic, and Rolston, a graphic designer) had a strong investment in the activist use of visual materials. The book project itself makes an argument for the importance of documentation and distribution, as the authors make clear,
This book is intended as a demonstration, in both senses of the word. It is meant as direct action, putting the power of representation in the hands of as many people as possible. And it is presented as a do-it-yourself manual, showing how to make propaganda work in the fight against AIDS.119

Interestingly, the book does not focus on the specific aesthetic merits of particular activist collectives. They are all deemed equal in the service of AIDS propaganda. Individual members of collectives are not even mentioned. AIDS DEMO GRAPHICS opens with an introduction that sketches the chronology of ACT UP graphics, beginning with SILENCE=DEATH, described as a “simple graphic emblem … [that] has come to signify AIDS activism to an entire community of people confronting the epidemic.”120

AIDS DEMO GRAPHICS introduces such questions as: what does the intersection of visual arts and direct action entail? How do artists and art activists participate in social movements? What did activist responses achieve that others did not? One thing not covered is the ways in which publics responded to works used outside the contexts of demonstrations.121 Gran Fury was adamantly committed to creating public art activism – that is, creating works for display on streets rather than in galleries. One of the collective’s greatest achievements is its orchestration of what Tom Kalin has called “democracy in action.”122 In other words, the distribution of controversial posters on lampposts, billboards, subways and building walls engendered a forum for contentious public debate. Often posters were torn down or defaced with anti-gay graffiti. This

119 Crimp and Rolston (1990), 13.

120 Crimp and Rolston (1990), 14.

121 Whereas in a gallery there will be a book for visitor comments there is no such practice with street art.

contestation was as meaningful to the overall ethos of the project as the content or form of the works alone. As Vazquez-Pacheco describes it, “we did not want to create art objects, so all of our stuff was ephemeral. They were posters, billboards – once they were up, they got torn down and thrown away.”123 The defacement of Gran Fury posters is an important facet of the culture wars that shaped American art in the late twentieth century.

During the Presidency of George H.W. Bush (1989-1993), the social and fiscal conservatism of the Reagan era became more entrenched. What became known as the culture wars were campaigns by conservative politicians such as Jesse Helms and religious leaders such as Jerry Falwell, who sought to identity and censor obscenity in federally funded visual art through legislation as well as public opinion campaigns.124 The majority of artists who came under fire were those who engaged controversial themes such as AIDS, race, and non-normative sexuality in their art.125 This context is crucial to understanding the stakes of the period, wherein not just the crisis of AIDS but also the inextricability of art and politics impacted artistic practice.126 As the works by Gran Fury examined thus far demonstrate, art collectives manipulated the charged climate of discourse in U.S. politics in order to create impactful artworks for social

123 Vazquez-Pacheco continues, “That was purposeful on our part because we never wanted to see a Gran Fury piece at auction 25 years later at Sotheby’s.” Vazquez-Pacheco (2013). All of Gran Fury’s work is in available for free in the public domain. Its archives were given to the New York Public Library.


125 For example, the artists Nan Goldin, Marlon Riggs, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Andreas Serrano, among others. See Dubin (1995).

126 Richard Meyer has argued that censorship pressures upon artists have resulted in innovative “outlaw representations” of homosexuality rather than capitulation. See Meyer, Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth Century Art (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
change. Ephemerality is a key lens to examine crucial themes of contingency, topicality, and publicity that shaped the period.

Conclusion

Any history of ACT UP aesthetics should resist isolating its achievements in terms of originality or innovation, and instead examine the far-reaching impact of AIDS cultural activism and the wide range of references it drew upon. Activist graphics, like the political movements that sustain them, are predicated on collectivity, both in terms of production and distribution. As we have seen, the ubiquity of visual ephemera corresponded to intense periods of political action. Posted ephemera transformed public space because it evoked the specter of collective presence. Ephemeral materials contributed to the formation of new sexually empowered communities amidst the AIDS crisis. Importantly, Gran Fury foregrounded issues of same-sex desire and sexuality in its projects; this, as we have seen, was an incendiary political act in the late 1980s. It was also a reflection of the increasing importance of sexuality within gay and lesbian communities after a period in which many were too shocked or scared to engage, at least publically, with issues regarding sexuality and, by implication, HIV/AIDS. Using archival images or creating new ones to fulfill the requirements of the age, Gran Fury established a queer voice in the public sphere.

Rather than simply responding to instances of negative stereotypes and implicit norms in mainstream news media and society, ACT UP New York and its affiliated collectives engaged in a complex and transformative dialogue with scientific, political, and media institutions, as well as the heteronormative public sphere. Yet these works also
targeted parts of the public, urban sphere such as the East Village and West Village, where the high LGBT population meant different readings than elsewhere. The ephemeral network of ACT UP aesthetics, from Gran Fury posters to *SILENCE=DEATH* T-shirts, enabled the micro-activism of individual bearers long after the crowds of demonstrations cleared.

The history of Gran Fury provides a unique window into the battles over representation and identity politics that defined mainstream America in the late 1980s. It also reflects the internal dynamics of ACT UP and the broader AIDS activist community, wherein the issue of how best to respond visually to the AIDS crisis was a key conversation of the era. This chapter has examined several projects by Gran Fury between 1988 and 1989 in terms of creation, distribution, and reception. Continuing this dissertation’s broader focus on ephemera as both as a medium and a metaphor for the crisis of AIDS in the public sphere, I argue that these objects must be understood within a context of overlapping and dynamic pictorial responses to AIDS. In other words, ephemeral materials are contingent, activated by users, multiple, and even, promiscuous.
CHAPTER 3

STREET POLITICS OF VISIBILITY: QUEER NATION TO DYKE ACTION MACHINE, 1990-1992

I hate having to convince straight people that lesbians and gays live in a war zone, that we’re surrounded by bomb blasts only we seem to hear, that our bodies and souls are heaped high, dead from fright or bashed or raped, dying of grief and disease, stripped of our personhood ... Being Queer is not about the right to privacy, it’s about the freedom to be public.

Anonymous Queers, *Queers Read This*.1

Introduction

The quote above by the activist collective Anonymous Queers is from “Queers Read This,” a manifesto collaboratively produced during the late spring of 1990 and distributed during Lesbian and Gay Pride festivities in New York and Chicago that June. The manifesto called upon lesbian and gay people to “come out” as homosexual despite the weight of political, social, and cultural violence. The excerpt above reiterates, nearly word-for-word, Vito Russo’s speech “Why We Fight,” delivered at an ACT UP demonstration in Albany on May 9, 1988.2 In Russo’s speech, he used a warzone metaphor to characterize life as a person with AIDS in the US.3 Both Vito Russo and

---

1 Anonymous Queers, *Queers Read This!* (New York: 1990).
3 “Living with AIDS is like living through a war, which is happening only for those people who happen to be in the trenches. Every time a shell explodes, you look around and you discover that you’ve lost more of your friends, but nobody else notices. It isn’t happening to them. They’re walking the streets as though we
Anonymous Queers use a first-person narrative to describe the isolation of existence in a domestic war zone. However, there are important differences: whereas Russo focuses exclusively on HIV/AIDS, “Queers Read This” characterizes a wide range of oppressions against LGBTQ people (“I hate having to convince straight people that lesbians and gays live in a war zone ...”), including internalized and societal homophobia, sexual and physical violence, and the indignity of civic disenfranchisement. The phrase “I hate having to convince straight people” underscores the new oppositionality of “Queers Read This,” which signaled a different take on the visibility activism that had characterized AIDS activism thus far. As Frank Bruni described AIDS activism in the first decade of the crisis, “for Americans in the 1980s to care about AIDS, they had to care about homosexuals, and to care about homosexuals, they had to realize how many they knew and loved.” In contrast, “Queers Read This” was about the dismantling of heteronormativity, the worldview that promotes heterosexuality as the normal or preferred sexual orientation. A new breed of aggressive and unapologetic visibility activism was on the horizon.

The rhetorical capaciousness of “Queers Read This” versus “Why We Fight” signals the shifting terrain of radical lesbian and gay street activism between 1988 and 1990. On the one hand, ACT UP and its affiliated collectives such as the Silence=Death

\[^4\] For more on the status of homosexual rights in 1990 see Vaid (1995).

Project and Gran Fury had, by 1990, made a significant impact on the treatment of people living with HIV/AIDS including the language and resources mobilized towards ending the crisis. On the other hand, the intense experiences of many gay men and lesbians spurred a renewal of radicalism that extended beyond HIV/AIDS to encompass sexuality-based activism at large. This shift was signaled by the fact that by the early 1990s “queer” had become the preferred self-description for many lesbians and gay men, primarily those who comprised the generation of individuals (young and old) who were radicalized by HIV/AIDS. As Simon Watney put it in his foundational essay “Queer Epistemology,” queer was “obviously an identity that has emerged in an emergency.” This was largely a result of the AIDS crisis wherein the necessary creation of safer-sex education meant an intense focus on sexual practices as opposed to sexual identities. Beyond the necessity of safer sex, the utopian promise of queer on the streets and in the academy was its capaciousness – “queer” seemed well suited to the coalitional unity of lesbians and gay men, historically disparate communities, who were united in anger by the AIDS epidemic. “Queer” was reclaimed from a derogatory slur and repurposed as a sexual identity that refused to segregate individuals based on gender or sexual preference,

---

6 By 1990 there was a radical AIDS activist movement in place. While it was not exclusively queer it did produce a new queer consciousness, which was collective and expansive, and distinct from the single-issue approach of traditional liberal political activism. See Vaid (1995) for the debates between different approaches to gay activism in the period.


8 The urban theorist Neil Smith described this period in New York in terms of “revanchism,” referring to the reactionary moral rhetoric used to justify urban policy. See Neil Smith, The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City (London: Routledge, 1996). In addition to health- and political-activism, lesbians and gay men came together in the 1980s because there were fewer bars and parties tailored specifically to lesbians, compared to the 1970s. See Gieseking (2013), 144.
as terms such as “lesbian,” “transgender,” and “gay” do. Instead it marked a new collectivism, as well as a shift in emphasis towards performativity – in other words, a contingent, experimental notion of identity that was more about who you do than who you are. The etymology of queer speaks to the values of activists during this period, as does the ways in which it was used to designate not only a sexual identity, but also a sexual politics and a new school of academic thought. Because of its origins as a pejorative slur, violence was embedded within the term; indeed it remains to this day offensive when used as an epithet. Those who used “queer” as a self-description shifted, at least conceptually, from a defensive to an offensive position. In other words, wearing queer insignia was a way to take back the terroristic threat of homophobic violence from potential assailants in public spaces.

From the inception of “queer” as an umbrella term there were critiques of its failed inclusivity. This chapter examines lesbian art activists who challenged the aesthetic and rhetorical limits of queerness with innovative formal strategies. The move from AIDS to queer art activism was not linear but overlapping: many individuals worked simultaneously on both fronts. Anonymous Queers, for example, was a collective formed

---

9 This transformation is a byproduct of the affective shift from shame to anger within the gay community, discussed in chapter one. However, the adoption of “queer” was by no means universally accepted within the disparate gay and lesbian communities of New York.

10 Jagose explains this is a direct by-product of the HIV/AIDS crisis wherein the necessity of safer sex meant a focus on practices rather than internal identity. Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: an Introduction* (New York: NYU Press, 1997), 76.

in New York in 1990 by former and current ACT UP members to focus on sexuality-based issues, namely the political importance of “coming out.” This new take on visibility politics emerged directly from the exigencies of the AIDS crisis. As “Queers Read This” put it: “being Queer is not about the right to privacy, it’s about the freedom to be public.”

Queer Cultural Activism: Contestations over Space

At the dawn of the Internet’s ubiquity, contentious positions were still asserted via cultural ephemera wheat-pasted to city walls and temporary structures. In New York City during the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was an intense amount of street-based radical AIDS art and activism including theatrical demonstrations, occupations, political funerals, banner drops and poster campaigns. During this time many new direct action and cultural activist groups formed, many with overlapping membership and most comprised of present- or former ACT-UP participants. These included: Queer Nation (f. in NY), Anonymous Queers (f. in NY), OutPost (f. in NY), Queer Action Figures (f. in NY), Oral Majority (f. in NY), Dyke Action Machine (f. in NY), fierce pussy (f. in NY), Women’s Action Coalition (f. in NY), and the Lesbian Avengers (f. in NY). Most of these groups aimed, as the Oral Majority manifesto put it, to promote “queer visibility in

12 “Queers Read This.”

13 During the late 1980s and early 1990s social unrest, in the form of public marches and demonstrations, occurred regarding issues such as homelessness (i.e. at Tompkins Square Park riots in 1988 and 1991), women’s rights (i.e. direct actions such as draping the Statue of Liberty with a banner, by WHAM! or Women’s Health Action Mobilization! founded in New York in 1989), racial tension (i.e. 1989 marches sparked by the killing of African American teenager Yusef Hawkins by a white mob and the Crown Heights Riots in 1991).
New York and around the world, but with a bit more flair and a lot less bullshit.”\textsuperscript{14} This phenomenon signals, on the one hand, an urban context in which a robust visual culture of protest was possible and, on the other hand, the immense political and artistic imagination of the period.

Visual ephemeral materials were crucial objects of dissent and communication, providing a medium for discourse internally among gay men and lesbians as well as a means to speak towards broader publics. During the late 1980s and early 1990s urban conditions of decay and development in New York City meant minimal policing of illicit wheat pasting and many abandoned buildings and temporary construction walls to utilize.\textsuperscript{15} These structural conditions made radical street activism by ACT UP and other groups possible; they created an urban terrain of expectation in which, as Gregg Bordowitz described it, “at that time [circa 1987], I looked to the city’s walls for direction.”\textsuperscript{16} In fact “the city” was crucial to the very formation of queer publics during this period. As George Chauncey and others have argued, cities have been, at least since the Industrial Revolution and particularly after the First World War, the spaces in which

\textsuperscript{14} Oral Majority quoted in Harmony Hammond, \textit{Lesbian Art in America}, (New York: Rizzoli, 2000), 178. This quote, by the lesbian public art collective Oral Majority, references Queer Nation but reflects the general tendency of fission that characterized the period. ACT-UP, as an institution, was slow-moving dragon burdened by bureaucratic methodology and increasingly strained by divisive politics. The offshoots above were akin to the affinity groups of ACT-UP in play since its founding in 1987. These, such as The Marys, took on specific actions in order to work quickly and without impunity.

\textsuperscript{15} Joe Coscarelli, “New York City Street Lamp Stories Date Back to the ‘90s, But Who’s Behind Holy Crap?,” \textit{Village Voice}, March 10, 2011.

sexual outlaws created subcultures. The notion of queer as the “freedom to be public” should be understood within the emancipatory discourse of a “right to the city,” first conceived by Henri Lefebvre in 1968 and later developed by David Harvey. Harvey explains:

The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access human resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends on the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.

Just as AIDS activism and “queer” activism were a means of remaking gay and lesbian identity in terms of self-empowerment, so too were posters and other forms of cultural ephemera, in conjunction with street patrols and demonstrations, a means of remaking the city into a safer space.

How can we understand the dense visual field of queer cultural activism in New York in the early 1990s? How is it possible to hone in on the breadth of this cultural activity, when the urban public sphere was so glutted with ephemera that one observer described it as “feeling more like the 1960s again, as posters – and demonstrations – became frequent spectacles”?

One concept that provides some context is sociability, a notion that helpfully describes the strategic formation of social and relational spaces by

---


queer activism and culture in New York during this period, including the layered and sometimes oppositional ways in which people connect to one another within political movements and queer social worlds.\textsuperscript{21} In other words, this period was characterized by the existence of overlapping experiences of political, social, sexual, and amorous realms. Sociability also provides an approach to the dense archives of the period and the remarkable achievements including “promiscuous intertextuality”: the ways in which queer activist graphics knowingly referenced other street-side graphics and, as a result, the ways in which the works became part of a collective urban consciousness. Although direct action groups and public art collectives were typically interrelated with overlapping membership, and many had common origins in ACT UP and/or Queer Nation, they were at times oppositional.\textsuperscript{22} Several collectives formed as splinter groups intent on critiquing the dominant paradigms of larger organizations and develop reactive activist strategies.\textsuperscript{23} After years of involvement with AIDS activism, many queer feminist women in the early 1990s turned towards lesbian-specific issues in their collective art and activist endeavors.


\textsuperscript{22} For example: Carrie Moyer of Dyke Action Machine did graphics for Lesbian Avengers; Marlene McCarty of Gran Fury did graphics for Women’s Action Coalition; Zoe Leonard was simultaneously in fierce pussy and GANG.

\textsuperscript{23} For example, Dyke Action Machine formed to critique lesbian marginalization in Queer Nation; Queer Action Figures formed to promote direct action more radical than that of Queer Nation, and Oral Majority formed as the lesbian wing of Queer Action Figures. See: Hammond (2000), 176-179.
The early 1990s was a desperate time mitigated only by the social joys of participation in collective activism. Despite the relentless deaths of young- and middle-aged-people from AIDS, there were exuberant moments including activist gains and a thriving public culture of sex positivity (itself a politicized act in the face of AIDS). Queer people seemed to be under siege, not only from the reality of HIV/AIDS but from a nationwide rise in the number of hate crimes against lesbians and gay men, as well as the escalation of culture wars over issues of reproductive rights, school curricula, and the federal funding of sexually explicit art. In the face of these conditions, a queer visual culture of protest emerged spatially and sartorially: territorial, confrontational, and promiscuous. As these adjectives suggest, the efflorescence of queer art and activism in the early 1990s was more fractious than monolithic. The activism of Anonymous Queers, Queer Nation, Pink Panthers, Dyke Action Machine, fierce pussy, and other groups is therefore a point of departure to consider the complex theorization and praxis of queer as a multi-faceted politics of the street.

---


25 Michael Warner notes, “what is often forgotten about that moment (the late 1980s-early 1990s) is that the term (queer) came from a grass-roots politics before it became theory. ACT UP had already made possible a politics directly against shame and normalization, and aiming at a complex mobilization of people beyond sexual identity.” Warner (2012).
In New York City in the first several months of 1990 there was a dramatic spike in hate crimes against lesbians and gay men. Because many gay men and lesbians had been working together on HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment issues, there was an organized community of activists ready to respond. Additionally, publications provided an important resource for information and support. From June 1989 to July 1991 the New York-based magazine *OutWeek* was the central publication of the ACT UP generation of activists that adopted a queer mantle. The magazine, founded by Gabriel Rotello and Kendall Morrison, published just as many articles about activism as it did about sex and fashion. It provided a dynamic public forum through its op-ed pages, columns such as “Gossip Watch,” and reader comments. At the height of *OutWeek*’s influence during the spring of 1990 there was a wellspring of direct actions. Several direct action groups formed in New York City to address issues of violence and visibility. The first, Queer Nation, came about in March when then-current and former members of ACT UP (including Alan Klein, Karl Soehnlein, Michelangelo Signorile and Tom Blewitt) called a meeting at the LGBT Community Center on West 13th Street to discuss homophobic

---


27 All 105 issues of *OutWeek* are available via a digital archive: http://www.outweek.net/description.html. As the site’s “About” section describes, “OutWeek redefined the role of the activist gay press, not only by reporting news but also by frequently making news itself. Its aggressive coverage, incisive commentary, and investigative articles on gay rights, politics, AIDS, the arts and popular culture made it a must-read publication far beyond the usual scope of gay magazines.”

violence and what to do about it. Over sixty people showed up and Queer Nation was founded (although it was not named as such until several months later). The second meeting, attended by over 100 people, concluded with a late-night wheat-pasting and stenciling spree around lower Manhattan: posters and stencils with the phrases “My Beloved Was Queer-Bashed Here” and “Would You Feel Safe Walking Hand-in-Hand With a Lover on This Street?” were installed at the locations of recent hate crimes against gays and lesbians.

The address of these posters is important. First, they were different from a vigil comprising of flowers, photographs, and candles, as a response to a tragedy involving loss in the public sphere. The posters personalized the experience with a first-person address: “Beloved” is contrasted with “Queer Bashed” to a jarring effect; the two words/phrases are disjointed and forces the reader to choose a side. “Would You Feel Safe Walking Hand-in-Hand with a Lover Down This Street?” similarly interpellated audiences over the dynamics of public safety.

Queer Nation quickly gained momentum, with biweekly meetings at the LGBT Center soon averaging 350 people. In many ways Queer Nation was contiguous with ACT UP in terms of membership and a commitment to direct action activism. Yet Queer Nation was also distinct from ACT UP, foremost in its focus on issues regarding queer


29 Queer Nation was called the “New Group” initially and wasn’t officially named until late spring 1990. For a detailed chronology of the first six months of Queer Nation New York, see Guy Trebay, “In Your Face (the birth of Queer Nation),” The Village Voice, August 14, 1990.


sexuality rather than HIV/AIDS. In fact around this time there was significant contention within ACT UP about the most effective direction for the organization. Some individuals felt ACT UP should broaden its social justice appeal to include issues such as anti-war and anti-racism. Beyond this, part of the appeal of Queer Nation, as many noted at the time, was the group’s prioritization of immediate action. This circumvented the increasingly bureaucratic nature of ACT UP meetings, as well as creeping movement fatigue. Queer Nation member Laura Morrison explained,

The thing that’s important to me about Queer Nation is that we’re ready to act. People are frustrated with endless talking about issues around lesbian and gay concerns, we don’t want to sit around and strategize anymore … I want to do something proactive. Sometimes you need to take it to the streets.

“Taking it to the streets” included dropping a 40-foot banner reading “Dykes and Fags Bash Back!” from the roof of the bar Badlands in the West Village in April 1990. Two days later, when a pipe bomb went off in the Greenwich Village gay bar Uncle Charlie’s, over a thousand people mobilized within an hour and marched through the streets behind the banner.

Clearly, the confrontational direct actions of ACT UP had, by 1990, engendered a wider street politics of visibility and protest that recalled the ethos of 1970s gay liberation. This aggressive posturing was captured by the slogan “Bash Back,” utilized by the co-ed Pink Panthers, a Queer Nation splinter group that formed in New York during


the spring of 1990. Despite the aggression suggested by “Bash Back,” the Pink Panthers was a non-violent vigilante group that responded to hate crimes with a neighborhood watch program akin to the New York City Anti-Violence Project (AVP), a non-profit organization formed in Manhattan in 1980 in response to several violent attacks against gay men. The Panthers utilized the AVP’s community-based model for the prevention of violence, and drew upon the feminist self-defense movement as well. Panthers patrolled in groups of five or more, unarmed, with whistles, walkie-talkies and flashlights.

Overnight patrol routes were carefully established in consultation with Anti-Violence Project reports, mostly in the East and West Villages, based upon areas and even specific streets determined to be the greatest risk for hate crimes. As in ACT UP, many men in the Pink Panthers learned activist techniques from women with experience in the feminist movement. Male panthers recount learning self-defense moves from female members and taking self-defense classes at the now-defunct Karate Gym on Bleecker Street. Pink

---

34 Besides the campy appeal of conjuring the Pink Panther, an animated character featured on The Pink Panther Show, a popular Saturday morning cartoon that aired from 1969-1980, the name “Pink Panthers” recalls the well-known Black Panther Party, a black revolutionary socialist organization active in the United States from 1966 until 1982. The closest reference, however, was the lesser-known activist group the Lavender Panthers, formed in 1973 in San Francisco in response to homophobic attacks. Unlike the unarmed Pink Panthers, the Lavender Panthers carried chains, billy clubs, and cans of red spray paint. A Time magazine article from 1973 quotes the group’s founder Rev. Ray, a Pentecostal Evangelist and gay man, as describing the group’s purpose: to confront and intimidate “all those young punks who have been beating up my faggots.” See Time Magazine, “The Sexes: The Lavender Panthers,” Time Magazine, October 8, 1973, and The Bangarang Collective, Out of the Closets and Into the Libraries (Portland, OR: Microcosm Publishing, 2007). In the early 1990s besides the Pink Panthers, the group Brooklyn Lesbians and Gays Against Hate Crimes, formed circa 1990, was founded to protest attacks against lesbians and queer women in the Park Slope neighborhood of Brooklyn.

35 The New York City Anti-Violence Project (AVP) was founded in 1980 in response to a rash of violent hate crimes against gay men.

Panthers performed specific tasks such as documenting information from witnesses of crimes, calling 911, and crowd control.

The Pink Panthers was a tactical amalgamation of the New York City Anti-Violence Project and ACT UP. Pink Panthers’ conventional tactics complemented the more outlandish ones devised by Queer Nation, but retained the period’s activist style and queer visibility. The Pink Panthers’ mission demonstrated presence itself to be a crucial strategy. Many Panthers wore black T-shirts and leather jackets emblazoned with the group’s emblem, which consisted of an inverted pink triangle framing a black paw print, set against a black background (figure 3.1). This re-imagining of SILENCE=DEATH thus directly linked the self-empowerment of AIDS activism to the queer consciousness. Like the group’s slogan “Bash Back,” the uniforms aimed to combat homophobic violence and intimidation with confrontational visibility.³⁷ Wearing pink panther insignia was important because sexual outlaws often can’t be as quickly discerned as other minority groups – for example on the basis of gender or skin color. This marking entailed the dynamics of looking.

“Queer bashing” is about the assertion of power in public space. It is fundamentally a terroristic activity that puts into service the creative and political strategies thus far described in this project. Potential bashers roam often in groups,

³⁷ In the early 1990s the pink triangle was an important, although contested, symbol of gay pride and defiance (see Chapter 1 of this dissertation for further discussion). Although the rainbow flag was designed as a symbol of gay pride in 1978, rainbow accessories did not become a ubiquitous and well-recognized LGBTQ symbol until the mid-to-late 1990s. See: Gill Valentine, “(Re)Negotiating the ‘Heterosexual Street,’” in BodySpace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality, ed. Nancy Duncan (New York: Routledge, 1996): 155-169, and David J. Bell and Gill Valentine, “The Sexed Self: Strategies of Performance, Sites of Resistance,” in BodySpace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality, ed. Nancy Duncan (New York: Routledge, 1996), 143-157.
policing the public sphere. They aim to identify sexual outlaws and then “correct” them with physical and sometimes (particularly for queer women) with sexual violence. In this context, the marking of oneself as queer is bold and strategic. Like taking on the insult “queer” as a self-description, the act of marking oneself as queer it robs the would-be assailant of discovery (in other words, the ability to identify deviance, name it as such, and punish it) by allowing the would-be victims to preemptively name themselves. This is fundamentally a means of claiming identity as well as space. Unlike previous incarnations of LGBT identity, “queer” was aggressively proactive, claiming a “right to the city” beyond the delimited parameters of gay neighborhoods such as the West Village. It does not attempt to assimilate or to defang non-normative sexual culture. Queer is not a neutral term; it denotes violence and perversion. Beyond the victim-assailant dynamics of Pink Panthers’ queer activism, it also galvanized gay men and lesbians to come out and organize. Pink Panther patrol leaders recall heckling from people on the street as well as supportive cheers from gays and lesbians.\footnote{Moss (2010).}

As suggested by the “Queers Read This” manifesto, this tense dynamic between increasingly out, visible, and unapologetic lesbians and gay men and those who sought to maintain the old order became a contestation of space. On June 16, 1990 Queer Nation and New York City Anti-Violence Project co-sponsored a well-attended (1500 people) march from Greenwich Village to the East Village, to protest inadequate criminal justice responses to rising violence against hate crimes against LGBT people.\footnote{Jack Curry, “A Gay Protest Against Attacks Becomes Violent,” The New York Times, June 18, 1990.} The route was symbolic, travelling from the established gay male neighborhood to the newer, and more
co-ed, queer headquarters in the East Village. During the rally that followed the march, violence erupted: a man was arrested for trying to drive his car into the crowd, and young adults were arrested for throwing eggs at spectators.40 In 1991 Kevin Berrill of the New York City Anti-Violence Project observed, “greater gay visibility and activism have opened the doors to understanding and acceptance. However, our increasingly open and unapologetic existence has triggered hostility and made us a more identifiable target for potential assailants.”41 Large public rallies, like the uniformed patrols of the Pink Panthers, defiantly called attention to the collective resistance of lesbians and gay men in the urban public sphere. Rather than a defensive retreat or the adoption of reactionary positions (such as assimilation), lesbian and gay activists – emboldened by several years of radical HIV/AIDS direct actions – redoubled their efforts at community building and spectacular demonstrations.

Anonymous Queers was founded along these lines, in New York during the late spring of 1990. The collective comprised a loose group of ACT UP, Gran Fury, and Queer Nation members past and present including Avram Finkelstein, Maria Maggenti, Vincent Gagliostro, Heidi Dorow, Rand Synder, David Gips, and Walter Armstrong. Their aim was to circumvent the arduous decision making process of ACT UP, which had been rendered unwieldy by its large membership and adherence to Robert’s Rules of Order protocols. Anonymous Queers’ first project was the four-page manifesto “Queers Read This,” which was distributed along the Pride Parade route in New York City on

40 Ibid.
June 24, 1990.\textsuperscript{42} It contained a two-sided one-sheet diatribe, with “Queers Read This!” printed on the front and “I Hate Straights” on the back. Its strident tone recalled the separatist ethos of the Black Panthers and radical feminists. A key difference, however, was its emphasis on permeation rather than isolation: “let’s make every space a Lesbian and Gay space. Every street a part of our sexual geography. A city of yearning and then total satisfaction. A city and a country where we can be safe and free and more.”\textsuperscript{43} This description, akin to the spatial imaginary of the name Queer Nation, indicates the expansive contours of this queer generation’s political imagination. Rather than the utopian imaginary of the 1970s, which often sought to “start over” through the formation of separatist communities, the queer imaginary of the early 1990s sought to “take back the streets.” This was not a new strategy but a repurposed one. In fact it was precisely the conceit of the chant made famous during the Stonewall Riots of 1969, the symbolic origin of gay liberation: “Whose Streets? Our Streets!”\textsuperscript{44} The metaphors and tactics of occupation and infiltration utilized within AIDS and queer activism may be understood as a means to stave off the psychic violence of quarantine threats made in the mid-1980s and more broadly, the social isolation and marginalization of lesbians and gay men in a homophobic society.

\textsuperscript{42} 20,000 copies were printed and distributed in New York. Anonymous Queers put them in shopping carts and stood alongside the parade route, until the carts broke under the weight of the broadsheets and the materials were transferred to the back of the ACT UP float. It was also distributed in Chicago and San Francisco. See Finkelstein (2010).

\textsuperscript{43} Anonymous Queers (1990).

The “hot” anger of the “Queers Read This!” pamphlet is tempered by its “cool” political analysis. Its exhortation addresses the phenomenon of hate crimes by naming it at such. In other words, this document implores queers not to resign themselves to verbal and physical insults as a de facto part of life. Instead, such acts are called out as crimes that must be stopped. The section “WHEN ANYONE ASSAULTS YOU FOR BEING QUEER, IT IS QUEER BASHING. RIGHT?” gives examples of recent hate crimes against lesbians and gays in New York City in which people who were attacked didn’t fight back:

Tompkins Square Park, Labor Day. At an annual outdoor concert/drag show, a group of gay men were harassed by teens carrying sticks. In the midst of thousands of gay men and lesbians, these straight boys beat two gay men to the ground, then stood around triumphantly laughing amongst themselves. The emcee was alerted and warned the crowd from the stage, ‘You girls be careful. When you dress up it drives the boys crazy,” as if it were a practical joke inspired by what the victims were wearing rather than a pointed attack on anyone and everyone at that event. What would it have taken for that crowd to stand up to its attackers?

Like the Queer Nation posters *My Beloved Was Bashed Here* and *Would You Feel Safe Walking Hand-in-Hand with a Lover on This Street?* the “Queers Read This” manifesto addresses the LGBTQI community in a powerful yet tender tone. It acknowledges the reasons why some lesbian and gay men were timid, tired, and complacent. It provides tools (language, political analysis, strategies) to stand up and take ownership of space, identity, and fight back. “Queer” is used to remind people of violence (“using ‘queer’ is a

---

45 In 1990 a bill for hate-motivated crimes based on sexuality, race, ethnicity, etc overwhelmingly passed the New York State Assembly but it was stalled in the Senate by a committee of Republicans who took issue with the “gay and lesbian” component. See Pooley (1991).

way of reminding us how we are perceived by the rest of the world”), to insulate from coercive violence ("it’s a way of telling ourselves we don’t have to be witty and charming people who keep our lives discreet and marginalized in the straight world"), and to forge coalition ("Queer, unlike GAY, doesn’t mean MALE. And when spoken to other gays and lesbians it’s a way of suggesting we close ranks, and forget — temporarily — our differences because we face a more insidious common enemy.")47 In a sense, these formulations bear out Simon Watney’s characterization of queer in terms of crisis. The Anonymous Queers manifesto reflects this sense of urgency; it was written piecemeal by a group of people assembled in one apartment, each of whom individually wrote phrases and statements, and then took turns editing and assembling.48 The final version contains several typographic and grammatical errors, but its distinctive multi-vocal tone reflects the consciousness-raising method of its production and is an important example of the collaborative production that characterized the period of AIDS and queer cultural activism of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The spatial tactics of Anonymous Queers, Pink Panthers and Queer Nation are intelligible as a means “to extend the kinds of democratic counter-politics deployed on behalf of AIDS activism for the transformation of public sexual discourse in general.”49 Like ACT UP, Queer Nation expressed activism through style, with provocative buttons and T-shirts such as “Queers Bash Back,” “Big Fag,” and “Big Dyke.” Sabine Lebel described this activist style in terms of camp – “a radical queer camp sensibility has been

47 Ibid.

48 Finkelstein (2010).

49 Berlant and Freeman, (1992), 198.
strategically used by activist groups like ACT UP, where members often deliberately draw on and exaggerate stereotypes of queers as part of their actions/performances.\textsuperscript{50} It recalled as well the civil disobedience tactics of the Civil Rights era of the 1960s, wherein activists’ bodies became frontlines of conflict. As with ACT UP, Queer Nation chapters quickly formed throughout the country. Within a year, Associated Press articles appeared in small-town newspapers about the group, accompanied by photographs of young activists decked out in “Queer Nation: Get Used to It” T-shirts and “Dyke” patches on baseball caps.\textsuperscript{51} As Jen Jack Gieseking points out, both ACT UP and Queer Nation direct actions were non-violent but loudly and brightly occupied spaces where LGBTQ bodies and desires seemed least fitting … Their wild, in-your-face tactics made it impossible for the world to look away and thousands of bodies of gay men dying with AIDS could not be hidden either.\textsuperscript{52}

While Queer Nation drew upon the tactics of ACT UP, such as having demonstrations at symbolic social sites (for example ACT UP New York’s targeting of “finance” – Wall Street, “government” – City Hall, “media” – the New York Times building), the group was innovative in its infiltration of everyday spaces such as bars and shopping malls.

Queer Nation actions put pressure on a general population that was indifferent if not acutely hostile towards “sexual outlaws,” with events that were organized in terms of

\textsuperscript{50} As Lebel states, “‘Camp’ has long been associated with gay male culture. It has been suggested that Susan Sontag’s famous [1964] essay, ‘Notes on Camp,’ helped to cement that relationship for the larger culture. In this often-cited piece she talks about the difficulties of naming a ‘sensibility’ but points to an aesthetics of ‘camp’: a valuing of style over content, a love of exaggeration and artifice, and a failed seriousness.” Sabine Lebel, “Camping Out With the Lesbian National Parks and Services” Canadian Women’s Studies 24, no. 2/3 (Winter/Spring 2005): 182-185.


\textsuperscript{52} Gieseking (2013), 342.
embodied sex radicalism and unapologetic visibility.\textsuperscript{53} Like the Anonymous Queers manifesto, these actions sought to “redefine the [LGBTQ] community, its rights, its visibility – and take it into what’s been claimed as straight political and social space.”\textsuperscript{54} For example, Queer Nation devised “Mall Visibility Actions” wherein activists descended on suburban shopping malls and “Nights Out” actions, where groups of 50 or more queers met at New York City’s iconic straight bars to order drinks, socialize and make out with each other to the discomfort of regular patrons.\textsuperscript{55} These public displays of queer sexuality created \textit{mise-en-scènes} of Gran Fury’s 1989 \textit{Kissing Doesn’t Kill} campaign. Rather than mobile bus billboards, Queer Nation staged activist events that pervaded public spaces entrenched in heterosexual mores. Their surreptitiousness raised the stakes of Kiss-Ins, ACT UP-sponsored public mass kissing actions that were advertised in advance and typically held in public locations such as city plazas or streets.\textsuperscript{56} The point of Queer Nation visibility actions was not only to flaunt non-normative sexuality, but also to call attention to the structural ways in which commercial and social spaces are implicitly marked as heterosexual. By disrupting them with same-

\textsuperscript{53} The phrase “sexual outlaws” is Deborah Gould’s, and is used here because it aptly demonstrates the range of sexualities and identities present within the queer community. See Gould (2009).


\textsuperscript{55} For example, at the Newport Mall in Jersey City in 1990 and at the White Horse Tavern in the West Village on June 2, 1990 and at Dorrian’s Red Hand on the Upper East Side on July 6, 1990.

\textsuperscript{56} In the early 1990s the Lesbian Avengers, a direct action group formed in New York in 1992, held kiss-ins attended by hundreds of women at sites such as Rockefeller Center. Jen Gieseking explains, “Pairing female objectification alongside fears of homosexual deviance, the Lesbian Avengers would use tactics that radically altered the perception of participants and viewers. They were regularly known for baring their breasts, breathing fire, and posting notices that they sought to recruit.” Gieseking (2013), 321.
sex acts and the most banal romantic gestures, heterosexist culture was revealed as presumptive and naturalized.57

In the early 1990s, queer presence included city spaces as well as city walls. Many of lower Manhattan’s abandoned buildings, temporary construction walls and phone-booths were plastered with a range of illicit posters made in response to hate crimes against the lesbian and gay/queer community. For example, Don’t Tread on Me debuted in the summer of 1990, made and distributed by Anonymous Queers. This double-sided design, in poster, sticker, and patch versions, appropriated the famous American Revolutionary War slogan of the iconic Gadsen Flag, but replaced its serpentine iconography with a pink triangle. This re-working of SILENCE=DEATH via nationalistic rhetoric was aimed more towards the general public than lesbians and gay men. Avram Finkelstein explained the design as follows:

[it] talked about freedom as a revolutionary idea and tried to re-contextualize the lesbian and gay struggle as the American struggle against tyranny, but it also had flames on it, so it was intended slightly as an incitement.58

Like Queer Nation, Anonymous Queers utilized nationalist imagery to develop its confrontational art activism and establish the legitimate right of queers not only to exist but also to participate in American society. These rhetorical and symbolic choices participated in the heated contestations of national identity that characterized the period.59

57 Berlant and Freeman (1992), 207.


59 This over-identification with nationalist rhetoric and imagery is characteristic of the period and unique to the late 1980s/early 1990s. It was a period wherein the Cold War ended and the U.S. renewed its intervention in the Middle East with the Persian Gulf War. See Berlant and Freeman (1992) and Dubin (1995).
There were other approaches to the subject of queer visibility as well. In 1990 Bureau (a trans-disciplinary design studio founded in 1989 by Gran Fury members Marlene McCarty and Donald Moffett) created Proyecto Anti-Violencia Gay y Lesbianana, a bilingual poster commissioned by the Anti-Violence Project for display in New York City (figure 3.2). A rotary telephone dial image provides a visual rendering of the poster’s purpose, along with the phone number, to advertise a twenty-four hour helpline for individuals dealing with harassment or hate crimes. The poster’s bold design (purple and white horizontal stripes, white-and-black sans serif type) is characteristic of Bureau projects.\(^{60}\) Distributed throughout the urban environment, these posters were important signposts for the LGBTQ community.

In 1991 a group called Camp Out created and disseminated a poster in New York City that read “The Fabulous Emma Peel Says, ‘There’s a DEATH SENTENCE for Queer Bashers!” (figure 3.3). Emma Peel was a fictional spy, played by Diana Rigg in the British 1960s adventure television series The Avengers. Notably, Peel was a feminist heroine, rather than a “damsel in distress” – she rescued her partner as much as she was rescued, and rarely lost a fight. As such, Peel was a campy and feminist role model for queer activists of the early 1990s. The poster has a DIY aesthetic akin to fanzines, with computer-derived text cut-and-pasted atop a xeroxed image of Peel, slightly smiling and standing casually with one arm crossed-over her body propping her other arm, which holds a gun. The collective’s name is pasted sideways in the mid-left margin of the poster. This poster captures the humor and rage that characterized much queer activist art

---

of the period. An *in situ* photograph of the poster indicates that it was defaced with graffiti, and reveals the degree to which posters displayed in urban public space were antagonistic sites. In other words they prompted critical *as well as* affirmative graffiti responses. Like *My Beloved Was Queer Bashed Here*, this poster marked and reclaimed territory.

Certainly one of the most controversial street art projects of the period was the *Absolutely Queer* campaign of OutPost, an anonymous collective affiliated with Queer Nation, which appeared throughout the East Village in 1990 and 1991 (figure 3.4). These works were tongue-in-cheek appropriations of the iconic Absolut Vodka advertisements of the period.  

61 OutPost’s version deployed the sensational tactic of “outing” celebrities’ purported homosexuality in order to critique the hypocrisy of Hollywood’s closet culture. In one poster of the series, an image of Jodie Foster was captioned “Oscar Winner. Yale Graduate. Ex-Disney Moppet. Dyke.” Distinct from coming out, being “outed” entailed the involuntary disclosure of an individual’s sexuality. As Douglas Crimp has observed, this controversial tactic was less about shaming public figures who remain in the “closet” and more a condemnation of those in mainstream media and Hollywood who reify that closet by enforcing it.  

62 Like Queer Nation actions, the intent was to destabilize the ways in which heteronormativity is implicitly naturalized and reinforced by unitary ideals of the public sphere. “Outing” became a key strategy of queer visibility, and sought to make

---


visible what has been hidden through cultural codes of “compulsory heterosexuality,” to use Adrienne Rich’s phrase.\(^{63}\)

Although Queer Nation began at a meeting in the traditional heart of the New York gay community – Greenwich Village – much of the new queer activism such as the Absolutely Queer posters occurred around the East Village. Associated with immigrant-led labor riots in the first half of the twentieth century, the neighborhood had, in the 1980s, developed thriving art and performance communities due to the availability of “real estate so cheap as to be negligible.”\(^{64}\) In the late 1970s and ‘80s the East Village “became a focal point for a great deal of grassroots political activity,” including for example the collectively edited political comic book World War 3 and the squatters’ collective Bullet that managed an art and performance space in the abandoned building it inhabited.\(^{65}\) By the late 1980s the East Village was the epicenter of the new queer scene. As Gregg Bordowitz describes it:

The East Village was then host to a hodgepodge of cultures – punk, bohemian, queer, and druggie. No one I knew referred to himself as gay. That identity was reserved for clones – older gay men who wore mustaches and dressed alike in jeans and nylon bomber jackets, or in leather.\(^{66}\)

---


\(^{64}\) Schulman (2012), 415.


\(^{66}\) Bordowitz (2003), 224. Bordowitz was heavily involved with ACT UP New York as a video activist in the late 1980s. Taken out of context, the quote is slightly hyperbolic. Douglas Crimp (self-described as a disco-era gay clone) uses it to evidence his intergenerational friendship with Bordowitz, in his foreword to The AIDS Crisis is Ridiculous. In fact, by 1990 the ACT UP/queer look had itself become a new standard,
This generation gap was playfully acknowledged by Douglas Crimp, a self-described “West Village fag” who “always felt a bit out of place among the ACT UP boys,” in his foreword to Bordowitz’s 2004 collection of essays. Crimp and Bordowitz met in the early days of ACT UP and worked together on “AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism,” the Winter 1987 special issue of the journal October that Crimp edited and for which Bordowitz contributed the essay “Picture a Coalition.” Their relationship is characteristic of the inter-generationality that would become a hallmark of ACT UP. If the West Village, home to old-style 1970s clones, was the initial site of AIDS infections, by the early 1990s, the East Village / Lower East Side, with an AIDS infection rate of 1,434 per 100,000, had become the proverbial eye of the hurricane. However, this shift was due as well to the material effects of loss during the first decade of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, as one resident of the West Village in the 1980s recalled:

In the ‘80s when all the gay men who died in the [West] Village, there was a huge influx of breeders [i.e. heterosexuals] because the apartments came on the market, and that’s when the West Village changed. By the end of the ‘80s, early ‘90s, the West Village was barely even a gay space anymore. And my flower guy and my dry cleaner and the mom and pop stores went out, everyone you used to wave to at night on your way out of work, gone. So it was the end of that neighborhood feeling … that demographic changed, for a while there, it didn’t even feel safe in the West Village to hold hands.


69 Gieseking (2013), 124.
Despite the fact that the East Village was home to several important cultural centers for lesbians and queer women, including the WOW Café Theater, a primarily lesbian women’s theater collective founded in 1980 and housed on East Fourth Street since 1984, the Park Slope neighborhood of Brooklyn, colloquially known as “Dyke Slope” by many, was an equally important neighborhood for many lesbians and queer women who lived and socialized there.\footnote{Gieseking’s interviews with New York City-based queer-lesbian women, among study participants who came out between 1983 and 1991, the East Village ranks fourth (5) among “Most Mentioned Neighborhoods,” after Park Slope (50), Greenwich Village (22) and Chelsea (19). For those who came out between 1992 and 2000, the East Village (29) is second behind Park Slope (71). See Gieseking (2013), 121.}

**Dyke Action Machine**

The alterity signaled by the geographic location of “Dyke Slope” in a borough outside of Manhattan is significant. It is from this marginalized position that self-identified dykes critiqued the elisions of queer activism and visual culture. For example Carrie Moyer and Sue Schaffner formed the so-called “lesbian working group” of Queer Nation in 1990, shortly after meeting there. Schaffner was inspired to join Queer Nation after encountering the “Absolutely Queer” OutPost campaign.\footnote{Robert Atkins, “Girls With Wheatpaste and Web Space,” The Media Channel, May 2001, http://www.robertatkins.net/beta/shift/public/girls.html [accessed May 20, 2013].} Both had formal art educations and both worked in the commercial arts sector: Moyer as a freelance graphic designer and Schaffner as a photographer. Moyer and Schaffner split off in 1991 to become an independent public art collective, Dyke Action Machine (DAM). The name Dyke Action Machine was chosen to signal “that lesbians had their own particular set of
oppressions and social conditions – separate from gay men – that needed attending to.”

In other words, what DAM termed “lesbophobia,” or “the invisibility of lesbians in both gay activist organizations, where lesbian issues were often subordinated to the problems facing gay men, and in society at large.” Between 1991 and the mid-2000s DAM produced annual projects concerned with lesbian visibility. Like Queer Nation, DAM formulated (at least initially) its public art projects in terms of culture jamming, that is, within an oppositional framework regarding the capitalist public sphere:

Initially we were drawn together by the desire to subvert the images we were producing at our day jobs. We are steeped in the ideology of marketing and the media, and this was a logical place to intervene.

DAM’s politicized posters, a “hybrid form of public address” were intended to be read as advertisements and “packaged to fit seamlessly into the commercialized streetscape.”

The first three poster series – The Gap Campaign (1991) and Family Circle (1992) and Do You Love the Dyke In Your Life? (1993) – were direct appropriations of specific, well-known advertising campaigns (The Gap, Family Circle magazine, and Calvin Klein, respectively). In each case, DAM modified the tactic of the Absolutely Queer campaign by carefully restaging well-known print ads with primarily androgynous lesbian models,

---


73 Ibid.

74 Culture jamming, coined 1984, “a tactic used by many anti-consumerist social movements to disrupt or subvert media culture and its mainstream cultural institutions, including corporate advertising.” See Dery (1990).

75 Raizada (2007).

and distributing them in urban public space near extant copies of the original ads when possible.

In June 1991, Dyke Action Machine wheat-pasted 500 copies of its inaugural project The Gap Campaign, an 11 x 17 inch xeroxed poster in six versions, throughout lower Manhattan (figures 3.5, 3.6, and 3.7). Two immediately apparent issues are timing and scale. Firstly, for queer street artists June is the favored month for distribution: not only does warmer weather guarantee increased foot traffic, the month itself is symbolic of gay and lesbian dissent as it commemorates the 1969 Stonewall riots, and large numbers of lesbians and gays congregate for the Pride Parade and related nightlife events.77 Secondly, 500 copies is a paltry amount, compared to the 20,000 copies of “Queers Read This!” distributed by Anonymous Queers a year earlier at the Pride Parade.78 Even the name sounds bigger than it is – Dyke Action Machine belies its status as a two-person agitprop duo.79

Dyke Action Machine described The Gap Campaign as a “straightforward effort to expose the lack of lesbian representation in American popular culture.”80 It dealt with lesbian visibility in these terms: “the project highlighted the fact that for one to ‘exist’ or be visible in mainstream media, one must belong to a recognizable consumer group.”81

77 Queer public art activist projects debuting in June include: ACT UP Quarantine Camp float (1987), Anonymous Queers, “Queers Read This!” (1990), and fierce pussy’s re-naming the streets project (1992).

78 See Raizada (2007).

79 DAM didn’t reveal its members until a 1997 mailing.


81 Ibid.
This entailed the literal replacement of models with lesbian subjects. Each ad layout mimics the original: models, cropped at the waist, are in the center of the composition against a blank background; models are identified in the upper right- or left- corner of the image – with name, identifying caption containing “lifestyle” details – and another description, often one-word, at the bottom of the composition in all-caps. For example, the caption “Lesbian-wear as modeled by SARAH, dyke academic and KRIS, hip dyke activist” accompanies an image featuring two androgynous women kissing with the all-caps caption “SMOOCH”; “Serious Sapphists,” describes “MARIA, writer/poet and JILL, Pink Panther,” who stand head-to-head each gazing into the camera intently with the caption “INTENSE”; “Anti-Violence Whistle as blown by SAMANTHA, Pink Panther” accompanies an image of a woman smiling with whistle in mouth, manicured hands on cheeks, and “SHARP” written below her; “Boxing gloves as worn by KATE, queer martial artist. Kate’s partner CARRIE, lesbian activist artist,” describes a couple embracing, with a “FIERCE” caption. Each photo is credited to GIRL RAY, Sue Schaffner’s alias and a tongue-in-cheek play on the Dada-Surrealist photographer Man Ray (1890-1976). Each poster is credited to DAM with an exclamation mark in the lower corner. In situ archival photographs indicate the posters were displayed in a grid, which conformed to period advertising conventions (figure 3.8).

DAM’s The Gap Campaign was precisely rendered to mimic the “sepia-washed and black-and-white photographic tones” of the original Gap advertisements (figures 3.9 and 3.10), appropriating the Gap advertising campaign “Individuals of Style.”

---

Gap’s campaign had achieved widespread social recognition by 1991, when it was “ubiquitous on the sides of mass transit buses and payphone kiosks throughout New York City.”\(^83\) Inaugurated in 1988 by Gap’s in-house advertising department, the campaign featured celebrities (many of them unconventional and/or iconoclastic) demonstrating the individualized ways in which they wear Gap clothing.\(^84\)

The Gap campaign’s use of a wide range of celebrity models was a canny strategy. Since many of the models were unknown to potential consumers encountering them on city streets, they had a general appeal, according to Millard Drexler, former President of the Gap, (“We get hundreds of letters from people who think they would be perfect for the ads. It’s a real kick”).\(^85\) In a profile for the *New York Times* on the Individuals of Style ad campaign, an advertising executive affiliated with the Gap, put it another way: “There’s some feeling that the ‘80s were about celebrities and the 90’s are more about people.”\(^86\) These comments indicate a shift in advertising of the period, due in no small part to the increasing social exposure of radical health- and feminist- activists in ACT UP. Notoriously “trendy multicultural and polysexual ads”\(^87\) became a fixture of the period, particularly in campaigns by clothiers the Gap, but also by the United Colors of

---

\(^83\) Raizada (2007), 42.

\(^84\) For example, the “Individuals of Style” ads featured the actress Whoopi Goldberg, the actor/playwright B.D. Wong, jewelry designer Tina Chow, jazz legend Dizzy Gillespie, and neo-country singer K.D. Lang.


\(^87\) Raizada (2007), 41.
Benetton and Calvin Klein. Queer art activists were quick to respond this capitalist co- 
opption.88

Before DAM distributed *The GAP Campaign* in June 1991, Queer Nation culture 
jammers had been at work on the *New York Gap* project, in which activists used markers 
to change the “P” in Gap to a “Y” (changing the word to “gay”) in “Individuals of Style” 
ads featuring (mostly closeted) gay celebrities, and the out lesbian K.D. Lang. Lauren 
Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman, in their spring 1992 essay “Queer Nationality,” discussed 
*New York Gap* and argued that,

> For the insider, these acts ‘out’ the closeted gay and bisexual semi-celebrities the 
> Gap often uses as models. But the reconstructed billboards also address the 
> company’s policy of using gay style to sell clothes without acknowledging debts 
> to gay street style: style itself is ‘outed,’ as are the straight urban consumers who 
> learn that the clothes they wear signify gay.89

Berlant and Freeman’s observations about this informal, guerrilla style of cultural 
activism apply as well to the more elaborate *The Gap Campaign* by DAM:

> More ambiguous than the tradition of political defacement from which it descends 
> – feminist spray-painting of billboards with phrases like ‘this offends women,’ for 
> example – Queer Nation’s glossy pseudo-advertisements involve replication, 
> exposure, and disruption of even the semiotic boundaries between gay and 
> straight.90

Part of the success of DAM’s *The Gap Campaign* (that is, it’s ability to “trick” audiences 
into believing its status as advertising) was its proximity to the actual advertisements it 
referenced. DAM’s project calls attention the fact that lesbians aren’t recognized in 
mainstream society as celebrities or consumers by appropriating the very campaign in

---

88 Recall that in 1989, Gran Fury’s *Kissing Doesn’t Kill* billboards were a direct appropriation and implicit 
critique of United Colors of Benetton ads.

89 Berlant and Freeman (1992), 212.

90 Ibid.
which lesbians ostensibly would be recognized as such. The fact that DAM posters were vandalized evidences the degree to which “the mere presence” of a lesbian body “has the power to provoke, destabilize, and explode a given order.”

DAM’s The Gap Campaign points to the limits of representational conventions, even within purportedly subversive corporate advertisements. However, the radical potential of the project, and its foregrounding of activists, academics, and artists as occupations/activities befitting lesbian “celebrities,” is defanged by the visual rhetoric of advertising and capital’s appropriation of subcultures. In 1996 Carrie Moyer noted that

In the beginning, it was subversive to have chic lesbians who were as beautiful as anyone else. Our campaign addressed how lesbians are never recognized as ‘celebrities’ or as general consumers in advertising imagery.

Beyond this, on a simple level of pleasure and the affective significance of self-reflection in public visual culture, the project served an important role (as Moyer indicates): “DAM injects images of people – dykes – who are never represented within the visual culture that surrounds us each time we step outside or turn on our television sets.”

A discernable difference between “Individuals of Style” and The Gap Campaign is that the DAM posters, with the exception of one, feature lesbian couples rather than individuals. In terms of style (hair, jewelry, clothing, androgyny), each of the models is visibly queer-lesbian – what Jen Jack Gieseking has referred to as “radical and stand out

---


lesbian-queer styles of the 1980s (such as power-dyke or activist aesthetic).”

Dyke Action Machine’s *The Gap Campaign* was primarily directed towards lesbian audiences, although it was indelibly marked by the aesthetic sensibility of the co-ed queer activist generation. As well, straight passersby could presumably mistake the posters for genuine “Individuals of Style” GAP advertisements. In fact that was DAM’s intention. In a 2007 interview Moyer and Schaffner said:

Since DAM’s projects are first and foremost aimed at the lesbian viewer, images of women function in a particular way. While our work acts as a reminder that lesbians are rarely portrayed in mainstream culture, it also seeks to give lesbians visual pleasure within the same high-end, consumerist paradigm. From the beginning, we have used attractive, younger butch models to telegraph this dichotomy. Except when it comes to race, our projects play within the conventional parameters of beauty – mainly because we want the work to read as ‘advertising’ first and foremost. The hip, young butch has since [the early 2000s] become the visual token for the mainstreaming of lesbianism.

Notably, this statement reflects a lesbian feminist awareness and criticality about the mass media and conventional beauty standards, a discussion absent from much male-created AIDS and queer cultural activism. The lesbian sitters in *The GAP Campaign* are represented as individuals with identities: each is captioned with her first name and a description of her social occupation. Hence, they aren’t objectified in a classical sense. They look directly into the camera and are strong and self-possessed. There is a deadpan element to the series, in its acknowledgment of the rise of underground queer “celebrities” within the ACT UP / Queer Nation community at large. In a lengthy piece on Queer Nation published in *The Village Voice* in August 1990, fashion writer Guy Trebay observed that ubiquitous Queer Nation T-shirts “don’t yet outstrip the street-side

---

95 Gieseking (2013), 131.

potency of ACT UP’s graphics, which have defined a generation of activists through fashion presence, but they’re pretty close.”97 Beyond its critique of lesbian invisibility, *The Gap Campaign* seemingly provides a humorous take on the psychology of advertising, and its ability to generate desire and manipulate self-image.98

**Conclusion**

How do we account for cultural ephemera and space within the discipline of art history? The projects discussed in this chapter, including printed ephemera and performance, constructed “queer” against heteronormativity through a variety of means. One tactic was subterfuge: the insertion of queer subjects into advertisements, as in Dyke Action Machine campaigns, in order to disrupt the assumptions of conventional advertising and to insist upon queer visibility in the everyday spaces of capital. The second tactic was about shock and infiltration, for example the infiltration of straight bars and shopping malls by queer activists who disrupted such spaces with flagrant displays of homosexuality. These endeavors envisioned queer as a lived, not just a political, space.

By 1990 triage visibility, or the representational needs of the first decade of the HIV/AIDS crisis, had paradoxically resulted in success (changing perceptions of people with AIDS), opposition (escalating censorship of sexually explicit art dealing with HIV/AIDS and sexuality themes), and co-optation (mainstream clothiers appropriating the style conventions of activist in national campaigns). At the height of the culture wars


98 The project did little to dislodge the tyranny of whiteness though, as the majority of its models were white passing individuals.
over the federal funding of sexually explicit artwork and diversity in school curricula, national commercial advertising campaigns appeared that seemingly reduced queer activism and lesbianism to style. Thus by the early-mid 1990s, queer art activism had to address punitive legislation as well as mainstream capitalist co-optation. In the chapter that follows, I argue that lesbian visibility was the most aesthetically and politically compelling terrain of public art, since it was uniquely poised to respond to the paradoxes of the era: on the one hand, more lesbian and gay visibility (due to activist success) and on the other hand, more capitalist co-optation along with a retrenchment of culture wars and debates over American identity. Lesbians were poised to address this paradox since it is precisely the one that had been there all along.
No one has imagined us. We want to live like trees,
Sycamores blazing through the sulfuric air,
dappled with scars, still exuberantly budding,
our animal passion rooted in the city.

Adrienne Rich, Twenty-One Love Poems.¹

Introduction

If queer visibility was about the “freedom to be public,” the project of lesbian visibility that emerged simultaneously entailed something else. Like the “scars on a tree” described by Adrienne Rich in this chapter’s epigram, many artists of the period aimed to address – in form and content – the specific exigencies of lesbian experiences in the public sphere. For example, the ways in which women are made invisible yet targeted for sexual violence or objectification, and the ways in which men tend to dominate both mainstream and gay spaces. In this chapter I argue that fierce pussy, a public art collective of queer women artists and AIDS activists formed in New York in 1991, mounted the period’s most successful critiques of queer and mainstream representational politics. This is because fierce pussy drew upon different registers of legibility and signification – namely the underground print culture of ‘zines, utilized within punk, feminist, and queer subcultures – in its public art projects. In so doing, the collective

distinguished its campaigns from the advertising based AIDS – and queer activist public projects of its contemporaries.

The slick graphics of AIDS cultural activism, as represented by the Silence=Death Project and Gran Fury, were successful in creating ACT UP’s signature style. These graphics were also challenged on aesthetic and political grounds: as conflating AIDS with gay men, as too male-focused, too dogmatic, and/or too closely connected with corporate advertising. In contrast, fierce pussy asserted the issue of sexual difference formally with the visual and conceptual rhetoric of its posters. This chapter focuses primarily on fierce pussy in order to reframe the questions already under consideration in this dissertation, namely: can typography and graphic design be gendered and/or sexed? Chapter 1 of this dissertation took SILENCE=DEATH as a point of departure to explore artists’ use of visual ephemera as a means of organizing gay men and lesbians into a politicized and self-empowered community. Chapter 2 focused on Gran Fury to consider the expansion of cultural activism towards mainstream publics, as well as the political and aesthetic effects of ephemeral reproduction and distribution. In this chapter I argue that fierce pussy was successful in distinguishing its project from the glut of activist ephemera in the public sphere explored in previous chapters, and in creating a uniquely and powerfully lesbian conceptual art practice. As the entry on fierce pussy in the anthology Art and Queer Culture puts it, “fierce pussy’s graphics made the ACT UP posters developed in the 1980s look positively commercial in comparison.”\(^2\) Published in 2014, this anthology forms part of an evolving consensus on AIDS cultural activism and its offshoots; for their

---

formal and political complexity the projects of fierce pussy stand out and deserve closer attention than they have received thus far.

In fact in the early 1990s there was an “explosion of dyke [art and] activism.’’\textsuperscript{3} While recent attention, in film and exhibitions if not in scholarship, has turned towards the ephemeral AIDS activism of the late 1980s and early 1990s, there has been little attention to the attendant queer-centric projects that also characterized the period. We must develop reading practices that mirror or at least respond to the conditions of reception and site in order to approximate the impact and meaning of these works. fierce pussy posters provide a key opportunity to do this, as they had multiple layers of signification: as critiques within the community of LGBTQ activists, as interventions in the public sphere aimed at mainstream straight audiences, and as messages intended for lesbian audiences. This chapter examines lesbian activist art, specifically text-and-image based identity art activist strategies made between 1991 and 1992 – the DIY zine aesthetics of punk feminism (i.e. fierce pussy’s list series and family pictures and found photos series).

Lesbian art activism as it developed in the early 1990s was a position of resistance formulated from the margins of the margins.\textsuperscript{4} As such it reveals the shortcomings of the ACT UP milieu, among other tensions. I argue that fierce pussy projects were more innovative than contemporaneous lesbian visibility projects by the art activist collective

\textsuperscript{3} Lord (2014), 185. The explosion of dyke activism included the art collectives Dyke Action Machine, Oral Majority, fierce pussy; the activist groups Lesbian Avengers; and the art gallery Trial Balloon.

\textsuperscript{4} The exception here is on the grounds of race; the majority of members of all collectives addressed in this chapter were white.
Dyke Action Machine, which were akin to the style of Gran Fury and thus limited by their close approximation of advertising aesthetics.

**fierce pussy**

In contrast to Dyke Action Machine, the aesthetic and rhetorical exceptionality of fierce pussy’s *I AM A ... AND PROUD* poster series was immediately discernable (figures 4.1 and 4.2). These modestly sized posters, unsigned and in two versions, began appearing on building walls throughout lower Manhattan at the same time as DAM’s *The Gap Campaign*, in the spring-summer of 1991. They were, simply, type-written lists of lesbian signifiers sandwiched between the self-nomination “I AM A…” and the affirmative coda “…AND PROUD!” For example, “I AM A mannish muffdiver amazon feminist queer lesbian femme and proud!” and “I AM A lezzie butch pervert girlfriend bulldagger sister dyke AND PROUD!” Neither clearly polemical nor informational, these posters seemingly defied generic conventions. The typical layout of posters (both commercial and activist) was, by the early 1990s, created with newly available desktop publishing technology. This resulted in, on the one hand, the relative ubiquity of slick aesthetics and, on the other, the encouragement of viewers to quickly scan posters.5

The austere graphic design of *I AM A ... AND PROUD* rendered in black typewritten text against a white background, mines a different temporal register. Reading the posters takes time. Although resonant of the “I’m Black and I’m proud!” slogan of the

5 Examples of desktop publishing-derived aesthetics from the period include posters by the Guerrilla Girls, Gran Fury, and Dyke Action Machine.
1960s, these lists were unequivocally part of the 1990s’ queer present in which the essence of identity was queried. That is, rather than a singular identity, the lists instead reveal multiple and contingent options for sexual identification: from sexual acts (as in, “muffdiver”), to gender presentation (“femme”), to political affiliation (“feminist”). Initially, the posters appear as though hastily designed, especially because of the splotches. A closer inspection reveals an aesthetic that formally embodies the gradual, sometimes messy processes by which sexual identity is acquired and experienced as malleable. This is evident in the words’ uneven spacing; in the very materiality of their typewritten rendering, emphasized by letters that achieve a bold effect through multiple, layered iterations; and even, in the dots and smudges that pepper the composition, an effect amplified with each successive reproduction.

In fact the poster’s formal difference signaled its intent of resistance from the margins. *I AM A ... AND PROUD* was the inaugural project of fierce pussy, the public art collective formed in 1991 in New York by a group of queer women artists and AIDS activists born in the late 1950s and early 1960s, including Pam Brandt, Nancy Brooks Brody, Jean Carlomusto, Joy Episalla, Donna Evans, Alison Froling, Zoe Leonard, Suzanne Wright, and Carrie Yamaoka. Membership was loose and the group of active participants changed from week to week. With so many art-producing activist collectives active in New York by 1991, why start a new one? For fierce pussy it involved a very specific mission: to confront the particular dilemma of lesbians’ dual marginalization within straight and queer cultures, by developing an inventive model to foster “lesbian

---

6 The collective had core and occasional members, such as women who sometimes participated in creative meetings and wheat pasting sessions.
visibility” in the public sphere. The collective, which disbanded in 1994 and reconvened in 2008 in a smaller version with fixed membership, has retroactively described its I AM A...AND PROUD! poster project as follows:

Rather than taking on the critique of mass media, homophobia, and the male gaze, we announced ourselves as lesbians and directly addressed other lesbians walking those same streets. Our first poster project, the lists [sic]… speaks in the first person. Here we not only reclaim this derogatory language, we name ourselves and provide a position for the viewer to do the same.⁷

As we have seen with DAM, this desire to speak by and for lesbians as a marginalized population, even among marginalized populations, had been a preoccupation within the milieu of AIDS activism within which fierce pussy formed. Other precedents include the informal "Dyke Dinners,” which started in 1988 at the Park Slope homes of ACT UP members Maria Maggenti, Maxine Wolfe, and Jean Carломusto; they were attended by members of the ACT UP women’s committee including Sarah Schulman and Amy Bauer. Discussions entailed “a lot of things that had to do with ACT UP, and a lot of things that didn’t have to do with ACT UP.”⁸ The handbook Women, AIDS, and Activism was written by members of the Women AIDS Book Group of ACT UP and published by the lesbian Cleis Press in 1988. This important collection on the politics of regarding women and AIDS featured essays, bibliography, and lists of resources. fierce pussy members Zoe Leonard, Jean Carlomusto and Suzanne Wright were among the contributors.


fierce pussy members were more closely affiliated with ACT UP than Queer Nation. Zoe Leonard, an ACT UP activist since 1988, had attended her first ACT UP meeting at the invitation of her friend, artist David Wojnarowicz. In the late 1980s, Leonard encouraged Joy Episalla and Carrie Yamaoka, two long-term fixtures in the East Village art scene, to join ACT UP, as well as Nancy Brooks Brody. Susanne Wright invited Leonard to join the ACT UP auxiliary collective Gang and work on feminist art activist projects. Most members of fierce pussy were artists and many were engaged in AIDS activism that overlapped with their fierce pussy work, at least initially. fierce pussy members have described that part of appeal of a new street art project focused on lesbian visibility was the diversion it offered to young AIDS activists who were, by this time, veterans of meetings and direct actions; moreover, they were beleaguered by caretaking, frequent hospital visits and funerals. The affective climate of AIDS activism was, in short, intensely complicated. Participants simultaneously experienced the intense joys of resistance, meaningful embodied experiences at meetings and demonstrations and extreme trauma from mass AIDS suffering and deaths. By the early 1990s, the initial fervent phase of ACT UP was on the wane – meetings were burdened with heavy sadness

---


over the death of members, activist burnout and (not insignificantly) contentious debates over strategy and politics.¹²

Lesbian artists and activists such as Dyke Action Machine and fierce pussy led a new wave of sexuality-based cultural activism that emerged in the melancholic waning of AIDS cultural activism in the early 1990s.¹³ Not only was a defense required against homophobia from mainstream culture, but from the elision of queer representation and its utopian claim of inclusion of gay men and lesbians.¹⁴ In a speech at the West Village LGBT Center, Sarah Schulman emphasized this point and called for a redefinition of lesbian issues worthy of historical activism:

Since the middle eighties lesbians have by and large withdrawn from activism. We write, publish, have cultural events, tell each other how we have sex, and provide services – all of which are important. But we are not in the streets . . . the time has come for a new lesbian activism – in or out of ACT UP.¹⁵

Although Schulman’s speech in January 1991 did not directly cause the formation of lesbian public art collectives such as fierce pussy, it does highlight some issues that were in the air at the time that caused a number of groups to form.¹⁶ By the early 1990s, as


¹³ This included Trial Balloon gallery, which British artist Nicola Tyson opened in New York in 1993 as a space to show female (predominately lesbian) artists, and the “Bad Girls” exhibition organized by Marcia Tucker at The New Museum in New York (January 14-February 27, 1994).


¹⁶ Many New York-based lesbian feminists had long been active in political and social movements including “rape crisis centers, women’s education groups, anti-Central American militarization environmentalism, anti-nuclear, reproductive rights, anti-apartheid, and other movements and organizations that brought women together, often separate from the spaces and political agendas of gay men.” Gieseking (2013): 288.
previously discussed, the field of cultural activist engagement was quite dense. fierce pussy’s development of a distinct aesthetic was thus a departure from the graphic regime of AIDS cultural activism but also from a number of visually-based activist collectives creating and distributing ephemera in lower Manhattan in the early 1990s, including Dyke Action Machine; the Lesbian Avengers, founded in 1992 by six women (Sarah Schulman, Maxine Wolfe, Ana Maria Simo, Anne-christine D’Adesky, Marie Honan, and Anne Maguire) to mobilize lesbians and engage a new generation of women in direct action; Women’s Action Coalition (WAC), founded in 1992 as a feminist direct action group; and the Queer Nation splinter group Queer Action Figures and its lesbian wing Oral Majority.

Impacted by these affective and social conditions of political activism, fierce pussy put in place a collaborative method of production that was intentionally geared toward rapid and lo-tech creativity. Like Queer Nation, fierce pussy devised tactics that were a departure from ACT UP meetings as well as Gran Fury’s production method that was notoriously contentious (as Richard Deagle put it, “we would spend a two-hour meeting deciding where to put the comma.”)\(^{17}\) To prioritize quick-paced action, fierce pussy incorporated a “wheat-paste every other meeting” rule. Under this plan, members brainstormed and made poster-templates that drew upon resources at hand (such as typewriters and personal photographs). The group illicitly made photocopies at their corporate day jobs. They met under the cover of night in crews of ten or more women. This size had multiple purposes: to effectively carry out the “bombing” of walls, to

\(^{17}\) Deagle (2003).
ensure safety of participants, and to distribute the task of carrying the gallon jugs of water and buckets of wheat-paste needed to covertly distribute their posters around the city. While formally as “postmodern” as Gran Fury and DAM in their reliance on appropriation and montage, fierce pussy rejected the collective’s détournement technique of mimicking advertising aesthetics.\textsuperscript{18} The majority of fierce pussy projects mined a very different archive by turning to posters constructed with members’ own childhood or found photographs or words rendered with an inky typewriter. The result was an indelibly old-fashioned, anti-advertising aesthetic that was especially distinctive when juxtaposed with everyday urban ephemera, commercial advertising and contemporary art activist posters. The typographic intensity of fierce pussy compositions is, therefore, notable since in their display context, the posters formally enact the autonomy required when considering lesbian sexual difference in the public sphere.

As previously mentioned, the aesthetic and rhetorical power of fierce pussy’s inaugural project \textit{I AM A \ldots AND PROUD!} derives as much from its distinction from the visual culture of public advertising as from the repertoire of message-driven AIDS cultural activism. The project debuted at the height of Gran Fury’s notoriety in 1991, and appeared nearby Dyke Action Machine’s \textit{The Gap Campaign} on building exteriors of Manhattan, primarily in the East Village / Lower East Side.\textsuperscript{19} In contrast to the

\textsuperscript{18} Détournement involves appropriating a media source (such as advertising) and manipulating it towards new, subversive ends. Developed by the Lettrist International and then Situationist International in the late 1950s and ‘60s, respectively, it became a highly influential technique for punk subcultures, appropriation artists, culture jammers, and AIDS cultural activists. See Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman, “A User’s Guide to Détournement” [1956], in \textit{Situationist International Anthology} [1981], rev. ed., ed. and trans. by Ken Knabb (San Francisco: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006): 14-21.
territoriality of Queer Nation’s geographical imagination, which influenced its tactics of “occupation” (themselves drawing upon tactics used by Gay Activists Alliance in the 1970s), fierce pussy’s project reflects the ways in which “lesbian-queer spaces are almost always impermanent, diffuse, and fleeting, on or near the periphery of heteronormative spaces and experiences.”

Unlike DAM’s *The Gap Campaign*, which construed lesbian visibility in terms of activist visages, fierce pussy considers “lesbian” as an assemblage. While the *lists* were intended more for urban lesbians who might encounter them on the street than the general public, their context of display at the very sites of recent hate crimes, noted above, enabled a vital discursive means of protest.21 Ann Cvetkovich describes the effect in these terms: “Affixed to walls, newspaper boxes, and light poles, the language of graffiti and harassment is circulated with a difference in the public sphere.”22 The lists, in other words, refuse to image “lesbianism” pictorially. Instead, they re-present and emphatically reclaim violently inflected words. As such, it is an artistic strategy that takes its form from the very kind of power it wishes to confront – street harassment and language. Like the queer activism and art of the early 1990s, this series stands, to use Richard Meyer’s terms, “as both a mark of denigration and a means of self-description, as both a stigma

---


20 Gieseking (2013), 115.


22 Ann Cvetkovich (2001), 299.
imposed from without and a sense of difference perceived from within… a defiant form
of self-naming.”

The lists present “lesbian” as a public identity that is imposed even as it is
claimed. Their durational aspect asks those who read them not only to inhabit the first-
person voice of a sexual minority, but also to spend time in public space doing so. In
effect, the posters offer a gesture of reparation within the combative context of their
display. Markedly different than the divisive tone of the Queer Nation slogan, “We’re
Here. We’re Queer. Get Used to It,” I AM A … AND PROUD! implicates those who
encounter it as lesbian as such, whether or not they inhabit that identity. Perhaps what is
most significant about this series is that these works simply proclaim and affirm
variations on queer existence. The posters, their layered display a chorus of affirmations
and ephemerality, are personified as mobile stand-ins for queer subjects. Their display
enacted the communicative network of community bulletin boards on a larger, more
public scale. Bulletin boards were prominent within the many small independent coffee
shops that thrived in the 1980s and early 1990s, and were key spaces for lesbians and
queer women to congregate, especially during the day.

23 Richard Meyer, Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American

24 Judith Halberstam uses the phrase ‘gesture of reparation’ with regards to Yoko Ono’s Cut Piece [1965].

25 The significance of public art for lesbians cannot be over-stated. One of the participants interviewed in
Jen Gieseking’s dissertation study recalls, of the mid-to-late 1980s, “I was so isolated … Of course I
couldn’t afford to go to the city. So the only way that I had any kind of community at all was those albums
[like Holly Near and Cris Williamson]. I played it in my Walkman… it was definitely a relief not to feel so
isolated. There was a way that, on a cellular level, that music kept me from preventing my suicide. A
couple of times really. I thought, ‘Okay, these people are finding this then it’s possible for me to find it
Such a deft conceptual maneuver, however, was not intelligible to everyone who encountered it on New York City streets. By its very status as ephemera, the project structurally embraces the inevitability of its obsolescence. Once the posters were affixed to building walls, their length of exhibition may have been an hour or a year – depending on when and how they were removed (ripped, torn or posted over). And while anyone who encountered these posters might readily state they contained no obvious political message, their earnest and direct speech act registers as an appeal. In fact, these posters encapsulate a lengthy lesbian history lesson: from ancient Amazons to classical Sappho; from the androgynous women of 1930s Paris to the deviant homosexuals of the postwar McCarthy era from the archetypal femme-stone butch couple of working-class bar culture in the 1950s and 1960s, to the lesbian feminists of the 1970s, towards the queer dykes of the 1980s and 1990s. Invoking this historical past in relation to a present struggle was a canny move for a work of lesbian street art, particularly since minority sexual cultures have historically been created, defended and affirmed in the public sphere (in bars, riots and pride parades).

In 1991, lesbian culture and its public spaces again needed defending, reaffirming and historical grounding. This is highlighted in *L is for the Way You Look*, 1991, a short 24-minute film by Jean Carlomusto, an AIDS activist, filmmaker and occasional fierce

---

26 Since at least the eighteenth century, ephemeral materials have functioned in the street in this manner. Addressing the central issues of the day, ephemera have the potential to vanish or paradoxically last. For a contextualization of ephemera in these terms, see Kevin D. Murphy and Sally O’Driscoll, “Introduction,” in *Studies in Ephemera: Text and Image in Eighteenth-Century Print*, eds. Kevin D. Murphy and Sally O’Driscoll (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2013).

pussy collaborator. The film, billed as a “playful exploration of lesbian history and the women who have served as models and objects of desire for young lesbians,” follows a rumor about Dolly Parton’s lesbian identification (sparked by her purported attendance at a Reno performance at PS 122 in the East Village). Provocatively, Carlomusto “follows” the rumor as it travels through a close-knit group of queer women (including several fierce pussy members).28 She then turns the camera on herself and interviews her friends about a range of topics including the portrayal of lesbians in the media, their elision from history books, activist burnout and romantic boredom. In L is for the Way You Look, Carlomusto importantly argues that the relationship between past and present LGBT history is crucial. By underscoring the fact that the annual June Pride Parade commemorates the Stonewall riots that sparked the gay liberation movement in the United States, Carlomusto persuasively connects the necessity of the past with the urgency of the now.29 Formally, she accomplishes this by intercutting scenes of a protest march against violence towards lesbians in Park Slope, Brooklyn (July 28, 1990) and the Gay Pride Parade in Manhattan (June 1991). Interspersed throughout this montage is footage of people wheat-pasting posters onto building walls, under the cover of night. As often as cultural activist graphics were displayed as posters and stickers, they were also worn as T-shirts and held as placards during demonstrations. Viewers are reminded of the


29 Many recognized a revitalization of gay liberation politics and tactics in ACT UP’s street activism and Queer Nation’s sex radicalism, i.e. the refusal of sexual shame in light of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. See Gould (2004), 52.
relationship between ephemera and embodiment, and the enduring importance of ephemeral materials to LGBT political and social movements.\textsuperscript{30}

The film premiered on 22 September 1991 at a fundraiser for the acquisition of a Park Slope brownstone to house the Lesbian Herstory Archives, the world’s largest collection of ephemeral materials documenting lesbian communities, founded in the 1970s.\textsuperscript{31} This was an apt occasion, since \textit{L is for the Way You Look} is about the ways lesbians come to know about and understand their own histories. In this way, Carlomusto’s film showcases footage of fierce pussy members and their affixing foam core street signs with stenciled names of famous lesbian icons (the range included athletes [Martina Navratilova Court] and poets [Audre Lorde Lane]) to utility poles during the 1991 Gay Pride Parade in Manhattan (figure 4.3). This project was interesting because it built upon the tradition of holding placards with notable LGBTQ figures from history at Gay Pride Parades.\textsuperscript{32} Yet, it insists upon the recognition of lesbians by temporarily claiming space, and competing with (or even displacing) the gay leaders being celebrated. In effect, the fierce pussy project spills out from the parade boundaries and into the realm of the street. Even some iconic “gay streets,” such as Sheridan Square and Christopher Street in Greenwich Village, were renamed in terms of lesbian

\textsuperscript{30} There is also an important link between embodiment and the experience of making art collectively, which, like political activism, involves forgoing individuality in favor of losing oneself to the crowd. See Eileen Myles, “Lest We Forget: Eileen Myles on ‘ACT UP NEW YORK,’” \textit{Artforum}, March 2010.

\textsuperscript{31} The Lesbian Herstory Archives began in 1974 as a grassroots collective project by several women including Joan Nestle and Deborah Edel. For fifteen years the LHA was housed in Nestle’s Upper West Side Manhattan apartment, before moving to its permanent home in Park Slope, Brooklyn and re-opening in 1993.

\textsuperscript{32} This is a central tactic of identity-based social movements. At the Queer Nation “Mall Visibility Action” on May 12 1990 at the Newport Mall in Jersey City, activists handed out leaflets with info about queers including safe sex tips and a list of famous queers from history. See Trebay (1990).
specificity (they became fierce pussy Plaza and Tomboy Turnpike). The project continued throughout 1992 featuring sidewalk stencils and spray paint in addition to the foam core street signs. These guerrilla methods of publicity re-envision urban space and the gay and lesbian history contained within it that is commemorated in the annual Pride Parade. 33 Both Re-Naming the Streets and L is For the Way You Look are projects of mapping, “a way of imagining a site in terms of its geographic and historical specificity, as it is viewed through the prism of fragmented subjectivity.”34 By expanding the reach of its public art intervention beyond the Pride Parade and into the surrounding streets, fierce pussy makes an effective statement for the legitimacy of lesbian experience.

In Re-Naming the Streets and other projects, fierce pussy departed from the toolkit of contemporary sexual activism in order to create an archive of resistance that explicitly folds lesbian specificity back into and around the queer present. The collective, in projects between 1991 and 1993, crafted a lesbian archive of icons and taxonomies that adopted the ethos of reclamation, but forewent polemic. Why, then, was fierce pussy confrontational if it drew upon history with an archivist impulse?35 In fact, the late 1980s-to-early 1990s was a contentious period. The reclamation of the term “queer” (along with other expletives including “dyke” and “faggot”) by fierce pussy’s generation of AIDS activists (both young and old) was so controversial within the lesbian and gay community


35 As discussed in Chapter 2, some of Gran Fury’s earliest posters were made using appropriated historical images – a World War II-era photo of two sailors, and a 1926 Broadway show publicity still featuring two women. The first-version of the women’s READ MY LIPS poster was controversial for its depiction of lesbian eroticism. See Meyer (2004), 229-230.
that public forums were called to debate it. For some, the seemingly glib adoption of hate speech after decades of oppression was untenable. In June 1990 at the Pride Parade when Anonymous Queers distributed their “Queers Read This / I Hate Straights” manifesto, some parade-goers refused to take it because of the prominence of the word “queer.” Thus, the intergenerational/historical sensibility of fierce pussy projects is particularly significant. The insistent materiality of fierce pussy graphics (whether the smudgy typewriter font of the posters, or the spray-painted stenciled lettering of the street signs) registers as retro in the context of streamlined AIDS and queer cultural activist graphics (particularly the advertising-influenced work of Gran Fury, Queer Nation and Dyke Action Machine). A 1993 fierce pussy work (figure 4.4) echoed the 1970s slogan


37 As Richard Meyer notes, “while a public reclamation of the term ‘queer’ may be a product of the early 1990s, the antinormative strategy behind that reclamation most certainly is not. Attempts to trouble the conventional codes of gender and sexuality, to highlight the performative aspects of identity, and to oppose the tyranny of the ‘normal’ are woven into the historical fabric of homosexuality and its representation.” Meyer (2004), 343. As Simon Watney has written, “the resistance to ‘queer’ ‘forcibly reminds me of the strong resistance put up by many self-styled ‘homosexuals’ to the adoption of the term ‘gay’ in the late Sixties and early Seventies. For many who grew up in the Fifties, ‘queer’ is evidently still closely associated with painful memories of insults and low self-esteem. Yet it is often forgotten that ‘queer’ has also long been used by many people, of themselves, in a way that is quite open and positive. Thus throughout the post-war period ‘queer’ has always been available for conflicting meanings, very much depending on the user.” Watney (1994).


39 There was an acute historical consciousness among activists, however. In the Village Voice cover story by Guy Trebay on Queer Nation (1990), Martin Duberman is quoted as characterizing Queen Nation’s radicality in terms of intergenerationality. For instance, he notes how certain Queer Nation tactics i.e. occupying ‘straight’ spaces were developed in the 1970s by Gay Liberation activists – i.e. the Gay Academic Union ‘took’ over a Manhattan bar. Watney (1994) also describes queer activism of the early 1990s in terms of “intergenerational energy.”

40 However, fierce pussy was not the first group to use typewriter graphics. Besides their prevalence in contemporary zines, even Queer Nation designed a t-shirt design with a large Q in chartreuse typewriter-type against a black background, circa summer 1990.
“Lesbians are Everywhere.” A poster asks, “What is a Lesbian?” and answers with a list: “your veterinarian, your nurse, your favorite movie star, your lawyer, your teacher, your gynecologist…your girlfriend.” Like I AM A ... AND PROUD! this poster addresses both the lesbian community and the wider population and the emphasis is on the plurality of identity.41

The collective’s explicit name is as much aligned with the Queer Nation project of visibility and reclamation as with the flagrant obscenity of the vulvic iconography developed by cultural feminists in the 1970s.42 This link was apparent in fierce pussy’s 1992 Political Greeting Cards Campaign, a mailing card pre-addressed (in two versions) to Catholic Cardinal of New York City John O’Connor, and New York Senator Alfonse D’Amato (figure 4.5). The card featured a large black-and-white photographic reproduction of a woman’s genitalia, accompanied by the text (in fierce pussy’s signature typewriter type) “You can’t legislate it. You can’t lick it. You can’t beat it.” Fierce pussy described the campaign, distributed during the November 1992 political season, as “our response to their endorsement of oppressive, misogynist, homophobic public policies.”43

Interestingly, the Greeting Cards campaign utilizes a declarative and confrontational tone and is relatively private compared to public posters. In several respects the Greeting

Cards campaign was a departure from earlier fierce pussy projects. It specifically addressed political figures, whereas earlier projects were intended for lesbian audiences (I AM A ... AND PROUD!) and the lesbian and gay community more broadly (Re-naming the Streets). Whereas posters and street-signs are relatively immobile, a mailing is not.

When considering the particularities of lesbian public art collectives, the issues of audience and scale are important. Like DAM, fierce pussy had a small membership, and limited ability to print and distribute posters. Fierce pussy’s DIY imperative is reflected in the provenance of the vulvic image used in the Greeting Cards campaign, one of several photographs taken by Zoe Leonard of women in her circle, on the condition of their anonymity. While it mines pornographic tropes, it also exposes the extent to which such tropes are dependent on context. For example, the photograph recalls Gustave Courbet’s painting Origin of the World (1866) yet Leonard’s image is more direct, since it is taken from a straight-on angle. While such a graphic image would seemingly reinforce female objectification, in effect it became personified when paired with the bold, declarative text – literally a fierce pussy. Leonard’s image provided the source for several projects in 1992: besides its feminist deployment in fierce pussy’s Political Greeting Cards Campaign, the image was used in an abortion rights poster by the collective Gang that paired it with the all-caps phrase “READ MY LIPS” (a decidedly feminist appropriation of the slogan used by Gran Fury and President George H.W. Bush) (figure 4.6). Zoe Leonard used it in her 1992 installation at Documenta IX in Kassel,

where she juxtaposed different versions of it with seventeenth-century portraits of bourgeoisie and aristocratic women in the Neue Galerie (figure 4.7).

The viewer who encountered *Untitled* at Documenta with an awareness of feminist art history might have understood its vaginal imagery as distinct from both the central-core aesthetics of the 1970s and the repudiation of essentialism in the 1980s. Leonard’s confrontational deployment of sexuality was a decisively “queer” gesture; playful, yet intent on reconfiguring the means by which marginalized populations are represented in mainstream contexts. In a press interview for Documenta, Leonard defended the feminist and queer activism that influenced her artistic practice, stating, “the European view that Americans are naïve in their linking of politics and sexuality to art makes it almost impossible for them to understand the ‘cultural revolution’ that is happening in the United States.”

*Toward a New Strategy of Queer Lesbian Representation*

fierce pussy projects engage the politics of representation from a feminist consideration of sexual difference. While the fierce pussy posters discussed thus far present “lesbian” as a ubiquitous, historical phenomenon, several of the collective’s other posters tread in ambiguity. Between 1991 and 1992 fierce pussy completed a series of montages that combined members’ childhood photographs with lesbian epithets (figures 4.8, 4.9). In *Muffdiver* the composition’s granulated surface, typewritten font and cut-and-paste composition evokes contemporary zines, a genre of artists’ books notable as

---

much for their distinct aesthetic as for their distinctive affect of passionate, and often politicized, homespun engagement.\textsuperscript{46}

In the early 1990s, queer and feminist fanzines were a vibrant genre of underground production, circulated nationwide through mailing lists and independent booksellers, an intentional departure from profit-driven gay glossy magazines as well as the détournement tactics of cultural activism.\textsuperscript{47} In the 1980s and 1990s, lesbian zines were “rooted in the lesbian/gay and feminist communities but also defined in opposition to them.”\textsuperscript{48} Thus beyond its utility as a cheap mode of production, the zine aesthetic adopted by fierce pussy was a means to signal a critique of queer cultural politics. The juxtaposition of text and image in this series personalizes the reclamation of language in \textit{I AM A … AND PROUD!} Yet, its feminist imaging of lesbianism remains iconoclastic since \textit{Muffdiver} complicates objectification with the destabilizing visage of a young child.

While these works may seem more subversive than confrontational, they were actually quite controversial. Deployed at the height of culture wars debates over sexuality in school curricula and popular science reports of a “gay gene,” these posters were spurned by public audiences who wrote graffiti responses across the works, including “child abuse” and “keep your views out of the public eye.”\textsuperscript{49} In fact, both the form and

\begin{flushleft}

\textsuperscript{47} Berlant and Freeman (1992), 220.

\textsuperscript{48} Austin and Gregg (1993), 81.

\textsuperscript{49} Smyth (1997), 90. In 1989 the lesbian-themed children’s book \textit{Heather Has Two Mommies}, written Lesléa Newman and illustrated by Diana Souza, was published by the LGBT press Alyson Books. The Lesbian Avengers’ first action (September 9, 1992) was organized to protest homophobic, right-wing
\end{flushleft}
content of *Muffdiver* resonate with contemporary zines, since in the 1980s and 1990s zines became a “sanctioned forum in which to broach taboo topics such as incest and child sexual abuse – leading to unconventional and sometimes unsettling presentations.”\(^{50}\) Rather than a diaristic approach, fierce pussy mobilized an ambiguous engagement with the subject of childhood sexuality.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the escalation of violence against lesbians in the early 1990s was coextensive with their unprecedented visibility in realms of culture, society, and politics.\(^ {51}\) This paradox was distilled, for example, in the media phenomenon that became known as “lesbian chic,” which, in effect, de-politicized lesbianism by presenting it in terms of a fictional binary of violence or glamour. Although it was legible to many as an appropriation of transgression against heterosexual patriarchal social norms, some lesbians recall “the startling and joyous experience” of encountering lesbian chic, such as the 1993 *Vanity Fair* magazine cover that featured the supermodel Cindy Crawford, scantily clad, shaving a dapper K.D. Lang (figure 4.10).\(^ {52}\)

As a stand-in for the queer subject, the child in *Muffdiver* disavows the budding niche of lesbian and gay markets that accompanied lesbian chic in the capitalist de-politicization of queer.\(^ {53}\) A fierce pussy poster created in 1993 drives home this critique

\(^{50}\) Austin and Gregg (1993), 81.


\(^{52}\) Recollections of the Vanity Fair cover are recounted in Gieseking (2013), 317.
in explicit terms: “Lesbian Chic My Ass. Fuck 15 minutes of fame. We demand our civil rights. Now.” (figure 4.11). With their un-branded, anti-advertising aesthetic, fierce pussy deployed a critique of lesbian chic in the very spaces in which this public advertising circulated.\textsuperscript{54} The poster’s crude rendering of a backside literalizes the figurative expression “my ass” while its emotive register, enabled by the subjective medium of drawing, is at once excessive, funny, and angry. fierce pussy thus countered “lesbian chic” and banal political activism with a departure from the clean, minimal graphic styles of contemporary activist posters, as well as the glossy production values of lesbian chic as it appeared in fashion photography and magazine covers.\textsuperscript{55}

If ephemeral printed works are an ideal medium for the public sphere, used by authoritarian as well as anarchic forces, and are equally suited to the material culture of protest and mass-culture advertising, in what ways did fierce pussy posters traverse these realms?\textsuperscript{56} It is often remarked that a principal achievement of AIDS cultural activism was its style; even – style as activism. By the early to mid 1990s, a particular dialectic between mainstream and alternative-activist cultures in American capitalism had come


\textsuperscript{54} For the first few years of the collective’s production, fierce pussy posters were unbranded. At some point (circa 1993) a \textit{fierce pussy} signature (in sans serif font) began appearing on select works. Most of the posters in the fierce pussy collection at the New York Public Library contain this signature. The collective donated these materials (approximately 30 works, mostly posters and stickers) after the NYPL organized a groundbreaking exhibition of gay and lesbian history, “Becoming Visible: The Legacy of Stonewall” for the 25\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the Stonewall Riots in 1994.

\textsuperscript{55} Cvetkovich (2001), 300.

\textsuperscript{56} For the importance of publication to the formation of a bourgeois public sphere, see Jurgen Habermas, \textit{The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society} [1962], trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989), 43.
full circle. On the one hand, while artist-activists had drawn from the realm of advertising, by the early 1990s some advertisements had become nearly indistinguishable from activist posters (for example, a 1994 United Colors of Benetton poster featuring Ronald Reagan as a PWA). 57 On the other hand, fierce pussy posters were distinguished by their “purposive anachronism,” to use Kobena Mercer’s phrase. 58 Inasmuch as this strategy distinguished the collective’s work from the advertising aesthetic of contemporary cultural activism, it also produced “an (un)canny version of advertising’s power to exploit difference, including anachronisms, to draw attention to itself,” as Ann Cvetkovich has argued. 59 The complex aesthetic developed by fierce pussy was a response to the paradoxical terms of visibility in the capitalist public sphere of early 1990s New York, where lesbians (and other sexual outlaws) were disavowed and yet frequently subject to violence. 60 Hence, the collective’s conception of lesbian visibility in terms of autonomy, rather than through a pedagogical mandate to educate the community-at-large about lesbian life or specific political issues, to primarily address lesbian-identified people on the streets. 61 The address of lesbian experience and


59 Cvetkovich (2001), 299.


61 In other projects fierce pussy did engage in specific political and issue-based projects: Boycott Colorado in 1993, a series of posters in support of the boycott in protest of anti-gay legislation passed by voters in Colorado; No Special Rights in 1994, a series of posters that appropriated the phrase ‘no special rights’ used by the Christian Coalition to promote anti-queer legislation.
excavation of lesbian history enacts a critique, as well, of solipsistic cultural activist strategies too heavily ensnared in a dialectical engagement with the “institutionally empowered format.”

The singularity and complicating of the activist-mainstream culture relationship is underscored in fierce pussy’s visual strategy when juxtaposed with the aforementioned Absolutely Queer posters by OUTpost. Displayed as a grid consisting of multiple posters, Absolutely Queer posters formally exploit an advertising aesthetic to rather arbitrarily impute a queer or “het” (heterosexual) orientation onto its celebrity personae, including Jodie Foster and Paula Abdul. In contrast, fierce pussy’s use of members’ own childhood photographs with imposed epithets effect a retroactive “outing” that privileges the voice of a queer subject while acknowledging the violence of that process. By appropriating decades-old snapshots, fierce pussy crafted queer identity as a continuum experienced in historical time, rather than a rhetorical abstraction to be deployed for controversy’s sake.

While OUTpost, like Gran Fury, hones a classically activist, declarative sensibility that drew upon mass media, fierce pussy negotiates its critique by mining ambivalence. When compared to the AIDS cultural activist strategy in which polemical statements are reiterated and made by public figures, fierce pussy’s divergent strategies are evident. Consider Gran Fury’s appropriation in 1990 of a newspaper photograph of a smiling young woman wearing a shirt that says “Thank God for AIDS” (figure 4.12).

---

62 Members of Gran Fury were wary of the endgame of appropriation as early as 1989, as discussed in their interview with David Deitcher. See: David Deitcher, “Interview with Gran Fury” [1989], Gran Fury: Read My Lips, eds Michael Cohen and Gran Fury (New York: 80WSE), 34-49.

63 For example, the installation Let the Record Show . . ., by the ACT UP ad hoc group (1987) a storefront window at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation.
Despite the mediation attempted by Gran Fury’s small caption “This is To Scare You,” the re-presentation of such a brutal statement is a gesture of publicity as much as it is a disavowal. Recognizing the futility of that dialectic, played out on both sides of the Culture Wars, fierce pussy’s poster *She Had Recurring Dreams about the Girl Next Door* is purposively anti-spectacular (figure 4.13).

This poster is part of a series that turns inward and mines a personal archive of snapshots and phrases that intentionally address the specificity of lesbian experiences. Rather than the juxtaposition of obscenity and innocence discernable in the childhood photographs series, these works feature (mostly) young adults and a more tentative language. As such, they present “lesbian visibility” to public audiences in a more nuanced and complex way. The 1950s and ‘60s photographs include one with an elementary school class photograph accompanied by the caption “are you a boy or a girl?” and another with two young women in bathing suits, sitting side by side, captioned by “we just really enjoy each other” (figures 4.14 and 4.15). The majority of images in this series detail women together in spaces beyond the domestic realm – in outdoor settings such as parks and beaches, or public institutions. This theme, when combined with veiled phrases that have historically shaped the exchange between queer women and the wider population, underscores negotiation as a constituent part of public lesbian experiences. Despite the cut-and-paste zine format and the intimate snapshots, the feelings evoked by these posters are not nostalgic. This diaristic aesthetic, inserted into the urban fray of the East Village, seems to promise interiority but quickly refuses it, as the images knowingly reclaim the cultural euphemisms for lesbian kinship.
fierce pussy posters are self-contained. That is to say, they forestall the inevitable social responses to lesbian visibility: violence, objectification, or co-optation. Key to this process was fierce pussy’s literal disembodiment of a lesbian narrator. For instance, the “speakers” in the posters are either invisible (in *I AM A . . . AND PROUD!*) or, if images do exist (in *Muffdiver* and *She Had Dreams About the Girl Next Door*), they belong to an age of decades-old innocence, thereby denying closure or any clear readings of the works. Although the language of harassment and interrogation is re-circulated in the public sphere, its vehemence is stunted by an insistently personal point of view. Herein, fierce pussy forms a critique of mainstream and queer representations that draws more from the individualism of graffiti signatures than from the mass subject addressed by advertising (as well as cultural activism), because while posters are visible to all, their references to lesbian experiences are legible to few.64

In an urban context now glutted with activist art, the collective was effectively distinguished by its rejection of polemic. In order to refuse the dialectical terms of spatial political engagement, fierce pussy’s posters denote “lesbian” with an economy of means. Despite its withdrawal from polemic, this project was indeed audacious. fierce pussy posters enact a third space, an autonomous means of rendering lesbian publics visible in a patriarchal image culture. In fact, the quest for autonomy has shaped lesbian political imaginaries throughout the twentieth century, most spectacularly in the separatist ethos of lesbian feminism in the 1970s.65 Thoroughly imbued with the affective landscape of

---

AIDS and queer cultural activism, however, fierce pussy crafted lesbian autonomy with an activist sense of public engagement. By exploiting the rhetorical capacity of printed ephemera as a mode of counter-publicity and discourse, the collective simultaneously addressed lesbians as well as the public at large. fierce pussy drew upon collective baby pictures, found photographs and references to lesbian heroines and taxonomies, in order to examine the present. Inasmuch as these fierce pussy projects are critiques of the limits of appropriation, they are also radically plainspoken gestures affirming existence in a public culture of violence and mass death.

Conclusion

New York-based queer public art collectives between 1990 and 1993 redoubled the cultural activist strategies of the 1980s, for example by expanding visibility tactics and intensifying public displays of queer sexuality in the public sphere. This historical moment, in which queer cultural practice was developed and named as such, was very brief. In the first half of the 1990s queer visibility projects increasingly addressed dilemmas of objectification and commodification. By 1992 there was a different paradigm to contend with as the election of a democratic president, William “Bill”

66 On counter-publicity as foundational to the public sphere, see Michael Warner, Publics and Counterpublics (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 183.
Clinton, ushered in a new wave of mainstreaming lesbian and gay politics.\textsuperscript{67} The advertising and entertainment industries cashed in on the cultural cachet of queer and lesbian style, and in some cases began marketing to lesbian and gay consumers. Yet familiar patterns of marginalization remained. As Ann Cvetkovich explains:

> The concept of ‘lesbian visibility’ in the 1990s … carried a particular charge in the face of fears that lesbianism will be left out of constructions of gay identity. As gay men became more visible in the early 1990s in the context of media coverage of AIDS, gays in the military, and even queer activism, lesbians worried about remaining invisible.\textsuperscript{68}

Recuperating strategies from previous generations of radical lesbians, fierce pussy developed a visual politics of differentiation – from queer men, straight feminists, assimilationist gays and lesbians, and mainstream straight culture. fierce pussy avoided the over-determined field of mass media critique and devised new strategies drawing upon under-examined archives – from the feminist art movement to queer zines – to deftly negotiate the exigencies of the period.

This chapter has argued that lesbian art collectives were bellwethers of transformations in queer cultural activism in the 1990s. Coming out of postmodernism and its strategies of appropriation and conceptual art on the one hand, but with the raw energy of punk on the other (signaled by the zine aesthetic), fierce pussy developed a feminist and conceptual art practice unique to the history of AIDS- and queer- cultural activism as well as, more broadly, the history of twentieth-century political art. Within the history of feminist art, fierce pussy hit an important note. If the conceptual practices of 1980s feminist artists like Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger were “cool,” and the

\textsuperscript{67} See Vaid (1995).

\textsuperscript{68} Cvetkovich (2001), 284-285.
didactic-figurative art of cultural feminists like Judy Chicago was “hot,” then fierce pussy occupied a different aesthetic register. It was both hot and cool: hot in terms of its incendiary language (“fierce pussy,” “dyke,” “muffdiver,” etc), yet cool for its refusal of sexualized imagery (instead it utilized repurposed family photographs of young children, a cartoon drawing, text and no imagery, etc). fierce pussy is thoroughly of its early 1990s moment for its “in your face” language. The collective devised an ingenious solution to the difficult and persistent dilemma of representing lesbian experiences in a manner shielded from male objectification.

The high stakes involved in fierce pussy’s activist art projects resulted in projects that were developed ingeniously and rapidly, as in the foundational works of late 1960s-conceptual art: fierce pussy developed projects with an economy of means, in order to foreground the operation of the artwork. The group's message, like its medium, announced its public status from the start: a poster that was meant to be discursive, in the sense of adding voices to the public sphere, signaling presence, claiming space, and redirecting the conversation. Unlike institutionally based conceptual art practices, however, which typically consist of ostensibly neutral text, this body of work gained meaning in and through its display on the street. In other words, the posters’ contestatory language was only enacted when multiple publics encountered it.
CHAPTER 5

EPILOGUE: 1993-1995

It was personal, too, selfish. I am an artist, right? But as an artist, I completely gave over my practice to ACT UP, and GMHC, and the AIDS movement. From 1988 to 1993, I didn’t make a single work that I signed under my own name … [by 1993] I … wanted to do something myself. I just wanted to make some work that was a kind of statement about all of the stuff I had been through in those years.

– Gregg Bordowitz¹

Introduction

Gregg Bordowitz describes a sentiment felt by many in the mid-1990s, when membership in ACT UP declined, as feelings of hopelessness and fatigue began to outweigh the anger that had propelled the previous phases of the AIDS activist movement. Why did membership in ACT UP decline? Some people transitioned from full-time activists to AIDS professionals. Others were burnt out from the all-consuming demands of AIDS activism, which included attending meetings and demonstrations as well as caretaking and burying friends living and dying from HIV/AIDS.² For artists like Bordowitz, there were additional reasons to leave. During the height of ACT UP (between 1987 and 1993) many artist-participants in AIDS activism forwent studio-based art projects as “diletantism”³ and focused instead on collective political art endeavors.


² Many activists were HIV positive themselves and some became too sick to participate at certain points, particularly in the mid-1990s, including Robert Vazquez-Pacheco, Tom Kalin, Mark Simpson, and Gregg Bordowitz. See the ACT UP Oral History Project.

However, by the mid-1990s most direct-action activist art collectives had disbanded and artists began exploring themes related to their experiences of AIDS in individual projects. This chapter seeks to understand this shift, by considering the waning of direct-action art activism. I examine two final projects by Gran Fury and fierce pussy in terms of their tactical, structural, affective, and creative aspects. The second half of the chapter examines projects Zoe Leonard and Gregg Bordowitz, completed by individually during hiatuses from collective activism, and interprets them in terms of the affective experiences of AIDS, archives, and political representation. Finally, I conclude with a recent project by fierce pussy. This chapter considers the aesthetic impact of AIDS activism on a generation of queer artists, represented here by two key figures from ACT UP New York-affiliated art and video collectives. It argues that artists affiliated with ACT UP developed new modes of queer representation that were emotionally as well as politically complex.

Context: From Margins to Mainstream

After more than a decade of activism, by 1993 the landscape of AIDS in America had changed. Although in the mid-1990s AIDS was still a devastating disease with no known cure or even effective treatment, in terms of perception AIDS was changing, from a disease associated with social pariahs to a mainstream cause embraced by celebrities. Between 1986 and 1993, the activism of ACT UP members and others had achieved the first two of three ACT UP goals: to publicize the crisis, to get drugs into bodies, and to end the AIDS crisis. The last goal presented a grave difficulty to activists who realized
that rather than cease to exist, AIDS would remain an ongoing phenomenon. Whereas ACT UP had been propelled by a narrative arc towards the final aim of ending the AIDS crisis, at a certain point the heroic posture of this construct gave way to the reality of AIDS, as described by Gregg Bordowitz in his 1993 autobiographical film *Fast Trip, Long Drop*:

I used to think that I’d see the end of this, now I don’t think so. I think it’s gonna [sic] last longer than I am. I thought that our activism would lead to its end and I would survive AIDS and now I feel pretty confident that I’m going to die from it.4

This is an emotionally complex statement from the perspective of a 29-year-old person with AIDS, which was complicated by the perverse violence of the fact that in the American imagination AIDS and AIDS activism had begun to change: AIDS was no longer a crisis of representation concerning social outcasts and AIDS activism ceased to be primarily motivated by political anger.5 During this period there was a shift in attitudes towards AIDS as a more relatable and more mainstream disease. For example, the popular (and heterosexual) basketball player Magic Johnson came out as HIV positive in 1991, which changed perceptions of AIDS as a “gay disease.” In 1993, the film *Philadelphia* became the first big-budget Hollywood production to address the AIDS crisis. It featured major movie stars, won several Academy Awards, and was described by a prominent film critic as “a ground-breaker like *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967)

---

4 *Fast Trip, Long Drop* is discussed later in this chapter. In 1993 there was virtually no known successful treatment for HIV/AIDS. With the advent of protease inhibitor cocktails in 1996, AIDS became a manageable disease. Gregg Bordowitz has been a professor in the Video, New Media, and Animation department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago since 1995.

5 From the 1980s on, the fastest growing number of new HIV diagnoses has occurred among African Americans. In addition to a person’s sexual network, poverty is a major factor determining HIV infection. “HIV & AIDS in USA,” http://www.avert.org/hiv-aids-usa.htm [accessed July 30, 2014].
… it uses the chemistry of popular stars in a reliable genre to sidestep what looks like controversy.” In 1993-1994 the American playwright Tony Kushner was lauded with two Tony awards and a Pulitzer Prize for his play *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. The work, which is set in New York City in 1985 and details the struggles of a gay man living with AIDS, was praised by critics for its handling of social issues. However, some AIDS activists took issue with the moral and religious overtones of the work that smothered any trenchant political analysis of the AIDS crisis. For many people living with the disease – either as people with AIDS or as caretakers of people with AIDS – the daily struggle was increasingly unbearable. Anger-fueled direct action AIDS activism began to decline as new types of AIDS visibility emerged.

The Red Ribbon Project, which began in New York in 1991, is perhaps most indicative of changing American ideas about AIDS (figure 5.1). The symbol was designed by the Visual AIDS Artist Caucus and capitalized upon the popular yellow ribbons then worn in support of American troops fighting in the Persian Gulf War.

---


8 The Red Ribbon Project was a coalition of AIDS groups who distributed ribbons. Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS, a theater-based AIDS awareness group, The symbols they considered were red roses (anti-abortion movement) and pink triangles (gay rights and radical AIDS activism) before picking red ribbon. The color signifies blood. Visual AIDS was founded in the fall of 1988, by four white gay men who were art professionals: Robert Atkins, William Olander (curator of contemporary art at New Museum), Thomas Sokolowski (director of New York University’s Grey Art Gallery) and Garry Garrels (then at the DIA.
Celebrities were the first to wear the red ribbon publicly, at the 1991 Tony Awards; by the Academy Awards the following year, it was ubiquitous. As one AIDS activist put it, “we knew how subversive the ribbon was, when – a full fifteen months after its creation – Republican handlers ripped it off First Lady Barbara Bush’s chest at the 1992 Republican convention in Houston.” While there are affinities between the red ribbon and other AIDS activist projects, namely that it is copyright free and not intended for profit, it may be a stretch to call the ribbon “subversive” when it inspired copy such as “whether they wear silk and tails or jeans and flak jackets, many well-dressed celebrities are adding one accessory to their attire these days – a red ribbon.” The red ribbon signified compassion rather than anger. It aimed to build bridges between people with AIDS, their caregivers, and the uninfected.

*Four Questions and fierce pussy mobile*

As a sign of support and a means to raise awareness, the red ribbon may be understood in broader terms of the “normalization of AIDS.” Douglas Crimp used this phrase to describe the process by which, in the early 1990s, “the attitude toward AIDS

---

9 The red ribbon debuted at the 1991 Tony Awards. By the 64th Academy Awards ceremony on March 30, 1992 the red ribbon was ubiquitous. It was first worn publicly by British actor Jeremy Irons. This coalition distributed ribbons only days before the Tony Awards so there was no official mention of them during the ceremony.


changed when it went from being a crisis situation to a chronic, manageable disease.”

In other words, “a new kind of indifference, an indifference that has been called the ‘normalization of AIDS’ … how often do we hear the list recited? – poverty, crime, drugs, homelessness, and AIDS.” The normalization of AIDS, its transition from an “emergency” to a “permanent disaster” was explored in some of the final projects of the activist art collectives Gran Fury and fierce pussy, namely *Four Questions* (1993), and *fierce pussy mobile* (1994), respectively. These two text-based poster projects were similar in that their address was turned (at least partially) inward, toward individuals who were directly impacted by HIV/AIDS, rather than toward a general public. However they represent different subject positions, and are distinct in terms of scale and political representation.

*Four Questions* (1993) was one of Gran Fury’s final projects (figure 5.2). This poster was the collaborative effort of several Gran Fury members plus Vincent Gagliostro and Charles Kreloff, two ACT UP-affiliated art activists. The work’s “raw emotional quality” has been credited to Mark Simpson. Indeed the work was markedly different in

---


14 Ibid.

15 Many meetings for *Four Questions* were held in the home of Charles Kreloff, who was a founding member of The Silence=Death Project. Marlene McCarty, Robert Vazquez-Pacheco, and Michael Nesline did not participate in the creation of *Four Questions*.

tone than any other Gran Fury project. Rather than a poster featuring a caustic text-and-photo juxtaposition, this work is devoid of any imagery and is “not very visual.” It is simply a list of four questions, in a conventional black serif typeface, double-spaced and centered amidst a generous white background. The questions are as follows: “Do you trust HIV-negatives? Do you resent people with AIDS? Have you given up hope for a cure? When was the last time you cried?” There is no demand, nothing didactic, and there are no instructions for further action. The work “addresses sadness” rather than “homophobic institutional enemies.” As Gagliostro recalls, “We had decided that we didn’t have any statements to make. That we only had a bunch of questions.” The stark questions touch upon issues pertinent to people impacted directly by HIV/AIDS. Especially from the mid-1980s onwards, many gay AIDS activists maintained, “it was a political act to fuck with rubbers.” Within a socio-political climate of sex-shaming and abstinence-only sex education programs, “there was this whole idea – the epidemic stops with me.” Gran Fury projects (such as Sexism Rears its Unprotected Head, Men Use Condoms or Beat It, Kissing Doesn’t Kill: Greed and Indifference Do, and Women Don’t Get AIDS. They Just Die From It) as well as other AIDS activist works (including Know Your Scumbags) were central to the politicization of safer sex. However the stark quality

---


of *Four Questions* addresses sero-negative versus sero-positive status as a dividing line. The plaintive questions explore the experience of HIV/AIDS through issues of trust and vulnerability. For example, “Do you trust HIV-negatives?” could be interpreted in light of what Richard Deagle described as the paranoid condition of “you can’t trust people to tell you the truth about their sero-positive or negative status … the way you know if someone’s telling you the truth is if they tell you they’re positive.”

At a certain point, for many the constant mortality of life as HIV positive or life among HIV positive people became overwhelming. *Four Questions* affectively captures the particular emotional hardship of this shift in focus from safer sex to intimacy.

The process by which *Four Questions* was made recalled the consciousness-raising support group that produced *SILENCE=DEATH* in 1986. Gran Fury arrived at these four questions over the course of a year, through conversations with each other that were comprised of “a lot of tears and a lot of sadness and a lot of fights and a lot of hurt feelings.” Members recall it as a “very, very emotional piece.” In fact like *SILENCE=DEATH* the poster utilizes an economical design to relay a powerful message.

As Richard Meyer has observed, its “modest format and negligible cost recall the earliest

---

22 Ross and Gran Fury (2012).


graphics of ACT UP. The Silence=Death Project designed its poster with a maximum
of black space and utilized a serial display upon its initial presentation in order to drown
out the visual noise of the urban environment. *Four Questions* was conceptualized and
designed in a similar manner. This is evident in an installation photograph of Gran Fury
member Mark Simpson wheat pasting *Four Questions* posters (figure 5.3). Despite a
crowded city wall with layers of posters, four adjacent copies of *Four Questions* demand
visual quiet through their sparseness. Avram Finkelstein, a participant in the creation of
both *SILENCE=DEATH* and *Four Questions*, links the two works in a narrative arc
relating to the rise and waning of AIDS cultural activism:

> … there was a return to some emotional core where all of these projects began. I
> see it as an end piece, but I also see it in the context of *SILENCE=DEATH*; the
> black poster declarative, the white poster interrogative. One is confrontational, the
> other forces intimacy.  

Although *SILENCE=DEATH* and *Four Questions* both implicitly address a queer
audience, *SILENCE=DEATH* does so in heroic terms while *Four Questions* refuses a
revolutionary posture. If *SILENCE=DEATH* is fueled by anger, *Four Questions* is sad
and tired. The questions almost seem to express an internal dialogue, the types of
thoughts that people internalize rather than publicly express. The large, bold all caps type
“SILENCE=DEATH” translates as a shout in the visual environment, and indeed quickly
became a go-to slogan at demonstrations and inspired others (“ACTION=LIFE,”

---

27 Meyer (1995); 82.

28 Finkelstein quoted in Gran Fury (2011), 70.

29 Karrie Jacobs discusses *SILENCE=DEATH* in these terms: “It’s directly inspired by the upside-down
pink triangle that the Nazis required homosexuals to wear, but in the way it assigns meaning to abstract
form, it’s reminiscent of El Lissitzky’s great constructivist poster, ‘Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge.’
In that 1920 poster the artist used a red triangle to stand for the Bolsheviks and their cause.” Jacobs (1992),
11.
“IGNORANCE=FEAR”). The slight type of *Four Questions*, however, seems to be a whisper in its urban context of display, barely discernible amidst the visual noise of the street. SILENCE=DEATH used a symbol, the pink triangle, to rally people into the cause of AIDS activism. Here, there is no symbol. The typography has a poetic effect and the overall whiteness of *Four Questions* was nearly translucent with the effect that the wall underneath came through (figure 5.4). In this way the poster bled into the wall, creating a poetic effect perfectly suited to its melancholy tone. The palimpsest effect of the poster’s transparency metaphorically underscored the inevitability of dissolution. The small-type of the poster invited viewers to approach it in order to read it. Whereas SILENCE=DEATH provided instructions for further action, *Four Questions* was open-ended in the sense that its creators didn’t know if audiences would write in answers to the questions.30

While *Four Questions* “calls for introspection and individual analysis,” a similar project by the lesbian public art collective fierce pussy called for introspection and direct-action activism.31 One year after *Four Questions*, in 1994, fierce pussy created a mobile installation entitled *fierce pussy mobile*, which the collective described as “our own low-budget moving billboard” (figure 5.5) 32 This entailed a white truck that travelled around the streets of New York City during the LGBTQ Pride festivities commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots in June 1994. On each side of the truck were two

30 The poster was signed “Gran Fury.” Lindell quoted in Crimp (2003), 77.
32 Hammond (2000), 177
foot by 12 foot posters, created illicitly in the Conde Nast offices in which several
members worked, using newly available color printing technology. These were wheat-
pasted to all sides of the truck. On the back of the truck are two copies of a list: “Start an
I.V., Hold a Hand, Pick Out a Coffin, Bury Your Best Friend.’ AIDS: Tired of the
Routine? Be enraged. Become explosive.” While the list format of the poster on the back
of the truck is resonant with Four Questions, this work’s perspective is different: it
speaks from the point of view of queer women. The voice of the poster is not someone
living with AIDS, rather the tasks described identify the speaker as someone taking care
of someone with AIDS. Certainly for many individuals and queer women in particular
involved in ACT UP, caretaking was an all-consuming activity at the height of the AIDS
crisis. In this work the typography of the list is cursive, a script conventionally gendered
feminine, and it also underscores the informal and quotidian nature of life with AIDS
wherein the tasks of caretaking become as much a routine as assembling items on a
grocery list. As Gran Fury member Michael Nesline recalled during this period: “We
went from the funeral to the cocktail party to the art opening to the hospital to the
demonstration, and on and on and on. And that would be a normal experience.”
However, this poster resists such a normalization of life with AIDS with its insistence to
“be enraged. Become explosive.” This imperative is apt for the twenty-fifth

33 April Wen, “Graphic Depiction: Gran Fury and Fierce Pussy on Art in the Age of AIDS Activism,”

34 See Ann Cvetkovich, “Legacies of Trauma, Legacies of Activism: ACT UP’s Lesbians,” in Loss, eds.

commemoration of the Stonewall Riots: the exhortation to “become” rather than to “remain” explosive acknowledges the activist fatigue prevalent during this time.

In fact the billboard looks forward with its characterization of “dyke” as “the final frontier.”36*Fierce pussy mobile* engages the psychic stakes addressed in *Four Questions* but maintains a commitment to direct-action activism. It does so through its command to “be enraged / become explosive” as well as its juxtaposition of this work with a poster concerning lesbian visibility. The *fierce pussy mobile* had a large “fierce pussy” sign in the front of the truck and one side featured a large sign comprised of three six by twelve foot color posters that read, “DYKE: The Final Frontier … To Boldly Go Where No Man Has Gone Before” (figure 5.6).37 This slogan and its presentation (a star-dappled space landscape) directly evoke the opening credits of the 1960s science fiction television program *Star Trek*. This campy reference seemingly suggests the utopian possibilities of lesbian activism.38 This boldness is underscored by the grand gesture of the project’s presentation: mobile and visible from afar, it proudly proclaims the validity and futurity of dyke culture. Yet despite this bravado, the project was made within the context of movement fatigue and creative burnout; in fact it was completed without the participation

---

36 The emphasis on futurity in the fierce pussy project is important, not only because this generation was so besieged by death, but also because it appeared concurrently to a major exhibition at the New York Public Library entitled “Becoming Visible: The Legacy of Stonewall” (June 18 – September 24, 1994). This was organized in commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots and was to date the largest and most comprehensive exhibition about LGBT history.

37 The *Star Trek* opening sequence features an image of space and the following voiceover: “Space, a final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship enterprise. Its five year mission to explore strange new worlds to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before.” “Star Trek (1966-1969),” *imdb.com*, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt_0060028/ [accessed June 1, 2014].

38 In a sense it is true that lesbian visibility followed gay visibility in activist campaigns of the 1980s and 1990s, respectively, as discussed in chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation.
of two of the collective’s members, Zoe Leonard and Nancy Brooks Brody, who were no longer living in New York at the time.

Both *Four Questions* and *fierce pussy mobile* are transitional projects that reveal the changing nature of direct-action AIDS and queer art activism in the mid-1990s. These projects are intelligible in the terms used by Urvashi Vaid to critique the costs of ACT UP’s direct-action activism, wherein there was a “triumph of the reductive, sound-bite, and media-driven politics of expediency over the thoughtful, morally grounded politics of social justice.” As explored in Chapters 1-3 of this dissertation, these advertising-based visual strategies utilizing shock value and presentation in the spaces of capital were effective in breaking apart notions of the general population and changing the public discourse of AIDS. However at a certain point in the 1990s, direct-action graphic design strategies central to this form of politics were no longer effective. John Lindell described the dissolution of Gran Fury in these terms: “We stopped because there were questions that we wanted to address that we couldn’t find a means to address.” *Four Questions* and *fierce pussy mobile* reject the “reductive sound bite” in order to attend to the complexity of issues surrounding HIV/AIDS. As such these works can be categorized in the terms used by Douglas Crimp to describe AIDS cultural activism:

AIDS activist art is grounded in the accumulated knowledge and political analysis of the AIDS crisis, produced collectively by the entire movement. The graphics not only reflect that knowledge, but actively contribute to its articulation as well. They codify concrete, specific issues of importance to the movement as a whole, or to particular interests within it. They function as an organizing tool, by conveying, in compressed form, information and political positions to others affected by the epidemic, to onlookers at demonstrations, and to the dominant

media. But their primary audience is the movement itself. AIDS activist graphics enunciate aids politics to, and for, all of us in the movement.40

Both Gran Fury and fierce pussy address the AIDS activist movement from different perspectives and towards different ends. These works are transitional in that they mark the dissolution of collectives and depart from the “sloganeering” mode of address as well as the advertising aesthetic that defined AIDS cultural activism associated with ACT UP from 1987 onwards.41 In fact, these works reveal a crisis of form. Gran Fury’s last projects, including *Four Questions*, rely less on shock value and more on text to express the unwieldy totality of AIDS. In 1996 Vincent Gagliostro recalled, “Ten years ago, my thought process as I worked on something was never ‘Will this offend someone?’ If it was a political piece, it was supposed to offend.”42 By the mid-1990s, projects like *Four Questions* and *fierce pussy mobile* no longer think of political representation in terms of an offensive position.

The Waning of Direct-Action Activism and Printed Ephemera

Why did direct-action activism, and its attendant ephemeral graphics, wane in the mid-1990s? First, the issue of audience became more complicated, as reflected in the different modes of address adopted in late projects by Gran Fury and fierce pussy. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the divisive political leadership of Presidents Reagan and Bush


41 As argued in Chapter 3, fierce pussy rejected advertising aesthetics in its compositions; however some of its final projects did engage advertising to focus on issues of queer rights, as in the *No special rights* series (1994).

engendered an “us versus them” polarity, whereas the political climate inaugurated by the 1992 election of Bill Clinton, the first democratic President since Jimmy Carter, ushered in a seemingly more conciliatory climate. A central tactic of AIDS cultural activism as developed by ACT UP was holding public officials accountable for mishandling the AIDS epidemic. With demonstration graphics and political theater, ACT UP utilized shaming tactics that included the reiteration of offensive statements and parodic representations of public officials. As Gran Fury explained, [President Bill Clinton] “…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.”43 With the election of Clinton there was a shift to mainstreaming within the gay and lesbian activist movement.44 Within AIDS activism this entailed a transition from “politics-as-theater” represented by ACT UP to the “more reality-based disease activism” of the Treatment Action Group (TAG).45 The success of ACT UP meant that activists were invited to become part of the conversation, for example testifying at panels, teaching at universities, or working as professionals in non-profit organizations.

Second, in the realm of commercial advertising, AIDS cultural activism became a source for corporate campaigns. If it was formerly subversive to insert AIDS and/or queer visibility into the space of capital, then by the early 1990s advertising had usurped


activist style and politics and used its cachet to sell products. Vaid describes the impact of ACT UP on culture at large:

A new generation of activists, committed solely and principally to being queer and promoting queer freedom, came into its own. And the deep impact of AIDS on certain industries – notably, entertainment, fashion, theater, and the arts – brought unprecedented mainstream investment in AIDS-related organizations.\textsuperscript{46}

This “impact” resulted in the co-option of activist style, as discussed in Chapter 4. Whereas this paradox complicated the field of lesbian visibility, it impacted the representation of AIDS as well. One of ACT UP’s greatest achievements was its transformation of representations of AIDS. In 1987 when ACT UP was formed,

…at that point in the media, when you would see someone with AIDS, it was always this mopey Jesus, pietà kind of thing. It was always, oh, look at this poor person, they’re about to die, don’t you feel sorry for them? And, the people I met in ACT UP were not ready to die. They were going to kick some ass before they died.\textsuperscript{47}

ACT UP members demonstrated against problematic depictions of people with AIDS in the media and in the realm of culture. Additionally the images of ACT UP activists provided new depictions of angry, empowered, and sexy people with AIDS in newspapers and on television.

The influence of ACT UP’s critique of representations of AIDS is evident in the ways in which public audiences reacted to images of people with the disease, for example in the controversial backlash spurred by a 1992 United Colors of Benetton advertisement featuring a photograph of AIDS activist David Kirby (figure 5.7). The image, taken by Therese Frare, depicts Kirby moments before his death and was originally published in

\textsuperscript{46} Vaid (1995), 86.

\textsuperscript{47} Deagle (2003), 29.
1990 in *Life* magazine, which subsequently claimed that it was “the photo that changed the face of AIDS” (figure 5.8). The photograph shows Kirby in his hospital bed; he is emaciated and blankly staring into the distance. His skeletal appearance is rendered even more acute by the presence of his corpulent family members, who appear despondent at his bedside. The black-and-white composition, particularly the embrace of Kirby by his father, recalls the pietà iconography of Christian art. His family granted the United Colors of Benetton company permission to use the image, which was colorized in an ad campaign that audiences across a wide ideological spectrum deemed highly provocative and offensive: from the Catholic Church (on the grounds of its blasphemous proximity to pietà imagery) to AIDS activists (who castigated Benetton for profiting from an AIDS death) to the fashion industry (several publications including *Vogue* and *Elle* refused to run the ad). After this backlash, in 1993 Benetton released an “HIV positive” campaign wherein “images of seemingly healthy young torsos were stamped with the phrase ‘HIV Positive’ and arrangements of multicolored condoms promoting the prevention of disease” (figure 5.9) These images had nothing to do with fashion and were made to

---


bring awareness.\footnote{Ibid.} However as Gran Fury stated in a critique of Benetton’s AIDS campaigns, “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.”\footnote{“Many of the strategies … used [by Benetton in the issue of Colors magazine it addressed to AIDS] were borrowed from projects we had done; we had been contacted by a researcher from Benetton who asked for examples of our work, saying that they would be considered for inclusion in the magazine. That never happened; instead, they reworked our strategies, skewing them in a surreal direction with little or no context in which to interpret the images or statistics.” See: Gran Fury (1995), 83.} Gran Fury ceased making advertising-derived work in light of the co-optation and dilution of such image tactics by corporations such as Benetton. While subsequent ads by the company were more favorably received than the one depicting David Kirby, there are a few aspects of this campaign worth noting that mark its distance from the late 1980s: first, the presence of tattoos as a form of identification, which a few years earlier would have been incendiary in light of calls by William F. Buckley Jr. and others for mandatory branding of people with AIDS.\footnote{William F. Buckley Jr., “Crucial Steps in Combating the Aids Epidemic; Identify All the Carriers,” \textit{New York Times}, March 18, 1986.} Second, the depiction of people with AIDS as athletic, healthy and vibrant individuals was a radical departure from previous conventions of AIDS representation, the “mopey, Jesus, pietà” trope castigated by ACT UP in 1987 and reiterated by Benetton in 1992.\footnote{From the 1980s on, AIDS activists created depictions of PWAs as healthy sexual people. These undoubtedly influenced the Benetton ad. Incredibly in the catalogue for the 2013 New Museum exhibition “NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star,” Jenny Moore described Benetton’s 1993 HIV Positive campaign in these terms: “Fashion as we knew it in the traditional sense was rendered absent in the face of such enormity. And yet it took a fashion company to reveal the ultimate reality of the AIDS crisis and to offer a refutation to the resounding silence and inactivity of our government and population at large in the face of the epidemic.” This is historically inaccurate and the catalog makes no mention of AIDS cultural activism. Jenny Moore, “Fin de Nothing,” in \textit{NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star}, eds. Massimiliano Gioni et al (New York: New Museum, 2013), 41.}
Thus by the mid-1990s, the back-and-forth between the manipulation of advertising syntax by AIDS activists was rendered ineffective by the recuperation of activist style and strategies in commercial advertisements.

While Gran Fury members cite the reason for the collective’s disbanding as the inability of sloganeering strategies to capture the complexity of issues pertaining to HIV/AIDS, it was also the case that the terrain of political and collaborative art and activism had changed. A magazine article about the mainstreaming of gay male culture in New York in the mid-1990s bemoaned that the late 1980s was

… the last time the gay community could easily place itself at the political edge, the last time it had a single, easily identifiable, clear-cut agenda: the fight against AIDS. That cause provoked the last great explosion of trenchant, outrageous, critical gay style, which was ACT UP.

Indeed, in the context of movement politics, style became a tool to further the aims of social change. In the case of ACT UP this was particularly true, as argued in Chapter 1 with regards to SILENCE=DEATH. But as the AIDS movement changed, style failed to signify radical politics. As the red ribbon and pink triangle became ubiquitous, there was a failure of radicalism.

56 Gran Fury adopted strategies of 1980s politicized postmodernism, such as appropriation, slightly after their critical moment (for example essays by Crimp [1982] and Hal Foster [1982] which were foundational to the understanding of appropriation in that decade). In the 1990s, following the critical failure of identity politics – signaled by the reception of the 1993 Whitney Biennial – and due to the increasing influence of collaborative art practices such as new genre public art, the field of public political art had changed. Gran Fury touched upon some of these issues in Ross and Gran Fury (2012).

57 Mendelsohn (1996), 27.

58 “Certainly people wear ribbons for the ‘wrong’ reasons, just as some people wore SILENCE=DEATH for a variety of reasons (occasionally in order to get laid).” Robert Atkins, “How to Have Art (Events) in an Epidemic: A History of Visual AIDS from Day Without Art to the Red Ribbon,” lecture at School of the Art Institute of Chicago on December 1, 1992.
Gran Fury discussed these issues in its final project, which was an essay entitled *Good Luck, Miss You* (1995) that was published in the form of a handbill (figure 5.10). In it, the crisis regarding the role of the artist and in relation to AIDS activism is made clear. These issues became acute particularly with regards to “the public.” It is significant that at a certain point, activist projects were focused on internal dialogue rather than external audience. Not only were there pressing issues to address (affective conditions of movement politics, as discussed above) but the concept of mainstream publics had also been complicated by an over-crowded and complex visual field. In this piece, which the collective called its “swansong,” Gran Fury discusses the reasons for the group’s disbanding after working almost continuously for seven years. Namely, that issues surrounding AIDS were more complex, that members were overburdened by professional obligations, that the group had developed a signature style that was no longer effective, and could not change or adapt its methods. The group bemoans the shifting role of art in terms of the political crisis of AIDS and the triumph of symbols of “remembrance and reprieve” such as the red ribbon and the *AIDS Quilt* over more politicized representations of the disease. Conceived as an exquisite corpse, the tract recounts the history of Gran Fury, the current state of AIDS and activism, and suggestions for future projects. It acknowledges the reality of personal responses to AIDS (such as those explored in *Four Questions*) but also calls for action. It is notable that the text-heavy composition of *Good Lucky, Miss You* was published as a handbill in association with the exhibition “Temporarily Possessed: The Semi-Permanent Collection” at The New Museum of Contemporary Art (September 15 – December 17, 1995).

---

59 “Good Luck, Miss You” was published as a handbill in association with the exhibition “Temporarily Possessed: The Semi-Permanent Collection” at The New Museum of Contemporary Art (September 15 – December 17, 1995).

60 Ross and Gran Fury (2012).
Luck Miss You utilizes only a single illustration, on its cover: a scientific image of a cell under a microscope that is abstracted to the point of near-illegibility. Like fierce pussy’s sci-fi reference in Dyke: The Final Frontier, this iconography gestures towards the future but in an open-ended way. Here we see a departure from the trenchant and declarative address of previous activist projects: both fierce pussy and Gran Fury seem to suggest that the present no longer offers adequate solutions to the exigencies of the day, and that those solutions remain unclear.

Another reason for the waning of ACT UP New York was structural. During this period the possibilities for public, political art in New York City were diminished, particularly in the mid-late 1990s when non-commercial wheat pasting became a prime target of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s “Quality of Life” policing of misdemeanor crimes.61 Helen Molesworth has described the effect of this policing as “an image lockdown sanitizing the urban space of any hint of rebellion.”62 As political conditions prevented the distribution of cultural ephemera, many artists increasingly explored the city as a metaphor for loss.63


62 Molesworth quoted in Myles (2010), 440.

63 For example in the late 1990s Gregg Bordowitz wrote a column entitled “New York Was Yesterday” in the journal Documents. In the 1990s Tom Burr’s black-and-white photographs of public bathrooms in New York City addressed the loss of meeting places for gay public sex. Moyra Davey photographed newsstands
The Introspective Turn

The turn inward, described above in final projects by Gran Fury and fierce pussy, was taken further as many artists involved in collectives began to pursue studio-based projects in earnest. While many artists working in ACT UP came from arts backgrounds (including art school education, professional experience, and gallery representation), within the context of the AIDS activist movement these skills were put in service of a broader purpose in projects realized collaboratively with other activists, many of them non-artists. Some artists maintained studio practices while working in collectives, hoping to balance “the outward impulse to foster change with the inward impulse to persist in maintaining rigorous art practices,” as Nancy Brooks Brody described it. While agitprop addresses multiple audiences towards specific ends, is displayed and distributed in the public sphere, and has a particular criterion (legibility and functionality), studio-based projects typically shown in artist’s studios, apartments, galleries or museums, present an expansive opportunity to explore different modes of expression. As Vincent Gagliostro observes, “Making a painting is about me. Making a piece of propaganda is not.” The concluding section of this chapter examines several studio-based projects that reflect the introspective turn in the 1990s.


Zoe Leonard (1961-) is a self-taught artist who began taking photographs at the age of sixteen, when she dropped out of high school. Leonard began exhibiting and selling her photographs in 1989, and her career as an artist blossomed concurrent to her involvement in ACT UP as well as several activist art collectives including Gang and fierce pussy. In her interview with the ACT UP Oral History Project, Leonard discusses the issue of artistic versus activist identity at length. She recalls a crisis of confidence wherein being an artist felt like dilettantism; she felt conflicted choosing between developing film in a darkroom and participating in direct actions.\(^66\) Whereas some art activists within ACT UP came to the organization with backgrounds in graphic design and art direction, and thus transitioned fairly easily to the advertising-based aesthetics of ACT UP cultural activism, the more cerebral formal qualities of Leonard’s artwork presented the artist-activist with particular challenges:

My voice felt really different, like the work that I made wasn’t graphic in that way. I didn’t use tacks, I didn’t use silkscreen, I didn’t use acid colors. My work was much, much quieter. It took me a few years to develop my individual voice into a politicized queer voice, and that happened through ACT UP.\(^67\)

This difference was reflected in the “quiet” aesthetics of fierce pussy’s projects, which resulted from the artistic inclinations of its members including Leonard. In the summer of 1992, Zoe Leonard and fellow fierce pussy member Nancy Brooks Brody left New York and travelled to India for several months. Leonard later moved to Massachusetts and learnt to sail while living on Cape Cod in Provincetown. She then went to Alaska and stayed there for several years, returning to New York intermittently. Her decision to leave


\(^{67}\) Leonard (2010): 111.
New York, and ACT UP, occurred after the death from AIDS of her close friend, the
artist David Wojnarowicz, who died on July 22, 1992. As Leonard recalls:

ACT UP had started to feel – like something terrible would happen, and we would
rush to that, and something else terrible, and we’d rush to that. We were in the
position of being reactive. Also WAC [Women’s Action Coalition] had started.
There were all these other things, Queer Nation. We were running around putting
out fires, and I think I got to some place as both an artist and a human being and a
citizen where I wanted to roll it back a little bit and get a little bit of a look at the
whole beast and to understand more about my relationship to that. I think I needed
to find out whether I really needed to be an artist or whether I needed to go do
something else and get more serious about being a political person.68

This period of introspection and exploration resulted in Strange Fruit: For David (1992-
1997) (figure 5.11), an installation comprised of approximately 300 reconstituted pieces
of dried fruit strewn across a gallery floor. It was first exhibited in 1995 at Leonard’s
New York apartment and was acquired by the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1998.

Strange Fruit: For David is a transitional work within Leonard’s oeuvre. It
addresses the devastating losses of the AIDS epidemic through its materials, its title, and
its references to David Wojnarowicz, who was an outspoken AIDS activist. Indeed, the
sewn skin directly recalls Wojnarowicz’s Untitled (1990) (figure 5.12), an arresting
black-and-white image of his mouth sewn shut, with thick thread, blood running down
his chin.69 Despite the personal reference of the title, the work refuses to individualize
AIDS in that it depicts a “crowd” of objects. Wojnarowicz is one of many Americans

------------------

68 Ibid.

69 This observation is indebted to Claire Bishop. This image derives from Rosa von Praunheim’s 1990 film
Silence=Death, which explores the reactions of the New York art community to the AIDS crisis.
who died from AIDS and herein he is evoked as part of group. This association politicizes the violence of AIDS. This reference to death by political violence is underscored by the title’s homage to Strange Fruit, the song recorded in 1939 by Billie Holiday that addressed with the subject of racist lynchings in the American south. As well as this direct reference, the title cleverly uses “strange” and “fruit” as euphemisms for queerness to emphasize the persecution of homosexuals.

Strange Fruit: For David honors Wojnarowicz with an aesthetic vision that is beautiful and politicized. Leonard recalls a conversation with Wojnarowicz wherein she showed him a stack of aerial photographs that she had just printed and asked, “What do I do with these things? Why am I doing this work? It feels so stupid…”. Wojnarowicz responded by telling Leonard that the photographs were “beautiful, and that’s what we’re fighting for.” He described their AIDS activism as a fight, and beauty as the goal: “The goal is to get through this mess so that we can make beautiful work about clouds and life and existence.”

---

70 Based upon its scattered installation, Strange Fruit has “the aura of a graveyard, a gathering of strangers wherein each remains uniquely individualized, a place hospitable to reverie and solace.” “Strange Fruit (for David)”, Philadelphiamuseum.org, under “Collections,” http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/92277.html [accessed July 3, 2014].


The ephemerality of these objects is key. The temporality of Leonard’s installation is a rich mediation on the transience of life, and makes art historical as well as contemporary associations. Indeed, the piece has a place within the history of vanitas-still life paintings, which depict impermanent objects such as flowers, fruit, and candles in order to symbolize the fleeting nature of life. Fruit over time will decay and wither away. Whereas still-life paintings remain, the fruit in this installation are ephemeral. No preservatives have been added; in fact Leonard has refused a conservation requests to treat the pieces.74

Leonard explains that this project was a means for her to “sort of sew myself back up.”75 She used the remains of fruit she and her friends had eaten, and she painstakingly repaired the remains using materials such as zippers, thread, wire, and buttons. Leonard began sewing the dried skins of already-eaten fruit while living in Provincetown. She continued doing so in New York and even had her friends send her fruit while she was living for two years in the remote wilderness of Alaska. Leonard has admitted that she didn’t think of the exercise as art when she first started:

I didn’t even realize I was making art when I started doing them. I had just come back from India and was impressed with how each scrap of paper, each bit of wire was used to its maximum, to the very end of its possible useful life … one

74 Leonard’s dealer Paula Cooper facilitated Leonard’s partnership with German conservator Christian Scheidemann on the preservation of fruit in this installation. “After much testing, Scheidemann developed a solution that consisted of shock-freezing the pieces and then penetrating them with Paraloid B72 under vacuum… however, Leonard realized that the appearance of decay was not enough for her; the metaphor of disappearance was insufficient… the pretense of deterioration was no longer persuasive. Leonard set herself a criterion of honesty and rejected the preserved pieces.” Leonard quoted in Temkin (1998).

morning I’d eaten these two oranges, and I just didn’t want to throw the peels away, so absentmindedly I sewed them back up.  

The repetitive motion of repairing fruit through sewing can be understood in terms of gendered rituals of domesticity or mourning. The scale of the project – nearly 300 pieces of fruit – adds ritualistic meaning to the process of eating, drying, and then reconstituting fruit. There is a quiet desperation in the futile maintenance of materials that will inevitably decay. The work seems to be a metaphor for the dissolution of the human body by AIDS.

Beyond these associations, the installation is also evocative of the AIDS-related “endless supply” artworks of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, such as Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) (1991) (figure 5.13), comprising 175 pounds of multicolored cellophane-wrapped candies piled in a corner of a gallery. In this piece Gonzalez-Torres used candy to create a portrait of his partner Ross Laycock, by basing the weight of the pile (175 pounds) on the weight of Laycock, who died of an AIDS-related illness in 1991. Visitors are encouraged to take pieces of candy, and as the pile gradually diminishes it is replenished daily. This is a participatory installation in the sense that consuming the candy is a central component of the work: on the one hand visitors experience “communion” with Ross and, on the other hand, recognize his or her “complicity” in his death. In other words, the dissolution of the candy pile meant to represent Ross Laycock also symbolizes the dissolution of the gay community as it was ravaged by AIDS epidemic. In contrast,

Strange Fruit is not participatory, as the objects are arranged in a tableau and are off-limits to visitors. In this installation, the artist and her circle of friends have already consumed the fruit. The distance between audience and artist/artist’s circle maintained in Strange Fruit evokes the intense emotionality and community-oriented address in projects such as Four Questions. The candy in Untitled is activated by visitors’ interaction and consumption with it, while the objects in Strange Fruit are displayed in their stillness and are “very, very silent,” in Leonard’s words.77 Whereas Gonzalez-Torres used a pile of candy to represent his deceased lover, Leonard displayed reconstituted fruit throughout a room to represent an entire generation lost to AIDS.

In his 1993 film Fast Trip, Long Drop Gregg Bordowitz (1964-) similarly explores the tension between individual and collective experiences of HIV/AIDS. Like Leonard (and the Silence=Death Project), Bordowitz utilizes associations with otherness (Jewish ethnicity) to underscore the affiliation between people with AIDS, queers, and social outcasts in general. Drawing upon his ethnic background, Bordowitz uses a soundtrack of Jewish music, performed by the group Klezmatics.78 This music is featured throughout the film and, in addition to connoting otherness, serves as a structuring device. Fast Trip, Long Drop is an “imaginative autobiographical documentary” of Bordowitz’s identity as a 29-year-old person with AIDS, which utilizes archival, documentary, and scripted footage to craft a viscerally honest antidote to the heroic


78 In an interview with Robert Atkins Bordowitz said, “the figure of a person with AIDS was constructed as ‘other’ in the same ways as Jews, people of color, queers, outcasts, etc. have been historically.” Robert Atkins, “Fast Trip, Long View: Talking to Gregg Bordowitz,” artistswithaids.org, under “Artist in the Archives,” http://www.artistswithaids.org/ artery/artist/artist_bordowitz.html [accessed June 30, 2014].
posturing of AIDS activism. Bordowitz dropped out of graduate school at New York University in 1987 to become a full-time AIDS activist with ACT UP. That year, his essay “Picture a Coalition” was published in the “AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism” special issue of October; it begins with the powerful statement, “As a twenty-three year old faggot, I get no affirmation from my culture. I see issues that affect my life – the issues raised by AIDS – being considered in ways that will probably end my life.”

He became a leader within ACT UP New York, he worked on cultural endeavors geared towards empowered representations of people with AIDS, such as Testing the Limits, a video activist collective he co-founded that documented ACT UP demonstrations and produced progressive AIDS media for public broadcast television. Bordowitz tested HIV positive in 1988 and shortly thereafter came out as gay to his family. In Fast Trip, Long Drop he assumes an introspective position that contrasts with the declarative rhetoric and collective fervor of movement politics. As Bordowitz recalled in an interview circa 2000, “by the early 90s people with AIDS and folks in the communities hardest hit by AIDS needed something else … I needed to openly confront the despair, the hopelessness, and the burn-out.” The 54-minute film (black-and-white and color) shot on grainy video, makes a formal connection to the medium of video, which was the

---


80 From 1988 to 1994 Bordowitz produced the public access television show Living With AIDS with video artist Jean Carlomusto for Gay Men’s Health Crisis. In 1989 he and other video activists founded DIVA TV (Damn Interfering Video Activists), which worked in close association with ACT UP to document AIDS activist endeavors, primarily demonstrations. All of these projects were intended to counteract the problematic ways in which AIDS was represented by mainstream media.

primary mode of Bordowitz’s AIDS activism. *Fast Trip, Long Drop* utilizes archival video footage of AIDS activist demonstrations alongside contemporary interviews in order to complicate political representation.

In a retrospective examination of the events of his life, Bordowitz engages in feelings of ambivalence and hopelessness. This is best exemplified in an early scene in which he is depicted in his New York apartment wearing a Silence=Death t-shirt and white cotton underwear (figure 5.14). He is lying in bed, taking his temperature, waiting for the doctor to call because he has the flu. Despite feeling under the weather, Bordowitz’s languid posturing here speaks to the erotic appeal of ACT UP AIDS activists—empowered, sexual, angry. Bordowitz informs the viewer, in an exasperated voice, that as a person living with AIDS, any bout of a routine illness assumes grave proportions. Throughout the film Bordowitz grapples with this oscillation between everyday life and the constant presence of mortality; exhausted, he comes to the following conclusion: “I don’t wanna [sic] be yours or anyone else’s model. I’m not a hero. Not a revolutionary body. Not an angel.”82 His task in this film is an authentic portrayal of the emotional and lived experiences of life as a person with AIDS. This seems obvious but when one considers the pressure for positive, heroic images of people with AIDS, which shaped the representational goals of the 1980s (as examined in Chapters 1 and 2), this “un-politically correct” depiction is significant, it is a refusal.83 Whereas mainstream media and

---

82 Gregg Bordowitz, *Fast Trip, Long Drop* (Video Data Bank, 1994).

83 Bordowitz was at the forefront of empowered representations, of people with AIDS and AIDS activism, in the 1980s, through his writing and his work with the video activist collectives Testing the Limits and DIVA (Damned Interfering Video Activists). From 1988-1994 he was co-producer (with Jean Carlomusto) of *Living With AIDS*, a cable television program sponsored by Gay Men’s Health Crisis.
entertainment typically assumed a heterosexual audience and sought to reassure them that AIDS remained a threat at bay, Bordowitz’s film privileges the experiences of people with AIDS. He seems to be spiraling in the despair of mortality, searching for connections in the present and past events of his life. This makes this film difficult to watch. He rejects the “positive imagery” mandate of identity-based cultural politics and instead focuses on the stark realities of his life, for example by depicting his informal conversations about mortality with different groups of people in his life: his friend Yvonne Rainer (1934-), the noted dancer, choreographer and filmmaker then grappling with a recent breast cancer diagnosis, as well as with his mother and stepfather, and a support group of people with AIDS.

Bordowitz described the impetus behind the stark emotional tenor of the film as follows:

I thought *Fast Trip* would be my last film. It was a militant, angry, corrosive film. I thought I was dying; I felt I could say anything. I wanted to represent what people with AIDS in my immediate circles were experiencing, which was death, contemplations of suicide, mourning and defeat. I wanted to break all the taboos and open the discussion.84

Similar to the “nothing-to-lose” status that propelled the creation of Gran Fury’s *Four Questions*, which was spearheaded by HIV-positive member Mark Simpson, *Fast Trip, Long Drop* achieves an affective portrayal of illness that breaks free from both conventional and activist representations of AIDS. Bordowitz critiqued the film *Philadelphia* on the grounds that it follows “the time honored Hollywood strategy of

constructing a protagonist who is not the figure of disgust, but a character ‘all’ can identify with. Instead, *Fast Trip, Long Drop* refuses to reassure audiences and instead speaks as a PWA to other PWAs. It’s not about making a universally relatable character; in fact it is intentionally about *not* speaking to wide audiences. Both Bordowitz and Leonard take pains to create works of art that are anti-heroic. Both pieces depart from the urgency of activist time (the rush from action to action) in order to linger in the present and take stock. Whereas earlier activist projects were fueled by the declarative urgency of representations of AIDS and responses to it, these artworks suggest that the particular affective devastation of HIV/AIDS requires other modes of representation and engagement.

**Affective Modes of Representation**

Ann Cvetkovich has theorized AIDS archives in affective terms, and her concept of an “archive of feelings” provides a useful and productive entry point into the poignancy of these projects by Zoe Leonard and Gregg Bordowitz. An archive of feelings explores “the affective dimensions of activist cultures in a way that problematizes distinctions between therapy and politics, or between mourning and militancy.” The affective trappings of AIDS activism under consideration in this chapter included


86 In a sense this follows the trajectory of other identity-based projects wherein political demands of representation and visibility give way at a certain point to more nuanced and exploratory forms of cultural expression. See Peggy Phelan and Helena Reckitt, *Art and Feminism* (London: Phaidon, 2001).

87 Cvetkovich (2003), 13 These are the very terms in which AIDS cultural activism has been conceptualized by Crimp in “Mourning and Militancy” (1989) and Deborah Gould (2009).
complex and sometimes contradictory feelings: mourning the mass deaths from AIDS, elation from experiences of collective direct action, anger at government and media neglect of the AIDS crisis, desire while cruising at activist meetings and demonstrations, and activist burnout and despair, to name a few. In the mid-1990s, as direct-action art activist collectives disbanded, artists turned towards introspective projects that explored political representation and the experience of collectivity in innovative ways.

A retrospective account of these experiences occurred in a 2010 installation by fierce pussy entitled *Get Up Everybody and Sing*, created two years after four of the original core members of fierce pussy – Nancy Brooks Brody, Joy Episalla, Zoe Leonard, and Carrie Yamaoka – reunited as an art collective (figure 5.15). *Get Up Everybody and Sing* was made as a commission for the second iteration of *ACT UP New York: AIDS, Art, Activism 1987-1995* at White Columns Gallery in New York in 2010. This installation comprised two parts: a three-foot stack of oversized white paper containing the printed lyrics to Sister Sledge’s dance anthem “We Are Family” (1979), and approximately fifteen sheets of white paper taped on two adjoining walls of the foyer, from floor to ceiling. Each slip began with the same phrase “if s/he were alive today…” and ended with different examples of everyday activities: “she would have finished writing that book”; “she’d be outside smoking”; “he would be going gray”; “you’d be so her type”; “he’d still be living with AIDS.” The visual repetition of these sentences on the wall created a poetic effect, as did the typography’s intimate scale. There is also an incantatory element to viewers’ ritual recitation of sentences. The collective described the

---

installation as a “new work that explored mourning and loss as an ongoing experience, one that continues today rather than residing only in the past.” Get Up Everybody and Sing was quietly powerful. It combined individual memories of mourning with shared references to AIDS activism as well as the pre-AIDS exuberance of the disco era, signaled by the Sister Sledge reference. The modest materials used – computer paper, painter’s tape – were typical of fierce pussy’s projects of the early 1990s, conceived in terms of speed and accessible resources. More poignantly, though, the fragility of these materials and their installation conveyed a sense of ephemerality that metaphorically marked the death of so many people in the New York LGBTQ community from AIDS.

The stack of paper literally disappeared throughout the duration of the exhibition as gallery visitors took sheets with them; this was both a reference to transience and an homage to the artwork of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who died from AIDS in 1996. For visitors entering and exiting the gallery, this installation was not only an invocation of the spirits of those who have died from AIDS, it was also a tribute to the tenacious exuberance of the LGBTQ community. Like the exhibition itself, Get Up Everybody and Sing toggled between the specific and the universal; the individual and the collective, private and public, New York and elsewhere. It remained open to peoples’ interpretations, yet visitors might have had the sense that each “she” or “he” referred to a particular individual. In this way the dead “spoke” yet remained anonymous.

This installation privileged feelings of mourning and contemplation, and made room for them amidst an exhibition of AIDS activist work that was created at a fast and

furious pace that left little room for much else. The seeming arbitrariness of AIDS deaths, which decimated a generation before combination drug therapies became available in the mid-1990s, was metaphorically conveyed by the resemblance of these printed pages to the slips of paper found in fortune cookies. The blue tape (a dash on each corner suspending the paper statements on the gallery walls) animated the installation and had a confetti-like effect that framed this artwork’s presentation of mourning as a complicated emotional experience. Get Up Everybody and Sing facilitated participatory and collective mourning by inviting visitors to “sing along” and take posters with Sister Sledge lyrics (in the figurative sense of sing along, since these are song sheets).

Conclusion

The dissertation has examined the rise and demise of confrontational queer art activism in New York between 1986 and 1995. This complicated trajectory is based upon several factors, including the waning efficacy of spectacular activist politics, the mainstreaming of homosexual identity in the U.S., the structural conditions of urban policing that foreclosed the possibilities for un-commissioned public, political art projects, the co-optation of activist strategies by corporations, and affective conditions that changed the ways in which artists conceived of political representation. The exigencies of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s demanded “complexity into sloganeering,” and works such as SILENCE=DEATH, READ MY LIPS, and others created a new form of sex positive political art responsive to its urban environment. These were influential in the creation of other strident text-and-image based printed ephemeral posters. Partially due to the success of these campaigns in transforming the ways in which mainstream Americans
dealt with HIV/AIDS, the production of activist ephemera slowed down in the early 1990s. Many movement participants felt that sloganeering was no longer adequate to the increasingly complex terrain of AIDS in the U.S. and moved onto different modes of activism or else left the movement entirely.

Queer activism impacted public space in a variety of ways. During a period of unprecedented crime in New York City, visibly queer people were particularly at risk for homophobic attacks. Posted ephemera, in conjunction with massive protests, was a powerful means of creating new, safe public spaces. However, in order for a public culture of dissent to thrive it is necessary to have a receptive context. The practices examined in this dissertation occurred just before the rise of the Internet and the escalation of urban development in New York City under Mayors Rudolph Giuliani and Michael Bloomberg. These factors partially contributed to the waning of a vibrant public culture of protest ephemera in New York in the mid-1990s.

The activist collectives examined in this dissertation were themselves ephemeral, created in a climate of urgency and topicality. This dissertation exposed the tension that exists, and which needs to be further explored, in the artist who participates in movement politics, but is ultimately limited by the restrictions of that context. Artist-activists faced a challenging situation in the late 1980s and early 1990s wherein participation in AIDS activism was all-consuming, and the demands of the movement led to a focus on collectively produced agitprop at the expense of individual artworks. Formed in affiliation with social movements, activist art collectives were not sustainable models of aesthetic engagement. Nancy Brooks Brody has described the “desire to work with others to create change, alongside the desire to set out alone” as paradigmatic of queer artists
who came of age in the age of AIDS.\textsuperscript{90} Bordowitz, Leonard, and many others including Joy Episalla, Carrie Yamaoka, Marlene McCarty and Carrie Moyer have two or more bodies of artwork – activist work realized collectively and studio-based work that often engages issues of politics through different aesthetic means.

What is the significance of an image-focused history of HIV/AIDS activism? With the onset of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the early 1980s, the implicit homophobia of the conservative movement exploded in the national consciousness. It was unleashed and made visible in the blatant disregard for people with AIDS due to its association with homosexuality. Gay men and lesbians initially met the HIV/AIDS epidemic with shock and triage responses including caretaking and fundraising. By the mid-1980s, however, gay men and lesbians increasingly focused on self-empowerment and changed the discourse on AIDS by creating new representations of PWAs. The Lavender Hill Mob and ACT UP revived the radical direct action tactics of the gay liberation era and engendered a period of activism in which anger was the predominant emotion. This led to a transformative period in which “queer” was reclaimed an identity uniting the new generation (old and young) of AIDS activists who were as sex positive as they were politically active. With the formation of Queer Nation, the goal was no longer merely to “come out” and seek civil rights, but to boldly proclaim and flaunt sexuality and to take up space on one’s own terms. \textit{SILENCE=DEATH} came to signify “queer” and was central to the ways in which this was a spatial transformation – the emblem became

ubiquitous in New York, worn as t-shirts and buttons, held on signs at demonstrations, plastered on walls as stickers and posters. ACT UP represented the rejection of responses to the epidemic characterized by moralizing and assimilationist impulses. The group promoted collective mass action and self-empowerment rather than shame-fueled individualized experiences of HIV/AIDS. ACT UP, and eventually Queer Nation, became known for mob responses: sheer numbers of people in the street. Activist art collectives fulfilled a crucial task: creating a politicized urban underground arts movement that disseminated anonymous street art actions, which gave visual form to the threat of mobs of angry queer people coming together en masse.

The result of AIDS cultural activism was queer empowerment. The reactionary response to this empowerment is clear in the measures through which queerness and racial otherness were defined as pathological and displaced. These measures include the culture wars, in which non-normative artists and artworks were attacked as pornographic and blasphemous, as well as the commodification of queerness through advertising appropriations of activist style. This dissertation mapped how queer identity was formed in the divisive politics of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the ways in which posters became a fulcrum, literally establishing the street as a battleground for

---

91 This phenomenon may be interpreted a struggle to (re)define Americaness in light of the upheaval produced by the end of the Cold War and from increased diversity among the American populace. Other examples include the redevelopment of Times Square in New York in the 1990s, which forced many porn shops and theatres to close in the name of public decency. Identity politics were critically panned as aesthetically bankrupt at the 1993 Whitney Biennial, which one critic described as a “festival of whining.” See Robert Hughes, “Art: The Whitney Biennial: A Festival of Whining,” *Time Magazine* (March 23, 1993) and Rosalind Krauss et al, “The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial,” *October* 66 (Fall 1993): 3-28. The mid-late 1990s were characterized by an intense push on the part of major corporations such as Budweiser to target gay men as demographics. See Pelligrini (1996). Queer shifted from a politics to a lifestyle. The rainbow flag eclipsed the pink triangle as the predominant symbol of the LGBTQ community.
representation and discourse. I’ve taken aims to map the rhetorical nuances at play but certainly my focus on gender issues could have been enhanced by a more intersectional analysis.

A comprehensive survey of AIDS cultural activist art in New York is needed, as well as a repository of information that will enable future research. Since much of the material remains of AIDS cultural activism are scattered throughout the country, the formation of a publicly accessible archive devoted to AIDS cultural activism would be helpful in this regard. An in-depth bibliography of all writing about the politics of ephemeral display in urban settings, from the fields of art history and critical geography must be compiled. I envision a massive research project to produce a chronological history of lesser-known visual works produced under the auspices of collectives and organizations including Queer Nation and Oral Majority. Within this structure, a more comprehensive understanding can be ascertained, of the relationship between such visual objects in urban space. Additionally, ephemeral visual culture of the period including newspapers, magazines, temporary exhibitions and nightclub performances should be documented and examined, in order to more fully establish the context in which visual activism flourished in New York in the late 1980s and early 1990s. An examination of the impact of this activity on the individual projects of artists is necessary. The legacy and impact of participation in ACT UP on a generation of queer artists remains to be written.

A central inquiry of this dissertation is the issue of form and difference. In other words, how if at all is difference manifested in the resources and formal choices of collectives? First, in terms of resources (access to printing technology, funds to pay for
printing and distribution, etc), there are gendered differences to note. Whereas the Silence=Death Project paid for its posters to be printed and wheat pasted in Manhattan, fierce pussy relied upon the pilfered resources of corporate employers and members did the wheat pasting. Second, in terms of formal choices there are disparities that can be interpreted along lines of difference, particularly gender and sex. This is particularly the case with regards to typography. The Silence=Death Project and Gran Fury utilized a bold, all-caps sans serif type that had institutional associations with contemporary art (i.e. the graphic works of Barbara Kruger) as well as contemporary advertising. In contrast, fierce pussy primarily utilized a typewriter, and sometimes handwriting, in its poster projects. This mined a different affective register all together since it resulted in an intimate scale was more homespun than institutional. Whereas bold graphic design and assertive typography of earlier AIDS cultural activism had the effect of “yelling” in public space in order to capture the attention of passersby, fierce pussy’s public art works take a different approach, and invite the viewer to approach and examine the work from a closer distance. It is no less angry or assertive, yet it takes a different approach to the presentation of its message. Indeed the first-person speech of fierce pussy posters (“I am … and proud!”) insists upon the validity of marginalized individuals experience in public space. This harkens back to the “I am a Man!” declaration of the civil rights movement, for example, seen in hundreds of placards at the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike in 1968. This first-person voice is distinct from the disembodied and anonymous voice of AIDS cultural activist posters by the Silence=Death Project and Gran Fury, which had a threatening and powerful effect on mainstream audiences, and an empowering effect on queer audiences.
As both a material activist practice and a symbol for the AIDS crisis, the creation and distribution of slogan-wielding ephemera became a predominant practice of urban protest, a way for activists to “speak” to broader publics in person via passersby on the street, or through the reproduction of images transmitted by photojournalists to newspaper readers and television viewers worldwide. To a degree, this continues to be the case. The rise of the Internet in the 1990s changed the face of communication, though during the 2011 Occupy Wall Street protests there was a notable return of handheld ephemeral signage, not dissimilar to posters made by committees formed within ACT UP. The Occupy protests were an important moment in New York City history as they represent a rebirth of New York as a space of protest, after the increased policing of the public sphere, in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 as well as in support of gentrification. Occupy activists used low-tech, low-production value resources, such as cardboard, to make signs of protest. These cardboard signs were symbolic of dispossession as they recall the signs used by panhandlers and the homeless population on the streets of New York. The ubiquity of cardboard signs in the Occupy movement was striking, particularly in light of the escalation of digital media that characterized the first decade of the twenty-first century. Individuals used ephemeral cardboard signs to signal and assert their presence within a capitalist society they felt dismissed by; this is a similar to the use of ephemera as a metaphor of dispossession by AIDS and queer activists. More recently, in December 2014, the INSIDE OUT project contributed eight large-format signs together comprising the eyes of Eric Garner to the Millions March in New York City, protesting police killings of unarmed black men, an image of which appeared on the cover of the New York Times. This use of ephemera in
anti-racist protests in New York City was so influential that in January 2015, during rallies in Paris after the murder of journalists and cartoonists working for the publication Charlie Hebdo, INSIDE OUT contributed large posters of journalists’ eyes for demonstrators to hold.92

Part of ephemera’s importance to the history of AIDS activism is the fact that it gave physical form to a political and ideological crisis that was already conceived of in spatial terms. Just as the political landscape was volatile, mobile, and malleable, ephemeral art provided exemplary media for voicing dissent during the AIDS crisis, produced in multiple copies intended for far-ranging distribution. This dissertation demonstrates the particular achievement of AIDS and queer art activism, which was to create printed ephemeral works that were nearly inseparable from the performative actions they announced and accompanied. The concept of embodied collectivity entails both shock tactics and infiltration tactics, and can be seen in contemporary activist endeavors around anti-racism and anti-capitalism in the U.S., for example the use of Die-Ins to protest the killing of unarmed black men, or the occupation of public plazas to protest economic inequity. In each case printed ephemeral materials were central to the development of an activist project. Ephemera plus embodiment continues to influence social movements, and the achievements of AIDS and queer art activism are a lasting example.

92 INSIDE OUT was founded in 2011 as a “global participatory art project,” led by the artist JR. For more info see “About the Inside Out Project,” http://www.insideoutproject.net/en [accessed January 10, 2015].
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anonymous Queers. *Queers Read This!* New York: 1990.


--------. *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics.*


ACT UP Oral History Project.


“Projects.” fierce pussy.


Habermas, Jurgen. The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society [1962], trans. Thomas Burger. Cambridge, MA:


Hubbard, Jim and Sarah Schulman. *ACT UP Oral History Project*. 2001-


Myers, Terry R. “Route 66 to Kassel: Driving to Documenta IX with the Americans.” *Arts Magazine* (Summer 1992).


Sholette, Gregory. “Dark Matter: Activist Art and the Counter-Public Sphere.”


