AIDS Art: Activism on Canvas

Lucy Sumners
University of Rhode Island, lucy_sumners@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/srhonorsprog

Part of the Art and Design Commons, and the Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons

Recommended Citation
http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/srhonorsprog/77

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors Program at the University of Rhode Island at DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu.
“Art can translate the experience of living with AIDS; art can define courage and loss; art can ignite activism; and art can enlarge human understanding so as to change behavior and limit the spread of infection.”

Hoosen M. Coovadia, M.D.¹

“But, bottom line, this is my own sense of urgency and need; bottom line, emotionally, even a tiny charcoal scratching done as a gesture to marks a person’s response to this epidemic means whole worlds to me if it is hung in public; bottom line, each and every gesture carries a reverberation that is meaningful in its diversity; bottom line, we have to find our own forms of gesture and communication. You can never depend on the mass media to reflect us or our needs or our states of mind; bottom line, with enough gestures we can deafen the satellites and lift the curtains surrounding

AIDS (Acquired immune deficiency syndrome) was first reported in the
United States in 1981. Since then, AIDS has become a pandemic that has
infected 0.6% of the world’s population, approximately 33.2 million people, and
2.1 million people have died from the disease so far. Everyone is affected, either
directly or indirectly, by AIDS and as a result protest groups were formed to elicit
awareness and change in how persons with AIDS (PWAs) were and still are
treated and one of the more prominent ways of getting activist groups’ voices
heard by the general population is through protest art or public works or art.
“Our mourning strives to be public, and to engage public institutions, because it
is in the public domain that the value of the lives of our dead loved ones is so
frequently questioned or denied. Thus the epidemic requires a public art, which
might adequately memorialize and pay respect to our dead,” writes Simon
Watney in an article memorializing the works of Ross Bleckner.

Protest art is effective in that the design is usually a simple one, with an
illustration and a phrase that will grab the viewer’s attention and make them
think about what they just read. However, if a person does not understand the
symbols in the artwork then they are not going to understand the message that
the protest art is trying to convey. We are seeing that more with this generation

---

when shown protest art from the 1980s. Unfortunately, it doesn’t mean anything to them because most of these artworks aren’t used anymore to fight AIDS. In this day and age, it is the celebrities who are putting their faces at the forefront of the AIDS campaigns, either because they actually believe that they are doing the right thing or because they want publicity. Some well known works of protest art were done by the Guerrilla Girls in New York City. In 1985 they began displaying protest art around the city in order to promote awareness of women and people of color in the art world. They hung all of their works disguised in gorilla costumes. There are different forms of AIDS related protest art and protest groups, but the main mission behind them all is to bring awareness to the general public about PWAs, to educate those about how AIDS spreads and how to prevent catching AIDS and to give a voice to those who no longer have one.

It took six years for Ronald Reagan to say the word AIDS in a public address. By that year, 1987, 41,027 people had died and 71,176 people were diagnosed with AIDS in the US. In that same year, ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) was formed in New York City with the mission to “turn anger, fear, and grief into action”.\(^4\) ACT UP still exists to this day, having just celebrated their 20\(^{th}\) anniversary, and has a chapter in most major cities. ACT UP/NY (New York) is the original group that was formed and according to their website, they

still have meetings every Monday at 8 p.m. In the late 1980s through the 1990s, their demonstrations and works of protest art increased as the death rate and infection rate of AIDS rose with little change in availability of medications to those infected. ACT UP’s signature is the right-side up pink triangle on a black background with the words SILENCE=Death written boldly underneath (Figure 1). The use of the pink triangle references the upside-down pink triangle (Figure 2) that was used by the Nazis to designate homosexuals in the concentration camps and is a reminder that gays were persecuted then as well. The slogan SILENCE=DEATH was taken by ACT UP from the Silence=Death Project, when the two groups joined together. Six gay men formed the Silence=Death Project in 1987 in order to come together to talk about what it meant to be a gay man living in the age of AIDS. They also posted the SILENCE=DEATH posters around New York City in the hopes that people would become more active in the fight against AIDS.

ACT UP’s first demonstration took place at Wall Street and Broadway on March 24th, 1987. Two hundred and fifty members gathered and protested for greater access to experimental AIDS drugs and for a more coordinated national policy against AIDS. Always looking for more exposure, ACT UP picked the New York Stock Exchange for their next big demonstration. On September 14th, 1989, seven members of ACT UP entered the NYSE and chained themselves to a VIP balcony with a banner proclaiming “SELL WELLCOME” in a protest against the high prices of AZT, the only drug available at the time to treat AIDS. A few days
after the protest, the pharmaceutical sponsor of AZT, Burroughs Wellcome, dropped the price of AZT from $10,000 per person per year to $6,400 per person per year.\textsuperscript{5} In this case, ACT UP brought about a change in the way the government and the scientific community was responding to the AIDS crisis. ACT UP also works with government and medical organizations so that their artworks get displayed in areas where people in positions of power will see them every day in the hopes that the messages in their artworks take an effect.

Gran Fury was formed by members of ACT UP which was dedicated solely to “exploring and exploiting the power of art to end the AIDS crisis.”\textsuperscript{6} The name Gran Fury was taken from the model of car that the New York City Police Department was using at the time, a Plymouth Gran Fury. Gran Fury made pieces of protest art from 1988-1994 and they exemplify the direct, antagonistic approach that characterizes protest art. The piece \textit{The Government Has Blood on Its Hands}, 1988 (Figure 3), is a good example of the works that Gran Fury were creating. Here the lithograph poster displays a bloody handprint front and center with the text The Government Has Blood On Its Hands above the handprint and One AIDS Death Every Half Hour below. The information that the poster delivers is clear and understandable and the viewer would have no problem comprehending the message being shown to them. It is the purpose of protest art to incite a reaction in the viewer, to make them want to take a stand,

\textsuperscript{5} Douglas Crimp, interview held as part of the ACT UP Oral History Project, 05/16/07.
\textsuperscript{6} Gran Fury, Queer Cultural Center, \url{http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/GranFury/GFIntr.html}, 4 March 2007.
either for or against the message in the work. The works by Gran Fury do just that, they ignite activism. One of Gran Fury’s artworks was used by the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1989 as a part of A Day Without Art. Around 8,000 postcards were distributed portraying three couples kissing with “Kissing Doesn’t Kill: Greed and Indifference Do” (Figure 4) above the pictures. But activist groups were not the only ones taking a stand against the lack of awareness and progress being made in regards to drug treatment research. Artists were also taking a stand and using their medium to raise awareness about AIDS and its effects on people and their lives.

Keith Haring was born in 1958 and found a niche in the art world at an early age. He attended first the Ivy School of Professional Art in Pittsburgh and then moved to New York where he enrolled in the School of Visual Arts (SVA). Haring was very interested in the line and the simplicity of the line and strived to make his works reach the public. At SVA he became friends with performance artists, musicians and graffiti writers who would influence his style of art. Haring was able to convey his drawings and artworks on a large scale when he began drawing with chalks on the blank, black walls of the subway station. Between 1980 and 1985, hundreds of Haring’s subway drawings graced the wall of the New York City subway system. Riders were able to talk to Haring while he was drawing, further drawing in the viewer to his art works. Haring spent most of his time creating public art works and murals and between 1982 and 1989, produced over 50 public artworks in various cities worldwide. These public works
often carried a social message with one of his better known works being *Crack is Wack* (1986) (Figure 5), located in a handball court 128th Street and 2nd Avenue, which was initially created as a warning against the crack epidemic that was affecting New York City at the time.

Keith Haring was diagnosed with AIDS in 1988 and in 1989 founded the Keith Haring Foundation to provide funding and imagery to AIDS organizations and children’s programs. His artworks evolved into statements about living with AIDS, being homosexual and the disease’s toll on the body. His works are known for their vibrant colors and energetic, block figures that look like they are dancing. After being diagnosed with AIDS, Haring continued to use bright colors and the “dancing” figures were put in more provocative situations. In *Safe Sex* (1988) (Figure 6), two figures stand side by side holding each other’s genitals. In this piece, his figures are muscular, instead of the rounded forms that are typical of Haring’s works (Figure 7). The figures are also covered in red dots, perhaps alluding to Kaposi’s sarcoma, which became one of the AIDS defining illnesses in the early 1980s. Haring used artwork as a way to speak to the masses about topics that they might not be fully aware of. Not everyone reads the newspaper or watches the news in the morning, but seeing a mural on their way to work is an effective way to expose a person up to the issues that are impacting either their lives or the lives of those living around them. Keith Haring’s

---

public works raised awareness about AIDS and the toll it was taking on him in a way that people had not seen before. Unlike AIDS activist groups who use artworks as a way to further express their cause, Haring was a world renowned artist who unfortunately was diagnosed with AIDS during his career. He didn’t change his style completely, so the viewer would still be able to recognize his works, and I think that is what made his artworks about AIDS all the more powerful. He was not scared to speak through his artworks about living with AIDS, having friends with AIDS and eventually dying from AIDS.

David Wojnarowicz was another artist who used his artworks and journals to express what living with AIDS was like. Unlike Haring’s works which still used bright colors that balanced the provocative images in them, Wojnarowicz was brutally honest in his writings about being a homosexual, living on the streets in New York, about being a man living with AIDS and he also used that brutal honesty in his photographs and artworks. Wojnarowicz wrote many books and memoirs about his life which displays the upfront manner of speaking which is needed when we talk about AIDS. AIDS is unforgiving and we need to be unforgiving when talking about it or depicting it in artworks. In Memories that Smell Like Gasoline, he reveals that he is “convinced that I am from another planet”\textsuperscript{8}. In another section, Wojnarowicz states plainly “there is something in

my blood and it’s trying to fucking kill me.” His plain language leaves no room for interpretation or any possible way to misunderstand what he is saying. While this manner of communication may shock some people (it certainly shocked me the first time I read his books), the shock factor is useful in inciting a reaction from the viewer that will hopefully provoke them into action.

Along with literature, Wojnarowicz used photographs and artworks to express what life is like as a PWA. In his silkscreen entitled When I Put My Hands on Your Body from 1990, which was part of the 1990 Whitney Museum Biennial, several skeletons are posed on a rocky ground. Some skeletons are whole and lain out like they were brought up from graves while others are in pieces or bent back on itself. The image is superimposed with a segment from one of his books that starts, “When I put my hands on your body, on your flesh, I feel the history of that body. Not just the beginning of its forming in that distant lake but all the way beyond its ending…” Wojnarowicz created this work in the remembrance of all of his friends and colleagues and lovers that had died from AIDS. His use of skeletons is important in that not only do they convey a sense of death but many PWAs look like walking skeletons toward the ends of their lives. This work displays more subtle techniques that artists used in artworks about AIDS, which works to its advantage. It is not a glaring poster of bright colors with an outlandish statement attacking one group or another for the lack of progress in

---

9 Ibid, Memories that Smell Like Gasoline, p. 59.
treating or finding a cure for AIDS. The silkscreen is somber and macabre and provokes the viewer into really thinking about the tremendous toll AIDS has had on this world. While the in-your-face protest art has a more immediate effect on the viewer, Wojnarowicz’s works take a little longer to seep in, to take root in one’s brain and have an effect, which to me leaves a more lasting impression.

Robert Mapplethorpe was another artist who, like Haring, set up a foundation in his name to preserve and manage his archive of photographs, to help support museums in creating photography departments, and to support medical research in the HIV/AIDS area. Since its creation in 1988, the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation has spent millions of dollars to fund medical research in the fight against AIDS and HIV infection. It has also provided study grants to university research centers and established important medical facilities and programs, such as the Robert Mapplethorpe Laboratory for AIDS Research at Harvard Medical School in Boston, the Robert Mapplethorpe AIDS Treatment Center at Beth Israel Medical Center in New York, and the Robert Mapplethorpe Center for HIV Research at St. Vincent’s Hospital and Medical Center of New York. The Foundation has also provided substantial financial support to the American Foundation for AIDS Research (AmFAR).  

Mapplethorpe did not take photographs that were always specifically about AIDS, but were more about glorifying the human body (Figures 9 & 10). He

---

shot many portraits of famous artists and celebrities, such as Andy Warhol and Isabella Rosellini, as well as many self portraits and nude portraits of both males and females. Mapplethorpe represents an artist who was diagnosed with AIDS (he died in 1989) that took a stand in trying to increase funding and research centers in order to put a stop to the AIDS epidemic. In 1988, Mapplethorpe took a self portrait (Figure 11) that shows him sitting against a black background, holding a cane with a skull on the top. Here he comments on his diagnosis with AIDS and how death is always a constant thought in the back of one’s mind.

Ted Gott wrote in the compilation *Don’t Leave Me This Way: Art in the Age of AIDS*, “It is hard to convey the manner in which AIDS turns one’s life into a series of ‘lasts’- last dinners with ill or dying friends, last birthdays and festivals, last shopping expeditions, last year of health, last visits to hospitals and hospices- but somehow never last funerals. Only those who love on the razor’s edge truly know the sharp cut of its blade.”¹² This work speaks worlds in that the only thing the viewer sees coming out of the blackness is Mapplethorpe’s head and his hand holding the cane. His disembodied head stares out at the viewer with an intensity that dares them to look away. The skull cane in the foreground symbolizes the artist’s internal struggles with AIDS slowly killing him, but also the death that he sees everyday when his friends die around him. Mapplethorpe was surrounded in controversy over his choices to use black subjects, interracial couples, and the portrayal of upfront male nudity. Many critics thought that his

works should be banned because they were too homoerotic and included interracial couples (Figure 12).

Banning or censoring artworks about AIDS was not only done by the government and the National Endowment for the Arts, but by museums and curators as well. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was created in 1965 in order to strengthen the artistic life of the United States and was an offshoot of the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965. In their mission statement, the NEA says that they are committed to investing in America’s cultural heritage. However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the NEA effectively banned all forms of AIDS related or gay related artworks because they were too provocative. The NEA did start out funding exhibitions dealing with AIDS related art such as Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing or Mapplethorpe’s retrospective. But with that funding came a backlash from Senator Jesse Helms, who used Mapplethorpe’s retrospective to get Congress to impose restrictions on what or who the NEA could give funding to. This intervention by Congress led to their statement that “NEA funds may not be used to promote, disseminate, or reproduce materials considered obscene, including sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the sexual exploitation of children or individuals engaged in sex acts… and which when taken as a whole, do not have serious, literary, artistic, political or scientific value.”\(^{13}\) If that is the case then I feel that the NEA would have to give up almost all of its funding of people

\(^{13}\) Michael Hunt Stolbach, “A Day Without Art”, Social Text, No. 24 (1990), pg. 183.
or exhibitions, because there is hardly any artworks out there that are not serious
or have artistic or political value.

A Day With(out) Art became the museum’s and gallery’s way of
protesting against AIDS without having to display artworks that were too
provocative and that might get them in trouble. World AIDS day is December
1st and in 1989 four hundred art institutions participated in A Day With(out) Art by
either taking down all of their art or covering the vast majority of the works in
black shrouds. A Day With(out) Art was supposed to bring awareness to the fact
that if something wasn’t done about the rapid spread of AIDS through the art
community, then there would be no art left because all of the artists have died.
Again, unfortunately, this tradition has slowly faded from memory. The current
teenage to early 20s generation does not have the memories of AIDS like their
parents do, which puts their focus on other things entirely. Also AIDS has all but
slipped from view in the western world, except when we see celebrities and
charities working to combat AIDS in Africa. Yes Africa is suffering and needs help,
but there are people in other parts of the world who are suffering just as
completely as the people in Africa are. We cannot forget about one group
because another seems to be suffering more. "Since this earlier flurry of interest
in artistic responses to AIDS in the mid-90s, the issue has waned in popularity.
Mirroring decreasing media interest and public concern about AIDS in the US, in
the late 90s the number of exhibits about HIV/AIDS declined. In western,
economically privileged nations, the availability of protease inhibitors has given
the popular press a reason to triumph the end of AIDS or, at least, to let it fade away.”

---

Figure 1

Silence=Death, 1986, Silence=Death Project,
lithograph

Figure 2

Nazi symbol used to designate homosexuals in concentration camps
Figure 3

The Government Has Blood on Its Hands, 1988, Gran Fury, lithograph

Figure 4

Kissing Doesn’t Kill: Greed and Indifference Do, Gran Fury, poster
Crack is Wack, 1986, Keith Haring, mural

Safe Sex, 1988, Keith Haring, acrylic on canvas
Figure 7

*International Youth Year, 1985, Keith Haring, lithograph*

Figure 8

*When I Put My Hands on Your Body, 1990, David Wojnarowicz, silkscreen on silver print*
Figure 9
Patti Smith, 1976, Robert Mapplethorpe, photograph

Figure 10
Ajitto, 1981, Robert Mapplethorpe, photograph
Bibliography


Retro/virus: Has AIDS Defined the Times Or have the Times Defined AIDS. Cleveland: Zygote Press, 2002.


