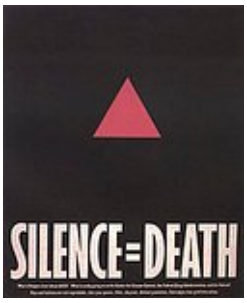
AIDS Activism in the Arts

by Craig Kaczorowski



A poster by the SILENCE=DEATH project (1986)

The activist movement of the 1970s that galvanized large numbers of gay men and lesbians to protest repression, police entrapment, and other forms of discrimination was transformed by the AIDS epidemic that struck the gay community so devastatingly in the 1980s.

In the early and mid-1980s, the unifying issue among gay activists was government negligence about AIDS. In the early years of the epidemic, AIDS was rarely discussed in the national media or by political officials. As a result, many gay activists were compelled to voice their anger and sorrow through art, producing traditional works that were embraced by the museum and institutional art worlds, as well as a number of anonymous, public graphics, emblems, and memorials.

These political, yet accessible, public artworks reached millions and helped transform AIDS from a syndrome that many were reluctant to speak about, to a subject that could be raised sympathetically in popular news magazines and on television programs.

Gran Fury

One of the earliest, and most influential, pioneers of AIDS activism through art was Gran Fury, an artists' collective formed in 1988 as the propaganda office for the gay activist group ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). Gran Fury, named after the brand of automobile used by the New York City Police Department at the time, sought to create a public, non-museum role for art that attempted to inform a broad public and provoke direct action to end the AIDS crisis.

Gran Fury's primary objectives were to render complex issues understandable and to give visual form to the shocking AIDS statistics originating at the time from the National Centers for Disease Control and New York's Department of Health. Gran Fury's artworks merged the simplicity of commercial advertising with the complexity of political argument to arouse a response from the general public. They targeted the streets, rather than the galleries, and determined that images were more compelling when accompanied by words of explanation and elaboration.

An early Gran Fury graphic offered the alarming news that "One In 61 Babies Born In New York Is HIV Positive" and another drolly advised men to "Use Condoms or Beat It." Their first institution-sponsored graphic implored the art world to fight AIDS because "With 47,524 Dead, Art Is Not Enough."

Gran Fury courted controversy throughout the late-1980s and early-1990s, with such projects as their street-spanning banner announcing that "All People With AIDS Are Innocent," which caused an uproar when it was exhibited at New York's Henry Street Settlement in 1989. This sentiment served as a direct counterbalance to the predominant attitude at the time, propelled by representations within the mainstream media, that people with AIDS were either "innocent victims"--that is, hemophiliacs and children--or "guilty sufferers--that is, gay men and IV drug users.

The collective's image of three interracial homosexual and heterosexual couples kissing above the caption " Kissing Doesn't Kill: Greed and Indifference Do" caused another furor the following year when it appeared on the sides of buses in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. The original format of the work included a block of type (which was deleted in some cities for its controversial content) that read "Corporate greed, government inaction, and public indifference make AIDS a political crisis."

Perhaps Gran Fury's most inflammatory work was its contribution to the Venice Biennale in 1990, which nearly got the group arrested. The Venice Biennale is one of the most prestigious of international art exhibitions. Gran Fury seized on this opportunity to export its provocative brand of art activism to Europe. The collective's infamous "Pope Piece" skewered the Pope for his anti-safe-sex beliefs. The artwork paired two billboard-sized panels: one coupled the image of the Pope with a text about the church's anti-safe-sex rhetoric; the other a two-foot-high erect penis with texts about women and condom use.

Italian authorities, including Biennale personnel, considered prosecuting the group for blasphemy; only the last-minute intervention of sympathetic magistrates precluded an international incident.

In addition to the work of Gran Fury, several other significant public projects arose as a response to the AIDS crisis, including the SILENCE=DEATH Project, the Red Ribbon Project, and the AIDS Memorial Quilt.

SILENCE=DEATH Project

In 1986, six anonymous gay men formed the SILENCE=DEATH Project and created the graphic emblem that has become synonymous with AIDS activism. This highly-visible work incorporated the emblem "SILENCE= DEATH" in white type beneath an inverted pink triangle--the symbol Nazis forced homosexuals to wear in concentration camps, and which gay activists of the 1970s had already appropriated as a symbol of gay liberation.

Similar to many of Gran Fury's works, the SILENCE=DEATH Project attempted to locate the root cause of the AIDS crisis not in HIV infection but in larger social forces--the government, the corporate culture, the mainstream public--that ignored, remained silent about, or profited from the crisis.

The Red Ribbon Project

Another artists' collective, the Visual AIDS Artists' Caucus founded in 1989, created the Red Ribbon Project. Intended to be anonymous, the Red Ribbon--originally a loop of red silk ribbon fastened on a lapel or pinned to a shirt--was designed as a symbol of commitment to people with AIDS and to the AIDS-struggle. Sponsored by the group Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS, the Red Ribbon debuted at the televised 1991 Tony Awards.

Since then, the Red Ribbon has become a widespread symbol throughout the world and has appeared in many different forms and versions. In 1993, for instance, the U.S. Postal Service released a Red Ribbon stamp with the caption "AIDS Awareness." The Red Ribbon Project has also provided the impetus for other groups to designate variously colored ribbons for their own causes, such as the pink ribbon worn for breast cancer awareness.

Over time, a small backlash against the use of the Red Ribbon developed, with some AIDS activists deriding the symbol as more of a politically correct fashion accessory than a meaningful social or political statement. Despite some commercialization, however, the Red Ribbon continues to raise consciousness about the epidemic and demonstrate support for, and solidarity with, those living with HIV and AIDS.

NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt

Activist Cleve Jones conceived the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt in 1985 as a community artwork to

commemorate the lives of those who had died of AIDS. Typically known simply as the AIDS Quilt, as of 2003 it was composed of over 44,000 three-by-six-foot, quilted, appliquéd, and collaged panels of fabric, representing 83,000 names (19% of all AIDS deaths in the United States at that time). Since its inception, participants have created these quilt components for friends, lovers, family members, and public figures.

The ever-expanding AIDS Quilt--currently measuring approximately 792,000 square feet, or roughly the size of 16 football fields--is now too large to be exhibited in its entirety. Its national debut took place on the National Mall in Washington, D. C. during the March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights in 1987. At that time it covered a space a little larger than a football field and included 1,920 panels. A year later the Quilt returned to Washington, D. C., this time comprised of over 8,000 panels.

Celebrities, politicians, family members, lovers, and friends read aloud the names of the people represented by the quilt panels; this reading of names is now a tradition followed at nearly every Quilt display.

The AIDS Memorial Quilt is the largest public art project in the world. Nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, the Quilt has also been the subject of many books, films, scholarly papers, articles, and theatrical performances. *Common Threads: Stories From the Quilt* won the Academy Award for best feature-length documentary film in 1989.

Day Without Art

Another broad-based initiative was Day Without Art, an annual "international day of mourning and action in response to the AIDS crisis," which was launched in 1989. Day Without Art was conceived as an effort to force the art world to confront the effects of the epidemic within its own institutions.

In 1999, marking the tenth anniversary of Day Without Art, an art archive was created. A project of the Estate Project for Artists with AIDS, the Virtual Collection is an expanding database of 3,000 digitized images of artworks created by artists who either have died of AIDS or are living with HIV. The Virtual Collection has been shaped into a scholarly and curatorial resource that is housed in various museums and universities throughout the country.

Performance Artists

AIDS activism also emerged as a potent subject among performance artists. Examples range from the post-modern, drag extravaganzas of Lypsinka, to the overtly political parody of the Pomo Afro Homos, to Tim Miller's nude monologue performances. In fact, Miller became the center of national attention in the late-1980s as a preeminent AIDS firebrand and political radical, one of four artists whose National Endowment for the Arts funding was cut off in a censorship campaign spearheaded by Senator Jesse Helms.

The overall importance of these public, politicized works of art was their ability to focus attention on the AIDS crisis and to serve as a rallying cry for those inside the movement. Many of these projects gained media coverage across the country through wire services and public radio stations, and even spawned a debate over the representation of gays and lesbians on the floor of the Illinois State Senate.

As a result, AIDS awareness has now spread into the mainstream, creating its own sphere of community-based organizations, charitable institutions, and even magazines for those who are HIV-positive.

Conclusion

In the new millennium, gay activism has increasingly become less galvanized by the specter of AIDS and has seemingly splintered into dozens of micro-movements--focusing on issues ranging from gays in the military to parenting, same-sex marriage, workplace fairness, and so on. However, activists and artists working to

effect change, regardless of the issue, have learned many valuable lessons from their predecessors in the power and efficacy of vocal, public activism through art.

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About the Author

Craig Kaczorowski writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.