

BODIES OF ART:  
CREATIVE COERCIVES CAMPAIGNING AGAINST THE USA'S  
DEADLY HIV/AIDS STATUS QUO

by  
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A THESIS

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## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

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Title: Bodies Of Art: Creative Coercives Campaigning Against The USA's  
Deadly HIV/Aids Status Quo

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This thesis explores the power of the arts as a political weapon wielded by an emergent diverse, often queer community in resisting the United States of America's (USA) deadly HIV/AIDS (human immunodeficiency virus and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) status quo in the years 1981-2000, decades that we could learn from in modern day. These were the years between the first reported cases of what is now known as HIV/AIDS and the turn of the century, when ART (Antiretroviral Therapy) had become widely available at a cost.

My thesis explores whether creating art as forms of power, healing, collective action, self-actualization, and information dissemination kept this period of suffering from being extended, saving lives in the process. As a cultural and political review with modern-day implications, the thesis builds on existing literature to identify patterns in artistic action. It is organized chronologically through various theoretical lenses, real-world examples, and personal narratives. This thesis seeks to uncover whether this theory of art as power amidst the height of the HIV/AIDS endemic in the USA is valid, how said power was wielded, and the implications art activism may hold for future movements in the fight to preserve the right to life for everybody. Everyone deserves the right to life.

## **An Epigraph (or Two)**

*AIDS is really a test of us, as a people. When future generations ask what we did in this crisis, we're going to have to tell them that we were out here today. And we have to leave the legacy to those generations of people who will come after us.*

*Someday, the AIDS crisis will be over. Remember that. And when that day comes—*

*---Vito Russo, Speech at the ACT UP*

*Demonstration at the Department of Health*

*and Human Services, Washington D.C.*

*October 10, 1988*

*No, painting is not made to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war for attack and defense against the enemy.*

*--- Pablo Picasso, English translation of a written statement*

*given to Simone Téry (Barr 269)*

## **Acknowledgements**

This project is a dedication to the 45 million people lost to the preventable disease of HIV/AIDS and a call to action and hope to those living beyond HIV/AIDS.

I owe gratitude to the queer people who came out before me and who raised their voices as loud as they knew, forgetting shame, embracing pride in the hopes that future communities of lovers could have the right to live and love freely. Generations of academics, activists, and archivists have shone a light on the artists and everyday people who have challenged the state's HIV/AIDS status quo. I thank them.

I thank Grants Pass for the landscape where I learned who I was, Belgium for showing me who I could be, Amsterdam for taking me to the edges, Oregon for taking me back, and Eugene and D.C. for, in three short years, cracking wide a future for me that I cannot wait to live.

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## Part 1. Introduction

### Background and Definitions

Art has existed since before modern humans (Morris-Kay 1). Homosexuality has existed across species in diverse forms for likely even longer (Bagemihl 3). Yet HIV/AIDS is a deeply modern illness, caused by a virus spread through certain bodily fluids such as blood (“What Are HIV and AIDS?”). It attacks cells that help the body fight infection, making people vulnerable to other infections and diseases. If left untreated, HIV can lead to the disease AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome).

Although we now know (as recently as 2016) that HIV was present in the USA as early as 1969, the virus didn’t come to medical attention until 1981. The first news story about the then-mysterious disease appeared in 1981 in the gay newspaper *New York Native*. On June 5th of that year, the headline “Outbreaks of Pneumonia in Gay Men Reported” first appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* (Nelson 3). A CDC Epidemiologist said to Harry Nelson of the LA Times, in one of the first public statements by a federal employee: “The best we can say is that somehow the pneumonia is related to the gay lifestyle” (3). But the gay lifestyle has obviously persisted despite this health warning.

That same day, the June 5, 1981, edition of the CDC Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR) described a rare lung infection among a group of gay men in Los Angeles (Center for Disease Control and Prevention (US) 250). These five previously healthy young gay men, whom the Los Angeles Times first covered, would all go on to die of this disease. The virus quickly spread, as did panic, misinformation, blame, and bigotry. By December 1981, there were 337 reported cases of severe immune deficiency (Mills 4). However, today the CDC estimates

that roughly 42,000 people were unknowingly HIV positive at the time, and this number only grew (Mills 4).

In the early years, this disease was publicly labeled *gay cancer* or *GRID* (Gay Related Immuno-Deficiency) (Wright 1). Only years later was AIDS discovered to be caused by HIV, and the name HIV/AIDS became mainstream. But a name is just a name, and this thesis analyzes whether shaping mainstream public perceptions and public policy of this significant public health threat moved beyond labels and mainstream newspaper coverage. It proposes that this dominant narrative was resisted via a different, creatively and collectively fought story of diverse arts as a form of power, healing, and community uplifting that helped change laws and minds.

At times, this *necropolitical*<sup>1</sup> (with *necropolitics* referring to the state's dictating how some people may live and how some must die) meeting point between the State, the *body politic*, and some of its sick, marginalized citizens resembled something from a past plague. In little historical precedent, and not in our modern era, had the victims of a disease been so victimized by a society that they should have cared for them. Former Klansman David Duke, running for governor of Louisiana, proposed tattooing those who had HIV/AIDS, making them reveal themselves to the public ("David Duke" 1). He wasn't alone in this belief, as if discriminatory laws, widespread homophobia, or HIV/AIDS weren't bad enough. This necropolitical conflict over the policy and narrative of HIV/AIDS did not occur in typical political institutions like legislatures, where the only queer representation might be closeted. There were very few

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<sup>1</sup> Necropolitics refers to a socio-political theory (and title of a book) by Cameroonian political theorist Achille Mbembe of the states capability and increasing tendency to use its social and political power to dictate how some people may live and how some must die. This has been compared to French political theorist Michel Foucault's influential concept of biopower, describing the modern state's interest in and regulation of a "right to live". Foucault believed sovereign states are more concerned with shaping how people live, citing the improvements and regulation of modern medicine and the following increases in productivity and wealth that the regulation of life can bring to the modern state (Foucault, 139). It is notable that Foucault wrote this prior to his diagnosis and eventual death of HIV/AIDS.

legislators fighting for the type of people who were being diagnosed. Instead, pressure for policy change to resist HIV/AIDS' deadly status quo had to come from the sick or those close to them, with the little time and energy they had. It was an ideological and urgent battle that took place in the streets, in prisons, in schools, in galleries, in churches, in bars and clubs, and in the written power of narrative. The clock was ticking for these communities that fought creatively for people like them to live healthily in the future.

From these disparate yet collective movements for liberation from the necropolitics of HIV/AIDS, a common tool of resistance arose: the *arts*<sup>2</sup>. Activists and everyday people who were sick of seeing their friends become sick created art, whether as a protest sign, as graffiti, photographed, or dressed up in drag. During the HIV/AIDS crisis, the arts became a powerful political tool that coerced the public, political elites, the media, and the USA's market-based healthcare system to respond to people dying - people that many would have much rather ignored. From 1981, when the CDC announced the presence of the mysterious new disease in gay men, to 2000, the turn of the century, art became far more than a medium of mourning or memorialization; it became a weapon of resistance when the government was doing little. In this context, *coercive creatives*, defined as individuals and collectives who weaponize visual expression as a form of *coercion* (pressure) on institutions and the public. These artist's diverse creations transformed public consciousness and public policy. By examining how artmaking functioned as a form of coercion during the HIV/AIDS crisis, this thesis argues that creative production can, under conditions of mass neglect and stigma, operate as a form of collective

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<sup>2</sup> For a thorough analysis of academic attempts to concisely define what is art, see Thomas Adajian's "The Definition of Art" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. In this thesis, I look at art as, at the bare minimum, objects or performances imbued with human intentionality beyond everyday objects or performances. In this way, what is art (entirely subjective) is not the question, but rather, how does art, as a phenomenon, occur?

political power, capable of destabilizing complacent institutions and driving social transformation.

The first decade of HIV/AIDS' prominence in America, the 1980s, was under Ronald Reagan's White House and cultural conservatism. The Human Immunodeficiency Virus thrived under tight government criminalization of some of the activities that could spread it, like needle sharing and homosexual activities (*Save Lives: Decriminalize* 1). David Purcell in "40 Years of HIV" writes that,

"... criminal laws were passed in more than 35 states that punished behaviors that might transmit HIV... These laws were considered unjust because of their harsh penalties (felony), often for acts unlikely to transmit HIV; punishment regardless of intent or actual transmission; and lack of evidence that such laws reduced HIV transmission and might even unintentionally promote less disclosure of HIV status and resistance to HIV testing" (1231)

Biological explanations centered on risky and non-risky behavior cannot be blamed for the violently unequal impact of this disease alone. Later, in my *positionality* section, I begin to understand this through Geary's materialist understanding of disease. Whereas Reagan said, "Medicine and morality teach the same lesson" (*Remarks at a Luncheon*), and precious years of medicine research and development or common sense public health campaigns towards HIV/AIDS were wasted investigating Amyl Nitrite (Poppers), and bathhouse pipes (Kramer 2) as a root cause of the disease, any analysis of this disease and those affected by it must include the impact of social environment and policy structures on health. Structural forms of oppression and homophobia, with an example being the eviction of people with HIV due to their *seropositive* status, exacerbated this crisis. According to the City of Los Angeles:

“In the 1980s, discrimination against people with HIV or AIDS was rampant: landlords were evicting tenants who were HIV positive or had AIDS; employers were firing HIV positive employees; and schools were expelling students with HIV and AIDS. It was against this backdrop of overt discrimination that California passed confidentiality and anti-discrimination laws related to HIV and AIDS.” (*HIV/AIDS Discrimination 2*)

This background of poor public health policy and harmful cultural attitudes towards HIV/AIDS meant resistance was critical. Wielding the diverse arts was frequently the only weapon those most affected by this disease could wield to stand up, fight back, and create in pursuit of their right to life.

Here I define terms gathered from existing literature that have helped me gain a deeper understanding of the artistic and political power of those living and dying amid this virus in America at the turn of the century.

One might think it would be a good idea to have a concise definition of what we call art. But I won't. People have tried. According to the United States Federal Government's National Endowment for the Arts, “The term “the arts” includes, but is not limited to, music (instrumental and vocal), dance, drama, folk art, creative writing, architecture and allied fields, painting, sculpture, photography, graphic and craft arts, industrial design, costume and fashion design, motion pictures, television, radio, film, video, tape and sound recording, the arts related to the presentation, performance, execution, and exhibition of such major art forms, all those traditional arts practiced by the diverse peoples of this country[,] and the study and application of the arts to the human environment” (US Code). This brief mention in US code on art is helpful in that this thesis explores artistic responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in a case study of the United States of America in the years 1981-2000.

Art does not create itself. It is a product of individual consciousness, influenced by real-world events and the community. Through this lens of collective action, typical of mass movements (people working together) (Bozonelos et al. 1) discussed previously, we see the creation of HIV/AIDS art as an effective means of group protest. Direct collective action was a core tenet of groups fighting for medical care and more for those affected by HIV/AIDS. Direct action does not rely on institutions like voting or waiting for elected leaders (Hunter). Direct action demands change without waiting for someone else to do it, a theme in much of the art I analyze. In the times of AIDS, this was the *modus operandi* of using the creativity of art to change minds and policy. This is evident, of course, in the fact that many of these artists were part of various art-making and activist collectives, where together artists maximized their messaging impact. It's clear, these artists didn't work in silos. These collectives included the highly effective ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) organization, with their various artistic affinity groups (subgroups within ACT UP) such as Gran Fury (founded by a group that included artists and theorists that I profile here, such as Douglas Crimp and Avram Finkelstein), which produced posters and art that resisted dominant narratives. In public policy terms, essential to communities becoming sick, art also functioned as agenda-setting, sparking debates towards better policy, and making the news.

When anyone creates an object of artistic power that is new, bold, opinionated, and most of all, revolutionarily human, an outraged public may indeed come with pitchforks, judgment, and the always-familiar accusation of obscenity.

Coercive creatives are individuals and collectives who, through the strategic use of art, mobilized aesthetic expression as a form of direct political action, using visual culture to pressure institutions, confront public indifference, and demand systemic change. Their work used

artmaking as a mode of coercion, applying sustained public, cultural, and emotional pressure on governments, media, and health agencies that had failed to respond adequately to the epidemic. They demonstrated that creativity itself could be weaponized as a tool of collective action and political resistance.

Any studies on activist AIDS art are destined to include mainstream works of art that closer adhere to norms, not showing explicit homosexuality, not being angry, or vulgar - works that are considered relatively harmless and non-offensive. And indeed, normative works may have had a large and frequently beneficial impact on changing public perception and policy. Coercion in political science is defined as using pressure to alter institutional behavior (Greenhill and Krause).

Another term frequently mentioned in existing literature is HIV/AIDS disproportionate effects. Many scholars argue that this proportion is not an accident of biology but is created and worsened by power structures. In today's public health studies, these would be known as social determinants of public health, and not necessarily power structures.

## **Research Question**

How did the communities most affected by HIV/AIDS in the United States from 1981 to 2000 utilize the arts as a form of cultural and political coercion to resist harmful public policies, challenge institutional inaction, and influence shifts in public perception—and what does this indicate about the coercive potential of artmaking as collective action in activist movements?

To expand on this research question:

- How did people creating art resist and challenge harmful public policy related to the epidemic?

- Did people creating art (in its various forms) put pressure on institutions toward policy changes and medical advancements?
- Did art making en masse force the state to change its public policy towards HIV/AIDS? Does this have wider implications suggesting artmaking en masse could be a coercive force towards the state, playing a role in forcing the state, institutions, and norms to change? Should current and future activist movements embrace the direct, creative, and coercive power of art, if there is this power?

## **Methodology**

This thesis examines the various types of arts and the collective form of resistance these arts became in affirming resistance and challenging the status quo, with examples from different arts. This is a cultural history of the role of the arts in public health (HIV/AIDS) and individual and community endurance. It is organized chronologically, exploring case studies of artists and art mediums thematically between 1981-2000 in 4 distinct chapters organized by roughly 5-year time periods centered around one question: How did art resist and perhaps change harmful (deadly) HIV/AIDS public perceptions and policy?

I analyze how artists were also political actors with diverse forms of art as their weapons to coerce institutions. I analyze potential impacts on public opinion and the public policy surrounding HIV/AIDS via various methods. Uniquely intertwined with queer art, disease, and political activism is state censorship. A literature review of history, legal proceedings, and news articles has been particularly helpful in cementing this element of this thesis. As well, an archival analysis of media from this period and the years following it is a primary method of this thesis. I do this analysis using existing political theories detailed in the literature review as well as my perspectives (see the positionality section).

In brainstorming this, I created the following visual mind-map, which summarizes how I set about this process in the early stages of my research:

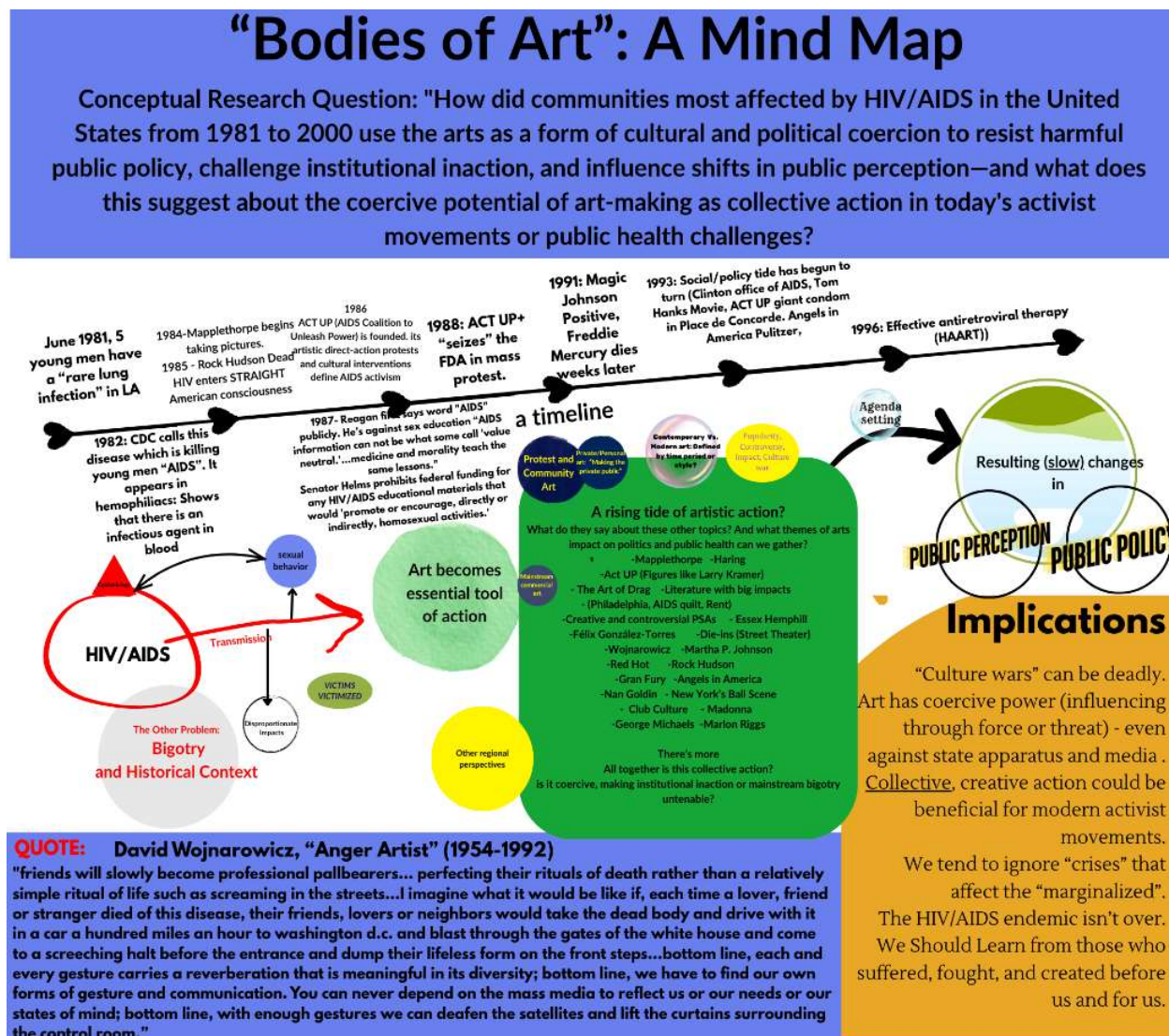


Fig 1. A *mind map* I created to visualize and organize the concepts of this thesis.

This is primarily a social sciences study, so I primarily utilize qualitative data, archival research, academic peer-reviewed articles, and news sources detailing the events of my study. I look at the leading cultural perspectives at the time. I analyze mainstream versus alternative sentiments towards this endemic and those afflicted. I also select primary sources, which include art pieces (of various forms) from this period. The criteria for their selection were popularity (as

an indicator of impact) and a tendency to critique the HIV/AIDS status quo of these 19 years. I do a content analysis of this data using a variety of theoretical lenses, including post-structuralism, public policy studies, art theory, and social movement studies. Limitations of the study include limits on the amount of hard data I had access to (indicating shifts in public perception) and the struggle to draw causation between art and changes in public policy. An inherent bias is introduced as I chose to study certain artists, certain people with AIDS, and certain pieces of art. I justify this approach by the awareness that this is one of the first comprehensive studies of its kind, and useful in this way. While it does not seek to exactly measure the extent to which art has had an impact, it does seek to confirm or refute my hypothesis that art indeed can be a confrontational and coercive tool resisting state harm and public stigma/hatred. The implications and conclusions of this study will be meaningful in that they will be useful to future activist movements as well as inform our future struggle to save lives from HIV/AIDS.

My extensive literature review was made easier with citation management software like Zotero. My analysis is *multidisciplinary* in using theories ranging from necropolitics and bio-power in the vein of Foucault or Mbembe to *semiotics* or the study of signs. It ventures into disciplines like traditional *Agenda-Setting* theory of the media, modern social movement theory, and abstract art theory, to name a few.

My largest ethical concern was that I did not interview members of the populations most affected by this disease (instead, I opted for a few informal talks not detailed here). This concern is countered by analyzing primary sources from the communities most affected by this disease. Equally of ethical concern is the risk I run of *historicizing* a disease that today still impacts so many and takes a huge number of lives globally. It's also important here that I be wary of the

canonization (if there is such a thing) of white gay artists from this period, which has at times erased black gay men and black people as fellow survivors of HIV/AIDS in America.

## **Positionality**

Here, I acknowledge some elements of my positionality and privilege and explore some ways my actions and the institutions I live under prop up structures of harm that both harm me, protect me, and harm others, particularly as they center on public health and social rights. This is acknowledging that the state sees some bodies as worthy of life and others as not. I am a queer, white young man in America. I was born in 2001. My historical study concludes in 2000. The FDA approved PrEP (Pre-exposure prophylaxis) in 2012 (Rosas Cancio-Suárez et al. 2), likely saving millions of lives. Of course, millions have died due to the cost of the medicine. Gilead and its branded pill, *Truvada*, which I try to swallow every day, likely will, or already has, saved my life. They've allowed many others to die, as Truvada's over-the-counter cost is as high as \$21,000 annually. When Gilead does put global public health interests first, such as by promoting their new twice-a-year HIV preventative "vaccine", which could end the epidemic, politicians like Donald Trump in 2025 are halting funding of it via executive order and a maliciously mismanaged NIH (Steenhuysen). Trump's health department says current medication regimens to prevent HIV globally are "enough" and has halted research into vaccines, just as results in clinical trials were becoming promising, a "setback of probably a decade for HIV vaccine research," according to Dennis Burton, an immunologist at Scripps Research (Gounder). This points toward this thesis's deep relevance to the modern day. This illness is set to get worse, not better, if we don't learn from how these communities fought back previously. In 2019, the US Congress made PrEP free for those with private insurance in America, private insurance being a privilege that I possess by circumstance of birth. If I take my

medicine, I am not at risk for HIV/AIDS, with protection of 99%. When I say disparities abound, I mean that in 2023, Oregon has a HIV prevalence of 0.219684483% (State of Oregon), which is likely to increase following Donald Trump's budget, while in Eswatini, the country with the highest rate of HIV prevalence, an estimated 27% of people are HIV positive (CIA 1). When I say disparities abound, I mean that HIV infection rates are 16 times higher for people who are unhoused compared to those who are stably housed, according to the City of Eugene, Oregon (City of Eugene). Today, housing status is a stronger predictor of contracting HIV than other factors like gender, race, age, or drug use in Eugene, OR. I am stably housed.

I have lived in DC, where my positionality has an obvious physicality, a segregation, in small ways and in crushing, large, and even celebrated, politically utile ways. My positionality seems to reveal that these material realities are part of creating the conditions for disease. Critical theorist and Queer and Foucauldian studies scholar Adam M. Geary wrote a book on this: *Anti-Black Racism and the AIDS Epidemic*, which posits this fact much more eloquently than I acknowledge here. He says,

“Black men's higher HIV rates, then, are not an index of greater violence per se, but of the gendered distribution of violence and exploitation directed at black people... A materialist analysis of epidemic situates disease within *relations* of domination and exploitation” (Geary 92).

Geary concludes, referencing so-called *disproportionate* rates of HIV/AIDS in black people in America, “That black people suffer ‘disproportionately’ from relations of violence directed precisely against them is no surprise” (93). He argues that HIV/AIDS is endemic in the black community, meaning that it is lasting in a certain region or population at persistently high rates (*Epidemic, Endemic, Pandemic*). While in white gays with access to medical care like me, AIDS is no longer an epidemic, for much of the world, due to the denial of care, the disease is

endemic. I hold the privilege of having been a Legislative Intern for an Oregon Congresswoman in Washington, DC. When I consider positionality in regard to art and AIDS, I think of a reflection I wrote for Dr. Barbara Mossberg, an advisor of mine, of when I worked as an intern in DC. Being an intern in Congress is a position of my own worked for reality but also a position that requires certain privileges, such as socioeconomic and familial. These privileges shaped my experience in this vibrant and artistic city, and my diverse positions from which I navigate inequality and being embodied. I expand on the reflection with added emphasis on perspectives of my positionality:

I will never forget the hours I spent at the DC Health and Wellness Center this last summer. The center, a clinic providing testing and treatment for public and personal health concerns - such as HIV and other infections transmitted through blood, primarily served queer and black people. The kind nurses at this clinic, primarily black women, tested me frequently - as a young gay guy exploring Washington, DC (a city of gay guys). I remember the people who waited under those fluorescent lights for their names to be called to be tested for any number of shameful/shamed diseases, or even worse, for their names to be called later to hear the results. I am HIV-negative. But, with a few missed “Prep” (pre-exposure prophylaxis) pills and an encounter with a partner who happened to be HIV positive, my position in society, in my relationships, and my optimism would be shaken, to say the least. HIV/AIDS is no longer a death sentence. But, to the young Black couple, in the same fluorescent-lit, publicly funded clinic, on a day I remember, whose results (if I trust my observation) came back differently than mine, it might as well have *seemed* like a death sentence. There is no “one America” of safety and prosperity.

In Washington, DC, this unequal distribution of health and power rots and shimmers. In no other city do the corporate powers of the world collide with the people answering phone calls to constituents from their hometowns being torn apart by these corporate powers. Blocks away from a gilded, white capital building, young women of color forced into immense poverty sit outside the 7/11 at night, a paper cup in their hand with a few coins in it, and their ever-skinny toddlers by their side. But walking at night to the club, I am simply another white gay guy, navigating a city of power in silly outfits, avoiding making eye contact with my peers, being beaten down by the structures of power my corporate PAC fundraising job helps prop up. I dance with the poor and kiss up to the rich. I have a maximum of \$200 in my bank account at any given time, but at *least* at work, I'm wearing a suit (I have two) that almost looks ironed. At least I spend Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, writing memos for schmoozy dinner fundraisers, schmoozing myself, working from home entering names like "Raytheon PAC", "United Auto Workers PAC", "Gilead Sciences PAC" into a Google spread sheet, sleeping from home, praying to be taken away from the inhumanness of this. Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and then some, I spend smiling, dancing, and looking pretty for the people who have been ushered into power/wealth in Washington, D.C, USA.

Here and certainly there, there are so many interlocking identities of power. Diseased bodies are the manifestations and battlegrounds for this. The poverty forced upon many Americans, due to a carefully crafted financial system of inequality, in DC becomes life, death, and the largest risk factor for disease. I'm glad I lived in D.C.'s black neighborhood, despite its gay gentrification. I want to live with people who represent America's beating soul, not its dying power structures. I'm grateful for the *networking* I did for those two summers at D.C.'s U Street gay clubs, for the PrEP I took, and the nurses who were there to draw my blood when I didn't

take my PrEP. I will never forget the moment I saw Speaker Emerita Nancy Pelosi arrive at the corporate PAC-sponsored birthday party that the Democratic fundraising firm I was interning at was organizing (see: asking for \$5,000 donations to attend) for a charming, and here unnamed, Democratic Congresswoman. It was my lucky night, my big break. House Minority Leader Jeffries would allegedly attend. He didn't. Also in attendance, and like most older men who make rules, Former House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer and I didn't see eye to eye, as I tried to teach him how to open the button-operated door to leave the party early. Then came the guards. And black Sedan one. Two younger white gay men in colored suits. And then the bob. A woman in a yellow suit. Speaker Emerita Nancy Pelosi's eyes and I lock, and it's a lock I cannot break through. I give my best: what was possibly a coherent and simultaneously trustworthy, "Welcome Speaker Emerita Pelosi... You can press R on the elevator to make it to the rooftop!". I am a *doormat*: walked on, cheap, and dirty fabric with a message stained on it that means nothing: "Welcome!" I am the robotic voice next to the elevator which will take you to the rooftop birthday party you paid \$5,000 for, where the conversation means nothing but "Welcome to a life you didn't ask for." And if your voice gets hoarse, and you do want to go home early, at 601 Pennsylvania Ave, Washington DC (described as a "stately condo... in a well-established and desirable neighborhood with the upscale features to match" (*Penn Quarter Real Estate* 1)) a one bedroom, one bath, is mindfully and luxuriously priced a comfortable \$500,000, depending on the floor. But that day I didn't care that I couldn't afford to be there, that I was not a neutral, benign doormat, or an elegant elevator, but a Chris from a different world then the Washington DC where 1.7% of the population lives with HIV (DC Health 2023) and 70% of them are black people. I am the cog in a great machine that has killed and birthed, but brought in \$10s of \$1,000s in funds for a Congressional cog. It's me, Chris, a cog that had to be cut, burned, and

melted down, bought, oiled up, pushed, turned towards forward movement, and turned away towards darkness. I turn toward and that's because she did *it*: flashed me a million-dollar smile (\$260.76 million that is, with \$111.4 million of that well invested in stocks working hard) and her entourage of security guards and prestigiously-educated, prestigiously-birtherd white gay male staffers who live in Georgetown brush past, move on, leaving behind a certain class of queers like me, not to mention queers of color or poor queer people, whereas 44 years ago we'd be perhaps united by a Congress that was voting against laws that would protect queer people from discrimination. And I presume much, but there's no welcome mat for me, just men with guns and glasses, gays and Her heels on powerful marble, the sound of the wrong button on the elevator being pushed, later, the groans of a distant "Happy Birthday" from the 14<sup>th</sup> floor - I had to stay on the first floor, watching over the nametags, with my smile getting sore, *got to* miss the schmoozing in case any donors arrived late. They weren't going to give *me* any money anyway. In acknowledging my positionality, I acknowledge both a certain bitterness towards glitz and glamour that only comes with having \$1.60 in your bank account and \$10,000 plus in debt, as well as an indebtedness to glitz and glamour that comes with being gay and loving art. Ms. Pelosi, who first won election from San Francisco at the height of the AIDS crisis, represented one of the gayest and increasingly gentrified and wealthy districts in America. Having made the rounds, and her pearls extraordinarily bright, the Speaker Emerita and her posse tromped away from the celebration early. This experience acknowledges essentially none of the harm Former Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi, of one of the gayest and wealthiest districts in America, has done towards minority and marginalized peoples at home and abroad, intentionally *or not*, cog in some American machine (cultural or political or economic) *or not*, attending every pride parade every year *or not*. Nor does our interaction encapsulate what this

machine of human invention has done for people like me, be they Anti-Discrimination laws, cultural acceptance, or the medication the government pays for to prevent me from becoming *seropositive* (with detectable levels of HIV in my bloodstream). But this is how power, in all its complexities, is personified; some are stepped on, and others live lives of unimaginable wealth and leverage. So, we must imagine differently.

In acknowledging my positionality, I acknowledge my biases – that at the risk of being hyperbolic, I do have emotions on this matter, if not beliefs. I want *power* in the hands of those who have only ever felt power’s violent or deadly institutions, diseases, and slow deaths<sup>3</sup>. I want to see what a world like that would feel like. I want D.C.’s Health and Wellness clinics to have all the money in the world and the Department of Defense to have none. And on that hot summer day in Shaw, DC, the nurses will speak English or Spanish, and they do not look like me. But the blood is all the same. It’s our marble laws and collective cultural *looking away*, which means that of those young people who walk out of that clinic, most gay men, but increasingly women, with the diagnosis of Human Immunodeficiency Virus, 70% will be black. This epidemic is not over - so my position here in creating a historical study about the arts, about galleries and *collective art* making, frequently in art worlds that are often exclusionary, sold and profiteered off, seems like a purely academic exercise. This thesis stays up late to look at our past simultaneously to remember the geniuses and dummies (but people) lost to this disease, to propose art as a tool to save the living who choke down the pills daily and take the needles monthly and live with the fear, stigma, shame, and bigotry constantly but also as a act of hope for future living. There are

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<sup>3</sup> For more on the concept of slow deaths, see Lauren Berlant’s (an American scholar, cultural theorist, and author) *Cruel Optimism* where she describes slow death as “the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence” (96). She links this to structural conditions under capitalism. Here, I apply this concept to HIV/AIDS deaths that did not occur instantly, were deemed acceptable by many in power, and could have been prevented.

many Americas in our America. And I'll sit with you in the clinic, but the house I rent in DC for the summer looks differently than yours, so I'll dance with you in the club and enjoy the luxuries of a bathroom stall and Madonna through the bearded gay guys' fingers grubbing on spinning disks lifting off, a play of light in the dark, singing "Welcome! Create something bolder. The celebration is here in the gutters. Not the roof!". And *that* experience, I know, is universal: when we *descend* into the underground gay bar, we are consumed in a darkness that is so bright. It's the type of club in DC (the especially gay gay club) that the political elite who fill the ranks of a Republican Congress would never admit to needing to go into. They've built themselves the most luxurious and obscenely minimalist closets, writing laws of death for personal enrichment, and so I move to a different position. I see the type now: perhaps wearing sunglasses in the club, jeans, and a t-shirt or a tank top, and my proud queer friends and I are wearing nothing of the sort, are art, dressing ourselves in the future. Maybe there are (no - there are) queer ancestors. Perhaps this is our most important positionality for you as writer, as artist, and I as reader, our place in a history that is still alive and the necessity for action towards a future that is dying without us. We mustn't underestimate roughly 20 years of queer life. Because I believe that being able to write this is a gift. David Wojnarowicz, whose art will be explored further in depth in the depths of this thesis, says:

"I find that when I witness diverse representations of "Reality" on a gallery wall or in a book or a movie or in the spoken word or performance, that the larger the range of representations, the more I feel there is room in the environment for my existence, that not the entire environment is hostile.

To make the private into something public is an action that has terrific repercussions in the preinvented world.." (Wojnarowicz 120)

We are man-made creative weapons against what David Wojnarowicz labeled in 1989 as the *preinvented world* – a world of homophobic and unjust laws, inequality, the effective enforcers and cogs who make these possible, HIV/AIDS, and those kicking the sick for social

points. It's a world of cultural norms of hatred that is not normal. These are institutions that the arts could *perhaps* be uniquely good at challenging. They're all microcosms of nature, disease, and power -- DC, the gay club, Congress, the courts, the film photos which have no choice but to resemble the reality of bodies, the body with a viral infection, the public funds hoarded, the voices silenced and censored, pharmaceutical profiteers (among other advantageous infections), and the human urge to rise above our nature. This urge creates openings to paint different futures where queer people and all people can grow old.

That night at the club, my friends and I step out of the "custom stonework steel door weighing a whopping 600 pounds that appears 'blasted into a side of a mountain,'" having entered free of charge and on the list because of the *homosocial* (friendly) relationship we have with the owner of the club, who we'll call, and is called, Zach. But the first rule of Bunker Club is to talk about Bunker Club (at least as a microcosm) if we have the goal of extending creative freedom and the right to joy like this to a society troubled with cultural homogenization and reactionary politics. That is, to push our *queer utopia*<sup>4</sup> even beyond what Zach "imagine(d) was a '60s Cold War shelter made fabulous" (Caplan 2).

We are positioned in a world that we both explore and change: a white-washed, treacherous, and infinite canvas of a world. Walked over, we dance. Censored, erased, and stigmatized, we keep painting. See new colors and bold stains. In the market-based economy of a fickle *art world* that is, historically, simultaneously too good and *not ready* for queerness know

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<sup>4</sup> See Jose Esteban Muñoz *Queer Utopia* for an influential queer theory centered on the premise that "Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future" (1). This hope guides this thesis. Muñoz argues that the creation of art is to change existing hierarchies, and that the "queer cultural maker is interested in art-directing the real. They offer new systems of knowing and organization" (126). To create his *utopia*, Muñoz believes diverse art making becomes collective referred to as *intermedia* (127).

that we are promised joy amidst suffering, bold *art worlds* of our own while we still stand and before we drop.

But the sun sets on this last metaphor of summer, and from this angle, it's clear that I have a thesis to write. The Capitol building and my friend's gay club are enclosed in darkness. Finishing a project like this is not purely academic, it's self-actualization, a love letter. To be transparent, I won't know what to do when I'm finished. My Dad makes yard art for his garden. But on *this* side of nature, disease, and power, there shall be a bright and complex future of people who live and grow older every day, tending to an earthly garden.

## **Significance**

As a human being, an animal, this dream of life, which is in the ideal world a right, is threatened constantly: by the various dangers of materiality, big and small, by predators, by disease, by the powers and people that can end a life. These simple facts of our world tell us: Growing old while queer has always been made difficult by many aspects of nature, from the small viruses that affect us all to the massive nation-states who can police natural human sexuality. Queer people, like all people and animals, live with disease. Diseases like COVID-19 have shown that we do not live in an era beyond plagues. But not all peoples living with disease are in turn victimized, as occurred to those living with HIV/AIDS at the turn of the 20th century (here, 1981-2000) in the United States of America (USA, or, "America"): Victimized by a bigoted and frequently violent portions of the public, elites, and the institutions that empower these people with power (like the US Congress, for-profit medical systems, or *cultural norm-making machines*. Cultural norm-making machines include the institutions of the mainstream news ecosystem, the dominating forces in the *art world*, most publishing houses, and most museums/galleries. Despite what the word victimized could imply (in a nation of justice), queer

people sickened and victimized by an uncaring public and state had no courts to hold accountable those who victimized, brutalized, or hated the sick. The sick themselves were criminalized. But the queer world has existed as long as there has been life on this planet (Bagemihl 1). This is significant. Although queerness is a fact of nature, we all face the unnatural practices of turning a constructed state apparatus and its laws, constructed for reasons of power and control, against its citizens. Globally, governments persecute and misrepresent minorities. Globally, a people's movement is necessary to challenge rising inequality, xenophobia, and public health challenges. Within structures of power and systems of hatred queer people have historically been villainized, disowned, denied political power, and corporeally, socially, and legally punished for active and/or public queerness. But to many, the joy, satisfaction, and pleasure of their queerness outweighs this, necessitating resistance to oppression. Throughout time immemorial, facing the winds, fires, and pitchforks of mainstream public bigotry and associated policy, the queer lifestyle would not cease.

This study is significant in that it analyzes how people created art as a form of resistance during the HIV/AIDS epidemic. This bold, unabashed, and artistic form of direct collective action is examined here to determine if it altered the trajectory of the epidemic in the United States. The US is currently grappling with stigmatized public health issues, including the opioid and synthetic opioid epidemic, growing mental illness, and racism. HIV/AIDS is far from over globally; One can see this through the fact that one in two black gay men is likely to become HIV-positive in his lifetime (Farrow 2). Following America's drastic rightward shift at the polls in 2024 which led to Republicans controlling Congress and the presidency, funding for Public health measures and other government services have been cut (Bloch et al. 1). Those seeking to

influence change in public perception and public policy could learn from those who have created and wielded art, here in this study of the early years of HIV/AIDS in America.

Mine is unique in the comprehensive case studies it reveals, as well as the new overarching theory that connects them all. My Historical research examined primary sources (e.g., letters, diaries, official documents) to understand these past events and their trends. Together, it understands immeasurable concepts like shifts in public perception and the arts as the phenomena that they are. My study becomes a *micro-analysis* of the individual and groups of people navigating conflict, social structures, institutions, disease, and mass media. It looks at the small-group interactions that shape, sustain, or challenge collective action. Rather than looking at large-scale political, institutional, or structural causes, I focus on the practices, motivations, emotions, communication, and methods of action among queer people that were increasingly part of a collective movement.

This research creates a comprehensive study and timeline of HIV/AIDS art activism via literature review, archival analysis, and interviews that emphasize the underutilized source of political power, which is the arts, expressed in the face of the diseases of bigotry and HIV/AIDS.

A closer look at the core concepts of this thesis also reveals its significance. Here: The word art comes from the Latin word *ars*, meaning *skill*, or *craft*, akin to the Latin word *arma* meaning *weapons, military equipment or tools of war* (Douglas 1). The disease AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) comes from HIV (the human immunodeficiency virus), a preventable yet prevalent retrovirus that attacks the immune system (World Health Organization). It's preventable. It can, should, and must be prevented. By 2025, at least 42.3 million people will have been killed by this disease globally (World Health Organization). HIV/AIDS will not prevent itself. Humans will not evolve at the rate of this deadly virus, so

human craft, human medicine, dialogue, institutions, laws, or artistic weapons must prevent it. A cure must stem from human ingenuity, from humans asking -- nay, demanding -- a right to life. Something must change public perceptions of, and public policy towards, this disease if even one life is to be saved. Could what changes human perception (and then policy) towards this disease be what we call art, in its many mysterious forms? This thesis seeks the possibility that the beautiful things we create, the challenging things we create, the controversies we cause by pen or paintbrush, the joy we seek and statements we make in a play or poem, or post do, indeed, have the potential of immense coercive power against the institutions that ignore, disregard, or harm us. In starting this thesis, I had a strange belief, curiosity, and hope. It was this: that humans are natural beings, that art is natural, that there is hope, that the weakness some see in the boy alone at lunch drawing futures where he holds hands with another boy is a strength, that a Florida judge *didn't* rule in 1988 that 9 year old Eliana Martinez with AIDS due to a blood transfusion, could indeed start school – but only if she was isolated from the other children by a “specially built glass booth” (“Mother to Appeal ‘Glass Cage’ Ruling” 14) or that the 16-year old girl is buried in a comic book that *rejoices* in her queerness even if her peers don't, that the drag queens dress is not for your entertainment, but the flag of a revolution – that our creativity is our humanity, and so it is art. That together, our diverse arts might resemble some kind of coercive political and cultural weapon, if we choose to call it that: Art arming us with the power to change minds, heal bigotry, and break unjust laws for a more profound, loving, creative future.

I know the significance of this all by heart; Today, and every day, I will take a rather large, oblong, matte-white (like ivory) pill called PREP+. I try to remember. My sexuality comes with a warning label - “risky”. Like other homosexuals in their 20s in 2025, I worry.

Most existing literature focuses on how HIV/AIDS in these years changed American art. My thesis focuses on the inverse of this: how activist arts changed the trajectory of public responses and perceptions of the HIV/AIDS endemic and those most affected by it, making it deeply significant. In this way, the thesis also seeks to change the connotations of HIV/AIDS and activism for future people, as today this “epidemic of significations” (Treichler, 32) impacts globally 40 million people. This study is also significant in opening the possibility that art deserves to be taken seriously as a political force.

Public policy studies of the arts frequently focus on *cultural policy*, or how the government, or the *state*, regulates, promotes, affects, or utilizes the arts. My study continues this tradition but also turns it around, seeking to discover (through archives, literature, popular media, historical public opinion polls, and interviews) how artists have had an impact on public policy and public perceptions of HIV/AIDS and those affected by it during this period. My work is primarily unique in that it borrows from many theories and disciplines and focuses comprehensively on artistic productions collectively and individually during this period. By doing these things, my work discovers if art can be a true political power coercing the public and state to change their behavior, in this case, responses to HIV/AIDS.

This has become increasingly relevant due to recent political developments centered on Trump/Musk cuts to longstanding federal US HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment programs:

“In 2025, while there's no definitive, single number for global HIV/AIDS deaths, projections and data point to a significant number of deaths, likely in the hundreds of thousands, with potentially a surge due to funding cuts. The UNAIDS 2025 targets aim to reduce AIDS-related deaths to 3.9 per 100,000 population, but this is not yet fully realized. Some reports also indicate a potential surge in deaths without US funding, with a projected increase of 6.3 million deaths in the next four years. CDC data reported that in 2025, there were 4,570 deaths related to HIV, with the majority being males (3,402) and Black/African American persons (1,903), CDC data says. UN News reports that UNAIDS Executive Director Winnie Byanyima warned that without funding, there will be a surge in the disease, and people will be dying as they did in the 90s and 2000s,” (UN News)

This study, sadly, is becoming more significant as we must remember how this disease (of bigotry, inaction, profiteering, *and* of HIV) has been combated in prior generations. This study reveals new possibilities in artistic action that could today save lives.

## Part 2. Scholarship and Literature Review

### Analytical Frameworks and Theories

A review of the literature surrounding art's impact on public and state responses to HIV/AIDS and those afflicted with it has borrowed from many disciplines. These multidisciplinary fields include the arts, social sciences, public policy, and a necessary understanding of epidemiology.

The first text I read in beginning this research was Susan Sontag's influential *AIDS and its Metaphors*, a sequel to her essay *Illness as Metaphor*, rejects the violent metaphors society prescribes to the HIV/AIDS crisis. In it, she argues that the deepest fears that society has surrounding contagious, progressively disfiguring, and stigmatized diseases mean the HIV/AIDS crisis has represented much more than just a disease in public sentiment. This has made the illness's spread more difficult to treat or slow.

First, Sontag challenges militaristic metaphors of illness, wherein there are "invading cells", "a defense", and a "war" or "battle" against the illness. She finds this mentality via metaphor harmful and further stigmatizing. She doesn't think a "total war" approach is good for the body and believes making a disease something to be battled sets up public sentiment as being against the disease sufferer. In this way, a war against HIV/AIDS could very well become a war against "at-risk" groups, "that neutral-sounding, bureaucratic category which also revives the archaic idea of a tainted community that illness has judged" (Sontag 134).

Sontag also explores perhaps the most common metaphor of the AIDS epidemic, that of the "plague". A "plague" carries a medieval tone, of a village being "visited" by death, wiping out a community that has perhaps been judged or is filthier than the village next door. A "plague" frequently comes via foreigners, rats on ships, or visiting soldiers. The point is that

disease must always be foreign; it can never come from those who are accepted within society. The infected are excommunicated, judged, and seen as harmful *others*.

Such was the AIDS metaphor that American society adopted. Sontag describes America as “a nation with the soul of...an evangelical church prone to announcing radical endings”. America adopted the metaphoric concept that AIDS had come virulently from an African country and would only affect those seen as the “others” in society, those living on the streets but never in the suburbs. It, as plague, was nature’s (or maybe god’s) revenge for unnatural acts, a punishment for modern society going too far.

The mentality around HIV/AIDS is critical to how public policy and individuals deal with an epidemic. The CDC’s language on the disease and Ronald Reagan’s, both full of metaphor, set the dialogue for people to judge and abstain from interaction with those suffering. Metaphors can’t kill, but the diseases they name, describe, and prescribe reality to can.

The second critical theorist I borrow from is French philosopher Michel Foucault. A relevant theory I use in analyzing this disease, art, and those affected in the period is *post-structuralist* theories of public policy, politics, and sociology. Michel Foucault is a prominent thinker here. He argued that *biopower*, the governing of how people use their bodies or are forced to live, is used to regulate sexual practices through institutions that medicalize and legalize heterosexuality while punishing queer love and criminalizing certain acts like ‘sodomy’ (*Society Must Be Defended* 32). Foucault created this theory before the advent of HIV/AIDS, where the state’s *biopolitical* provision of medicine to promote the health of laborers may seem less relevant. In this way, Achille Mbembe’s theory of *necropolitics* (how the state forces some to die and allows others to live) becomes useful. Mbembe argues that the state regulates how we die with necropolitical *governmentality* (Mbembe).

In analyzing the artists that responded to HIV/AIDS, I use frameworks that acknowledge their lived environment, cultural output, community practices, and impacts on public policy/perception.

A preeminent AIDS scholar is Sarah Schulman. An effective member of the AIDS collective ACT UP, Sarah Schulman has written a number of books on this topic and others. She is a primary source for this document. She writes of her theory of the *gentrification of the mind*—a loss of imaginative and confrontational art, activism, and queerness that was a result of compounding factors that included the AIDS crisis and affects us today. She connects the deaths of 10s of thousands of queer artists and the rising costs of living with not only *literal* gentrification in cities like New York and San Francisco, once gay meccas, but a gentrification of the mind, of resistance to the status quo. I summarize it as a kind of cultural decay and a growing loss of creative, organized resistance to state domination. She says:

“...in the middle of this process of converting low-income housing into housing for the wealthy, in 1981 to be precise, the AIDS epidemic began. In my neighborhood, Manhattan's East Village, over the course of the 1980s, real estate conversion was already dramatically underway when the epidemic peaked and large numbers of my neighbors started dying, turning over their apartments literally to market rate at an unnatural speed. As I watched my neighborhood transform, it was quickly apparent that the newly rehabbed units attracted a different kind of person than the ones who had been displaced and freshly died. Instead of Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Eastern European and Italian immigrants, lesbians, noninstitutionalized artists, gay men, and other sexually adventurous and socially marginalized refugees from uncomprehending backgrounds living on economic margins (in an economy where that was possible), the replacement tenants were much more identified with the social structures necessary to afford newly inflated mortgages and rents. That is to say, they were more likely to be professionalized, to be employed in traditional ways by institutions with economic power and social recognition, to identify with those institutions...

The replacement tenants had a culture of real privilege that they carried with them. I know that's a word that is bandied about, and can be applied too easily in many arenas... they did not have to be aware of their power or of the ways in which it was constructed. They instead saw their dominance as simultaneously nonexistent and as the natural deserving order. (*Gentrification of the Mind* 10)

This enhances the need for a sort of revenge of the artist across America -- the need for *creative coercion* not only to AIDS gentrification, but to State oppression and mainstream ignorance in general. Schulman summarizes, “No one with power in America ‘comes around.’ They always have to be forced into positive change.” (*Gentrification of the Mind* 10).

Queer theorist Judith Butler writes of gender as a performance. As we analyze a disease that primarily affects men, and an art world historically dominated by men, gender studies become important. Manhood, to preeminent masculinities scholar Raewyn Connell, is simultaneously “a place in gender relations, the practices people engage that place, and the effects of these practices on bodily experience, personality, and culture” (Connell 71). The emphasis on practice is referred to as performance by the theorist and gender scholar Judith Butler in her seminal book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. This emphasis on gender being constructed and taught is critical in understanding disease and the gendered body. My thesis examines artists who challenge traditional gender norms, including in the drag and ball scene, making their lives creative works of art and transforming the hegemonic visions of how people should look and dress or ‘be quiet’. In times when the government and media and public seemed to want to sweep queer people and those with HIV/AIDS under the rug, the act of putting on a dress and shouting becomes powerful and destigmatizing. Butler also writes of a concept of *grievable* bodies, saying of the dominant response to AIDS deaths, “‘It is not simply a matter of grieving over a life lost, but of knowing where and how a life is grievable, and of how that cultural recognition can be denied to those who are regarded as less than fully human.’” (*Undoing Gender* 18). Here we use this lens to analyze how those lost to or sick with HIV/AIDS were publicly mourned and fought for.

In understanding this topic, we must understand the location of the privilege and security that men hold at the top of the gender hierarchy and the bodily practices that confirm this place. Whereas gay men are frequently seen as hyperfeminine, and this is seen as a flaw by a male-dominated body politic, art can challenge this by creating new visions of masculinities. Masculinities are struggling, as seen in the harmful practices and cultures of men's wellness. These masculinities manifesting in hierarchies of homophobia have historical precedents and are constructed from social factors and practices. Harmful hyper-masculinities worsen health outcomes, including due to HIV/AIDS, and contribute to inequality. There are better alternatives that would result in improved public health - alternatives rooted in healthier masculinities based on principles of *care ethics*, creativity, and egalitarianism.

Many theorists write of an *art world*, described by Howard Becker: "Art is not the product of isolated individuals but of networks of people cooperating to produce and appreciate works of art" (Becker 3). My thesis relies on this analysis of art as collective action with political impact. The artists I profiled were friends who cared about each other, who bounced ideas off each other, and only collectively could have an impact in shifting AIDS narratives and policies to save lives.

Many of these works require non-Western modes of reading. They are raw in feeling and meaning and should be understood as such. They refuse binaries (sick/well, life/death, private/public), foreground affect and relationality and often operate outside rigid activist/didactic or purely aesthetic categories. This is summarized by foundational academic, ACT UP member, and art critic Douglas Crimp, in his essay "Mourning and Militancy", which first appeared in 1989: "We need to mourn. We need to fight. But to merge mourning and

militancy is not to be inconsolable; it is to be resolved.” Crimp wrote the influential *Melancholia and Moralism*, which theorizes that art can be a powerful form of protest and mourning.

Cindy Patton, a sociologist and cultural critic, in *Inventing AIDS* critiques the scientific and medical narratives surrounding AIDS, arguing that these discourses often reflect societal anxieties and prejudices. She examines how the construction of AIDS knowledge can marginalize certain groups and influence public health policies. Also, in *Fatal Advice*, Patton explores the divergence between official public health messages and grassroots activist responses. She discusses how activists employed explicit and provocative art to convey safe-sex messages, challenging sanitized government campaigns and confronting societal taboos. She was one of the first to write seriously about AIDS and representation. Her work aligns with Crimp’s in urging that narratives of AIDS must be reclaimed from mainstream distortion.

I also expand heavily on Geary’s *materialist* readings on HIV/AIDS in the black community. In my words, we cannot blame people for the diseases they catch, and social structures, laws, medical greed, and material conditions are just as relevant as the biology of a small virus in considering what went wrong in the Height of the HIV/AIDS endemic in the US between government recognition (1981) and the possibility of treatment at the turn of the century. My thesis takes a similar lens to the wider queer community in the 80s and 90s. Black people are much more affected by HIV/AIDS than white people today. Geary says this is no accident: That material conditions under “relations of domination and exploitation...(are) the true ‘cause’ of epidemics,” with “cause” here understood as the reason it has risen to epidemic proportions (72). I gain much from this theory in my understanding of an endemic that “coincidentally” most affected those structurally oppressed, whose acts are criminalized at every turn. From this theory, I argue that the arts, in their dramatic power to resist and transcend

domination and class structure, were effective tools as antagonists to this system of domination. Like many who face HIV/AIDS as a factor affecting people like them, Geary challenges notions of *risky behavior* being the sole cause of HIV/AIDS.

Theoretical concepts through which we can analyze the impacts of artistic activism against HIV/AIDS inevitably include *semiotics*, or the study of signs, hinting that items are not just visual but have meaning, significance, metaphor. Paula Treichler has referred to HIV/AIDS as not just a disease, but “an epidemic of signification,” with meanings that “multiply wildly and at an extraordinary rate” (32). The arts seem to both confound and condense these meanings - either way, they are certainly political. Through the lens of signs, we can analyze the impact of art on those who create it and consume it, be they outraged political elites or a public with a “tradition of homophobia” (Poirier, 461).

Semiotics theory centers on denotations: a word, a name, and what you see right away, and connotations: secondary meanings and how things are thought of. We can use this lens to understand not only the names assigned at times to HIV/AIDS, like the aforementioned ‘gay cancer’, but also the public responses to it. As it relates to names, many scholars reject the crisis or epidemic framing of this period of HIV/AIDS. HIV was present in the United States before this time (we now know), and certainly still exists to a disgraceful degree. *Crisis framing* is said to sensationalize HIV/AIDS as a one-time thing that no one could have expected, and everyone tried their best to ‘cure’. In this vein, an endemic -- as opposed to an epidemic -- lasts in a particular region among certain populations. An epidemic is a shocking time-limited event, frequently full of stigma, chaos, and disaster narratives. Scholars frequently refer to these societal stigmas as narratives -- and narratives have power, with impacts on individuals. During this crisis, “victims were victimized” as ‘gay bashing’, a hate crime, increased. (PBS)

### **Part 3. A Book of Artists**

#### **Chapter 1: The Early Years — Silence, Stigma, and the Artistic Avant-Garde (1981–1985)**

##### *Panic and The Political Vacuum*

The earliest known case of infection with HIV-1 in a human was detected in a blood sample collected in 1959 from a man in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, though how he became infected is not known (Daszak). Genetic analysis of this blood sample suggested that HIV-1 may have stemmed from a single virus in the late 1940s or early 1950s.

The U.S. government's catastrophic inaction during the early years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic catalyzed a creative uprising among the communities most devastated by the virus.

Society and media were widely against LGBTQ+ Americans in these early years, that is if they were even acknowledging the burgeoning queer communities present in major cities and across America (and the globe). This meant that for queer people, cities were dangerous; They are made by human hands and hierarchies, laws, and police, a system ready to criminalize two men whose bodies may fall into each other, two men who want to live together. In America and around the world in these decades, censorship and fear became two sides of the same door to the same closet with a mob at the door reading to paint you as evil for being sick, deathly sick, and it's spreading to your friends. The White House and the apartment you were just evicted from form two sides of the same coin, and some people are profiting off this. The closet and America were the sick and hated paint amidst plagues, make art against metaphors of natural viruses and a violent disease, art for a public that laughs at your pain. In the early 1980s, as HIV/AIDS began to devastate queer communities, a parallel crisis of representation was already deeply entrenched in American culture. As Vito Russo, a filmmaker and activist, powerfully argues in *The*

*Celluloid Closet* documentary, mainstream media had long trained audiences to view queer characters as tragic, monstrous, or invisible. These distorted portrayals—ranging from limp-wristed comic relief to murderous deviants—fostered a cultural landscape where queer lives were already marginalized, ridiculed, or erased altogether. By the time the first cases of what would later be named AIDS were reported, society had few if any frameworks for imagining queer people as fully human, let alone worthy of care or protection. Russo’s work, which documented and critiqued decades of homophobic cinematic tropes, thus becomes essential to understanding the stakes of artistic and activist responses to the epidemic. The art and protest that emerged in the wake of AIDS—from agitprop graphics to performance pieces—was not simply fighting a virus but battling a legacy of cultural erasure that had long made queer suffering legible only through stereotypes or silence. In fact, according to Larry Kramer, a founder of ACT UP, in his play *The Normal Heart*,

“During the first nineteen months of the [AIDS] epidemic, the New York Times wrote about it a total of seven times. During the first three months of the Tylenol scare in 1982, the New York Times wrote about it a total of 54 times. By 1983, AIDS had claimed more than two thousand lives, while seven people had died of Tylenol poisoning.”

Political elites disrespected, villainized, laughed at, or outright ignored those with HIV/AIDS. Art provided a different narrative and was essentially one of the only mediums those affected by the disease had to speak to the public. State permitted discrimination for those with HIV/AIDS, and slow medicine trials demanded political responses, artists forced to discuss it

Genius creators of art that don’t obey the state apparatus are decidedly a threat to the state’s dominance. As a challenge to status quo thinking, art like this must and will be persecuted and censored by the state, time immemorial. It can be advantageous for politicians to point out the ‘excesses and offenses’ of those on the edges of society, like queer people. Politicians extoll

and promise a return to the masculinities and heterosexuality people grew up with. Voters love a scandal, love a moral hierarchy, love the paranoia, and love having an ‘Other’ to villainize. Public persecutions of artists deemed obscene work great for the state by creating in the mind of the voter a comforting, powerful majority of ‘normal’ people, opposed to the offensive ‘Other’. Obscenity trials, in all their forms, minute and massive, in everyday judgments by a straight society or in the spectacle and extravagancies of courts of law, are staples of the “making art while queer” experience. Creating art changes what it means to be human. As the purest form of creation of the human mind, art is an individual miracle and less burdened by the hierarchies, expectations, and pollutions of the manufactured systems of violence, power, and cultural control we live within.

#### *First Artistic Responses: The Early Avant-Garde*

Robert Mapplethorpe, an accidental culture warrior, has had an impact that cannot be denied. He helped queerness gain a strong foothold in the American art world, popular culture, and right-winger minds. In the 80s, armed with a camera gifted to him by his male lover and armed with the occasionally controversial visual realities of people’s private and public lives, Mapplethorpe took the creative world by storm. His photographs, captured in a small square, developed in a Darkroom, are all just simple and stark still images of nature: Nature in a vase, nature in chains and leather, nature oddly muscular, nature with a gun, nature nude. Mapplethorpe gifted his subjects inimitable elegance. Mapplethorpe is honorifically described by one of his lovers, Patti Smith, in her memoir, *Just Kids*, as having,

“took areas of dark human consent and made them into art. He worked without apology, investing the homosexual with grandeur, masculinity, and enviable nobility. Without affectation, he created a presence that was wholly male without sacrificing feminine grace. He was not looking to make a political statement or an announcement of his evolving sexual persuasion. He was presenting something new, something not seen or explored as he saw and explored it. Robert sought to elevate aspects of male experience,

to imbue homosexuality with mysticism. As Cocteau said of a Genet poem, 'His obscenity is never obscene.' (Smith 199)

Born in the suburbs of New York to a Catholic family, Robert Mapplethorpe eventually embraced the possibilities and dark rooms of New York City, rejecting the culture he'd grown up with. He took New York's 'high' and 'low' society by storm. Writer Fran Lebowitz described him "as like a kind of ruined Cupid, and he was very reliant on his charm. He made great use of it" (Poniewozik). He enjoyed life and climbed the social ladder of New York City while lifting others around him as a dedicated photographer of the New York creative and gay scene. Robert Mapplethorpe was diagnosed with HIV in 1986. With this diagnosis, he rededicated himself to bringing beauty and permanence to the people he loved through the power of photography.

As a homosexual with AIDS, Robert Mapplethorpe was deemed guilty by society, and as someone who created art that challenged 'good', common-sense, conservative, or Christian American values, Mapplethorpe was twice guilty, a repeat offender. His resilient and genuine *Self Portraits* are both mugshots and piercing statements of innocence. They are artifacts of a life boldly lived and now forever permanent in the cultural consciousness. Weakened badly by disease, Mapplethorpe's *Self Portrait* series immortalizes him, casting himself in permanent photo as solid marble which no 'plague' can touch. Flushed with pride, Mapplethorpe reckons with his own fleeting life and looks directly at the camera, which will help solidify his legacy and visual memory. His *Self Portraits* transform constantly: He presents himself at times as masculine and feminine, sometimes nude, sometimes with props like a gun. In the portrait, he ages and displays his capacity to live with dignity, even while being killed. But the eyes never change - they pierce the viewer with humanity and moral clarity. It's a call to us all to fight for freedom and against the unjust life-taking of young people who are oppressed or disregarded by the state, structures of oppression, and an at times brutally bigoted society.



Fig. 2. *Self Portrait*, Robert Mapplethorpe (1980)



Fig. 3. *Self Portrait, Drag*, Robert Mapplethorpe (1980)

Robert Mapplethorpe created art that was more ‘outrageous’ than many of his contemporaries. It wasn’t sanitized, and it wasn’t intended for mainstream audiences. This proved to be a double-edged sword. His art used no metaphors, like Felix Gonzalez-Torres's most well-known pieces from the Untitled series. Mapplethorpe died young. His pieces can now only be debated endlessly, scandalized, and misunderstood, for he is not here to defend them. Mapplethorpe invents techniques and styles, without which their art would not be influential. By borrowing from classical art and disciplined photographic posing, lighting, and positioning, Mapplethorpe constantly provides the most dignity to frequently villainized, victimized, and disrespected subjects. By photographing everything from sex workers to Schwarzenegger, Andy Warhol to flowers to genitalia, Mapplethorpe inherently argues that there is beauty in this life he lives— no, in everything — the suffering imposed on him be damned.

All of this attracted deep controversy. A major posthumous retrospective of Mapplethorpe's work (Mapplethorpe had just died) was to be shown at The Corcoran Gallery in DC, blocks from the White House. It would include photos of nude men and nude women, some even engaging in acts of human sexuality. Conservative politicians were overjoyed that they had something to publicly be disgusted at (a homosexual killed by AIDS who created something parts of Middle America might find controversial). He saw in the leftover political tides of the conservative Reagan years an opportunity to smear those affected by AIDS, an opportunity to defund federal agencies like the NEA, deemed inefficient and liberal, and a new villain to canonize in a growing and popular culture war. In 1989, Senator Helms from North Carolina (Helms is deceased) preached and pandered loudly about radical artists “with AIDS” who were creating art that was simply out of line with common-sense Christian family values. By ranting to the Senate about explicit images, Helms paradoxically normalizes discussions of sexuality in politics while disparaging human sexuality. Helms, who had been elected to the U.S. Senate from North Carolina, proclaimed, “The American people ... are disgusted with the idea of giving the taxpayers’ money to artists who promote homosexuality insidiously and deliberately” (Davis). He believed this, citing religious reasons and concepts of acts considered “unnatural”. A quote from an investigative journalist at The New York Times about Helm’s response to the museum pulling the show is ultimately telling:

"Mr. Helms's office didn't call until after we canceled the exhibition," Dr. Orr-Cahall continued. "We heard through a variety of people that he was very distressed and angry the show was canceled. The day after we canceled, his office called and demanded we recount all the Federal funds we had received in the last year. It sounded as if he was distressed he wasn't going to have this weapon in Washington." (Gamarekian)

Mapplethorpe was killed by complications of HIV/AIDS. He was killed by elected bigots, FDA dilly-dallying, and an American public comfortable with their hatreds. His impact

lives on. Mapplethorpe's art has tripled in value and grown exponentially in infamy and clout. His foundation, the Mapplethorpe Foundation, thrives, fighting HIV/AIDS, the virus that took his and so many of his friends and lovers' lives. Medicine has developed, in part thanks to the fact that the victims of this disease in the first 20 years were far from silent. They were radically loud, and yes, at times proudly obscene.

It was not assimilationist homosexuals or those engaged in *respectability politics* that accomplished what we will label the *beginning* of relief from the massacre that HIV/AIDS wrought. It was those who challenged cultural norms, the queers like Robert Mapplethorpe who created what could be labeled obscene, or perhaps revolutionary. It was the radical, uncompromising, self-actualized queers who challenged institutionalized bigotry. Those seeking to “fit in” didn't change public opinion.

Mapplethorpe disobeyed. By capturing organic, sinful reality as it is, including in his *Self Portraits*, Robert Mapplethorpe (and all others simultaneously hurt and exalted by the spectacle of the conservative outrage machine) destroys the “normal”, state-approved image of gender and human sexuality. Ideologues like Senator Helms can only be left sputtering. Art is free to create, free to speak of, and free to inspire. In 2025, under the threat of fascism, the public should grow and push the limits of its freedom to speech. Mapplethorpe was a pioneer and prime exemplar of the creative, queer individual taking advantage of the culture wars. These “wars”, from a vaster vantage point, can be said to be waged from the right but eventually, and it takes constant work towards acceptance and cohabitation, won by the left. It seems as if art can change minds. An active and creatively non-docile public who wants to protect their rights to speech and profound artistic creation must accept the duty of being a “culture warrior” — not by putting on any uniform of ‘obscenity’, but rather by stoically and honestly undressing the labels and weight

societally prescribed to them, unveiling themselves as they truly are to the world, as works of art.

Some artists took on the role of the *spy*, infiltrating the art world and putting on a heteronormative face, such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres. He also faced censorship. He said:

“When I had a show at the Hirshhorn, Senator Stevens, who is one of the most homophobic anti-art senators, said he was going to come to the opening and I thought he’s going to have a really hard time explaining to his constituency how <sup>[1-]</sup>~~[SEP]~~ pornographic and how homoerotic two clocks side-by side are. He came there looking for dicks and asses. There was nothing like that. Now you try to see homoeroticism in that piece. There’s a great quote by the director of the Christian Coalition, who said that he wanted to be a spy. “I want to be invisible,” he said, “I do guerilla warfare, I paint my face and travel at night. You don’t know until election night.” This is good! This is brilliant! Here the Left we should stop wearing the fucked-up T-shirts that say “Vegetarian Now.” No, go to a meeting and infiltrate and then once you are inside, try to have an effect. I want to be a spy, too. I do want to be the one who resembles something else. We should have been thinking about that long ago. We have to restructure our strategies and realize that the red banner with the red raised fist didn’t work in the sixties and it’s not going to work now. I don’t want to be the enemy anymore. The enemy is too easy to dismiss and to attack. The thing that I want to do sometimes with some of these pieces about homosexual desire is to be more inclusive. Every time they see a clock or a stack of paper or a curtain, I want them to think twice” (Barr).

### *Rock Hudson and the Power of Public Recognition*

One turning point in AIDS awareness was actor Rock Hudson’s death in October of 1985. When Rock Hudson was diagnosed with HIV in 1984, he kept his sexuality a secret until three months before his death (M. Rappaport 3). Only months later did President Ronald Reagan address the disease (M. Rappaport 3). I read that in 1985, around 14 years after HIV was likely present in America, TIME Magazine and LIFE magazine finally decided the threat of HIV/AIDS was worth space on their cover. TIME Magazine went with the title: “AIDS/ The Growing Threat/ What’s Being Done”, with AIDS splashed prominently across the page in white and red, over a black and white picture with the caption: “Now that the disease has come out of the closet,

how far will it spread?”. It’s almost 2025 as I write this. The virus we now know as HIV/AIDS is long out of the closet. Let’s follow along with TIME magazine’s homophobic metaphor for a second longer. The World Health Organization’s (WHO) best guess is that AIDS today has affected at least 88.4 but up to 112.8 million people globally (World Health Organization “AIDS”). *Affected* here means that the disease has killed about half of these 88,400,000 people in every corner of our earth. This is an indefinable, ungroupable, heartbreakingly massive amount of people. I tell you that they are all different, all live or have lived indescribable, unique lives, met people you or I will never meet, had thoughts and spoke, made art, had lives. So, has HIV/AIDS spread from TIME’s proverbial closet? More importantly, what can destroy that closet?

## **Chapter 2: Militancy and Mourning — The Rise of Collective Artistic Resistance as Policy Pressure (1986–1989)**

*Coercive and Collective Art Activism: The Silence=Death Project, ACT UP, and Gran Fury*

Out of a lack of organized resistance to HIV/AIDS, inaction stemmed from collective artistic movements that immediately changed the dialogue. In 1985, 6 men (including Avram Finkelstein) founded the Silence=Death Project with the simple goal of supporting each other. But quickly, watching friends die, they embraced direct artistic action. According to an interview with the group in *The Village Voice* (a queer magazine publication), the project,

“can be traced to a New York diner in 1985. Nights earlier, Socarrás [one of the group’s six founders] recalls, he was “walking down Broadway towards Astor Place and having this irresistible impulse to throw myself on the sidewalk and pound my fists on the ground. I had to stop myself. I wanted to wail to heaven.” Over the previous few years he had lost so many men he loved that he stopped writing down their names after his list reached 100. That night, he remembers, he

“watched that potential scenario [play out in my mind] and thought, ‘I can either do that or I can try to do something with this energy.’” (Kerr 2)

Finkelstein also revealed to The Village Voice a note he’s held on to:

“Research direction of triangle  
printing prices (3 estimates)  
charles – typefaces  
pricing  
stock  
chris – cut paper + triangle for comps  
wheat paste  
van rental?  
appetizer

This is a to-do list from 1986, written in the journal of Avram Finkelstein” (Kerr 1).

And the tasks got done. In mid-March 1987, the Project wheat-pasted across New York the visionary, bold, and now iconic poster. The process to create the poster, which is included below, was targeted art in the public space that conferred urgency on strategically selected populations:

“professional wheatpasters (then an expensive, Mafia-run racket, as Finkelstein, who did the sourcing, reported back) were told to poster in the East Village, the West Village, Times Square, and Lower Times Square (meaning Chelsea), as well as on the Upper West Side, the goal being to target communities where lesbians and gay men lived and places where members of the media lived and worked. Overnight, months of love and labor blanketed the city.” (Kerr 5)



AZT, which was the only available AIDS treatment at the time. 17 were arrested, and the stunt gained huge media attention after Wall Street had to push back the opening of the day's trading ("ACT UP" 1). The following month, on April 15, ACT UP strategically used the media's annual focus on last-minute tax filers by staging a protest at New York City's main post office. Since news crews were already there to capture the rush, ACT UP's message was guaranteed visibility. This action also marked their first use of the motto: "Silence = Death." ("ACT UP" 1) In 1988, they "seized" the FDA. The Washington Post went with the headline "1,000 SWARM FDA'S ROCKVILLE OFFICE TO DEMAND APPROVAL OF AIDS DRUGS".

In January 1988, out of ACT UP, a group of artists devoted to AIDS activism, formed the Gran Fury collective as the "unofficial propaganda ministry and guerrilla graphic designers" of ACT UP (AIDS Demo Graphics 9). Douglas Crimp justified the group's existence by saying, "We don't need a cultural renaissance; we need cultural practices actively participating in the struggle against AIDS. We don't need to transcend the epidemic; we need to end it." ("AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism" 7). The name Gran Fury came from the Plymouth car model of the NYPD. How institutions (CDC, Reagan administration, media) governed whose lives were deemed grievable or disposable is an example of the use of what Foucault describes as biopower. Gran Fury's slogan, "Kissing Doesn't Kill," directly counters the societal stigma and points a finger at what is actually killing people: bigotry and greed, missing media coverage, and neglectful or harmful laws. The work, which was inspired by Benetton advertising, was plastered on buses in major cities, and, like most of Gran Fury's works, was used in political actions like protests.



Fig. 5. “Kissing Doesn’t Kill: Greed and Indifference Do”, Gran Fury, 1989 (via creativetime.org)



Fig. 6. ACT UP Chicago members carry a Kissing Doesn’t Kill banner during the Gay Pride Parade on June 24, 1990, Chicago. Image Courtesy: The New York Public Library.

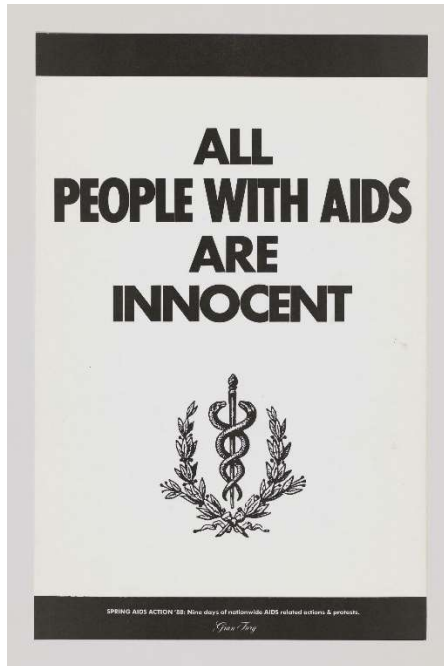


Fig. 7. *All People With AIDS are Innocent*, Gran Fury.

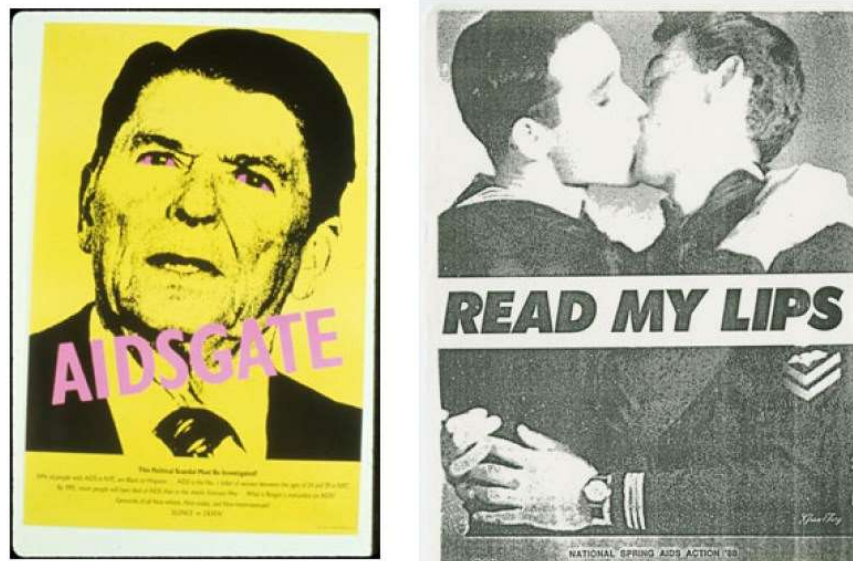


Fig. 8. Gran Fury, *AIDSGate* (1987) and *Read My Lips (Boys)* (1988), New York Public Library.

Gran Fury's methods of guerrilla dissemination and people-powered propaganda were diverse. The group shocked a pretentious *art world* at the luxurious Venice Biennale in 1990, juxtaposing the Pope with a condom and directly critiquing the role of catholic higher-ups in publicly lobbying against safer sex education in high schools and opposing contraception.



Fig. 9. Installation of *The Pope and the Penis* (1990) in the Aperto section of the 44th Venice Biennale, 1990. Courtesy and photograph: Bruno

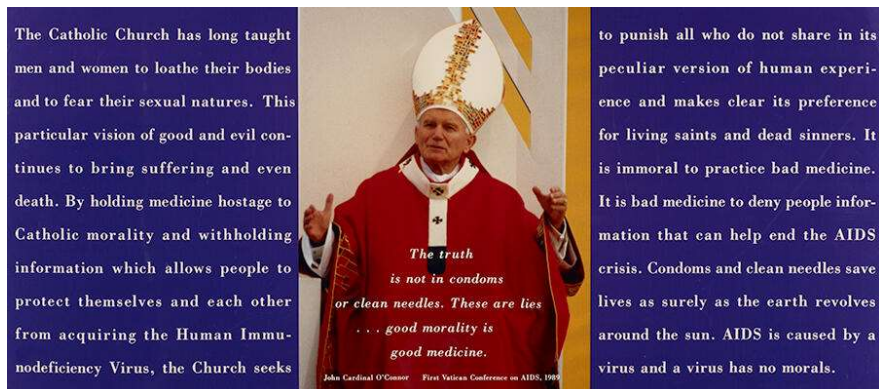


Fig. 10. Gran Fury, *The Pope and the Penis*, 1990, ink on PVC, 2.4 × 5.5 m. Courtesy: Gran Fury and Avram Finkelstein

These pictures stirred a major controversy and certainly made the news. Avram Finkelstein, one of the founders of Gran Fury, the art affinity group, said on their work in Venice:

“The details are chronicled through the collective’s recollections in the 80WSE exhibition catalogue, *Read My Lips* (2011). These included: seizure of the work by Italian customs; a visit by the United States Information Agency; threats of arrest; a boycott of its censorship by other artists; our hiding the work near the garbage containers of a pizzeria; a visit by magistrates; proposed legal action by

the Italian Parliament; and national tabloid coverage of the work that far exceeded its exposure in art-media outlets.” (“The Pope, The Penis, and the Phone” 4)

Finkelstein, like the other members of Gran Fury, was trained in the arts and advertising. The group utilized this visual language of capitalism (advertising) and flipped it on its head to challenge those same corporate systems of power to the benefit of their underrepresented community. Finkelstein says, of *The Pope and the Penis*,

“the work landed smack in the middle of its cultural landscape... because Gran Fury relied heavily on the centrality of advertising vernaculars, the folk language of capitalism. Although *détournement* was not original to us – nor were we the only artists exploring it – we squatted in advertising’s matter-of-factness, its insistence and its omnipresence, which we bent into a battle cry” (*The Pope* 5).

Activist graphics served as a response to information failure. Aesthetic choices (shock, satire, anger) also turned mourning into a public confrontation. Artists evolved from witnesses to warriors, forcing AIDS onto the national agenda. Most of all, this art broke the silence. This was key. Activists deliberately staged the sick, the dying, the grieving — using bodies to challenge the sanitized media images. The impact of the various forms of this street theater is undeniable; Even Dr. Anthony Fauci said,

“Before AIDS and before ACT UP, all experimental medical decisions were made by physicians, Larry [Kramer, founder of ACT UP], by assuring consumer input to the F.D.A., put us on the defensive at the N.I.H. He put Congress on the defensive over appropriations. ACT UP put medical treatment in the hands of the patients. And that is the way it ought to be.” (Specter 2)



Fig. 11. ACT UP protesters outside the FDA headquarters in Rockville, Maryland on October 11, 1988. Peter Ansin, Getty Images.

They demanded the release of experimental medication for those living with HIV/AIDS with slogans reading: 'Never Had A Chance.' 'I Got the Placebo' and 'I Died for the Sins of the FDA.'

### *Mainstream Interventions: The AIDS Quilt*

One mainstream, and highly effective work of art was the AIDS quilt, the largest piece of community folk art, weighing 54. It was stretched across the National Mall multiple times. Each

of its tens of thousands of fabric squares memorialized someone who died of HIV/AIDS, made by those who loved them.



Fig. 12. AIDS Quilt displayed on the National Mall, photograph.

The community folk project was supported by major politicians but created by activists (Quilt History). Some criticize this work as being a product of “respectability politics”, created to intentionally be as benign as possible and prioritizing only white gay male victims and only in mass deaths described as unpreventable without prescribing any demands for action or blame. In 2006, the Los Angeles Times reported that only an abysmal 260 quilt squares memorialized Black HIV/AIDS victims (of more than 48,000 total squares), even though Black people represented nearly half of the people newly being infected with HIV/AIDS (Hiskeys). Black people do not compose nearly 50% of the population, which is frequently referred to as HIV/AIDS disproportionate effects. Regardless, the quilt was a powerful and massively impactful, community-created exhibition that changed people's hearts, including lawmakers. It

made physical those whose deaths and lives were never front-page stories. Many of the pieces crafted by friends of loved ones were overtly political.

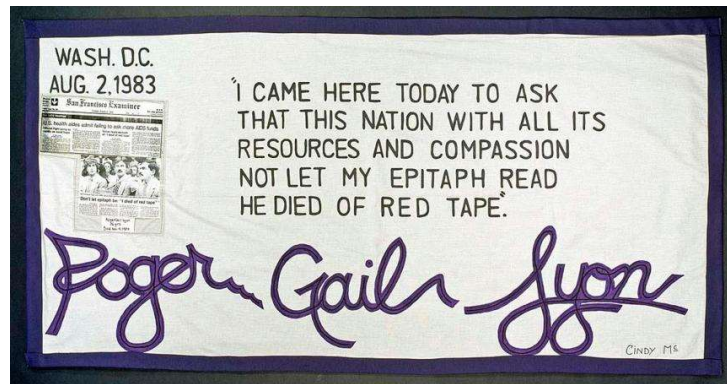


Fig. 13. AIDS Memorial Quilt Panel dedicated to Roger Lyon, 2011, National Museum of American History.

### *To Keith Haring and Those Who Have Danced with Madonna*

One universalizing fact of life is Madonna. My first time in New York, I asked an older gay man running a vintage store where to go clubbing. He told me: “All the good places closed long ago.” He went on to tell me a story of the time he was dancing at the club with a beautiful blonde woman. She was an amazing dancer, and she told him he was too. When he looked up, he realized it was Madonna. Keith Haring, a young man who frequented clubs like this, took the New York Subway system and art world by storm just as he was diagnosed with HIV. He must have danced with many people, many of whom are no longer here. Being queer means many things, including painting on walls. Keith Haring started as a graffiti artist. In a 1989 interview with the Rolling Stones, Haring said, “When AIDS became a reality in terms of my life, it started becoming a subject in my paintings. The more it affected my life, the more it affected my work.”



Fig. 14. *Is this the Policy of the AIDS Action Committee*, Keith Haring. 1989.

Keith Haring was a leader in the art world. As AIDS affected New Yorkers, Haring started graffitiing subways. He quickly went viral and took the art world by storm. Haring exemplifies how queer artists used their bodies, public space, and accessible visual language to challenge political apathy toward AIDS. His work made art a form of bodily intervention—through murals, subway drawings, and performance—and drew attention to queer existence as both vulnerable and resistant. Art as both creation and coercion: Haring’s art “coerced” public attention by being unavoidable, especially in urban spaces. His signature figures—often joyful, erotic, or anguished—demanded that viewers confront themes like death, sex, and state violence during the AIDS crisis, sometimes without explicitly naming the disease.

Haring strategically embraced both mainstream visibility (via his Pop Shop and collaborations with Andy Warhol) and radical politics (anti-apartheid posters, AIDS activism). This straddling of commercial success and direct action resonates with this thesis’s focus on how art was used to navigate, resist, and exploit cultural power structures. He founded the Keith Haring Foundation shortly before his death in 1990, ensuring his art would continue to support AIDS research and children’s programs. This was a future-oriented practice that countered state neglect with care and visibility

### *Disco Healing and Club Activism: Paradise Garage*

In the academic article HIV and AIDS Kin: The Discotecture of Paradise Garage by Ivan Muneura, the author builds a more cohesive picture of AIDS activism within art: Within the music and wild outfits of the majority black gay club that hosted artists like Sylvester and Cat Stevens. The club famously had walls adorned with Keith Haring graffiti. The club also had a major role in disseminating crucial information about HIV/AIDS to those most disproportionately affected by it. It was a space for organizing, mourning, and celebration. The article HIV and AIDS Kin analyzes the role the architecture of the *discotech*, the *discotecture* had in building kinship among queer people, specifically black queer people within Paradise Garage, as well as promoting activism and public health.

Paradise Garage, and the other diverse queer clubs that bloomed in New York City in the 80's created a space for a community that was being destroyed, sickened, and killed to feel magic, to become heroes, if only just for a night. Together they created new forms of music, architecturally diverse spaces, physical painted art, and music videos - but at its core this was a cultural response to diseases like hatred and HIV/AIDS. Paradise Garage's most famous DJ was named Larry Levan. A black man who created music that spoke to clubbers in a "godlike" manner, "The Paradise Garage was like church... That was the congregation, and Larry was the minister. He was preaching through his records" (Raymer). Clubs provided solace, joy, and community, and became a place of political battle. Many were shut down by public health orders to stop the spread of HIV. But clubgoers kept dancing as long as they could -- spreading public health awareness and leading protests. Paradise Garage's most famous attendees were artists like Keith Haring, Grace Jones, and Robert Mapplethorpe. But as Ben Start describes who attended the club, "Its clientele were high on the hit list of the human immunodeficiency virus",

as it was predominantly young, gay, people of color. Haring was killed by HIV/AIDS, as was Mapplethorpe. So was Levan. Doctors from NYC's Bureau of Venereal Disease Control blamed the infrastructures of nightclubs and bathhouses for the spread of HIV and AIDS, echoing rumors of microbes in the water supply of saunas, viruses in poppers, and bacteria in the ventilation systems of discos, medical theory assumed a gay lifestyle provoked the epidemic. Paradise Garage shut down in 1987. Haring, in his journal from the last party the club ever had, full of performance, drag, and new sounds, wrote:

“it's like losing a lover when everything was going just fine. Its like when Andy [Warhol] and Bobby [Breslau] died. Maybe Paradise Garage has moved to heaven... so Bobby can go there now. That would be nice” (Haring).

*Obsessions on the 'Obscene' By the Conservative Outrage Machine: David Wojnarowicz and Other Censorship Subjects*

David Wojnarowicz -- prostitute, drug user, victim, “Anger Artist”, “Hunger Artist”, provocateur, unlabellable, iconoclast, and assailant of a deadly American status quo -- was born September 14, 1954. His life was defined by trauma at the hands of adults and the state. At a young age he and his siblings were kidnapped by their alcoholic father and beaten repeatedly in suburban New Jersey- “while neighbors pruned their flowers and mowed their lawns” (Laing). While homeless as a child, he would cruise and graffiti Hudson's “gay piers” of New York. Years after he died of AIDS on July 22nd, 1992, at age 37 of AIDS-related complications, his work was featured on those hollowed, and since gentrified, gay cruising grounds of the Meatpacking District - at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Simultaneously angry and loving, Wojnarowicz's life and arts remain a tour de force that changes the dialogue of public opinion around HIV and shows that art will always be political. Wojnarowicz himself wrote,

“I’m not an artist who became an activist. I’m an activist who had to become an artist.” In these case studies, people make art as a form of necessary action.

David Wojnarowski was a prominent artist protesting the hatred, misinformation, and harmful public policy of the late 20th century surrounding the HIV/AIDS crisis. His art initiated censorship battles in Congress over National Endowment of the Arts funding, controversy in organized religion, and frequent criticism in art circles. Now his art has sold for up to \$1.5 million. His art didn’t stop at protesting HIV/AIDS. Although he was a member of ACT UP (the very active AIDS activist group), he fought against racism, fought for the homeless, and detailed his poverty and abuse. He intended to help those on the margins, or “close to the knives”. He also protested what he called ‘*The Pre-Invented World*’: “the brought-up world; the owned world. The world of coded sounds: the world of language, the world of lies. The packaged world...The Other World where I’ve always felt like an alien” (Close to the Knives). In “Post Cards from America: X-rays from Hell”, featured in the catalog for Nan Goldin’s exhibition “*Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*” in 1989, Wojnarowicz shares how he believes art impacts politics: “To make the private into something public is an action that has terrific repercussions in the pre-invented world” (*Artist Space*). The exhibition, which featured photographs and assorted art from 6 artists, the 6 of whom would since die of AIDS, sparked a debate in Congress led by the homophobic and anti-abortion Senator Jesse Helms, as well as religious groups, culminating in NEA rule changes targeting “obscenity”. It makes sense that the exhibition caught the eye and ire of politicians like Helms, who once said “We have to call a spade a spade, and a perverted human being a perverted human being”, referring to homosexuals (Goodwin). His anger was partially targeted at queer dissent in general, because in an essay eventually included in Goldin’s exhibit’s book, Wojnarowicz refers to Helms as “the repulsive senator from zombieland”. In an

America frequently dominated by the religious right-wing, Wojnarowicz writes that “one of the last frontier left for radical gesture is the imagination”, where he can at least “in the privacy of my own skull, douse Helms with a bucket of gasoline, and set his putrid ass on fire” (Postcards from America). Notably, Helms was both a foe to queer expression in art and queer lives, as he was a fierce advocate for reduced funding for HIV, and believed it was God’s punishment for unnatural acts. To Helms, queer art was a threat to a hetero-hegemonic America. To Helms, art should not be used to protest AIDS responses or even bring awareness to the epidemic under federal dollars.

David Wojnarowicz's art demands to be respected with its power of words and sacred imagery. It also humanizes AIDS “patients”, though the word implies they were being cared for, or AIDS “victims”, though the word implies powerlessness. He makes his suffering visible when the US government and homophobic majorities demand it remain hidden. One his most famous work of art, *Untitled (One Day This Kid...)*, does not mention HIV as a potential point of suffering a young gay child might one day face. He instead focuses on the abuse, the gay-bashing, the electroshock, and the disownment that a young gay boy, here represented with a young yearbook photo of David, might face.

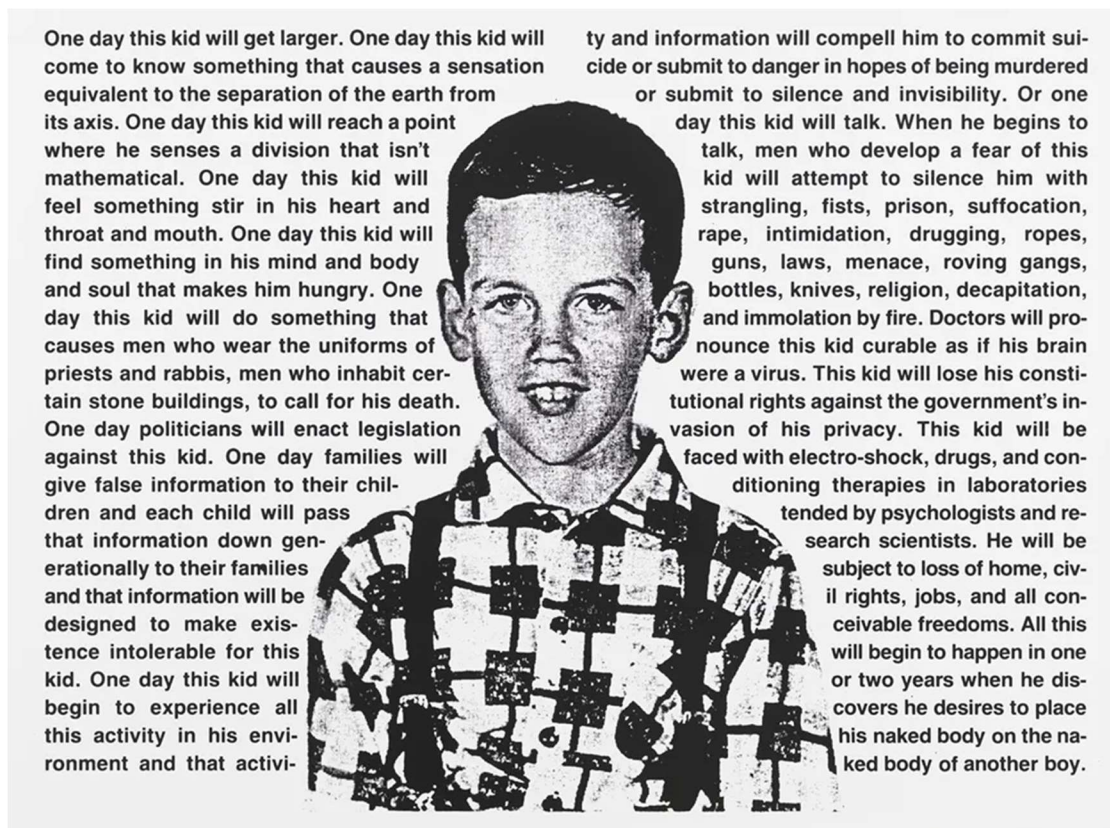


Fig. 15. *Untitled (One Day This Kid...)*, David Wojnarowicz, 1990–91. Whitney Museum of American Art, <https://whitney.org/collection/works/16431>.

By skipping the disease, Wojnarowicz hones in on the discrimination and hatred that accentuated the HIV/AIDS epidemic and sometimes participates in it: “I am waking up more and more from daydreams of tipping amazonian blowdarts in ‘infected blood’ and spitting them at the exposed necklines of certain politicians”, or “as each T-cell disappears from my body it’s replaced by tens pounds of pressure ten pounds of rage”, and “there’s certain politicians that had better increase their security forces”. David Wojnarowicz is not a *quiet* radical. As shown in the last quotes, following his diagnosis and the death of Hujar, Wojnarowicz got louder and louder - insistent that his death sentence from HIV/AIDS wasn’t a gag order. He promoted nonviolent protest and eventually leaned away from the nonviolent part. He said in *Post Cards from*

*America*, “I worry that friends will slowly become professional pallbearers, waiting for each death of their lovers, friends and neighbors and polishing their funeral speeches; perfecting their rituals of death rather than a relatively simple ritual of life such as screaming in the streets” (120). Witty, aggressive, and biting, Wojnarowicz did all he could, screaming for those afflicted, loudly and pointedly, but died feeling “a blank spot in a hectic civilization” (*Memories That Smell*). He died in New York, with his partner Tom Rauffenbart taking care of him.

After his death at 37 of AIDS, David’s partner of seven years, Tom, climbed the fence outside the White House and threw the ashes of David Wojnarowicz’s body on the green, perfectly mowed lawn.

Nan Goldin’s powerful collection of art centering on her friends, all of whom were sick, was titled “Witnesses: Against our Vanishing”. “Witnesses” took place at the Artist’s Space gallery in downtown Manhattan in 1989. Nan Goldin herself, the curator of the exhibit, had been a drug addict. This is only to say she had been living on the “margins” of society, a phrasing that degrades certain people. But the epidemic changed her addiction. Goldin says of her addiction, “I feel my own recent recovery from addiction, and that of many of my friends, is directly related to AIDS. With the advent of a fatal illness in our midst, the glorification of self destruction wore thin. We were no longer playing with death -- it was real and among us, and not at all glamorous.” Goldin, with many goals for the exhibition, collected her friends in the art world who happened to be sick. “Witnesses” was a spiritual exhibit, a life-affirming one, and a battle cry against vanishing. In *Art About AIDS*, Sophie Junge, an art historian, analyzes every aspect of the exhibit from spiritual, medical, political, and social lenses.

In the spiritual realm, AIDS is a haunting. For some affected, it is also life and soul-affirming. For others, it is just another sign that there is no God. Yet for others, it’s God’s

righteous vengeance for sin and well deserved. In the brochure for the exhibition “Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing”, there is a selection of powerful writings. One by Linda Yablonsky recalls that she and her dying friends share the same air:

A recent Harper's Index, that mad compendium of deconstructed statistical artifacts, cheerily noted how someone who loves the conceptual world figures. It says for every deep breath inhaled today, the chances it will contain a molecule of Julius Caesar's dying breath are 99 in 100.

Hey, I knew it. The air doesn't just feel close, it is. With every long sigh that escapes my lips I can keep afloat not just the memory of those friends lost to AIDS and cancers and drugs, but their actual first words! Well, why not? They've taught me what I know. Part of what I say belongs to them.

I hear their whisperings on the wind. Ghosts hiss in my ear to wake me each morning and climb in bed with me when I sleep.” (Goldin, et al., 12)

The visitor to Artist Space on the night of the exhibition has many psychological ‘masks’ or social personas they might wear upon entering. Those close to the dying artists became both celebrators of the exhibitions' unveiling and were likely filled with a terrible sense of foreboding (Most of the artists featured would go on to die of AIDS). In this way, attendees (and the counter protestors outside alike) become “witnesses” to state-sanctioned murder via HIV/AIDS neglect. The artists, some already aware they are sick, and some yet to be diagnosed, look over some of their final works. They might have been nervous about the exhibit and potentially stunned at the controversy created. Or maybe they expected it. Others don't like what they've heard and read of the exhibit, such as U.S. Senators who start scandals surrounding “political” or “obscene” art. John Frohnmayer (a University of Oregon alum), the head of the National Endowment for the Arts at the time, revoked funding from the exhibit due to “political” reasons (pressure from Evangelical right-wing politicians), only to later reinstate it. Jesse Helms, who had been elected to the U.S. Senate from North Carolina, proclaimed, “The American people ... are disgusted with the idea of giving the taxpayers' money to artists who promote homosexuality insidiously and deliberately” (Davis).

This was immediately labeled censorship and sparked outrage in the queer and artistic community. The night of the exhibit, defenders of the artworks and artists waved signs criticizing the decision:



Fig. 16. Demonstrations outside Artists Space during the opening of *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, November 16, 1989.

A line of people hold signs with messages including, "ED HELMS impedes THE 1ST AMENDMENT" and "OBSCENE ART?".

Junge analyzes David Wojnarowicz's photography featured in the exhibit, photographs taken of Peter Hujar right after he died. These photos are shown here (Wojnarowicz).



Fig. 17. *Untitled (Peter Hujar)*, David Wojnarowicz (1989). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Courtesy the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P·P·O·W, New York



Fig. 18. *Untitled (Hujar Dead)*, David Wojnarowicz (1989). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Courtesy the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P·P·O·W, New York.

Hujar, a prominent New York-based photographer, was a mentor to Wojnarowicz and Goldin. These post-mortem portraits are analyzed by Junge as religious. She says:

“Wojnarowicz’s photographs refer back to the Christian iconography of mortality. In particular the hands and feet have a strong symbolic impact as they are the sites of the Stigmata Christi, the traces of the crucifixion ... Finally, Hujar’s extended thumb, pointer and middle finger cites Christ’s gesture of benediction, marking him as judge and ruler of the world... Wojnarowicz ... made an analogy with the dying Jesus as a figure of suffering. Here Christ’s martyrdom, which in his time marked him as a “definitive social outcast,” is linked to the high AIDS-related death rate among young men. Hujar is appointed the status of a martyr and his stigmatization as a gay man with AIDS is equated to Christ’s stigmata. In this framing, his death from AIDS loses its meaninglessness. (Junge, 206)

This analysis hints at why homophobic senators recognized the potential and power of the exhibition and vehemently opposed it. To the people of New York's East Village, the exhibit became a sacred *witnessing* to the loss of their friends. To the sick artists, the exhibit provided a medium to reveal their hopes and sadnesses to their community.

The visitors to the exhibit also witnessed the medical impacts of HIV/AIDS on people. Shown Mark Morrisroe's self-portrait, viewers witnessed an emaciated young man bathed in sunlight in a fetal position on his bed (Morrisroe).



Fig. 19. *Untitled (Self-Portrait)*, Mark Morrisroe, 1989. Black-and-white instant print (Polaroid). Committee on Photography Fund, The Museum of Modern Art.  
<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/173284>.

The medical impacts of HIV/AIDS are seen in Morrisroe lying there, pounds lighter. But is also a strong image because he has ownership and prerogative. To Junge, this means he did “not relinquish control over representation of himself” (Junge 207). He shows death can be grappled

with and staged. Morrisroe refuses to be victimized. If one looks closely, one can almost witness a slight smile on Morrisroe's face, perhaps of defiance or peace. After his death, his boyfriend Ramsey exhibited bloodied sheets in a glass box at "Witnesses", with an excerpt from Morrisroe's writing saying "They have stopped listening to me, so I wrote everything down in a note; who was trying to murder me and how" (*Artist Space*).

The exhibition is full of political and social rebellion and righteous anger. But its purpose wasn't politics, it was community. It's the right wing that politicized it furiously. While these art pieces sat in the Artists Space gallery of New York, Goldin's friends had a home to express themselves: angry, joyous, and heartbroken. The men and women featured in the exhibit turned artistic expression into a form of freedom, a breath that uplifted those around them. The artists refused to vanish and created heartbroken art that was spun out of context, a spin that forced American society to reckon with their unjust deaths.

#### *Policy Impact: Reagan Finally Speaks*

In 1987, the CDC launched an unprecedented national campaign, *America Responds to AIDS* (ARTA). The goal of *ARTA* was to increase awareness and understanding of AIDS, to prevent HIV infection, and to encourage people to seek more information and counseling.

In 1988, the 'Understanding AIDS' Pamphlet, the nation's first coordinated HIV/AIDS education strategy, was released by Surgeon General Koop. The "Understanding AIDS" brochure was sent to every US household (and some doctors' offices). At 126 million copies sent, it was the largest mass mailing in American history, and aimed to clarify how AIDS is transmitted, emphasize behavior over risk group association, and stimulate public discussions.

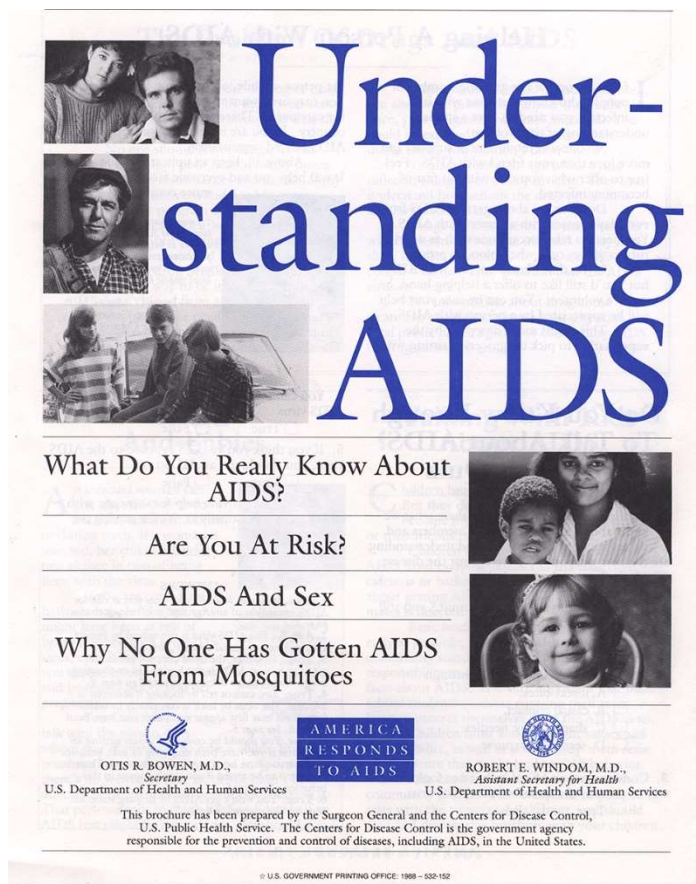


Fig. 20. United States Public Health Service, Office of the Surgeon General. *Understanding AIDS* (cover). 1988. Profiles in Science: The C. Everett Koop Papers, U.S. National Library of Medicine, <https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/catalog/nlm:nlmuid-101584930X1109-img>.

The brochure declared: “who you are has nothing to do with whether you are in danger of being infected with the AIDS virus. What matters is what you do.” Despite this information campaign, the administration took little concrete legislative steps to address the disease’s devastating toll.

### **Chapter 3. Pressure from the Arts; Institutional and Mainstream Responses Slowly Change (1990-1996)**

#### *Those Who Spoke Up: Madonna, George Michael, Salt-N-Pepa, and the Power of Pop Icon Interventions*

The collective nature of artistic resistance to AIDS meant that no artistic medium remained untouched by the epidemic's cultural and political upheaval, including music. In the 1980s and 1990s, some pop stars explicitly addressed HIV/AIDS through their work and activism, while others remained silent. Cultural elites and celebrity artists held a unique form of power: their vast audiences and public platforms enabled them to significantly influence the conflict over HIV/AIDS perceptions and policies. Interventions by pop icons served as powerful public signifiers of both support for affected communities and rejection of the state's inaction, helping to transform public consciousness.

This thesis uses Madonna and George Michael as case studies that exemplify how all forms of art functioned as collective action in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Many artists became activists after personal losses—friends and loved ones lost to the disease—which intensified their commitment to activism. Madonna, for example, lost her close friend Martin Burgoyne to AIDS in 1986 when he was just 23 years old. She held his hand as he died, and this personal tragedy propelled her to perform at fundraisers when many other major pop stars did not. Madonna spoke out against governmental and societal neglect of the epidemic, using her art and public voice to challenge silence and stigma at a time when few dared to do so.

Pop icons like Madonna and George Michael challenged prevailing social norms and state-promoted ideas of sexuality, which often marginalized or ignored the very communities most affected by HIV/AIDS. Instead of adhering to sanitized, heteronormative narratives, they

brought visibility to queer identities and realities that the state preferred to suppress, targeting niche groups that mainstream culture overlooked.

Salt-N-Pepa's 1992 public service announcement and single, "Let's Talk About AIDS," sold over five million copies and represented another critical intervention by a popular music group (fig. 20). By addressing HIV/AIDS in a mainstream, accessible way, they helped break down stigma and promote dialogue among broader audiences, particularly in communities of color often left out of the dominant HIV/AIDS discourse.

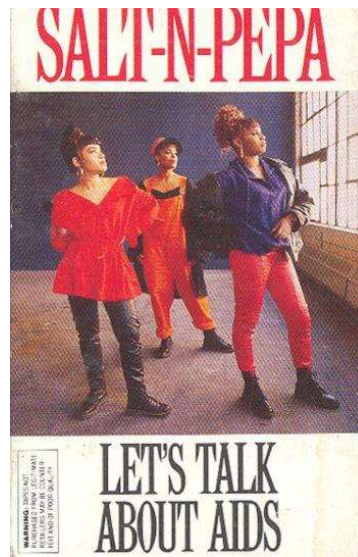


Fig. 21. *LET'S TALK ABOUT AIDS*, SALT-N-PEPA

With the support of cultural outsiders and art created by queer artists or those living with HIV, more positive and affirming representations of people with HIV/AIDS emerged. This contributed to shifting public attitudes, creating space for empathy, activism, and political pressure that ultimately advanced health justice. The power of pop icon interventions illustrates how celebrity cultural production became an indispensable tool within the broader collective artistic resistance to the epidemic, helping to dismantle ignorance, shame, and institutional neglect.

*'The Revolution Might Even be Televised on PBS': Essex Hemphill, Marlon Riggs, and Black Queer Poetics of the Early 90s*

In 1989, Marlon Riggs released *Tongues Untied*, a groundbreaking experimental documentary that merged spoken word, personal narrative, performance, and archival footage to unapologetically center the lives of Black gay men. The film challenged both mainstream gay white visibility and the silences within Black communities surrounding queerness, illness, and desire (Riggs). Riggs's vision was not only aesthetic but political: he weaponized the medium of public television, using PBS—a platform long associated with white liberal civility—to air a radical reclamation of Black queer life (Johnson 123). Essex Hemphill, one of the most prominent Black gay poets of his generation, featured heavily in *Tongues Untied*, lending his words and voice to a film that resisted erasure through lyrical defiance (Hemphill 45). Hemphill's poetry—raw, erotic, and deeply political—functioned not merely as artistic accompaniment but as a central force in Riggs's cinematic argument that Black gay men had always been speaking, loving, and surviving, even if America refused to listen. Together, Riggs and Hemphill crafted a poetics of resistance rooted in collective survival, truth-telling, and a refusal of both white and Black respectability politics (Cohen 445). Their collaboration stands as one of the most significant articulations of Black queer aesthetics in the early 1990s—an era marked by the AIDS crisis, cultural backlash, and the struggle for representation.

*Changing Policies and Artist Collectives in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century of AIDS*

In 1991, half of primary care practitioners, if given a choice, said they would not treat those with HIV/AIDS, and a third of primary care practitioners said, “caring for these people is not an ethical responsibility” (Gerbert et al. 2837). Major legislation was passed, improving conditions for queer people. The Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency Act

provided medical care for people with HIV without other options, and the Americans with Disabilities Act prohibited most HIV-related discrimination (Purcell 1232).

ACT UP in the 90s was not confined to New York. Across America and the globe, ACT UP branches fought creatively to advance public health and queer causes. Here you can see an artifact from an ACT UP Boston action, where they used custom made media to directly threaten the State, from ‘The Queer Nation’ (“Ticket Issued”):

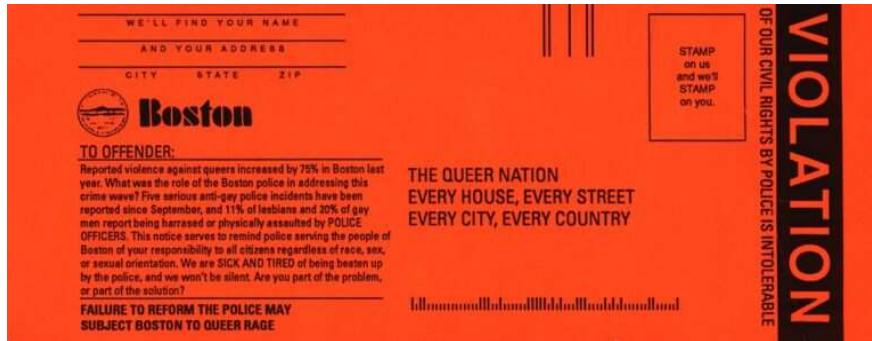


Fig. 22. “Ticket issued by Queer Nation against Boston Police Department,” ca. 1990-1999. ACT UP Boston (Robert Folan Johnson) collection, Northeastern University Archives and Special Collections.

## Chapter 4: ‘Not Enough’: Memory and Forgetting, The Turn of the Century and the Museum Wall (1996–2000)

### *Agenda Setting and the Final Display of the AIDS Quilt on the National Mall*

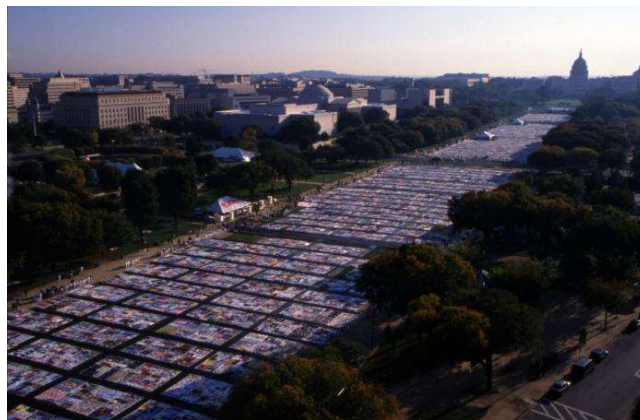


Fig. 23. The AIDS Memorial Quilt displayed on the National Mall, October 1996, by James Di Loreto. Smithsonian Institution Archives.

The quilt is only displayed in pieces now – it’s too large, “with nearly 50,000 panels representing over 110,000 individuals lost to AIDS. According to Neda Ulaby at NPR “Because of its size — put together, the whole quilt would stretch more than 50 miles” (2). Each panel was made by the loved ones of someone lost to AIDS. The panels are life-size, or “the size of a

human grave” to be exact: 3 feet by 6 feet (Ulaby 2). It’s heart-wrenching to say that this is the largest piece of community art ever created – a blanket of lives lost too soon.

The quilt was not without its critics. It is seen by many as non-confrontational, assimilationist, docile, and ignorant of the racialized impacts of this disease. I

*HAART, Declining Deaths, and a Changing Activist Landscape: Global AIDS Policy and the End of the "Crisis" in U.S. Media*

By the turn of the century, many believed the crisis *was over*. People began to forget. With the advent of HAART and declining deaths from the disease, HIV/AIDS was no longer labeled an epidemic in mainstream media but something to be ignored again. Sarah Schulman says this:

“...there is almost no conversation in public about these events or their consequences. Every gay person walking around who lived in New York or San Francisco in the 1980s and early 1990s is a survivor of devastation and carries with them the faces, fading names, and corpses of the otherwise forgotten dead. When you meet a queer New Yorker over the age of forty, this should be your first thought, just as entire male generations were assumed to have fought in World War II or Korea or Vietnam. Our friends died and our world was destroyed because of the neglect of real people who also have names and faces. Whether they were politicians or parents, as people with AIDS literally fought in the streets or hid in corners until they too died or survived, others—their relatives, neighbors, “friends,” coworkers, presidents, landlords, and bosses—stood by and did nothing. 81,542 people have died of AIDS in New York City as of August 16, 2008. These people, our friends, are rarely mentioned. Their absence is not computed and the meaning of their loss is not considered.

2,752 people died in New York City on 9/11. These human beings have been highly individuated. The recognition of their loss and suffering is a national ritual, and the consequences of their aborted potential are assessed annually in public. They have been commemorated with memorials, organized international gestures, plaques on many fire and police stations, and a proposed new construction on the site of the World Trade Center, all designed to make their memory permanent. Money has been paid to some of their survivors. Their deaths were avenged with a brutal, bloody, and unjustified war against Iraq that has now

caused at least 94,000 civilian deaths and 4,144 military deaths. (*Gentrification of the Mind* 42)

This succinctly summarizes years of continued silence on HIV/AIDS deaths and tells us that empowered capitalists and politicians will not mourn, memorialize, or make those dead of HIV/AIDS publicly matter. It is up to us to avenge and individuate them. It is up to us, and art, it seems, may be one of the few weapons we have to change hegemonic narratives: the capability to make a human human, (to make the dead matter to those who they don't). Schulman was an activist in ACT UP and today is an artist and writer. She speaks prominently on collective action and how modern-day *people's movements* can learn from AIDS activists in their creative resistance and vocal community-based uprisings, particularly insightful when today's left seems to be floundering in individualized isolation instead of connection and ideological purity tests instead of speaking up with a common cause – people's *right to life*.

What activism meant had also changed. The emergence of highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) in the mid-1990s, which significantly improved the outlook for people living with HIV, led to a shift in public perception and a decrease in the sense of urgency about AIDS. ACT UP simultaneously broadened its focus and declined in membership.

This art was not like George W. Bush's "painting fruit, plants, and portraits of world leaders" displayed in a Presidential Library (Medler). Instead, protest art like collages of President Bush plastered with slogans accusing him of homophobia and neglecting the AIDS crisis (Fig. 1) functioned as direct political weapons.



Fig. 24. Unknown. "ACT UP Boston members protest George Bush's response to AIDS." ACT UP Boston (Robert Folan Johnson) collection (Z15-005). University Library Archives and Special Collections Department.

## Part 4. In Conclusion

### Findings

The HIV/AIDS crisis exemplified a form of necropolitics—where state power exercises control over who lives and who dies—yet art provided a vital, life-affirming antidote that directly challenged this oppressive status quo. Through collective creative resistance, activists coerced the state and elected elites, making their political positions uncomfortable by amplifying a loud, persistent minority demanding action. This pressure eventually compelled governments to address the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Existing literature supports the argument that for affected communities, art-making—whether photographing loved ones, painting amidst the “plague,” or producing radical visual works—was never a pleasant luxury or mere aesthetic pursuit (Treichler, 1999; Schulman, 2016). This might seem foreign to contemporary observers, but the artists studied here made immeasurable impacts; their creative acts saved countless lives. Future research should delve deeper into this vital cultural resistance, as time constraints limited this study’s exploration of artworks, movements, and artists.

At times labeled offensive and obscene, this queer art was a necessary weapon, a method of community survival, and often a healing balm for those afflicted with HIV/AIDS. It demands a different understanding than art valued solely for beauty, profit, or traditional reasons. Artistic expressions confronting a fatal disease are inherently challenging, yet this research builds on scholarship affirming that such art was vital politically and socially.

These theatrical, elaborate art/signs and various direct actions, sometimes called ‘street theater’ by AIDS activist-author Sarah Schulman, vividly demonstrate art’s tangible impact on political dialogue, using culture to force changes in perception, policy, or at least media

attention. The media coverage of protests played a crucial role, drawing from “agenda-setting” theories that highlight art’s power to spark debate even within dominant news outlets surrounding HIV/AIDS.

Art made people with AIDS visible in a society intent on erasing them—campaigns like “Kissing Doesn’t Kill” challenged stigma with radical visibility. The new, offensive, obscene, colorful, and ambitiously radical art created during this era wielded underrated power, standing as one of the few bulwarks against growing corporate-state control, privatized healthcare, and the commodification of democracy.

The only force capable of interrupting “The Man” must be breathtakingly obscene, creative, unexpected, and artistic. Control over art and cultural norms enables fascistic elites to dominate the body politic, enriching themselves by cultivating an obedient, controlled population whose art and culture are sterilized, commodified, and propagandistic, promoting conservatism and control.

Traditional media largely failed to address the epidemic meaningfully, so alternative media rose to fill the void, rallying communities and illuminating the suffering ignored by mainstream outlets. Widespread examples of creative resistance—such as the Mapplethorpe controversies, ACT UP’s die-ins, David Wojnarowicz’s confrontational works, and the Silence=Death triangle—made political inaction untenable for institutions.

Artists and collectives forced cultural institutions to respond. Interventions like “Day Without Art” cracked open museums, galleries, and media spaces to compel public reckoning with the humanity of people living with HIV/AIDS. Visual interventions pressured the public, politicians, and health agencies to radically transform their responses.

How was this activist art created? Often, it was coordinated en masse within communities, becoming an unstoppable cultural force. Art was understood not simply as an individual act but as collective action—formed by interconnected individual political actors (artists) who communicated, supported each other, and fought censorship and complacency together.

## **Implications**

The model of art as both a creative and coercive force during the HIV/AIDS crisis (1981–2000) offers vital lessons for today’s activist movements—whether in health justice, queer rights, racial justice, or climate activism. Art’s unique ability to influence, challenge, and even coerce dominant institutions and public opinion remains deeply relevant, especially as many crises impacting marginalized communities continue to be ignored or minimized.

Should activist movements reclaim coercive creativity? Absolutely. The HIV/AIDS activist art of the past demonstrated that culture wars are not just symbolic battles—they can be matters of life and death. Art wielded as coercive creativity—the use of forceful, disruptive, and urgent messaging—pierced through the walls of state neglect, media silence, and public apathy. This legacy reminds us that art’s power lies not only in its beauty or expression but in its capacity to compel recognition and action.

Today’s movements can benefit immensely from embracing this model of collective, creative action. As marginalized communities continue to face institutional hostility and neglect, whether in ongoing health crises, systemic racism, or climate injustice, art-making can serve as a form of resistance that is both unifying and impactful. It can disrupt complacency, mobilize communities, and demand accountability in ways that pure policy advocacy or traditional protest might not achieve alone.

Moreover, the HIV/AIDS epidemic is far from over, and the lessons of past art-activism campaigns should not be forgotten. We must learn from those who suffered, fought, and created before us and for us, drawing on their strategies of using art as a weapon against erasure and violence. This historical memory anchors current struggles, reminding activists that art is not a mere accessory to political movements but a core tool for survival and change.

In conclusion, artmaking as collective action remains one of the most potent tools against institutional hostility and neglect, particularly for marginalized communities. Modern-day art values, such as collaboration, intersectionality, and accessibility, can amplify this power. By reclaiming coercive creativity, today's activists can continue to transform culture wars from deadly battlegrounds into spaces of resistance, resilience, and hope.

### **Action Items and Policy Suggestions**

Create art to fight! Join your local ACT UP. As of 2025, ACT UP is still active and creatively fighting public health threats in the modern era. Take direct, artistic action to fight President Trump's nonchalant effort to kill people with HIV/AIDS. Build community, talk to people, support higher education, medicine development, and prevention efforts. If you have money, donate it to organizations dedicated to direct collective action and ending the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Go to an HIV Alliance fundraiser in Oregon and cry because a rich white old woman donated \$5,000 to save queer lives and lives in general. HIV/AIDS affects everybody. Resist the technological corporatization of health and education promoted by the Trump administration via cuts and AI. Challenge the dumbing down of the mind with bold, artistic, revolutionary acts based in love for each other. Protest! Believe in science. Don't just hold a sign. Paint on it! Spin it and dance with it! Smear Robert F. Kennedy Jr's, Donald Trump, and Elon Musk's names

(gilded as they are) today in 2025 as they seek to allow their undesirable to die. Demand a Democratic Party that fights for Medicare for All—legislation that could be transformative in addressing the inaccessibility of HIV/AIDS preventative medicine like PrEP, which has the potential to end HIV/AIDS in America but remains underutilized. As Dr. Kathryn Macapagal, a clinical psychologist and sexual health researcher, explains:

“People aren’t always comfortable disclosing to a health care provider the types of sex they are having, or who they are having sex with, or what kinds of drugs they use. I’ve also witnessed providers fail to ask their patients about sex, sexuality, and drug use when it is relevant, as well as providers who make incorrect assumptions about their patients’ behavior. For example, although one-quarter of new HIV cases are attributed to heterosexual contact, some patients and physicians assume that HIV doesn’t affect straight people much — if at all. These factors, combined with high cost, limited insurance coverage, HIV-related stigma, and lack of access to information about PrEP have led to low uptake in groups that need it. (Macapagal qtd. in Lopez)

In short, the barriers to ending this disease are not just biomedical. They are cultural, structural, and deeply political. As Gran Fury warned in one of their most famous works, “Art is not enough” (Fig. 25).

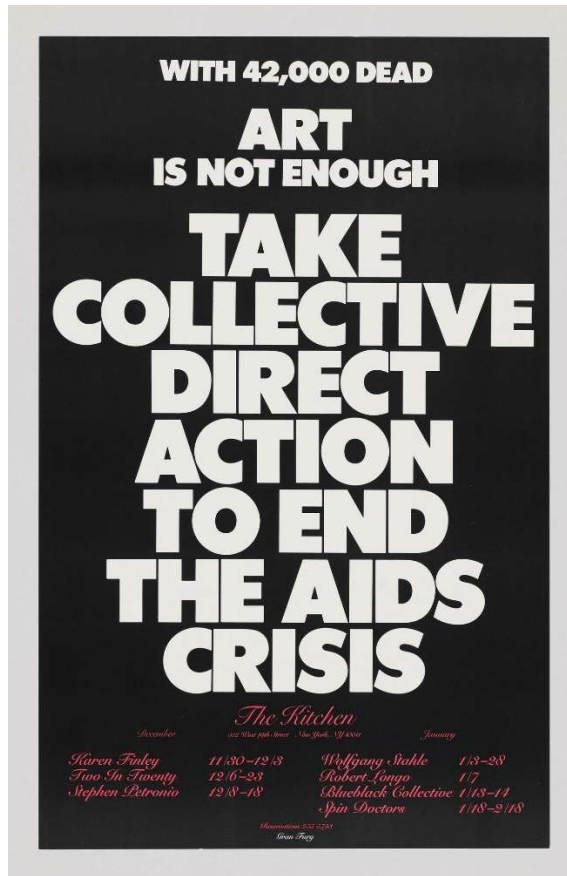


Fig. 25. *Art is Not Enough*, Gran Fury.

And yet, art remains essential. In 2025, as Donald Trump seeks to cut or privatize the very programs that allow the world to survive, we need to start painting on his hateful walls, tearing them down to build something better. We do this not only with outrage, but with the power of shared vision, of shared hope and shared art. Our policy changes must be paired with a cultural revolution in how we imagine care, art, illness, and each other.

## Conclusion - Our Community Remembers: Art, Activism, and the Afterlives of the Epidemic

As humans, we have the power to create art to fight. In the face of mass death, political abandonment, and social erasure, the communities most impacted by HIV/AIDS turned to creativity not as a luxury, but as a means of survival. This thesis has traced the powerful and

often contradictory roles played by artists, especially those I've called coercive creatives, who responded to a public health crisis by producing work that was at once deeply personal, radically political, and fundamentally collective. These were not artists working in isolation; they were organizers, agitators, lovers, archivists, and mourners. From the protest graphics of Gran Fury to the intimate installations of Félix González-Torres, from Essex Hemphill's searing poetry to Gregg Araki's chilling cinema, their work uses art not just as survival, but as a tool to fight for something better.

As José Esteban Muñoz wrote, "Art can't save your life. But it can teach you how to fight for it" (*Cruising Utopia* 143). What we learn from AIDS-era creative resistance is not just the content of their work, their images, sounds, and words—but the form of their action: collaborative, urgent, unsanctioned, and deeply embedded in the material and emotional fabric of everyday life. These artists and activists mobilized what I've called a queer politics of *health and futurity*, resisting dominant narratives of either victimization or villainization.

The slogans that defined the era, like "Silence = Death," originated not from a single figure, but from collective resistance. We should all embrace the coercive potential of art creation. In *Close to the Knives*, Wojnarowicz writes: "Bottom line, each and every gesture carries a reverberation that is meaningful in its diversity; bottom line, we have to find our own forms of gesture and communication. You can never depend on the mass media to reflect us or our needs or our states of mind; bottom line, with enough gestures we can deafen the satellites and lift the curtains surrounding the control room" (*Close to the Knives* 122). This is not just a call to arms—it is a blueprint for revolutionary cultural actions, for seizing visibility on our own terms.

Yet the work of art and activism is unfinished. The archival record remains uneven, with white cisgender gay male voices often overrepresented while the contributions of Black, Latinx, trans, houseless, or incarcerated people continue to be marginalized. Archiving resistance raises critical questions: Whose stories are saved? Whose losses are named? Whose art is funded or preserved? Even now, as new global health crises emerge and old ones persist, the legacy of HIV/AIDS activism demands that we build a queer politics of health that centers care, coalition, direct action, and the material conditions of those most vulnerable.

Future research might turn to contemporary movements—like harm reduction art collectives, trans-led mutual aid networks, or the cultural work of HIV+ artists today—to map how the lessons of the AIDS era are being reimagined and reactivated. Artistic resistance is not a relic of the past; it is a living tradition, constantly shifting to meet the crises of the present. And while art may not offer a cure, it continues to offer us something perhaps more radical: a weapon in the fight against bigotry, the fight to be human, the fight for a right to life.

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