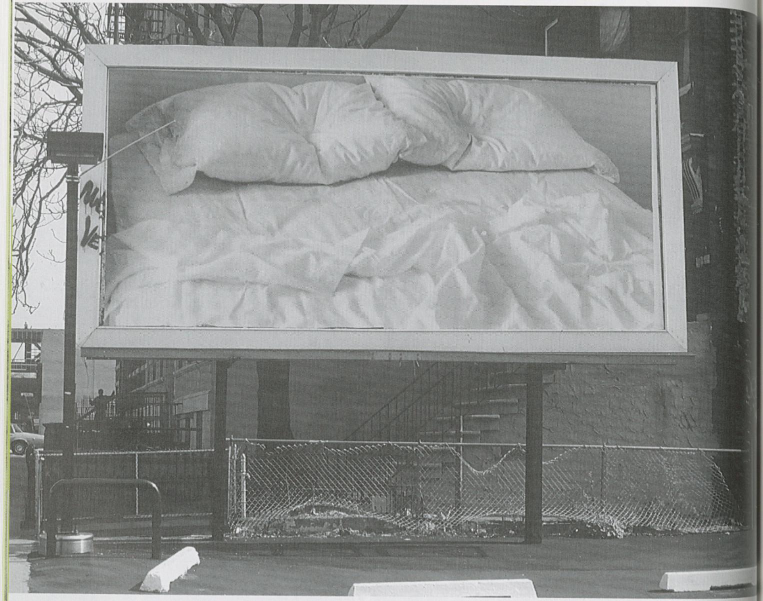


# What Does Silence Equal Now?

DAVID DEITCHER

> *We live in a world of survivors—we hope—but also a world of ghosts, who, like invisible housemates, invade our solitude and complicate our lives.*
>
> — WALT ODETS

These are strange times to be writing about the relationship between AIDS and American art. Almost a decade has passed since galleries, museums, alternative spaces, and city streets teemed with cultural projects that bore witness to the individual and collective experience of the epidemic. From our quietist cultural perspective at the end of the 1990s, the cultural activism of the late '80s and early '90s seems decidedly remote. These days, according to critic Peter Schjeldahl, "nice art rules," while "early '90s-style political rancor has gone scarce."

Scarce indeed is the rancor—but also the acerbic style and wit—of the AIDS activist graphics that once peppered public space to incite anger about the government's neglect of AIDS. Gone as well is the art that exploited the prestige and public reach of prominent arts institutions to memorialize the dead, galvanize the living, and counter the popular media construction of AIDS as the natural—and inevitably fatal—consequence of behaviors that the majority disdains to this day as sinful or antisocial.

To write about AIDS and its cultural consequences today is to risk contributing further through historicization to the epidemic's normalization, in which, as AIDS activist Douglas Crimp has pointed out, AIDS assumes its place among the nation's chronic ills along with poverty, homelessness, racism, crime, and drugs. Today we have the luxury of distance, or so it seems. Our removal from the sense of continuous crisis which marked the late 1980s and early '90s reflects the transformation of the popular perception of AIDS from a death sentence to a chronic but manageable disease, as it is said, like diabetes. This shift in the popular perception of AIDS dates from 1995 or 1996, when the first reports emerged regarding more effective drug therapies combining protease inhibitors with other antivirals and prophylaxes. Since then, articles trumpeting the end

Chapter opener:
Brian Weil, *ACT UP Demonstration, Maryland*, 1990, black-and-white gelatin silver print. Photo courtesy of the Center for Creative Photography, Tucson, and the Estate of Brian Weil. Art Matters grant recipient, 1986, 1988, 1990.

Left:
Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled*, 1991, billboard, variable dimensions, installation in twenty-four locations throughout New York City. Here, as installed for *Projects 34*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery. Art Matters grant recipient, 1988.

of AIDS have combined with statistical evidence of dramatically declining death rates to contribute to both a resurgence of high-risk behaviors and a precipitous decline in charitable donations to private research and AIDS service organizations.

To those whose lives have been unalterably changed by the epidemic, the public perception of HIV infection and AIDS as no-longer-a-death-sentence provides a welcome measure of relief from nearly two decades of relentless emotional trauma. Every day, it seems, one can find newspaper articles such as the following: "Chicago, February 2, 1999—'AIDS deaths plummeted by 48 percent last year, accelerating earlier gains attributed to improved drug therapies,' health officials said at a scientific meeting here today. They said the declines crossed sex and racial lines, suggesting that the new therapies were reaching all segments of the AIDS population." Yet, even if taken at face value, such good news can still feel like a betrayal of sorts as it exerts subtle pressure on survivors to leave behind cherished parts of themselves to live in the present more "normally"—though not necessarily more fully at the level of emotion.

Corresponding with these developments, the visibility of AIDS in the visual arts of the West has certainly diminished. Since the early '90s, many artists whose work was identified most closely with the epidemic succumbed to AIDS: David Wojnarowicz, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Marlon Riggs, Derek Jarman, Stuart Marshal, Keith Haring, Tony Greene, Hugh Steers, Arnold Fern. Others, whose work had for years been informed by the omnipresence of the epidemic, its political causes, and human costs, have since moved on to other things, or so it seems.

The diminished prominence of AIDS in the visual arts assumes disturbing significance when considered in the context of infection rates that, while holding steady among the largely white and middle-class constituency of the art world, have continued to rise among communities of color. Along with the popular perception of AIDS as no-longer-a-crisis, the epidemic's lower cultural profile in the West also seems, at best, premature in the context of the estimated thirty million people now living with HIV worldwide, more than 90 percent of whom live in the developing world.[1] And if this were not reason enough to regard the relative invisibility of AIDS in contemporary Western art with profound skepticism, reports from the 1998 World AIDS Conference in Geneva have cautioned that the protease inhibitors are far from universally effective—even among the men and women who can afford to pay for them; that the effectiveness of these treatments frequently diminishes over time; that their prolonged use can generate bizarre and sometimes dangerous side effects; that getting off the "cocktails"—or failing to adhere strictly to the terms of such regimens—can lead to the development of highly resistant strains of HIV.

I find it hard to determine the extent to which any or all of these conflicting circumstances have contributed to the problems I've had in writing this essay. I initially responded positively to the invitation from Art Matters to contribute a text about the role of AIDS in shaping American visual culture between 1985 (when sensationalistic media coverage of Rock Hudson's diagnosis and death endowed the epidemic with spectacular visibility) through the more hopeful, and confusing, circumstances of the recent past. From the late 1980s, I had written often about AIDS and its cultural consequences. This, after trying with little success to find my way as a writer for the better part of a decade. In retrospect, I understand that what then felt like a personal breakthrough was also part of a broader social transformation in which an unprecedented number of gay men and lesbians became both politicized and vocal as a result of the AIDS crisis and the homophobic backlash with which it was inextricably linked.

Yet, now I find it nearly intolerable to be writing on the subject. I feel weighted down by a sense of inertia, by the conviction that I have already said everything I have to say on the subject. In fact, I'd already felt this discomfort while preparing a catalogue essay about the response of contemporary artists to the pandemic for an exhibition titled *AIDS Worlds: Between Resignation and Hope*, which opened in Geneva during the summer of 1998. In that case, I found it hard to see exactly how contemporary artists have, in fact, been responding in their recent work to AIDS. Furthermore, I suspected that this perception of disinterest by others was bolstered by my own displeasure in having to deal with the subject again.

How is it, then, that AIDS, which arguably made it possible for me to write in the first place, has now become among the last things I want to be thinking and writing about? What has happened in the intervening years to induce this change? Just as my earlier ability to overcome writer's block to respond to the AIDS crisis was not just an individual matter, perhaps my desire now to not write about AIDS and to walk away from it is also not just about me.

Like many other gay men, I was slow to learn about AIDS when it first appeared at the beginning of the 1980s. What little I knew about the mysterious conditions that were then already afflicting gay men I had gleaned from the gay press and from conversations with friends. Together, this generated little more than a vague sense of foreboding—vague, no doubt, because of a desire not to acknowledge the significance of what I had been reading and hearing about. It seemed unthinkable then that only gay men would be getting sick and dying, as if in answer to the prayers of Jerry Fallwell and his flock, providing them with the ultimate weapon in waging their propaganda war against queers. Similarly, it seemed unthinkable that there could be biological justification for the self-loathing that vexes gay men and lesbians in heterosexist societies. On the other hand, how surprised could I have been to learn that gay men were coming down with an array of increasingly exotic and grave illnesses? Hadn't I had my own run-ins with hepatitis B, amoebas, gonorrhea? Hadn't I found it necessary to make more than one visit to the shabby health clinic overlooking New York's Sheridan Square to be tested and treated for conditions that I regarded as little more than chemically reversible inconveniences?

I think it was in 1981 (could it have been even earlier?) that I learned for the first time of a friend who was suffering from what was not yet called AIDS. I'd bumped into John near his office on Manhattan's Upper East Side. I'd had great sex with him on a few occasions, though at that point not for some time. We had met at an East Side bar, and sex had been the basis for our friendship. So, even on that crisp autumn day, I proposed that we soon get together. And we did "get together"—for dinner at a restaurant on the Upper West Side, after which John took me home to see his new apartment.

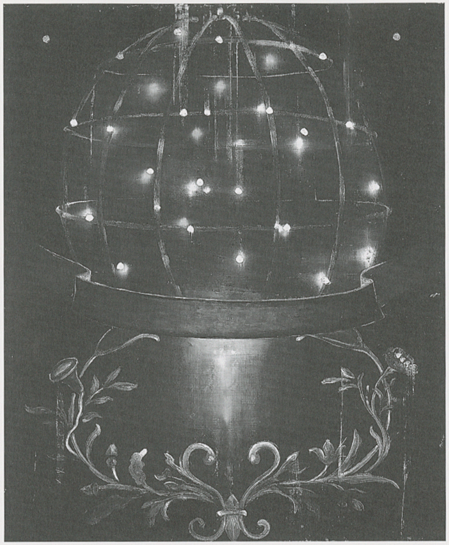
I remember how strange it seemed that John rebuffed my come-ons that night as we sat together on his couch looking through snapshots of his recent trip down the Colorado River. I only came to understand his rejection about a month later when I bumped into him near his office again. On that occasion, John, who had always been an avid bodybuilder, looked uncharacteristically gaunt. When I asked him about his health, he told me he'd recently been diagnosed with the "gay cancer." Even then, I failed to recognize, or accept, the gravity of what he was saying. But this denial ended a few months later. One day, in my mail, I received an envelope with a return address I did not recognize. Enclosed was a sober engraved card informing me of John's death, somewhere in the Midwest. He had gone back to die with the family he had left so many years earlier in order to live as a gay man.

In the introduction to the 1989 exhibition catalogue *AIDS: The Artists' Response*, critic Jan Zita Grover observed that the epidemic "erupted into North American consciousness at roughly the same time that a generation of academically trained artists were confronting willy-nilly the exhaustion of modernist art practices."[2] As an educator at CalArts, the nation's leading "post-studio" art school, Grover had herself helped the first generation of artists to be professionally trained as postmodernists to learn to "read" mass culture critically. She had helped to institute a model program of AIDS-related studies and projects at CalArts, and, as an activist writing at the peak of the mass mobilization in response to the AIDS crisis, she was in a position to discern the complex effects that the crisis was having on such young artists. From her perspective, the emerging health crisis challenged such artists to apply the critical skills they had learned in school to a situation that put the critical potential of those tools to the test.

In her essay, Grover belittled the taste for "pastiche and parody," as well as the devotion to the "simulacra of mass production"—preeminent characteristics of postmodernist art during the mid-'80s. Within the life-or-death context of the misrepresentation of AIDS and of people with AIDS in the media, she also dismissed postmodernism's "wan critiques of mass culture." In Grover's view, the AIDS crisis made it possible for artists to grasp the strengths and limitations of postmodernist critical theory as it had hitherto been applied within the parochial confines of the art world. But it also created a situation in which cultural practices that young artists had been trained to disregard as obsolete might prove useful once again.

Grover divided the artists' responses into two phases or "generations," each of which corresponded with a different grasp of the epidemic. The first generation bore witness to loss in memorializing works that were fundamentally declarative and descriptive: "Here was a life, this life is missed; here are its mourners."[3] Accordingly, such works were dominated by the traditional genre of portraiture, be it in painting, photography, video, or, for that matter, in the individual panels of the Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. Omitted from this account of the first generation of artists' responses to AIDS were works of art dating from the mid-'80s that attempted to give poetic form to the anxieties and fears that beset gay men who were then only beginning to grasp the enormity of the epidemic's impact on their lives. Thus, while some of Ross Bleckner's dark paintings from the mid-'80s featured memorial devices such as funerary urns, others described a blackness relieved (if that is the word) by sulfurous points of light that to some observers were less suggestive of memorial candles than erupting skin lesions.

According to Grover's periodization, the second-generation artists' responses emerged only after the political nature of the AIDS crisis became apparent. Corresponding with the mass mobilization of AIDS activism, the second-generation responses consisted of the "activist, largely collectivist work" that moved beyond expressions of loss to "make the social connections, touch the anger and harness



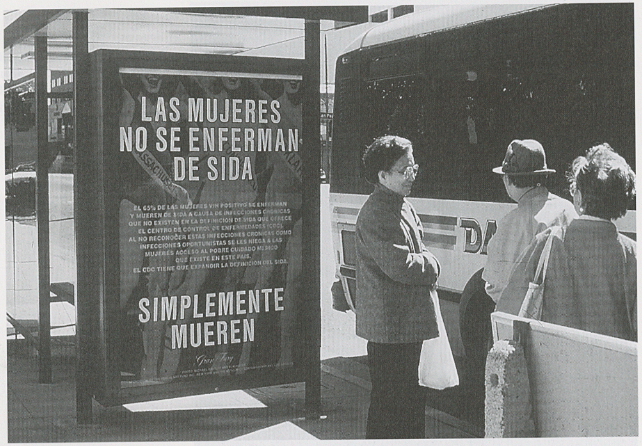
Ross Bleckner, *Poverty Bouquet*, 1986, oil on linen, 48 x 40 in. Photo courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery.

it to social purposes."[4] Here, too, Grover maintained that cultural practices dismissed as moribund within the context of the art world proved useful within that of the artists' response to AIDS. For example, she observed of video and filmmakers that, rather than adhering to the abstract or self-reflexive concerns that dominated vanguard practice since the late '60s, they exploited the narrative and documentary properties of their time-based mediums to bear witness to people living with AIDS and to provide the potentially life-saving educational information that the government and the media failed to supply—or, one might say, actively opposed.

From this aspect of Grover's account, one might well conclude that, confronted by AIDS, any cultural resource that helps people to deal with the crisis was deemed critically viable. But to draw such a conclusion would be to misrepresent the cultural situation of the late 1980s. Clearly the emergence of AIDS activism established a context in which cultural practitioners found themselves deploying creative means that were once regarded as off-limits; for example, to construct a counternarrative of AIDS, or to communicate urgent public messages regarding the activist response to the epidemic and its neglect by the American government. But AIDS activism also revived and even intensified proscriptive aspects of earlier debates about the nature of postmodernist culture that had flourished at the dawn of the Reagan era.

Notwithstanding the fact that during the early 1980s the influence of the American left had effectively retreated to cultural and academic spheres, the articulation of "critical postmodernism" and the related American adaptation of continental critical theory inspired a sense of exhilaration and hopefulness among its supporters. Discussions of postmodernist art tended to move beyond the self-referential concerns of modernist cultural practice to shed light on the ways power is exercised through language and representation—in their capacity, for example, to shape identity and experience. In this context, it was possible to grasp at once both the erosion of modernism's exclusionary conception of culture and the potential for an expansion of cultural participation. And yet, given the political and social climate of conservatism triumphant and of liberalism under siege, it is not surprising that these debates about postmodernism included attacks—even from the left—on the ideological complicity of art that offered little resistance to commodification, or on works that appeared to shore up the modernist myth of the artist as autonomous creator. Thus, for example, amid the superabundance of painting practices during the early '80s—not all of them neoexpressionist—some critics were inclined to issue sweeping proclamations of the "end of painting."

Within the context of the AIDS crisis of the late 1980s, what had always been at stake in the cultural conflict with Reaganism assumed a new sense of urgency. Among artists, curators, and critics, the need to respond to this crisis in their midst helped to deepen their appreciation for the political consequences of cultural practices, and prompted a greater readiness to embrace the kind of collectively produced, activist work that Grover then identified with the second-generation artists' responses to AIDS. But, at the same time that the limits of cultural possibility were being expanded in this way, the struggle against AIDS, against government neglect, against public apathy, and against personal devastation served to justify intolerance for those art practices that could not be seen to contribute directly to that effort. Nor was this intolerance limited to cultural practice. Should gay people not act up to the standards of clarity, militancy, and bravery that were established by AIDS activists in New York, they might well feel a sense of personal failure, if not of outright shame. For gay artists and writers it was difficult not to feel as if continued engagement in independent artistic practices amid the


LAS MUJERES
NO SE ENFERMAN
DE SIDA
EL 65% DE LAS MUJERES VIH POSITIVO SE ENFERMAN
Y MUEREN DE SIDA A CAUSA DE INFECCIONES CRONICAS
QUE NO EXISTEN EN LA DEFINICION DE SIDA QUE OFRECE
EL CENTRO DE CONTROL DE ENFERMEDADES (CDC).
AL NO RECONOCER ESTAS INFECCIONES CRONICAS COMO
INFECCIONES OPORTUNISTAS SE LES NIEGA A LAS
MUJERES ACCESO AL POBRE CUIDADO MEDICO
QUE EXISTE EN ESTE PAIS.
EL CDC TIENE QUE EXPANDIR LA DEFINICION DEL SIDA.
SIMPLEMENTE
MUEREN
Gran Fury

Gran Fury, *Women Don't Get AIDS (Spanish)*, (translation: "*Women Don't Get AIDS, They Just Die From It*"), bus stop sign, Los Angeles, CA. Photo courtesy of Tom Kalin. Art Matters grant recipients 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991.

devastation of plague was comparable to Nero fiddling while Rome burned. If it were not possible to transform one's art into a discernibly angry, articulate, and public response to AIDS, there seemed then to be little choice but to divide one's time between the demands of that art and those of bona fide activism or volunteerism or both.

In the catalogue accompanying *AIDS: The Artists' Response*, the artist/activist collective Gran Fury designed a centerfold that provides a vivid reminder of the tensions the epidemic provoked. The boldface text reads simply:

> WITH 47,524 DEAD, ART IS NOT ENOUGH. OUR CULTURE GIVES ARTISTS PERMISSION TO NAME OPPRESSION, A PERMISSION DENIED THOSE OPPRESSED./ OUTSIDE THE PAGES OF THIS CATALOGUE, PERMISSION IS BEING SEIZED BY MANY COMMUNITIES TO SAVE THEIR OWN LIVES./ WE URGE YOU TO TAKE COLLECTIVE DIRECT ACTION TO END THE AIDS CRISIS.

To some observers, Gran Fury's intervention amounted to little more than a highly inflammatory non sequitur. One of these critics, artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, summed up this attitude when, on more than one occasion, he quipped, "Who ever said art *was* enough?" Revisited almost a decade later, the most striking feature of Gran Fury's centerfold is neither the boldness of its graphic design nor the acuteness of its analysis of art as a specially sanctioned zone of social "permission." Rather, it is their assertion of art's inadequacy when confronted by a social crisis. In the context of the exhibition catalogue (or in its original context on a poster announcing a performance art festival at the Kitchen in New York), Gran Fury's assertion ("art is not enough") challenges the liberal notion of empathy as an adequate response to social injustice. Yet, with the benefit of hindsight, Gran Fury's design has the paradoxical effect of both eroding *and* reinforcing the boundary between art and social life, or between art and political activism. This is a key distinction that many cultural practitioners have been trying to dismantle since the 1970s (or considerably earlier, if one considers the historical avant-garde), either by fashioning unabashedly "political" works of art or by acting in ways that undermine the idealist view which holds that art and arts institutions are aloof from social and political life.

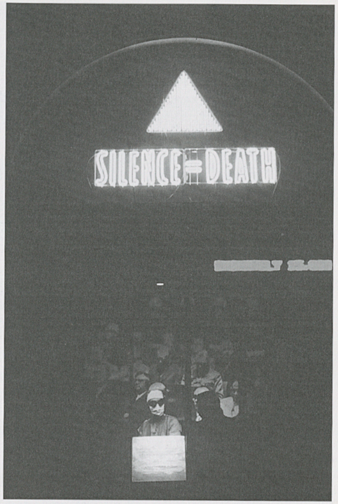
Only one month after *AIDS: The Artists' Response* closed in April 1989, the viability of this idealist view of art and arts institutions was put to a severe test. After rejecting a $10,000 grant to New York's Artists Space for another AIDS exhibition—*Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, curated by photographer Nan Goldin—National Endowment for the Arts chairman John Frohnmayer first claimed that the cancellation was necessary to ward off further attacks on the NEA from anti-Endowment zealots in Congress, such as Senator Jesse Helms. This was at least honest, inasmuch as the catalogue accompanying *Witnesses* contained a characteristically blistering attack by David Wojnarowicz on New York's immensely powerful and homophobic Cardinal John O'Connor, a man who made it his mission to oppose teaching HIV prevention or distributing condoms in New York's public school system. But Frohnmayer's explanation outraged AIDS activists, artists, and their supporters, who fully understood that it signalled his cowardice in opposing the right-wing attack on federal arts funding and on gay men and lesbians.

Confronted with expressions of anger by artists, writers, arts administrators, and other supporters of First Amendment rights, who mobilized to form such organizations as Art + (Art Positive), Frohnmayer then took another tack. "I believe," he explained, "that political discourse ought to be in the political arena and not in a show sponsored by the Endowment."[5] This language reiterated almost verbatim the idealist response of Thomas Messer, who, eighteen years earlier, as director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, had employed the same logic to justify his decision to suppress a scheduled Hans Haacke exhibition. From Messer's perspective, it was better to cancel the exhibition than to display works by Haacke that documented the shady business practices of a group of Manhattan slumlords. As Messer said, "Art may have social and political consequences, but these, we believe, are furthered by indirection and by the generalized, exemplary force that works of art may exert upon the environment."[6] When Frohnmayer retreated from this position and reinstated the grant to Artists Space (with the proviso that the funds not be used to help pay for the offending exhibition catalogue), it was only a matter of time before the Bush administration forced him to resign.

Taken at face value, Gran Fury's "Art Is Not Enough" design can function either as art or as activism, but not as both. Notwithstanding the work's implicitly harsh judgment of its own artistic or political worth, even before the collective's formation in 1987, propagandistic projects like theirs were enthusiastically being claimed for "art" by vanguard critics and at least one museum curator. In July 1987, only four months after the formation of New York's AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), William Olander, then curator at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, met with a group of ACT UP members—some self-identified artists, others not—in order to discuss how they might use the museum's window on lower Broadway to create an activist intervention.

In the flyer accompanying that intervention, a multimedium window installation titled *Let the Record Show...*, Olander was careful to claim *both* the political and the artistic status of that project as well as the "Silence=Death" posters that had begun appearing throughout lower Manhattan during the winter and spring of 1987. "There was no question," Olander observed, that the anonymous poster was designed "to provoke and heighten awareness of the AIDS crisis." Indeed, he claimed that the poster had first alerted him to the existence of AIDS activism. But, he added, "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." Olander went on to describe *Let the Record Show...* in similar terms, insisting once again upon the unity of its propagandistic function and of its status as art. "Throughout history," he observed, "all periods of intense crisis have inspired works of art whose functions were often extra-artistic. Let's cite just [one] of the more obvious modern examples: Jacques-Louis David's *La Mort de Marat*, painted in 1793."[7]

Certainly, then, Gran Fury's design for the centerfold of Grover's exhibition catalogue did not mark the first time that cultural practitioners have used their art for extra-artistic ends, or even to declare art inadequate as a response to a social crisis. Near the beginning of the Depression-era classic *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, author James Agee addresses his own writing, and declares, "Above all else: in God's name don't think of it as Art."[8] Agee had, after all, initiated the project with famed photographer Walker Evans, whose distinctive photographs appeared in an uncaptioned section preceding the text. But Agee evidently believed that any attempt to consider their project "Art" would limit the book's potential social or political effectiveness by bracketing it off from the specific conditions of rural poverty that Agee and Evans sought to bring to the attention of the American public. It would, in effect, neutralize the materiality of their encounter with three sharecropper families of Alabama by subjecting their report to the abstract, generalizing, and distancing effects of the aesthetic gaze.

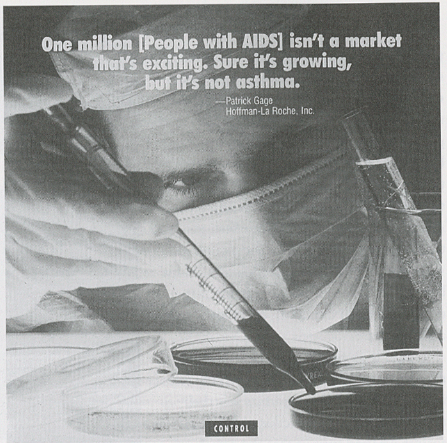


ACT UP, *Let the Record Show*, 1987, mixed-media installation, window of the New Museum, New York City. Photo courtesy of Tom Kalin.

Gran Fury's design suggests an even more insistent disavowal of its own status as art, going beyond urging artists and their public to become involved in the struggle against AIDS to suggest that the only kind of response to the epidemic that could really matter at that time was "collective direct action to end the AIDS crisis." Given the likelihood that Gran Fury's work would continue to inspire members of the contemporary art world in which idealist aesthetics had already been challenged by the postmodernist "social aesthetics" of the late 1970s and early '80s, it is hardly surprising that, from its inception, Gran Fury was beset by more than a hint of apprehension regarding the possibility of their own project being taken for "Art." In fact, it has been reported that these concerns were voiced at the meeting in which members of the ACT UP subcommittee responsible for creating *Let the Record Show...* resolved to continue working together under the rubric Gran Fury. "We have to get out of SoHo," one member insisted, "get out of the art world."[9]

Gran Fury did get out of SoHo; but even on those occasions when its projects did manage to get out of the art world, their public interventions rarely escaped the attention of critics, curators, and art historians who had little difficulty embracing them as both activism and art. Moreover, much of what Gran Fury produced became economically feasible because prestigious contemporary arts institutions helped to pay for them. It was not unusual for museums to commission projects from the collective, given the eagerness of such institutions to be (seen as) responsive to the epidemic. Thus, Gran Fury's participation in the Whitney Museum's *Image World*

Gran Fury, *New York Crimes* (detail), 1989, four-page newspaper, web offset, each page 22 3/4 x 15 in. Photo courtesy of Tom Kalin. Art Matters grant recipients 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991.


One million [People with AIDS] isn't a market that's exciting. Sure it's growing, but it's not asthma.
—Patrick Gage
Hoffman-La Roche, Inc.
CONTROL

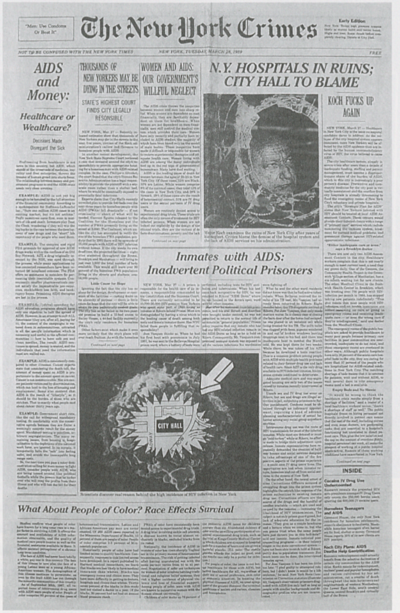
(1988–89), the New Museum's *The Decade Show* (1990), and the Venice Biennale (1990), to name only a few of the major art-world shows they joined, was in part a balm to the art world's growing sense of inadequacy in the face of the AIDS crisis.

Sometimes the sponsoring institutions got more than they bargained for, with the effect that Gran Fury's message did get well beyond the art world's confines. This occurred most spectacularly in the case of the 1990 Venice Biennale, to which Gran Fury sent *The Pope and the Penis*, a work consisting of two billboard designs, one challenging Catholic doctrine on AIDS education and featuring a photograph of the Pope John Paul II, the other urging condom use and featuring a photograph of an erect penis. Biennale director Giovanni Carandente vowed to resign if the work were exhibited, and Italian customs officials refused to release it from the airport in Venice. Gran Fury promptly held a press conference in their empty exhibition space, and this resulted, predictably, in nationwide headlines trumpeting "Scandalo alla Biennale." Within two days, the work was released from customs and installed at the Bienniale. Carendente never resigned. As has often happened in the course of the American culture wars, in this instance, the threat of censorship actually broadened the public discussion of issues that might otherwise have been contained.[10]

During the AIDS crisis of the late 1980s, arts institutions became accustomed, if not necessarily committed, to the political engagement of social aesthetics. In fact, they became so comfortable with the idea that on September 5, 1988, ACT UP (NY) became the recipient of a "Bessie," the Village Voice's "Oscar" for distinction in the performing arts. Its actions were thereby lauded as street theater, which is to say, taken as a form of art.[11] From the vantage point of groups like Gran Fury, it was most assuredly worth the risk of having their projects be taken for art. That risk was more than compensated for by the valuable resources and unprecedented visibility that could be provided by contemporary arts institutions during the late 1980s.

Though the polemical debates and critical practices that marked the emergence of postmodernist art during the late 1970s and early '80s paved the way for the institutional support of the second-generation artists' responses to AIDS, the extent of that institutional embrace for cultural activism would have been unthinkable outside of the immediate context of the state of emergency that took hold during the AIDS crisis of the late 1980s. Yet, that same sense of emergency, which prompted artists and arts administrators to devise innovative forms of cultural activism, also had the polarizing effect of intensifying disregard for cultural practices that some activists considered irrelevant to the struggle against AIDS.

For example, *Against Nature* was an exhibition (and accompanying catalogue) devoted to art and writing by gay men. It opened at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) in January 1988 amid threats of a hostile demonstration by local AIDS activists. Writing seven years later about their controversial project, artist Richard Hawkins (a student at CalArts when Jan Zita Grover was teaching there) and writer Dennis Cooper recalled the pressure to conform to a standard of cultural activism that coalesced as the mass movement of AIDS activism emerged in 1987:


"Men: Use Condoms Or Beat It"

The New York Crimes

Early Edition

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

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KOCH FUCKS UP AGAIN

Inmates with AIDS: Inadvertent Political Prisoners

Scientists discover real reason behind the high incidence of HIV infection in New York

What About People of Color? Race Effects Survival

INSIDE

Cocaine IV Drug Use Underconsidered

Homeless Teenagers and AIDS

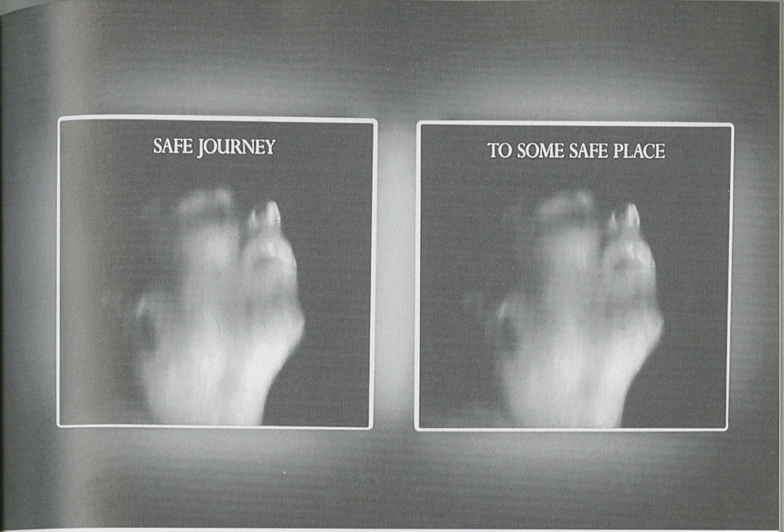
Koch City Plans: AIDS Deaths Help Gentrification

Gran Fury, *New York Crimes*, 1989, four-page newspaper, web offset, each page 22 3/4 x 15 in. Photo courtesy of Tom Kalin. Art Matters grant recipients 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991.

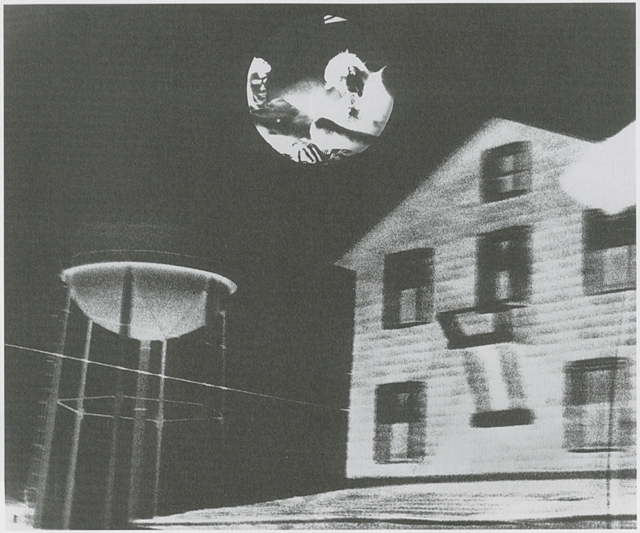
> *Ingrained in "Against Nature" was a reaction against contemporary art-hating activism, the kind heralded by such critics as Douglas Crimp and entrenched in a kind of "put down your paintbrushes; this is war" production. A practice we perceived as growing progressively more pervasive, more conservative, 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 accusatory to the point that all work outside of such prescribed practices was condemned as phobic, unengaged and removed from social significance or import.*[12]

As much as any other individual, Douglas Crimp (who was, significantly, one of the most forceful advocates throughout the early 1980s of "critical" postmodernism) helped to establish the theoretical rationale for the proscriptiveness that Hawkins and Cooper describe. That theoretical justification was evident in an impassioned introductory essay to a special 1987 issue of the journal *October* devoted to "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism." In that essay, Crimp described the presiding cultural situation in which a number of apparently concerned and publicly prominent individuals described AIDS as a tragedy, though not a political scandal. Crimp quoted Elizabeth Taylor, gay journalist Richard Goldstein, and art historian Robert Rosenblum, all of whom had suggested in different ways that art could transcend the tragedy of AIDS, but could do nothing to end it. The only possible exception, according to Rosenblum, was through the sale of art works to provide financial support for scientific research and AIDS service organizations. Crimp responded to these statements in a manner that was notably consistent with his response to the continued (and, from his perspective, irrational) proliferation of conventional cultural practices throughout the early '80s: he condemned them as the inevitable effect of an "idealist" view of art, whose eradication he consistently advocated. "Art *does* have the power to save lives," Crimp insisted, "and it is this very power that must be recognized, fostered, and supported in every way possible." "But if we are to do this," he continued, in a restatement of the position he had occupied before the AIDS crisis, "we will have to abandon the idealist conception of art. We don't need a cultural renaissance; we need cultural practices actively participating in the struggle against AIDS and its cultural consequences." (In Grover's catalogue, this frequently cited passage appears as one of ten "statements" on AIDS, in bold type under hefty Roman numerals on a double-page spread, appearing like nothing so much as the Ten Commandments of AIDS.)

There was a critical precedent for this kind of either/or account, in which art that has "the power to save lives" must be supported "in every way possible," including, necessarily, the abandonment of the "idealist conception of art." Crimp's formulation explicitly recalls Roland Barthes's influential proposition that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author." Of course, Barthes's proposition—which is so redolent of the emancipatory ideals of the late 1960s—undergirded all aspects of American critical postmodernism in the late 1970s and early '80s. But its specific application within the context of contemporary art did more to cast aspersions on the imaginary coherences and sensual pleasures of art than it did to erode the mystique of artist/authors like Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, Jenny Holzer, and Barbara Kruger, whose work it effectively described. Similarly, Crimp's statement, and the essay that contained it, inspired the work of cultural activists in their struggle against AIDS. But even as it empowered some, this critical position posed problems for others, who, notwithstanding the AIDS crisis (indeed, perhaps because of it), continued to seek whatever comfort could be gained in aesthetic experiences that might well be identified with the idealist conception of art. However, by the end of the 1980s, the responses of some artists to the epidemic made it possible to see how altogether inappropriate it was to feel obliged to choose between supporting art that has "the power to save lives" and art that by virtue of its imaginary coherence and symbolic pleasures merely helps people to get by.



Donald Moffett, *Safe Journey To Some Safe Place*, 1989, backlit cibatransparency, 25 1/2 x 56 x 4 in. Photo courtesy of the artist. Art Matters grant recipient, 1990.



David Wojnarowicz, *Sex Series (house)*, 1988–89, silver print, 31 x 34 in. Photo courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York. Art Matters recipient 1989, 1990, 1991.

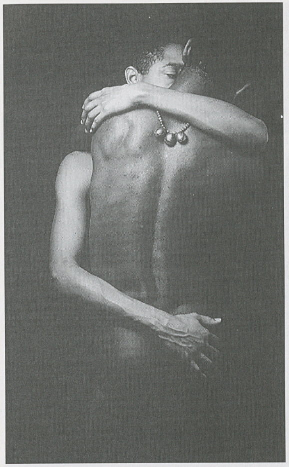
There was certainly a mutually supportive correlation of what Grover described as the second-generation artists' response to AIDS and the activist mobilization surrounding AIDS, but not all second-generation artists' responses were collectively produced or overtly political. nor were they always encountered outside or on the margins of the art world, or in what is widely understood to be "public" space. To cite only two of the most well-known examples, David Wojnarowicz and Felix Gonzalez-Torres created art for the "private" confines of the domestic interior, the art gallery, and the museum. Their work, however, demonstrated how problematic it could be to presume the existence of "privacy" from the vantage point of social subjects whose sexuality the Supreme Court had declared a public matter (in *Bowers* v. *Hardwick*, 1986). Their works often conveyed the political stakes in the AIDS crisis while also attending to the epidemic's psychic dimensions and emotional burdens. This is evident, for example, in Wojnarowicz's paintings "from sleep," and in his group of photomontages titled *The Sex Series (for Marion Scemama)* (1988–89).

In the latter works, the artist began with negatively printed images of powerful natural and man-made forces (such as a tornado, a freight train, a storm-tossed ship at sea, a flooded forest, or parachutists diving from military aircraft) onto which he then superimposed circular, peepholelike views onto pornographic vignettes (gay and straight), or images of money, microbes, a child's skeleton, a street demonstration, the multiply pierced torso of St. Sebastian, etc. Overlaying this imagery, he placed one or more screens of text, including fragments from newspaper articles (reporting, for example, the intensification of antigay violence) or his own forceful and poetic writings about love, sex, and memory in the age of AIDS. The *Sex Series* remains one of the most unsettling and moving evocations of the anxieties produced by living through the most desperate years of the AIDS crisis.

Gonzalez-Torres also created works that highlighted the ideological instrumentality of the unevenly applied boundary between the "private" and "public" aspects of American social life. This is evident especially in his unprepossessing framed photostats in which a few rows of white-lettered names and dates set against a matte black ground describe the profound privacy of free association amid the saturation of psychic life with public concerns. Thus, a work from 1987 reads: "*Alabama 1964 Safer Sex 1985 Disco/Donuts 1979 Cardinal O'Connor 1987/Klaus Barbie 1944 Napalm 1972 C.O.D.*"

But the art world's response to AIDS was not limited to agitprop and, by turns, poetic and politically acute works of art. During the winter of 1988, four gay New Yorkers—curators Gary Garrels, William Olander, Thomas Sokolowski, and art writer Robert Atkins—met at Sokolowski's Greenwich Village apartment to discuss what might be done to enlist arts institutions like their own in the struggle against AIDS. According to Sokolowski, the four participants each agreed to invite five more like-minded cultural practitioners to attend a second meeting. That meeting, which took place at New York University's Grey Art Gallery (where Sokolowski was director), led to the formation of Visual AIDS, an organization whose initial purpose Sokolowski has characterized as "public relations." By that phrase, he means that the organization was created to help coordinate AIDS-related arts programming while taking full advantage of the membership's art-world and media connections to ensure that such events received as much press coverage as possible.[13]

Given the inherent resistance to political programming at New York's prestigious arts institutions, the members of Visual AIDS adopted a proactive position. They developed the concept for the "Day Without Art" (which was observed for the first time on World AIDS Day, December 1, 1989) as a way for museums to memorialize AIDS deaths by dimming lights, draping their spaces, or closing altogether; the mode of commemoration was left to the individual



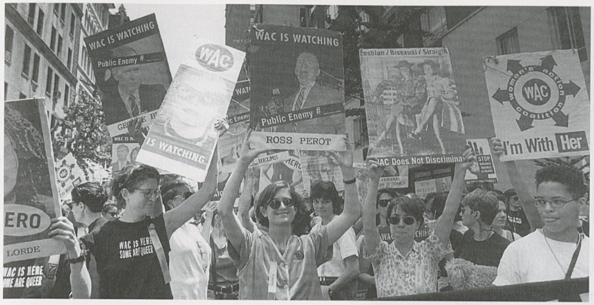
Lyle Ashton Harris, *Embrace*, 1993, duraflex print, 48 x 40 in. Photo courtesy of Jack Tilton Gallery. Art Matters grant recipient, 1990, 1992.

institutions. Inspired by the Vietnam-era moratoriums on museums organized by the Art Workers' Coalition and the Guerrilla Art Action Group, the Day Without Art was a political protest of a different sort. Unlike its historic predecessors, however, this action had a metaphoric dimension, inasmuch as the shuttered galleries and draped works of art suggested the disappearances that AIDS was effecting in and out of the art world.

True to the mandate of Visual AIDS, the first Day Without Art attracted a good deal of press attention, mostly uncritical pieces like the one I wrote for the *Village Voice* at the suggestion of its art editor, Jeff Weinstein. Rereading that article now, its relentlessly affirmative tone revives in me the embarrassment I felt soon after the article was published. Those feelings first surfaced when I sat in the audience at a panel discussion sponsored by the Dia Art Foundation listening to one panelist, Douglas Crimp, as he expressed puzzlement regarding the concept of the Day Without Art, and, in particular, the method that the Metropolitan Museum of Art had chosen to observe the event. Regarding the museum's decision to temporarily remove Picasso's *Portrait of Gertrude Stein* from display, Crimp wondered wryly if this gesture was supposed to symbolize lesbian invisibility. Clearly, within the context of the AIDS crisis, every institutional gesture, every public utterance, was subject to such scrutiny.

Despite Crimp's withering critique of the Day Without Art, the event did succeed according to one standard applied to it by members of Visual AIDS: it established an effectively replicable model that functioned nationally and internationally to bring a modicum of AIDS awareness where little might otherwise have existed. Even more successful in this sense, and ultimately far more controversial, was the Ribbon Project which was also inaugurated by members of Visual AIDS as a means of heightening AIDS awareness. First sported on the gowns and tuxedos of celebrities on the occasion of the nationally telecast Tony Awards in 1991, the red ribbon proliferated to such an extent that it became the most visible symbol of what cultural critic Daniel Harris denounced as "the kitschification of AIDS."

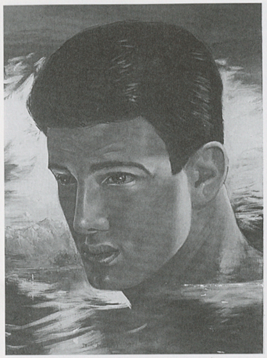
Early in the '90s, the collectively produced, publicly situated, graphic evidence of the AIDS activist struggle (Grover's second-generation artists' responses) began to disappear from public space.



Womens' Action Coalition (WAC), New York City Gay Pride March, June 28, 1992, blueprint poster multiples designed by Bethany Johns. Photo courtesy of Teri Slotkin.

This diminished cultural profile corresponded with the gradual erosion of the mass movement of AIDS activism. Among the most frequently cited causes for that shift are the many deaths among ACT UP members and the ensuing dissension, exhaustion, and frustration among survivors—characteristic signs of the "burnout" that would only intensify as the years passed without any prospect of an end to the crisis. Mary Patten, a Chicago-based cultural activist, recently identified another, less widely acknowledged and decidedly more paradoxical factor in the enervation of the mass movement of AIDS activism. Patten noticed a strategic faultline where one might least be expected: within ACT UP's much-vaunted success "in seizing the public space of spectacle in the media to articulate, and indeed reframe, the debate and crisis about AIDS." Patten argues that ACT UP's grasp of the power of representation contained within it "some of the very contradictions that contributed to the demoralization of the movement." "Despite our sophisticated manipulation of the broader culture's media through our direct actions, street theater, and counter-information," she wrote, "we neither fully anticipated the 'public's' eventual lack of interest in us and in the AIDS crisis, nor the ease with which our theater, our images, and our political subculture would get absorbed as 'queer style.' "[14]

To say that the visual manifestations of AIDS activist art became less visible during the early '90s is not to say that public space was stripped of all signs of cultural activism. Posters by activist collectives such as Fierce Pussy and Dyke Action Machine provided ample public evidence of the determination of lesbians to end their long-standing invisibility, and to protest the violence that inevitably accompanied their increased visibility. Similarly, posters and street actions by the Women's Action Coalition (WAC) and the Women's Health Action Mobilization (WHAM) offered evidence of women's



Arnold Fern, *It Is Beautiful There*, 1992, oil paint on canvas, 72 x 54 in. Courtesy of Feature Gallery.

determination to defend reproductive rights from conservative assault and to protest inadequate research of breast cancer and other conditions that adversely affect the health of women.

Neither did the diminished visibility of AIDS activist art mean that artists who were involved in the collective cultural response to AIDS simply retreated to apolitical cultural practices. Many artists who had participated in the collective cultural response to AIDS did, in fact, return to the studio. In producing individual works of art, though, they were now responding in part to another epidemic: antigay violence. Coinciding as it did with the continued perception of AIDS as the fault of sexually insatiable gay men, antigay violence constituted one aspect of the backlash against the heightened visibility of gay men and lesbians with nothing left to lose. Indeed, by the end of the 1980s, physical assaults on gay men and lesbians increased both in incidence and severity in urban and rural settings. Ultimately, the situation reached the point where urban-dwelling queers were compelled to organize to form civil defense groups like New York's Pink Panthers to protect themselves in their own neighborhoods.[15]

Seemingly random acts of antigay brutality were fueled by another form of violence: the discrete and programmatic form of homophobia embodied in the U.S. government's neglect of the epidemic and in the messages emanating from the Church, the State, and the media. How else is one to describe the Supreme Court's ruling in *Bowers* v. *Hardwick* but in terms of an assault—on the rights of gay men and lesbians to the most rudimentary form of privacy? How else is one to describe the 1987 Helms Amendment that prohibited federal support for the production and distribution of HIV-prevention education materials that "promote, encourage or condone homosexual sexual activities" but in terms of an assault—on the very lives of gay men? How else is one to describe Senator Helms's exploitation of the Gay Men's Health Crisis's (GMHC) publication *Safer Sex Comix* to promote the virtually unanimous adoption of his legislative prohibitions than as an assault—on gay representation?

Lesbian and gay artists also responded to the attempted suppression of queer representations with an outpouring of works in every medium that were more uncompromising in their confrontational (homo-)sexual content than anything ever before seen in contemporary art galleries, museums, performance spaces, as well as on the walls of city streets. Between 1989 and 1992, artists went well beyond the discreetly coded references to same-sex affection in the (gay) art of Jasper Johns, Robert Indiana, Andy Warhol, and David Hockney to embody the ethos of the "queer nationalism" that erupted in 1990 among younger members of ACT UP.[16]

Attempting to characterize the cultural consequences of AIDS—to impose an order onto its disorderly unfolding, let alone to outline what is a complex and contradictory cultural process—is a hazardous business. This is not only because of the scope and complexity of such an undertaking, but also because the circumstances of an epidemic that claims so many individual lives demand that attention be paid to the concrete, individual experience. To assert that the "second-generation," or activist, responses to AIDS gradually disappeared in the early 1990s is to risk misleading the reader. While the claim is true as far as it goes, it must be qualified. It would be inaccurate to suggest, for example, that the gradual disappearance of the activist cultural responses to AIDS was symptomatic of a diminished cultural prominence of AIDS. For, in film and video, in literature and the performing arts, AIDS continued to dominate American culture well into the 1990s. To cite one particularly prominent example, Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America: Part One: Millenium Approaches*, which only opened on Broadway in April 1993.

In a recent interview, filmmaker and activist Gregg Bordowitz pointed out that in the play's final act, Kushner effects a significant transformation in the spectator's view of the person with AIDS (PWA). Bordowitz's remark stems from his own long-standing concern over the significant historical transformations in the culturally constructed image of the PWA. Since the epidemic's emergence, the PWA has moved from being a demonized, powerless victim to being a heroic activist street guerrilla; from being the angelic conscience of a nation to being, in the last act of *Angels in America*, simply one citizen addressing another.[17] Bordowitz's observations seem especially noteworthy in this context inasmuch as they suggest another model for periodizing the cultural consequences of AIDS, one that is neither more nor less arbitrary nor potentially insightful than the model Grover adopted in 1989.

AIDS activism did not disappear during the early 1990s. Rather, the methods of many of its practitioners merely changed. Increasingly, members of ACT UP found themselves working within or alongside mainstream AIDS service organizations and the medical research establishment that ACT UP had hounded for years. For example, during the winter of 1991-92, members of the Treatment Data Group, an ACT UP subcommittee that had tracked the progress (and lack of progress) of new treatment options for people with HIV/AIDS, formed a new entity called the Treatment Action Group (TAG). Although TAG members retained ties to ACT UP, the new collective identity enabled them to participate independently within advisory and oversight groups, some of which (like the Office of AIDS Research) were directly tied to the research establishment.[18]

In 1995, Gran Fury, its membership depleted since 1992, criticized such developments in a document that marked the artist/activist collective's own official dissolution. Reflecting on the altered circumstances of the mid-'90s relative to the peak of AIDS activism a half-decade earlier, the statement charged that "by including activists in the inner circles of the research establishment, the system which activists set out to change neutralized their dissent." What Gran Fury failed to mention was the extent to which such activists had already helped to change "the system."[19] The same might be said about the gradual disappearance of AIDS activist graphics from public spaces. That, too, reflected the success of such practices in fulfilling the related goals of helping to maintain the energy and focus of the mass movement of AIDS activism and to advance the terms of the counternarrative opposing the media constructions of AIDS and people with AIDS.

Also contributing to the erosion of the mass movement of AIDS activism by 1993 was the election of a President who had campaigned on a platform that included gay-friendly pledges. After a dozen years of openly hostile and unapologetically homophobic Republican rule, it was a relief to have a Democrat in the White House, who at least hoped to end the military's ban on lesbians and gay men, and to respond more generously to AIDS research. The fact that President Clinton made such a mess of these pledges, that he was ultimately no more willing to take political risks than he was of acting on political principle, did little to counter the pacifying effect of his benign, empathetic presence.

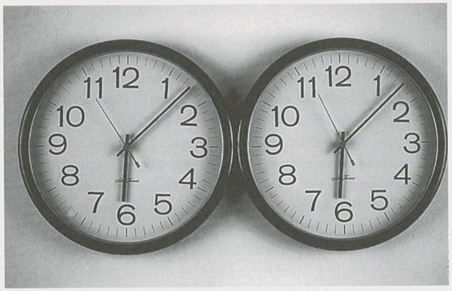
Outside of the political preconditions for the waning of the second-generation artists' responses to AIDS was the growing realization among artist/activists that their commitment to political struggle and collective process had come at a cost: the neglect of other cultural practices that—unlike agitprop—were better suited to contending with the sadness and uncertainty that deepened as the epidemic descended into its darkest and most hopeless period.

Partly overlapping with the inundation of erotomania during the early '90s was a class of art that makes it possible to extend Grover's periodization to encompass a third generation of artists' responses to AIDS. In the more measured work typical of this "generation," reflection and metaphor predominate. While the first-generation responses had attempted to give poetic shape to the grief, isolation, terror, and confusion of the epidemic's earliest years, the second-generation responses had embodied the hope implicit in the mass mobilization of AIDS activism. But the third-generation responses corresponded with the mounting sense of exhaustion and hopelessness regarding the epidemic which culminated in 1993 with the 10th International Conference on AIDS. In the unremittingly bleak reports from Berlin, scientists testified to the ineffectuality of existing drug treatments and to a pandemic with no end in sight.

But, again, it seems important to hold back on this attempt to impose an orderly schema by noting that all three "generations" of artists' responses to AIDS coexist and to some extent even survive to this day. The Archive Project, formed in 1994, continues to provide ample evidence of the depth and qualitative range of the art that has been, and is still being, produced in the shadow of the epidemic. Conceived by artist Frank Moore, and administered under the auspices of Visual AIDS, the Archive Project documents—and in that sense preserves—the works of any artist living with HIV/AIDS, who, for whatever reason, wants help in documenting his or her work.

Further proof of the limited utility of the periodizing system is evident in the case of Moore's own art. His paintings only achieved prominence during the mid-1990s, despite their use of traditional figuration and genres (characteristic of the first-generation artist's responses to AIDS) to articulate the political as well as the personal dimensions of the epidemic (as was characteristic of a second-generation responses). Yet, by the time Moore's alternately angry and at times whimsical magic realism received the kind of attention it deserved, it had in some ways become the exception to the rule of art that was alluding to the epidemic in more abstract, allusive, and poetic ways.

In very different ways, artists such as Jim Hodges, Tony Feher, Michael Jenkins, John Lindell, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Siobian Liddel, and Zoe Leonard have each employed ephemeral materials and processes to convey and, in some cases, to enact symbolically, transitoriness, vulnerability, privation, loss, and need. In Gonzalez-Torres's accumulations of candies and stacks of offset posters from the late 1980s and early '90s, gradual disappearance (viewers are invited to remove the work's constituent parts) is countered by the artist's stipulation that such works (can) be replenished. Though often interpreted as a challenge to traditional methods of distributing works of art, or as proof of the artist's "generosity," another way to read this strategy is as a symbolic suggestion of immortality. Other works by Gonzalez-Torres, as well as some by Lindell, Jenkins, Donald Moffett, Arnold Fern, Robert Flack, and Brett Reichman,

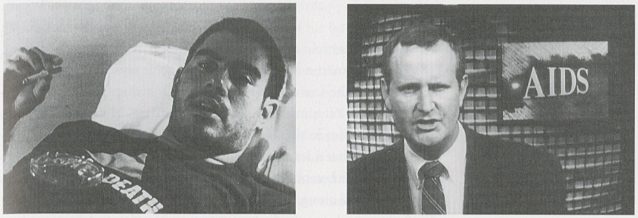


Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, 1987–90, clocks, 14 x 28 x 2 3/4. Photo courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery. Art Matters grant recipient, 1988.

employ more traditional symbolisms to evoke ideas and emotions that pertain to mortality and loss in the context of queer sexual identity.

Thus, Gonzalez-Torres poetically revises Minimalist seriality in *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, 1989, in which a pair of battery-operated Seth Thomas clocks imply the sameness in same-sex love, and the end that awaits even perfect couples as the health of one or the other fails. And, while Reichman's paintings of Baroque mirrors and clocks suggest the fussy aestheticism of stereotypically gay male "sensibility," the fact that these objects are so often depicted as if caught in a pendulumlike, stop-action motion suggests the passage of time, which these paintings symbolically arrest. Such works give poetic form to the experience of loss, but the extent to which they are memorial in purpose (or in some other way are meant to assist in the process of grieving) means that they could just as easily be identified with the first-generation artists' response to AIDS. (Consider as well, for example, Gonzalez-Torres's jigsaw-puzzle photographs of fragments of love letters, Donald Moffett's *E. Eichelberger* (1990), Jim Hodges's handsewn cascades of flowers, Zoe Leonard's similarly sewn pieces of fruit, etc.)

Even in film and video—the preferred mediums among many cultural activists—one can detect a third-generation artists' response to AIDS. Many works stand in stark contrast to the assiduously upbeat messages of earlier AIDS-related works. Peter Friedman's harrowing documentary, *Silverlake Life: The View from Here* (1993), conveys an early '90s despair, as well as rage, in its selections from Tom Joslin's video diary documenting his own decline. Finally, Joslin can no longer continue the video record, and it is picked up by Friedman, who unblinkingly continues right through the moment of Joslin's death. Somewhat similarly, Marlon Riggs's final work, *Black Is. . . Black Ain't* (1995), combines documentary footage—including the first-person testimony of a notably enfeebled Riggs in his hospital bed—with archival footage and allegorical sequences to address the painful tension between gay and black identities, which Riggs had explored in his ground-breaking film *Tongues Untied* (1989). Other films that embodied the pessimism of the early '90s include Derek Jarman's final film, the imageless *Blue* (1993), and Gregg Bordowitz's otherwise very different work, *Fast Trip, Long Drop* (1993). In addition to reflecting on his fate as a person with AIDS, Bordowitz departs in *Fast Trip* from his earlier AIDS-activist videos with dramatic sequences in which his alter-ego, Altes Allesman, mocks the upbeat view of people "surviving and thriving" with AIDS—a view that he and other media activists had done so much for years to promote as an indispensable element in the construction of an empowering AIDS counternarrative.



Gregg Bordowitz, *Fast Trip, Long Drop*, 1993. Film stills courtesy of the artist. Art Matters grant recipient, 1990, 1995, 1997.

Outside of film and video, the extreme discretion of the third-generation artists' responses to AIDS suggests the extent to which a still broader range of works might be understood in terms of the epidemic. Indeed, to those whose lives have been unalterably transformed by AIDS, the range of cultural experiences that can bring the epidemic to mind can seem as limitless as encounters with it are unpredictable. On the other hand, given the third-generation artist's tendency to work in abstraction and allegory, one might well comprehend much of this work in vague terms as, say, a function of millennial dread. This possibility highlights the way in which the third-generation artists' responses to AIDS has stripped such art of the kind of specificity that did so much to foreground the distinctly political dimensions of a death from AIDS, as distinct from the death of a Nicaraguan child in a mudslide, or the abstract notion of "death" as a natural and universal fact of life. The ability to read so many poetic and abstract works in relation to AIDS throughout the early 1990s was highly dependent upon such contingencies as the atmosphere of pervasive gloom that shaped them and into which they emerged.

It had been an article of faith among AIDS activists since the late 1980s that gay men radically transformed their sexual practices, incorporating the use of condoms to greatly reduce the rate of HIV-infection. Yet, during the early 1990s, the publication of a number of studies in the United States suggested that safer sex education had been less than a complete success. These studies revealed that a substantial proportion of gay men had been engaging in unsafe sex all along, that others were putting themselves at risk of infection, and that the lives of gay men of color and younger gay men were especially endangered. Coming shortly after the news from Berlin, the first reports of the so-called "second wave" of HIV-infection appeared in the American press.[20] After reviewing the latest studies, members of the San Francisco-based Gay and Lesbian Medical Association found the data sufficiently alarming to convene a national summit to address the problem. In July 1994, physicians, HIV-prevention educators, psychologists and activists met in Dallas and concluded that gay men are "in crisis, a crisis that is largely unacknowledged."[21]

One of the leading figures in breaking the silence about the alarming rates of HIV-infection among gay men was Berkeley-based clinical psychologist Walt Odets. At the Dallas conference he declared that existing methods of HIV-prevention education—essentially unchanged since the late 1980s—had become as much a part of the problem as they had been of the solution. Odets based his argument on his evaluation of the HIV-negative gay male patients in his clinical practice. He isolated a number of psychological and social factors that contribute to the fact that such men might knowingly put themselves at risk of infection. Among these factors were feelings of guilt about surviving the deaths of lovers and friends, envy of the support and respect that gay communities accorded people with AIDS, desire to be punished for sexual desires that gay men had been raised to despise, fear of losing one's sense of connection to those who have died, and eagerness to be done with waiting for a seroconversion that is perceived as inevitable. Odets criticized HIV-prevention campaigns for ignoring the emotionally devastating context in which HIV-negative gay men have been told to practice safe sex for the rest of their lives. Such methods, he found, implicitly devalue gay experience by failing to distinguish between the degrees of risk in different kinds of gay sex.

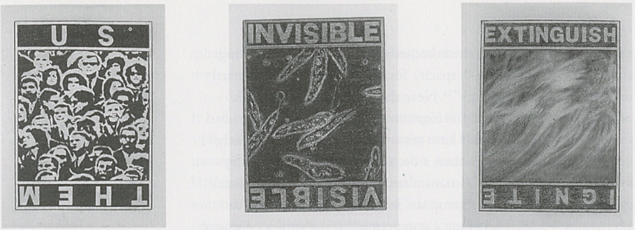
Odets also had the courage to take issue with what he calls, after William James, the "deification of survival." Survival, Odets told the audience in Dallas, must mean something more than just staying alive; it must include the "capacity for love, intimacy, and a sexual expression of such feelings."[22] Near the end of his book, *In the Shadow of the Epidemic*, Odets examines the widespread tendency to condemn gay men who have seroconverted relatively recently, despite the fact that more than a decade into the epidemic they know full well how HIV is transmitted. In the book's penultimate chapter—devoted to exploring the meaning of survival and its alternatives—Odets recounts a tense conversation with a colleague and friend in which the two gingerly approach, and finally explore, their feelings about such belated seroconversions among their sophisticated and well-informed clientele. Is it true, as conventional belief would have it, that there is nothing worse that can occur to a patient (and to the patient's psychotherapist) than for the patient to become HIV-positive?

After some hesitation, which manifests the fear of departing from this de facto rule of psychotherapeutic ethics in the age of AIDS, Odets and his friend realize that they both share in the belief that it is worse for a patient to remain HIV-negative if such biological well-being comes at the cost of an emotional and sexual demise. For Odets, the tendency to judge such seroconversions as a failure of mental health provides vivid evidence of the homophobia in heterosexist societies. Moreover, he writes that it reflects the sweeping negation of "the erotic life" that has been promulgated in the West since the sixteenth century by Judeo-Christian traditions. Such traditions, he writes, are "the instruments of society, not its antagonists," concerned, as they are, with

> *conformity, social contribution, and thus survival per se. As Jeffersonian democrats—and as Puritans—we envision erotic life as misinformed, selfish, or pathological. Despite the life-affirming meanings of eroticism, it brings to most of us who have in the name of society destroyed so much on Earth, nothing but a vision of beastliness and social annihilation.*[23]

Outside of a study like Odets's, or a memoir such as Mark Doty's extraordinary *Heaven's Coast*, it would be difficult to imagine such a provocative account of the challenges that AIDS posed to gay men between 1992 and 1996. Odets's book transcends its function as a clinical study to bear witness to the plague—a goal that the author acknowledges by invoking the model of Holocaust survivor Primo Levi in an epilogue that addresses the idea and the practice of "bearing witness."

The political pressure to prize biological survival even at the cost of one's emotional well-being informed one aspect of the divisive debate that erupted within gay communities as gay men absorbed the news of the "second wave"—or perhaps merely adjusted to the



Brad Melamed, *Crowd, Euglena, Fire*, 1988, crayon on vellum, each 12 x 9 in. Photo courtesy of the artist. Art Matters grant recipient, 1990.

fact that the "first wave" of HIV-infection had never really crested after all. During the fall and winter of 1994–95, both gay journalist Michelangelo Signorile and queer theorist Michael Warner published articles (in *Out Magazine* and the *Village Voice*, respectively) in which they recounted their personal experiences of engaging in unprotected anal sex. Though both articles were prompted as much by Odets's work as by personal alarm about their own unsafe sexual experiences, they represented strikingly different perspectives on the cause and significance of having put themselves at risk of infection.

Writing from the perspective of someone who found it irresistible to fuck a "classic gay hunk" without a condom, Signorile responded to this situation by indicting the gay cultural obsession with sex and the oppressively defined gay male physical ideal. Such a culture undermines self-esteem, he argued, thereby creating the preconditions for the high rates of suicide, alcohol and drug abuse, and unsafe sex among gay men. Warner, on the other hand, engaged in an Odets-style examination of the social, cultural, and psychological factors that undermined his ability to sustain risk-reduction practices. Rather than chastising himself or gay culture for taking such risks, Warner insisted upon the importance of gay male sexual expression. In the different perspectives of these authors—one condemning the commercialized legacy of gay male sexual liberation; the other eager to defend sexual freedom and to understand how it might be that gay men might risk their lives for sexual contact—one can find the fundamental opposing positions of what became an acrimonious debate over how to reinvent HIV-prevention education for gay men, and how to define the terms by which gay community might be revitalized after the devastation of AIDS.

The principles at stake in this debate extend well beyond the confines of the gay communities in which it first surfaced. They apply wherever conservatives seek to reverse the emancipatory personal and political legacy of the 1960s and early '70s. Thus, on one side are those who claim that gay culture should be redefined to promote long-term monogamous relationships and the development of a gay sexual ethic or "ecology."[24] On the other side are those (including the activists who came together during the spring of 1997 to form a new group, Sex Panic!) who decry this position as an acquiescence to (straight) social norms, and advocate a radical queer opposition to the limitations and inhibitions that are imposed by normative social and sexual roles.[25] Prominent on both sides of this debate, however, were some of the very same individuals who had been key participants within ACT UP. This suggests the persistence of the kind of internal political divisions that had always been present within the coalition and that finally had contributed to its collapse.

In the midst of this debate, news of effective drug therapies and the resulting reconstruction of AIDS in the media as a "chronic manageable disease" prompted more than a few claims that the AIDS crisis was over.[26] The emergence of the debate concerning the future of gay community and sexuality presumes, if not the end of AIDS, then at least the prospect of a future worth fighting over.

But how do artists respond in their work to dramatically declining death rates? And how might they respond to the fact that declining death rates do not mark the epidemic's end, not here in New York, not in North America nor in Western Europe, and certainly not elsewhere—as has been made abundantly clear with every update in the United Nations/World Health Organization reports on the pandemic?[27]

Perhaps the declining art-world visibility of AIDS is like a collective sigh of relief upon the renewal of hope—at least where "we" live. Perhaps it reflects the justifiable desire of artists, patrons, and the public to get on with life. Perhaps it merely provides evidence of a collective hunger for amnesia among those for whom the thought of AIDS has become intolerable. In the current climate, perhaps silence no longer equals death; but neither does it equal a state of well-being.

Caught between AIDS and the media's reports of its impending aftermath, we are living in an interregnum, one that is not without its own distinctive and confusing features. People don't talk very much about AIDS anymore. And when they do, as often as not it is in passing reference to a friend who is doing so well on protease inhibitors that he or she is about to get off disability and go back to work. For sixteen years, GMHC expanded as it assisted clients in preparing wills, getting on disability, fighting discrimination in housing and employment, dealing with treatment issues, with the emotional burdens of bereavement or the prospect of impending death. Now, GMHC is restructuring and downsizing as it responds to a dramatic decline in charitable donations; prospective donors evidently consider the crisis over. Increasingly, the organization now focuses on HIV-prevention education, on helping clients to get off disability and adjust to the challenges of having a future to plan for.

It's been almost three years since I personally have had to visit a dying friend; two years since I last attended a memorial service. This, after more than a decade in which those harrowing visits and awkward rituals were a common aspect of contemporary gay life in New York. The same might be said of the daily survey of the *Times* obituary column. It's strange to see that the obits have reverted back to the (relatively) benign status of listing death notices for elderly people who have led long lives. This is undoubtedly good news, and yet somehow nothing feels quite right, not even work. Three years ago I wrote critically about the abundance of cultural circumstances that brought AIDS and loss to mind. It then seemed to me as if the market culture was profiting from the ubiquity of works of art, theater, dance, and performance that in one way or another seemed to address death and loss, thereby lending a certain gravity to art that otherwise appeared trivial. Today, it is the paucity of cultural circumstances that brings AIDS to mind that feels alienating. Perhaps this estrangement will never go away; perhaps it's not just a function of the dis-ease that seems characteristic of life in this American interregnum.

Like the people in Albert Camus's *The Plague*, I don't seem able to feel anything more positive than ambivalence in the face of hopeful developments. I don't trust in hope, and I'm in no mood to party; and not just because I objectively know that this would be premature. I seem unwilling to put the epidemic behind me. The thought of doing so creates a knot of anxiety, as if even the prospect of a "normalized" life threatens to sever the bonds I maintain to friends who have died; to the memory of their lives and their deaths; and to the anger I still harbor about the fact that all this has taken place as the majority of Americans went about raising families with a smug, middle-class sense of entitlement that Reagan and Bush and so many others have done so much to normalize.

These are familiar thoughts and feelings, some of which date back to the earliest years of the epidemic. Their persistence in the very different circumstances of the present imposes isolation. At a time when other people seem intent on proceeding with their lives, if not on repulsing any reminder of AIDS, its political significance, and its legacy of loss and separation, to whom can one speak about being unwilling to "let go" without being considered morbid? From this perspective, the perception of the contemporary artists' response to AIDS as one of absence and quietism seems the cultural expression of an anxious silence that is imposed by the not-so-subtle pressure to move on and conduct business as usual. This, despite all that has happened; and despite the fact that somewhere—whether on the far side of the earth or on the other side of town—AIDS has not surrendered its grip.

Nearing the end of this essay, the fact that I don't now know of any satisfactory, tidy, resolved way to extricate myself from it seems related to my ongoing inability to gauge, let alone to understand, the impact of the past twenty years. Having lived through the AIDS crisis to date and, to my knowledge, remaining HIV-negative, I can be no more equipped to describe in writing what this feels like than I am able privately to comprehend what AIDS has left in its wake. It seems clear that my reluctance to write this essay (and now to complete it) relates directly to the glacial pace of actually doing so; and that the result of this process, not surprisingly, is more than the usual amount of conflict concerning what is actually, finally on the page. In his essay "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud addresses a not unrelated immobilization that results from mixed feelings on the part of the bereaved for the person who has died. This paralysis, "melancholia," is the product of a sense of guilt that is so powerful, so insupportable, that the mourner prefers immobilization to life. Perhaps it would not be too much to say that the difficulty I've had in writing this essay is a consequence of guilt that I (unconsciously) feel as a survivor of the plague. And what about the fact that I don't want to be addressing these issues? There is in this something subtly different: an element of will that belongs to more conscious thought processes, and in this I suspect the need to live as if none of this had ever happened, as if it is not still happening now.

1. “Global Estimates: HIV: Close to 16,000 new infections a day. New estimates show that infection with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) which causes AIDS is far more common in the world than previously thought. UNAIDS and WHO estimate that over 30 million people are living with HIV-infection at the end of 1997. That is one in every 100 adults in the sexually active ages 15 through 49 worldwide. Included in the 30 million figure are 1.1 million children under the age of 15. The overwhelmingly majority of HIV-infected people—more than 90%—live in the developing world, and most of these do not know that they are infected.” *UNAIDS Report on the Global HIV/AIDS Epidemic* (November 26, 1997), p. 3.

2. One of the first exhibitions of its kind, *AIDS: The Artists’ Response* opened at the Hoyt T. Sherman Galleries at Ohio State University in Columbus in February 1989. See Jan Zita Grover, “Introduction,” in *AIDS: The Artists’ Response* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1989), p. 2.

3. Ibid., p. 3.

4. Ibid.

5. William H. Honan, “Arts Endowment Withdraws Grant for AIDS Show,” *New York Times*, November 9, 1989, pp. A1, C28.

6. The titles of Haacke’s works foreground their investigative nature: *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System*, as of May 1, 1971, and Sol Goldman and Alex DiLorenzo *Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System*, as of May 1, 1971. See Rosalyn Deutsche, “Property Values: Hans Haacke, Real Estate, and the Museum,” in Brian Wallis, ed., *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996), pp. 20-37.

7. “On View at the New Museum,” brochure (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997), n.p.

8. James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), p. 15.

9. Quoted in Douglas Crimp, “AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism,” in Crimp, ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), p. 12.

10. As Loren McAlpin, a member of Gran Fury, recalled, “In the end, the director’s posturing backfired. There was lots of negative publicity for him, and it just escalated the attention the piece got, something we hadn’t counted on. He became, in effect, our partner.” Quoted in Richard Meyer, “This Is to Enrage You: Gran Fury and the Graphics of AIDS Activism,” in Nina Felshin, ed., *But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), p. 77.

11. Gran Fury designed a flyer that was distributed in the program of the awards ceremony at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. It added a note of gravity to the festivities: “During this program at least six people with AIDS will die.”

12. Richard Hawkins and Dennis Cooper, “Against Nature,” in Nayland Blake et al., eds., *In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1995), p. 57.

13. I have depended for this account of the inception of Visual AIDS on a telephone conversation with Tom Sokolowski during the summer of 1998.

14. Mary Patten, “The Thrill Is Gone: An ACT UP Post-Mortem (Confessions of a Former AIDS Activist),” in Deborah Bright, ed., *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire* (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 400-1.

15. See Mab Segrest, “Visibility and Backlash,” in David Deitcher, ed., *The Question of Equality: Lesbian and Gay Politics in America Since Stonewall* (New York: Scribner, 1995), pp. 83-122.

16. Among the many exhibitions that celebrated this outpouring, the one that received perhaps the most attention was *Erotophobia: A Forum on Sexuality*, organized by Simon Watson, and on view at his gallery on Lafayette Street in New York, June 4-July 28, 1989.

17. See Gregg Bordowitz and David Deitcher, “Art, Activism, and Everyday Life,” *Documents*, no. 11 (Winter 1998): 36.

18. Telephone interview with Joy Episalla, Spring 1998.

19. Gran Fury, “Good Luck,” flyer produced for *Temporarily Possessed* at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1995.

20. Robert A. Jones, “Dangerous Liaisons: Young Gay Men Know All About AIDS and HIV, Yet They Persist in Having Unprotected Sex,” *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, July 25, 1993; and “Second Wave of AIDS Feared by Officials in San Francisco,” *New York Times*, December 11, 1993, p. A1.

21. See Benjamin Schatz, Josh Schechtel et al., eds., *The Silent Crisis: Ongoing HIV Infections Among Gay Men Bisexuals and Lesbians at Risk* (San Francisco: Gay and Lesbian Medical Association, 1995). A number of scholarly studies provided the initial data suggesting the second wave; these included Donald Hoover et al., “Estimating the 1978–1990 and Future Spread of Human Immunodeficiency Virus Type 1 in Subgroups of Homosexual Men,” *American Journal of Epidemiology* 134, no. 10 (1991): 1190–1205; and Jeffrey A. Kelly et al., “Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome/ Human Immunodeficiency Virus Risk Behavior Among Gay Men in Small Cities (abstract),” *Archives of Internal Medicine* 152 (1991): 2293.

22. Schatz, *The Silent Crisis*, p. 16.

23. Walt Odets, *In the Shadow of the Epidemic: Being HIV-Negative in the Age of AIDS* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 256-57.

24. Two books, both published during Spring 1997, represent the conservative position: Gabriel Rotello, *Sexual Ecology: AIDS and the Destiny of Gay Men* (New York: Dutton, 1997); and *Michelangelo Signorile, Life Outside: The Signorile Report on Gay Men: Sex, Drugs, Muscles, and the Passages of Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997).

25. In November 1997, Sex Panic! issued a “Declaration of Sexual Rights,” which champions “the principles of sexual self-determination.”

26. See, for example, Andrew Sullivan, “Fighting the Death Sentence,” *New York Times*, November 21, 1995, p. A21; and “When AIDS Ends: Notes on the Twilight of an Epidemic,” *New York Times Magazine*, November 10, 1996, sec. 6, pp. 52-62, 76-77, 84. Nationally syndicated gay sex columnist Dan Savage provoked angry responses to a piece he published in October 1997 that provocatively declared “The AIDS Crisis Is Over,” and questioned the motives of those who might disagree with him.

27. Laurence K. Altman, “AIDS Deaths Drop 48% in New York,” *New York Times*, February 3, 1998, pp. A1, B6.

Brian Weil, *Maria and Adriana Saying Good-bye, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Hospital, NYC*, 1991, black-and-white gelatin silver print. Courtesy of the Center for Creative Photography, Tucson, and the Estate of Brian Weil. Art Matters grant recipient, 1986, 1988, 1990.