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Potent Images:
The Role of 'Art About AIDS'
in Informing and Influencing
Contemporary Culture.

by,
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Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art and Design and
Complementary Studies in Candidacy for the Joint Honours Degree
in Fine Art and History of Art.

March 1994.

I would like to thank
everybody at the Dublin AIDS
Alliance
Name's Project Quilt.

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Introduction

AIDS: Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. A viral disease that destroys the body's ability to fight infection. Collins Dictionary.

AIDS has stunned our society. From the first cases of GRID (Gay related Immuno-Deficiency) CAIDS and ACIDS ^a in the USA in the early 1980's to the devastating effects its having on some African countries, AIDS has necessitated profound changes in medical practice, social institutions and personal relationships.

The role of art and artists in this epidemic is an unusual one. Initially, the lack of any coherent policy or actions by government bodies in the USA led to grass-roots activism from within the affected community. Friends, lovers, family and People With AIDS fight to achieve a situation where adequate funding and healthcare for HIV positive people and People With AIDS is available to all. It is from among this group that activist Art About AIDS has come. In the fight for recognition, artists used their skills to make the visual work necessary to inform and raise awareness about AIDS.

^a Gay Related Immuno-Deficiency, Community Acquired Immuno-Deficiency syndrome and Acquired Community Immuno- Deficiency Syndrome were all names used before "AIDS" was settled on.

As the 1980's progressed the situation became more organised. AIDS activist groups mobilised effectively, innovatively and often outrageously to highlight inadequacies in health and social systems. Fear, prejudice and discrimination were part of any society's initial reaction to a disease like AIDS. The groups affected were minorities. They soon realised their lack of importance to society at large. Who could have imagined a retrovirus, spread through blood and semen, carriers of which would not show symptoms for years? Art Activism grew as a result of AIDS Activism. By the late 1980's it had become more coherent as art activist groups and art collectives like Gran Fury, Testing the Limits and Powers of Desire were formed.

Reading about AIDS Activism it seems as though AIDS exists only in the USA. Certainly, the methods and achievements of American AIDS activists are the only ones which have been publicised here. Countries where AIDS devastates heterosexual communities like Namibia and Uganda are almost ignored. Information about AIDS activism and AIDS art activism is available because of the same self-promotion that has worked so effectively for AIDS in the USA.

Not only has the appropriation of dominant media's forms promoted AIDS awareness it has also promoted the groups in question. Terms like People With AIDS, which are now in common usage were coined in an attempt to highlight the implications of loaded terms like "AIDS sufferers" and "AIDS victims". The use of the abbreviation, PWA is also a way of engaging with a culture involved with AIDS, a way of showing solidarity with the aims of AIDS activists. As PWA becomes more widely used and recognised, it is sometimes replaced with the term PLWA, People Living With AIDS in the more recent writings of AIDS activists. This is an attempt

to retain that aspect of solidarity with the affected community by using terms or abbreviations familiar to those involved with that community.

Art About AIDS attempts to inform and influence culture by highlighting aspects of that culture. To understand the influence of Art About AIDS it is first necessary to describe some aspects of the culture which it has challenged. Chapter 1, Images of AIDS discusses the ideas or icons of AIDS that society has generated. Chapter 2, Art About AIDS, Outside the Gallery, describes the way art activists have highlighted and helped to change many of the media representations of AIDS. It assesses the effectiveness of art in the public place. Chapter 3, Gallery Art About AIDS, considers the more ambiguous effects of Art About AIDS within the gallery system. It discusses what Art About AIDS has to offer to contemporary culture.

Chapter 1.

Images of AIDS.

A description of the treatments of AIDS as subject by
contemporary culture.

Fighting AIDS is not just a medical struggle, it involves our understanding of the words and images which load the virus down with such a dismal cargo of appalling connotations. (Watney, 1987, p.10)

To discuss the influence of Art About AIDS on our culture it is first necessary to look at the way AIDS has been dealt with in contemporary culture. The language and images of AIDS in mass health education, newspapers and television are often part of the "dismal cargo" that Simon Watney was writing about above. Images of AIDS in the mass media often misrepresent the disease, showing more people dying than living with AIDS. The language of disease is loaded, making words like innocent and victim imply guilt and helplessness for people with HIV and AIDS. In mainstream cinema AIDS is not often directly represented but the cultural fears and concerns which it embodies are apparent in contemporary films like Francis Ford Coppola's Dracula and Ridley Scott's ALIEN. A significant proportion of Art about AIDS sets out to question the language, images and fears of AIDS in cultural production. This makes it necessary to discuss mass cultural

responses to AIDS before describing artistic responses to it. Most of the documented artistic responses to AIDS have come from the U.S. and some from Britain. There is little evidence of "Art About AIDS" in Ireland but this country is sufficiently influenced by the US and Britain for the changes brought about to be visible in current Irish cultural responses to AIDS.

The Sunday Independent, Feb. 19th 1989 had a feature article entitled The Bleak Guardian, by Frank Byrne on Dr. James Walsh, National AIDS Co-Ordinator. The photograph with the feature was of a well groomed, middle aged man superimposed on a background of "AIDS" headlines. The legible words included, "jury, killer disease", and "increasing rapidly". The title of the piece was problematic. The Bleak Guardian. Guardian against what? Against the unsafe sex and intravenous drug abuse that spread HIV? I think not. This "bleak guardian" protects us all, (to the media we are all heterosexual, non drug abusing readers for whom this terrible illness happens to other people, other families and friends) from the outsiders of society. Marginalised high risk groups are the dangerous people in our society that we need guarding against. The writing and editing of the piece was inherently prejudiced. The article was constructed in such a way as to 'prove' that AIDS is a worthy cause by proving that this doctor worthy. The opening paragraph read, "When AIDS becomes an obsession, as it can for Dr. James Walsh, solace can be hard to find, 'it takes a very good race at the Curragh to keep my thinking off it.'" He described his difficulties in leaving AIDS behind him outside his work and is quoted as saying, "If you haven't got compassion in working with AIDS patients you have nothing. I like to think that victims are not treated as social outcasts but it is apparent to me that this does happen. It is a barbarous attitude. This disease does not recognise innocence or guilt."

(Byrne, 1989) We are given a brief life history and told that upon the death of his first wife he did not turn to religion and that he considers heaven to be somewhere between the Curragh and Lansdowne Road, his other sporting passion is rugby. The piece concludes with a description of his work as an AIDS co-ordinator here and in Europe.

A priority of this article was to prove that this doctor who worked with AIDS patients was not a freak or a quack. He relaxed with rugby and racing. He was not devoutly religious, so his compassion could not be explained away as religious zeal. He liked to read Joyce and Somerset Maugham. Having worked in Ireland during Noel Browne's campaign against TB and returned from England to join the Department of Health in 1964, his life experience was similar to that of many of his peers. A member of the European Management Group on AIDS and involved with the World Health Organisation (WHO) he has the respect of his own profession.

The media chooses the information it will publicise to please its chosen audience. The first media information campaigns about AIDS were flawed and prejudiced because they were the initial reaction of conservative governments and health departments to what was treated as a Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD). The departments did not have the experience to produce health campaigns that gave the correct messages to the "general population". Similar attitudes prevailed during the first British media campaign about AIDS in late 1987. The results of an opinion poll taken by Gallup in Britain contained the following information:

75% Thought AIDS will become an epidemic among the
 population at large.

81% People with a lifestyle like mine have no risk of getting AIDS.

- 72% Favoured confining all HIV+ and People With AIDS in special hospitals.
- 46% New laws should be introduced to restrict homosexual behaviour.

It is obvious from these figures that fear and discrimination were part of widespread public belief about the disease. Whilst 81% of those questioned said they did not feel at risk from AIDS, 72% felt that HIV+ people should be confined to hospitals. This left a considerable number of people who although they did not feel themselves to be at risk, feared the spread of HIV infection enough to believe in hospitalisation for all those infected. The poll indicated a majority of people were concerned about AIDS and a majority who thought that, "sufferers should be treated with compassion". These conflicting images of AIDS in the public mind contain not only the "facts" which have been publicised but also a set of ideas and beliefs about AIDS which have formed the iconography of this disease.

An icon is a sign that represents objects through a relationship of similarity, by exemplifying some property associated with the object ... Icons therefore cannot represent particular individuals, but only general classes of things ... Icons of disease appear to have an existence independent of the reality of any given disease. The representation of a patient suffering from a disease has iconic character, even if the patient and the disease are 'real', i.e., existing apart from the icon in time and space. This 'free floating' iconography of disease attaches itself to various illness (real or imagined) in different societies and at different moments in history. Disease is thus restricted to a specific set of images thereby forming a visual boundary, a limit to the idea (or fear) of disease. (Gilman, 1988, p.88)

Icons of AIDS and the metaphors of disease must change to allow those who are HIV positive to feel that they are not being prejudiced against. The

"idea" of AIDS can be as destructive as the reality. AIDS stigmatises sufferers as carriers of an infectious disease, as promiscuous homosexuals or as Intravenous (IV) drug users. Why these groups? Because, when AIDS was first identified in the US, it was among groups of promiscuous gay men, IV drug abusers and Haitians. Depictions of AIDS in the media display the fears and prejudices of society about AIDS. Many of the initial responses to AIDS in Ireland and Britain have given the icons of AIDS the potency they have today.

AIDS campaigns in America, Britain and in Ireland all used the same emotion as a cornerstone of public health and education campaigns, fear. Because the so called "high risk" groups have a sub-culture of their own, education campaigns must be tailored to meet special needs and followed up by fieldwork. Mass public education is different, to educate a whole population effectively about AIDS mass media and public service broadcasting is essential. The initial messages given to the population by governments were to be vitally important in the formation of icons of AIDS. It was the first time that this illness was given such media attention and the image of AIDS as broadcast by governments greatly influenced the iconography of AIDS. A fundamental part of any advertising campaign is to persuade not to dissuade, yet across the board the message was one of fear. Douglas Crimp describes a New York television advertisement aimed specifically at teenagers.

...one of these shows scenes of heavy petting in cars and alleys over a sound track of the pop song Boom Boom: 'Let's go back to my room so we can do it all night and you can make me feel right.' Suddenly the music cuts out and the scene changes to a shot of a boy wrapped in a blanket, looking frightened, miserable and ill. A voice over

warns, 'If you have sex with someone who has the AIDS virus, you can get it too. So before you do it, ask yourself how bad you really want it. Don't ask for AIDS, don't get it.' (Crimp,1988 p.268)

The final phrase serves as a title for the series "AIDS: Don't get it." The message is undoubtedly one of fear, primarily fear of sex . The 1987 British television campaign used a similar message. The original Saatchi and Saatchi campaign advertisements , "... spelt out the word 'AIDS' in seasonal gift wrapping paper, together with the accompanying question : 'How many people will get it for Christmas?' Another advert conveys the message that your next sexual partner could be that 'very special person', -framed inside a heart like a valentine - with a supplement beneath which tersely adds, 'the one that gives you AIDS.'" (Watney, 1987, p.136.) The 1987 Irish Campaign was no better, if not worse. On one of the television advertisements we saw a man and a woman playing poker. The male voiceover informed us that:

Today if you play around the stakes are too high. Because you're gambling with, AIDS. Meet an AIDS carrier and although condoms give some protection just one act of intercourse may give you, AIDS, (silhouette of the couple kissing,) and lead to death.' Here, the woman's hand turns a card face up. It is a tarot death card with the word AIDS printed on it. 'Sleeping around is a gamble . Casual Sex Spreads AIDS.'

This last phrase is written in white on black, with a smaller department of health logo above it. Here, not only do we get the heavy handed moral tone we are also incorrectly informed that casual sex spreads AIDS. Casual sex is not responsible for the spread of AIDS, unsafe sex is *one* of the ways in which

the HIV virus can be spread.¹ The prevailing messages of government campaigns was fear. Fear of sex, fear of promiscuity and by extension, fear of gays. In Ireland AIDS is primarily an IV Drug Users's illness with 138 of 300 deaths IVDU related by 1992. (Duffy,1993,p.38) In Britain 90% of People With AIDS are gay and in New York AIDS is a black's disease. (Watney,1988,p.178) The iconography of AIDS has made it a gay disease, as if the situation in Africa, where over half of those infected with the HIV virus live, does not exist. (Source; WHO,1990) Nowhere is this more apparent than in the use of language about AIDS.

Journalist, Nicholas Walpshott in The Observer in 1987 wrote about the second year of AIDS for Britain yet it was the fourth year of AIDS for Britain. In 1986 Walpshott used the terms, "New Morality, sexual time Bomb, gay plague," and "sympathy and understanding for those trapped by their own proclivities" in conjunction with AIDS. (Watney,1988,p.177) In the Daily Mail an article headlined "Second Man Dies of AIDS in Britain" referred to the second haemophiliac to die of AIDS in Britain." (Meldrum,1990,p.91) Death from AIDS related causes was considered newsworthy only when perceived to be the death of an innocent victim(sic). It seems that the death of a gay man was not a death at all as far as some were concerned.

As well as that the terminology is loaded: AIDS test, (it is a test for HIV antibodies), to catch AIDS (HIV virus is not easily transmissible); innocent

¹At this time advertising condoms was illegal under RTE's broadcasting laws. Contraception became legal in Ireland in 1980. Before 1985 contraceptives were only legally available under prescription from chemists.(O' Brien,1991) So, there was great difficulty in the framing of this ad. to make it suitable for broadcast. Due to recent changes in the broadcasting laws RTE are allowed to promote the use of condoms for the Dept. of Health but do not broadcast advertisements for condoms otherwise. Similarly, homosexuality was never mentioned as part of this government campaign because it was illegal here until mid. 1993.

victim (the implication being some are guilty, and victim implying passivity and helplessness); AIDS carriers and the use of such phrases as "AIDS infected prostitute, respectable housewife, rivulets of heterosexual infection" and "AIDS is not *just* a gay disease." (Owen,1986) This situation is not restricted to newspaper journalism, Paula Treichler gives a list of commonly used "AIDS phrases" on network television:

AIDS is caused by the AIDS virus.
AIDS is spread by those with HIV or AIDS carriers.
AIDS is a gay disease.
AIDS is everybody's problem.
Fear of AIDS is worse than AIDS itself.
Science is conquering AIDS.
Conquering AIDS may be impossible.
The face of AIDS is changing.
The general population is still safe. (Treichler,1989,p.148)

In 1988 this lead Simon Watney to remark about the whole debate that, "Such euphemistically stilted language makes it painfully clear that AIDS is still being handled right across the board with all the most up to date medical, psychiatric and sociological resources of the late 19th century."(Watney,1988,p.177) The iconography of AIDS is further consolidated by the metaphors used in conjunction with the illness. In her essay, AIDS and its Metaphors, Susan Sontag discusses the metaphors which we use about disease:

Disease is seen as an invasion of alien organisms, to which the body responds by its own military operations, such as the mobilising of its own immunological 'defenses,' and medicine is aggressive, as in the language of most chemotherapies ... disease is regularly described as invading society, and efforts to reduce mortality from a given disease are called a fight, a struggle, a war. (Sontag,1991, p.95)

Sontag maintains that these calls to war against diseases are not just calls for more zeal or more money for research . "They encourage us to think of disease as an alien 'other', as enemies are in modern war; and the move from the demonisation of the illness to the attribution of fault to the patient is an inevitable one, no matter if patients are thought of as victims. Victims suggest innocence and innocence logically suggests guilt." (Sontag,1991,p.97) Later in the essay Sontag makes the point that because AIDS is spread through contaminated body fluids another metaphor is invoked, that of pollution. Its association with sectors of the population, communities, or risk groups revives the archaic idea of a tainted community that illness has judged. The effects this has on People With AIDS are obvious. As well as having to cope with what is now a terminal illness the person with AIDS must deal with the fact that he/she is part of a tainted community. "The unsafe behaviour that produces AIDS is judged to be more than just weakness. It is indulgence, delinquency, addictions to chemicals that are illegal and to sex regarded as deviant " (Sontag, p.111)

Richard Goldstein in his review of cultural production about AIDS, states that, "The media portrayals of AIDS reflect the confusion and ambiguity experienced by society as a whole," (Goldstein,1991, p.21) Similarly, Edward Albert found that media coverage tended to reaffirm the stigmatised status of those at high risk, saying that reports emphasised deviant lifestyles, helping to confirm the notions of innocent and guilty PWA. (Feldman,p.161) Richard Goldstein divides responses into two types, those who are in some way implicated, wishing to make up for the stigma which the rest of society inflicts upon People With AIDS, and those who see themselves outside this sphere of influence, objective or "immune" to the situation. This, he claims

is the reason why the mass cultural response is largely concerned with the society surrounding People With AIDS. (Goldstein,1991,p.21) The mass media place themselves among the "immune" i.e., outside the groups associated with AIDS. He discusses the problems associated with the representation of PWA on television.

In television... the person with AIDS is rarely an innocent everyman, that category is reserved for infants and young haemophiliacs. Adult males are usually represented as transgressors whose behaviour places others in jeopardy; infected women are usually exempt from blame, but rendered nearly as helpless as their children. In these prime time masques it is not the person with AIDS that is victimised but those threatened or affected by the disease. Family and community occupy centre stage, and the issue is not survival but cohesion, how to deal with a breach in the safety net. (Goldstein,1991, p.21)

In an effort to "humanise themselves" in the early part of the epidemic some PWA went on television to discuss their situation. Because of widespread discrimination they were reluctant to make themselves visible and so the journalistic conventions for such a situation came into play. This meant the use of heavy backlighting and isolation of the subject in deep shadow. This has most commonly been used with felons or potential felons such as rapists, child abusers and drug abusers, and the convention made PWA look like criminals or those with something to hide. (Grover,1989,p.11) It was only after 1985 and the death of Rock Hudson that AIDS was dealt with on prime time television. Before that it was considered too contentious and too complicated an issue.

Homosexuality on television is problematic. Television shies away from gay male protagonists. In, An Early Frost, a made-for-tv movie about AIDS,

the gay son's relationship is revealed to be a fragile shelter that must give way to the enduring arms of family. Goldstein tells us that People With AIDS even when they aren't gay are generally more sympathetically drawn on television movies than in other popular forms. (Goldstein,1991,p.28) The reason for this is that the female audience is thought to have a more tolerant attitude to homosexuality and, women watch more television movies than men. If it is considered difficult to build sympathy for a gay man on television it is even more difficult to build sympathy for the IV Drug user. Therefore the most common heroes of AIDS movies are haemophiliac children or "a young, virtuous and vulnerable woman, the traditional emblem of innocence." (Goldstein,1991, p.28)

Children and women with AIDS are shown as helpless and suffering. A study of AIDS on television between 1985 and 1988 on the American networks, CBS, NBC, ABC and Fox , where AIDS was a principal part of the storyline, showed that 75% of PWA were women and children. (Atkin,1990,p.124). Amongst women it is poor black or hispanic women and their children that are most at risk from HIV infection. Women in these situations have little to identify with the young, white, middle class women with AIDS in the mass media. The passivity of women's characters as PWA has also come in for criticism. Awareness and assertion on the part of the person with AIDS has become one of the most important aspects of the AIDS activist movement. Showing a predominantly large number of women with AIDS may make women who identify with the character more aware of AIDS but it also reinforces and fuels stereotypes about passivity and a woman's lack of control over her own life. Women and children with AIDS on television may highlight the risks for some, but it is used by programme

makers as an easy option, a way of by-passing difficult issues like homosexuality or IV drug use. Representations of People With AIDS on television or in the mass media is a difficult subject. If PWA were proportionally represented stereotypes would be enforced and tensions exacerbated. The situation at the moment is out of touch with the reality. It seems the only solution would be to request a mature approach from those making programmes for broadcast on mainstream television. Equal representation of the many different types of risk groups could help to change the iconography of AIDS for the better.

These problems arise not only on television, Hollywood has not been immune from the impact of AIDS. Mainstream films about AIDS have been rare yet the fears which AIDS has been seen to embody are there, for example;

ALIEN (Dir. R.Scott.) -is a space age horror movie that that could be a metaphor for AIDS. "An E.T. monster enters the body of an astronaut by literally inseminating him through the mouth- a deft allusion to sodomy- and then bursts forth from his belly, a pathology that clearly relates to the violation of gender roles." (Goldstein,1991,p.23)

THE FLY (Dir. D. Cronenberg.) -a remake of a 50's horror classic... the 80's version contains a dose of sexual paranoia not present in the 50's . A 'liberated' woman has fallen in love with the inventor (who is seeing his own protoplasm turning into that of a fly) and who in the process of this experiment has lost all his hair,teeth, even his penis. This is an allusion to AIDS as a disease so often portrayed as reducing young men to monsters with weeping sores. To complete the

identification with HIV the inventor's condition is passed onto his son in the sequel. (Goldstein, 1991,p.23)

DRACULA(Dir. Francis Ford Coppola.)In another remake of the classic horror movie, the infection passed through the blood is very similar to AIDS. The structure of the victim's red blood cells are attacked and changed by the "virus". This is shown in a format which closely resembles that of the television graphics used to describe how the HIV virus spreads within the bloodstream. The sexual freedom and unusual lifestyles of those who are, or will become vampires during the course of the film contrasts with the chastity and conservatism of the film's heroes.

An understanding of the way AIDS is treated as a subject within contemporary culture is arrived at through discussion of the icons and metaphors of AIDS as used by mass culture. Only then is it possible to discuss art's influence on mass culture. If one was to look at AIDS as portrayed from within the arts the representations of AIDS would be by no means more accurate or inclusive than those of the mass media. The more sheltered venues of the arts allow issues related to AIDS to be explored in different ways but with different priorities. It is obvious that there have been changes to the way AIDS has been represented in the mass media over the last few years. Looking at some of the mass media work about AIDS very recently produced it is obvious that there have been some changes. To compare the 1987 (Irish) Department of Health's television campaign with the current series of television advertisements is enough. The 'Straight Talk About Sex' advertisements, advocating the use of condoms has no heavy moral

messages about promiscuity or sexual preference. It is my belief that some of these changes would never have been brought about so quickly were it not for art's and the gay community's involvement with AIDS. Challenging stereotypes, using years of experience with activism and critical cultural debate in the arts has lead to changes in the way AIDS is dealt with across the board. The following chapters will discuss AIDS in the Gallery, AIDS art activism and the way that both of these have conspired to change the way AIDS is dealt with in our culture

Chapter 2.

Art About AIDS Outside the Gallery.

Art About AIDS outside the traditional gallery system, an assesment of its effectiveness in challenging the icons of AIDS.

Art outside the traditional gallery situation has attempted to change some of the icons and metaphors of AIDS. Most of the artists that will be discussed here are working as part of the larger AIDS activist movement, using their skills as part of a group or collective. They are working for a common goal, to raise awareness and provide information about AIDS. These artists are involved in the production of work of many types. On video they document demonstrations and other "events". They are involved in the making of Safer Sex advertisements, documentaries and video information packs. Artists are working in a great range of media forms; posters, stickers, billboards, and flyers. Art plays an effective role in activism in important ways. Firstly the skills and experience of those involved allow work of professional quality to be produced and used. Videos and graphics can be made to look as "smooth" as the most professional mass media work. Images/Posters can also be made to work on several levels; to be read as a statement and to reference another debate, another type of art.

Gran Fury are affiliated with ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power, based in New York and founded in 1989. ACT UP describe themselves as, "A diverse non-partisan group, united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis." (Crimp and Rolston, 1990, p.13). Although most active in the USA, there are ACT UP groups in countries world-wide.^{1.5} Gran

^{1.5} ACT UP have been active in Dublin. They were part of a protest outside the Circuit Court when the IFPA (Irish family Planning Association) were being tried for selling condoms without a licence. (Coulter, p.5) (Thackeray, P.1) They also organised a demonstration outside the Pro Cathedral in Dublin where a five foot 'condom' was nailed to a crucifix in an effort to highlight the effects of the Roman Catholic churches' obstructions to changing the laws regarding the free availability of condoms.

Fury could be described as the artist's wing of ACT UP; a separate group who often work with ACT UP. Gran Fury in New York are a group of around ten artists and writers who describe themselves as:

A collective of AIDS activists opposing the government and social institutions that make those living with AIDS invisible. Through visual projects we seek to inform a broad audience and provoke direct action to end the AIDS Crisis ... we consistently attempt to situate our work in the 'public realm' in an effort to include a diverse non-homogeneous audience. Through appropriating dominant media's techniques we hope to make the social and political subtexts of the AIDS epidemic visible and to incite the viewer to take the next step. (Gran Fury, 1990, p.264)

The roots of Gran Fury are in the "artworld" but the intention behind their work is not. The majority of the work is intended for the public place. The group shuns individual recognition and claims to be wary of the publicity it receives from within the artworld. Exposure in galleries and art magazines is good but it informs the audience that are most aware of the dangers of AIDS. All of Gran Fury's work is aimed at the general public or at the AIDS activist movement itself. Gran Fury was founded as a result of an installation at the New Museum of Contemporary art Broadway, New York, for the "Let The Record Show" installation. The SILENCE=DEATH logo was originally part of this installation. (Plate 1.) It is one of the most well known and widely used of Gran Fury's graphics, calling on those who are involved in the AIDS crisis to take action, to allow their voices to be heard. The pink triangle was originally used in Nazi Concentration camps in World War two to denote Homosexuality. The Gay Pride Movement appropriated it to remember a history of suppression, turned it upwards and used it as a symbol of pride.

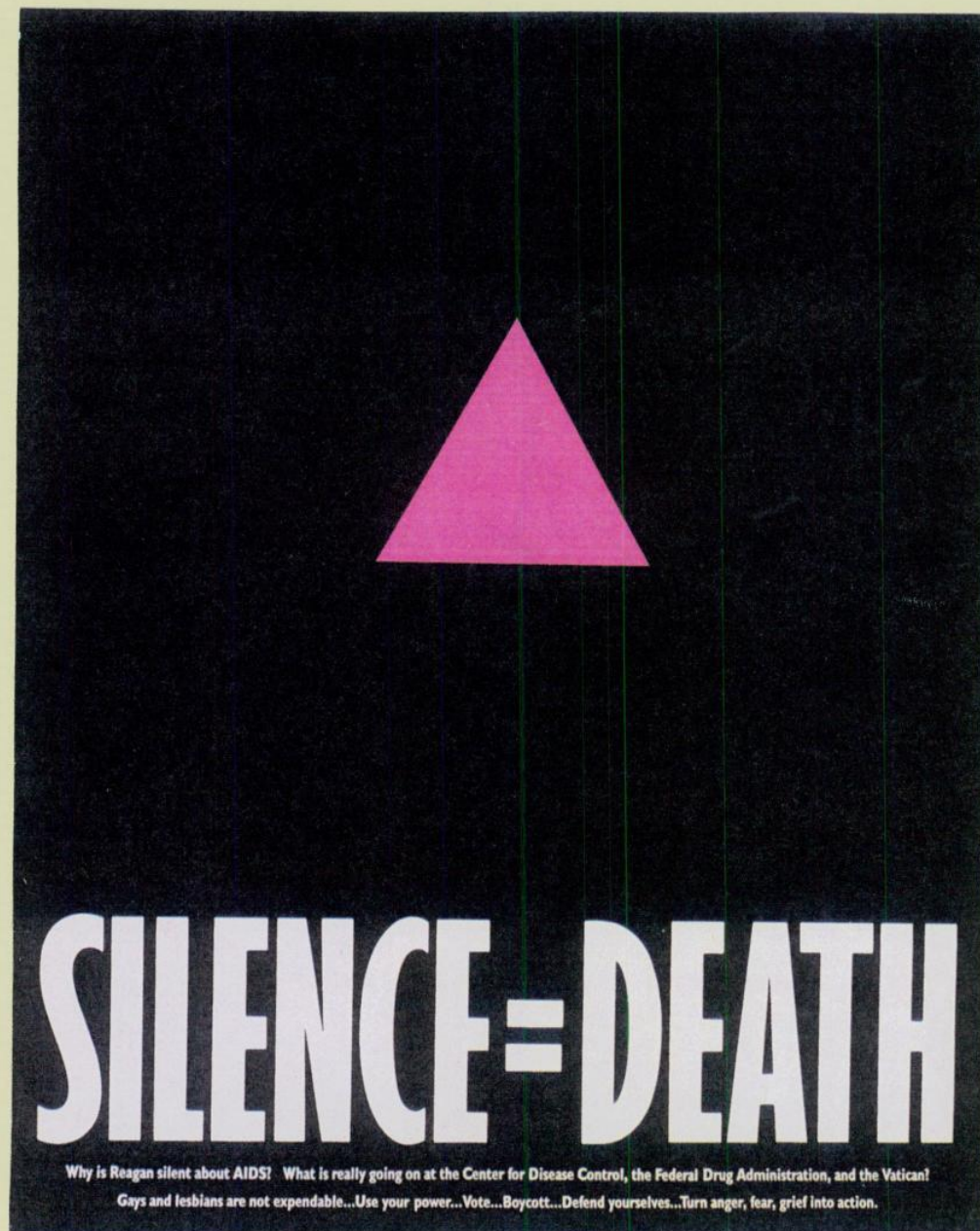


Plate 1. Gran Fury, SILENCE=DEATH, Poster, offset lithography.

Plate I

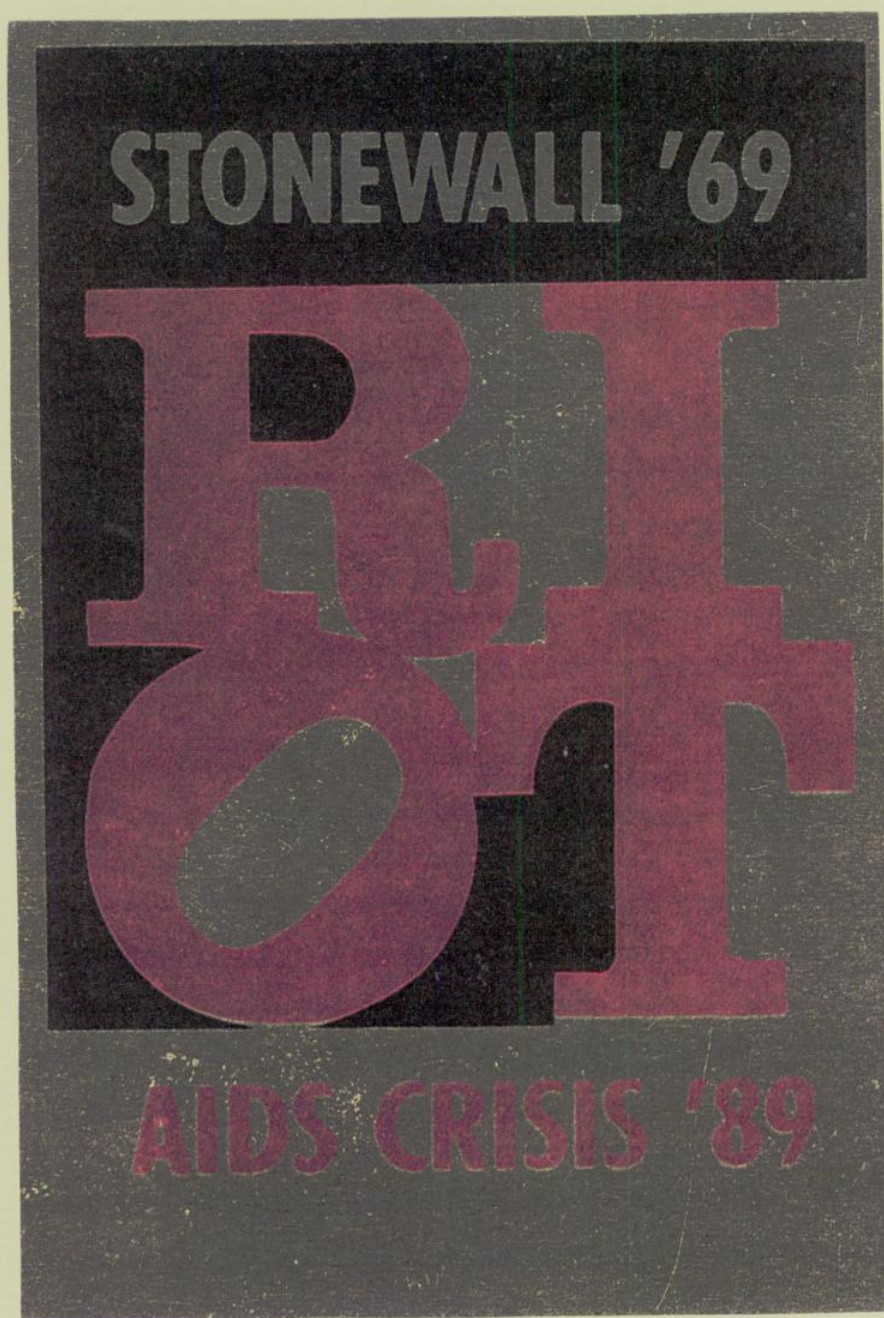
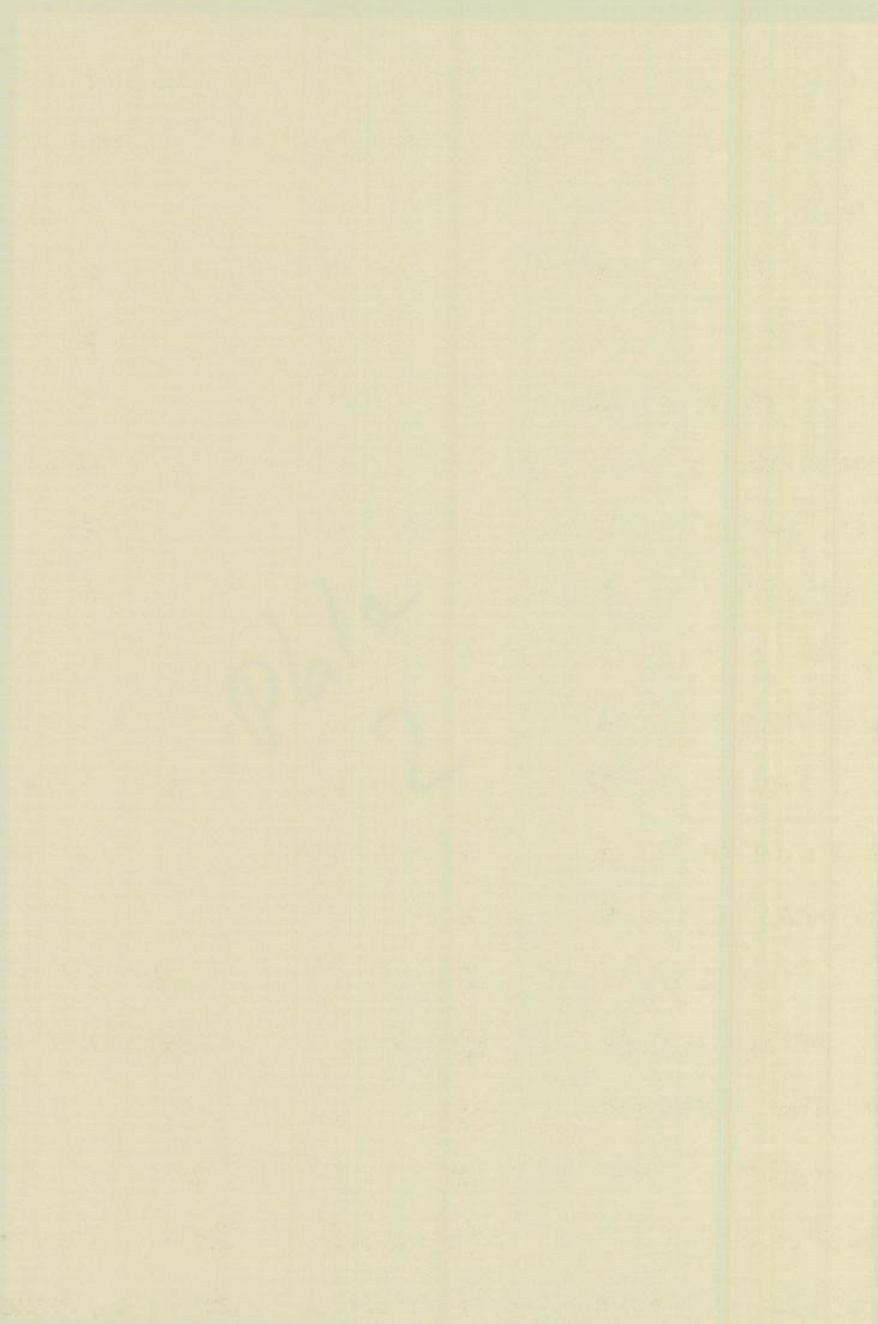


Plate 2. Gran Fury, RIOT, Crack and Peel sticker, Silk-screen.



Gran Fury placed it on a black background and added SILENCE=DEATH , using it as a "call to arms" for all who understand its significance to deal with the AIDS crisis.

For an art exhibition in Berlin the Canadian artist's collective General Idea appropriated Robert Indiana's pop art LOVE logo, using it in the same format in their square AIDS paintings, posters and stickers. What does the word AIDS mean in this format? Did '60's LOVE lead to '80's AIDS? Gran Fury contributed to this, producing RIOT, on the red, gold and black of the German flag. (Plate 2) This celebrated the Stonewall Riots, the most famous in gay liberation history. (Crimp & Rolston, 1990, p.104/5) For the public place Gran Fury produced a sticker of it. Above RIOT reads STONEWALL '69, and below it, AIDS CRISIS '89. This makes the message more direct, riot for gay rights in the '60's to change an unacceptable situation, riot for AIDS in the '80's and '90's for the same reason.

ACT UP and Gran Fury use any means available to them to publicise the AIDS Crisis. On the night of the 15th of April hundreds of tax-payers go to New York city's main post office to file their tax returns before the midnight deadline. Each year it is a "news" item, and the camera crews are present. In 1987 ACT UP used this excellent opportunity with a captive audience, the people and the media, as a way of highlighting just how little tax-payers money was being spent to fight AIDS. "SILENCE=DEATH" posters were used as placards for the demonstration. As television news attempted to report the tax return deadline, ACT UP were able to make "News" with their demonstration. (Crimp and Rolston, 1990, p.29)

Sensationalism, incorrect use of language, or ignoring AIDS altogether, are issues which ACT UP and Gran Fury have attempted to highlight. Making a media event and attracting a lot of publicity in one situation is an effective way of highlighting an issue. The ripple effect from this can change similar treatments of AIDS elsewhere. This is what ACT UP and Gran Fury did with The New York Times. The newspaper had consistently ignored homosexuality and AIDS in its reporting. Larry Kramer a journalist, writer and AIDS Activist noticed the following discrepancy in the New York Times reporting of AIDS:

*In the first nineteen months of the epidemic, during which there had been 891 reported cases the New York Times carried seven articles about it, none on the front page.

*During the three months of the Tylenol scare in 1982, where there were seven cases, the New York Times carried fifty four articles about it, four of which were on the front page.

The Times also refused to report AIDS as the cause of death, or to list gay lovers as surviving family members. When reporting on "exceptional" People With AIDS, the Times insisted on using the term, "AIDS victims", against the express wishes of these People With AIDS. (Crimp & Rolston, 1990,p.109)

Activists felt that this situation should not be allowed to continue. Effective action should be taken. The first act of retaliation by ACT UP was to place stickers on news stands and vending machines. These stickers read, "BUY YOUR LIES HERE" and "New York Times reporting of AIDS is OUT OF ORDER." Another measure taken was the Fax Zap. The Time's fax numbers were distributed at a weekly ACT UP meeting and members were encouraged to jam the machines at the NY Times with faxed complaints.



Six thousand copies of the four page "supplement" designed to fit over the The New York Times included articles entitled, "AIDS and Money: Healthcare or Wealthcare?" and "Inmates with AIDS: Inadvertent political prisoners." The back page of "The New York Crimes" had a full page advertisement for the pharmaceutical company Hoffman-Laroche, Inc. It showed a surgically masked scientist measuring liquids out of a pipette into Pyrex discs. Across the image were the words of an employee of the company, "One Million (People With AIDS) isn't a market that's exciting. Sure its growing, but its not asthma." Across the bottom of the image was the statement, "THIS IS TO ENRAGE YOU." (Ferguson,1990,p.208) (Plate 4.) Gran Fury used a similar image when asked to produce a piece for "The Artists Pages" in Artforum in October 1989.

The combination of the promotional skills of ACT UP and the graphics of Gran Fury has resulted in changes in practice and policy to do with AIDS care in the USA. In 1989, the year after the large, well orchestrated demonstration at the Food and Drug Administration Headquarters in Maryland, ACT UP reported and gave a list of instances where, "Government agencies dealing with AIDS began to listen to us, to include us in decision making, even ask for our input." (Crimp & Rolston, 1990,p.83) The availability of places on experimental drug trials and the strict rules applying to those on the trials have changed for the better in the USA as a direct result of AIDS activism. The cost of azidothymidine or AZT,² has also been reduced as a direct result of AIDS activism. On the same day in San Fransisco and in London ACT UP held demonstrations about the price of AZT. Produced by

²One of the drugs which is thought to have some effect inn delaying the onset of symptoms of AIDS, it is not as effective as originally hoped and has toxic side effects.(Garfield,1993,p.3)



**One million [People with AIDS] isn't a market
that's exciting. Sure it's growing,
but it's not asthma.**

—Patrick Gage
Hoffman-La Roche, Inc

THIS IS TO ENRAGE YOU.

Plate 4. Gran Fury, "This is to enrage you" New York Crimes 1989. Four page Newspaper, web offset.



Burroughs Wellcome in the US and Wellcome PLC in Britain the day after the demonstrations the share prices in Wellcome PLC fell sharply on the London Stock Exchange. Four days later Burroughs Wellcome announced a twenty percent reduction in the price of AZT. It was estimated by Dr. Mathilde Krim of the American Foundation for AIDS Research (AmFAR) that the production cost of each capsule of AZT is between 7 and 15 cents. In 1990 at the reduced price of \$1.20 its estimated cost per year, per patient was over \$6,000. (Crimp & Rolston,1990,p.119) In 1993 the Wellcome PLC profits from AZT were £213 million. It was their second biggest earner. (Garfield,1993,p.2) In fighting to change the day by day quality of life for the person with HIV or AIDS, activists highlight problems and inadequacies in the system. Effective graphics can raise awareness, call for help and involve others in the system. Visuals can be the most important tool of activism. The ability of groups like Gran Fury to produce graphics of a professional quality in a short space of time has made demonstrations more effective. Their ability to use mass media techniques and to subvert mass media messages has been one of the main reasons why AIDS activism has been so effective.

It is not only physical obstacles, (healthcare, access to housing, new drugs etc.) to getting help for PWA that need to be tackled. Many of the obstacles are present because of social conditioning, homophobia and fear. To allow People With AIDS and HIV the opportunity to lead a life without discrimination, activist art has highlighted some of the icons of AIDS in an attempt to change them. Mainstream media images of People With AIDS in the early part of this epidemic showed very ill and debilitated People With AIDS.

Television and photo journalists frequently sought out the most debilitated PWA's they could find. ABC's May 1983 20/20 coverage of AIDS is typical of such sensationalist coverage. The segment's producer, Joe Lovett contacted Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) in New York and promptly found several eloquent and very ill gay men. They didn't look very sick though, some of them looked downright handsome. Lovett kept searching until he found Kenneth Ramsauer, who at 28 was dying of Kaposi's sarcoma with an unusual -and ghastly- disfiguration of his once- winsome face. Kenny Ramsauer was subsequently featured in double page photo spreads in *Paris Match*, *Photo (Paris)*, and the British tabloid *The Sunday People*. The uses Kenny Ramsauer was put to are some of the most grotesque examples of mainstream media's penchant for seeking out the most visibly ill, but similar sensationalising coverage characterised most of the medias belated 'discovery' of AIDS in 1983. (Grover,1989, p.14) (Plate 5.)

Grover discussed the differences between photographs of "innocent victims", that is, adult heterosexuals and children with AIDS and the "guilty", gay men and IVDU's. The "innocent" tended to be photographed surrounded by family members and animals while the "guilty" were usually photographed alone and looking ill. Another example of the "guilty victim" was a photograph of David Chicadel in "AIDS: A Diary of the Plague in America." (People Weekly,1987,p.73.) It shows David Chicadel looking longingly out a window at the life which it seems he can no longer be part of. (Plate 6.) He has binoculars at hand. Between him and the outside world lies his illness, represented by the many bottles of pills on the window-sill. A small snapshot of two men, placed slightly behind him is the only reference to other people in the photograph. He looks ill and tired.

The Irish Times in a four part series on AIDS in 1988 called "The AIDS Generation" had a photograph with part one. The article entitled, "Exporting our AIDS problem" is about Irish IVDU's who are staying in, or returning to

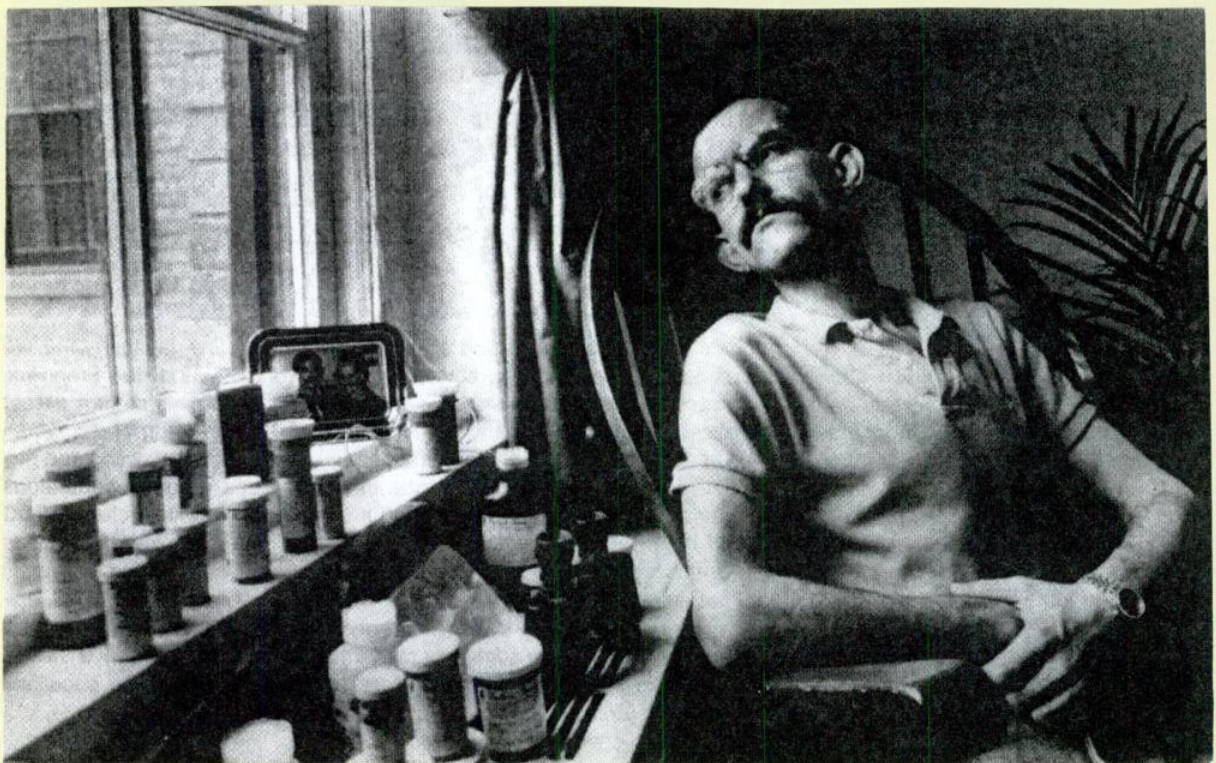
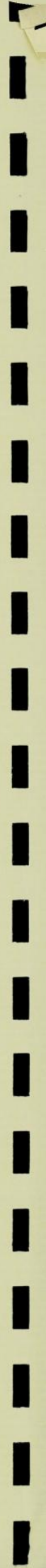
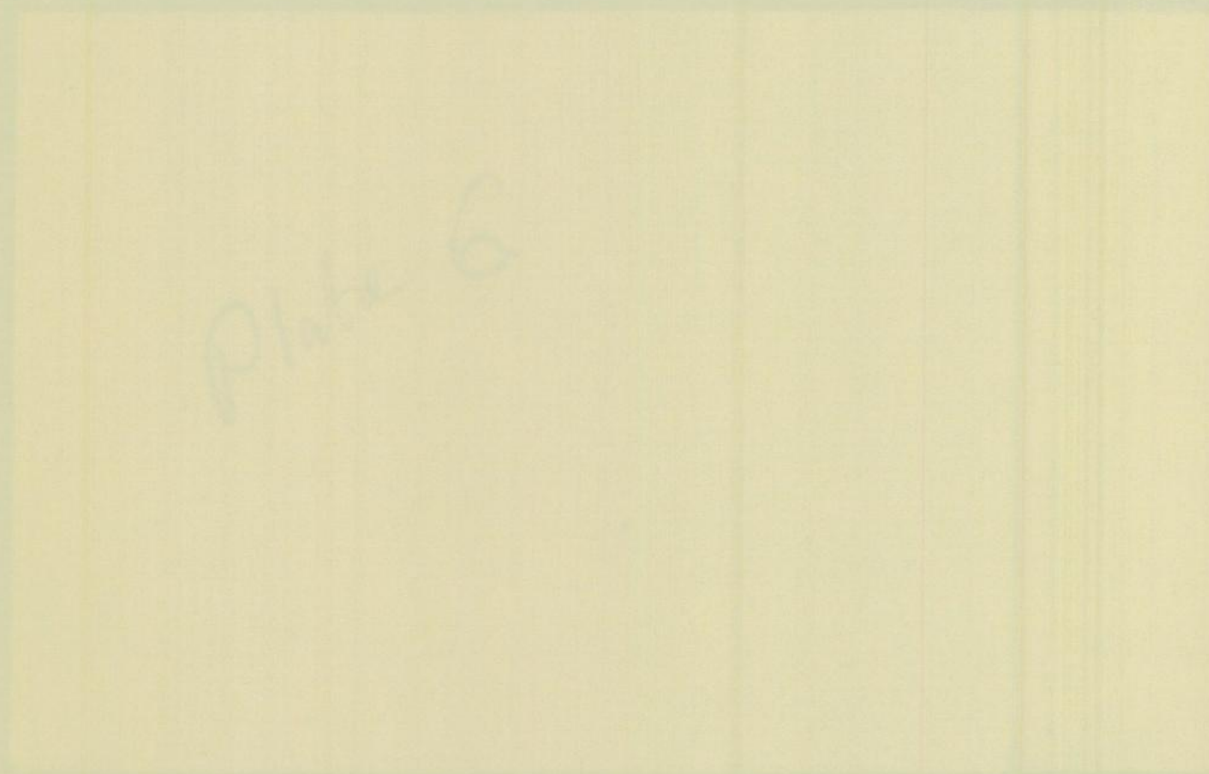
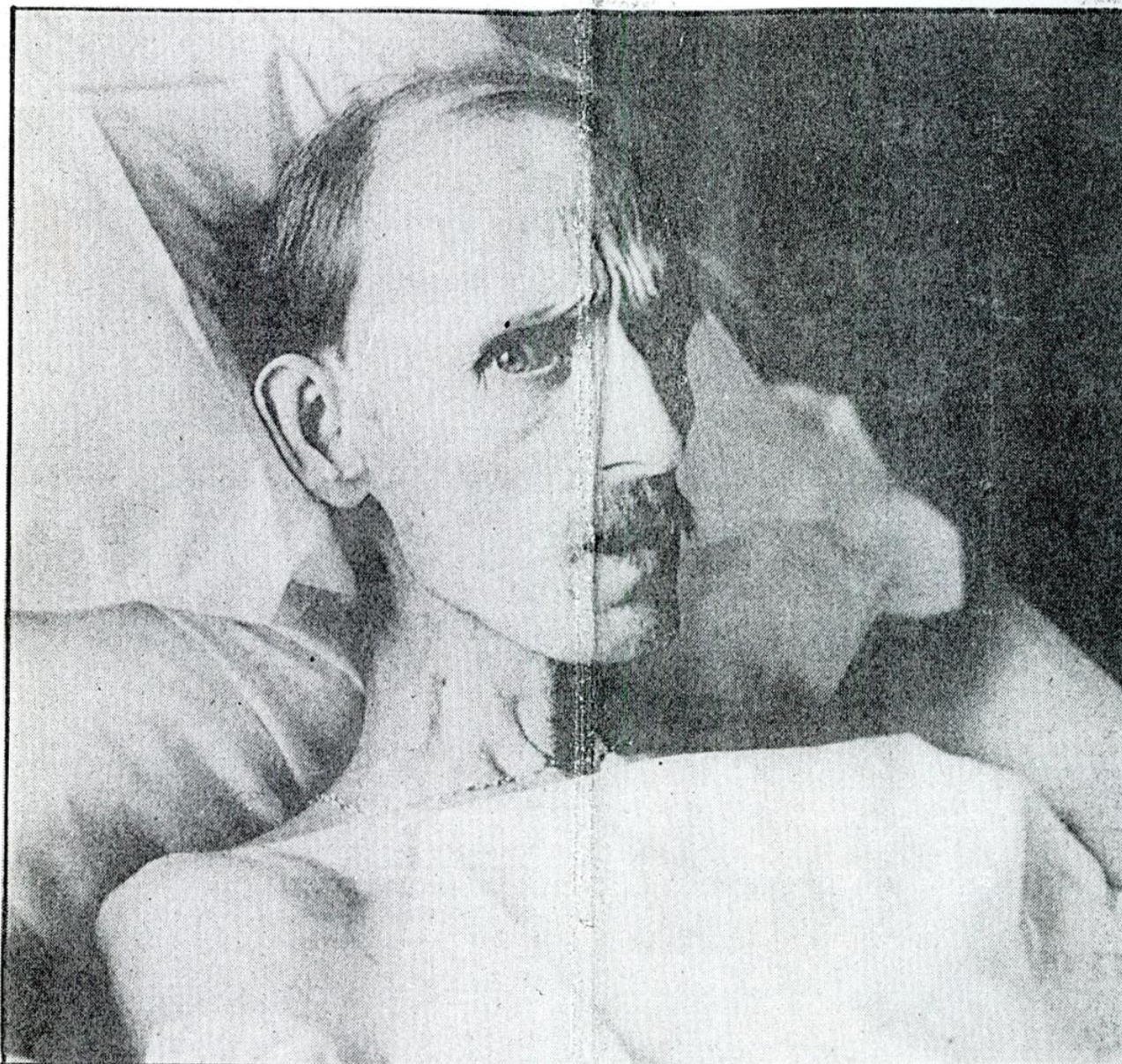


Plate 5. Photograph of Kenneth Ramsauer, originally in Paris Match.

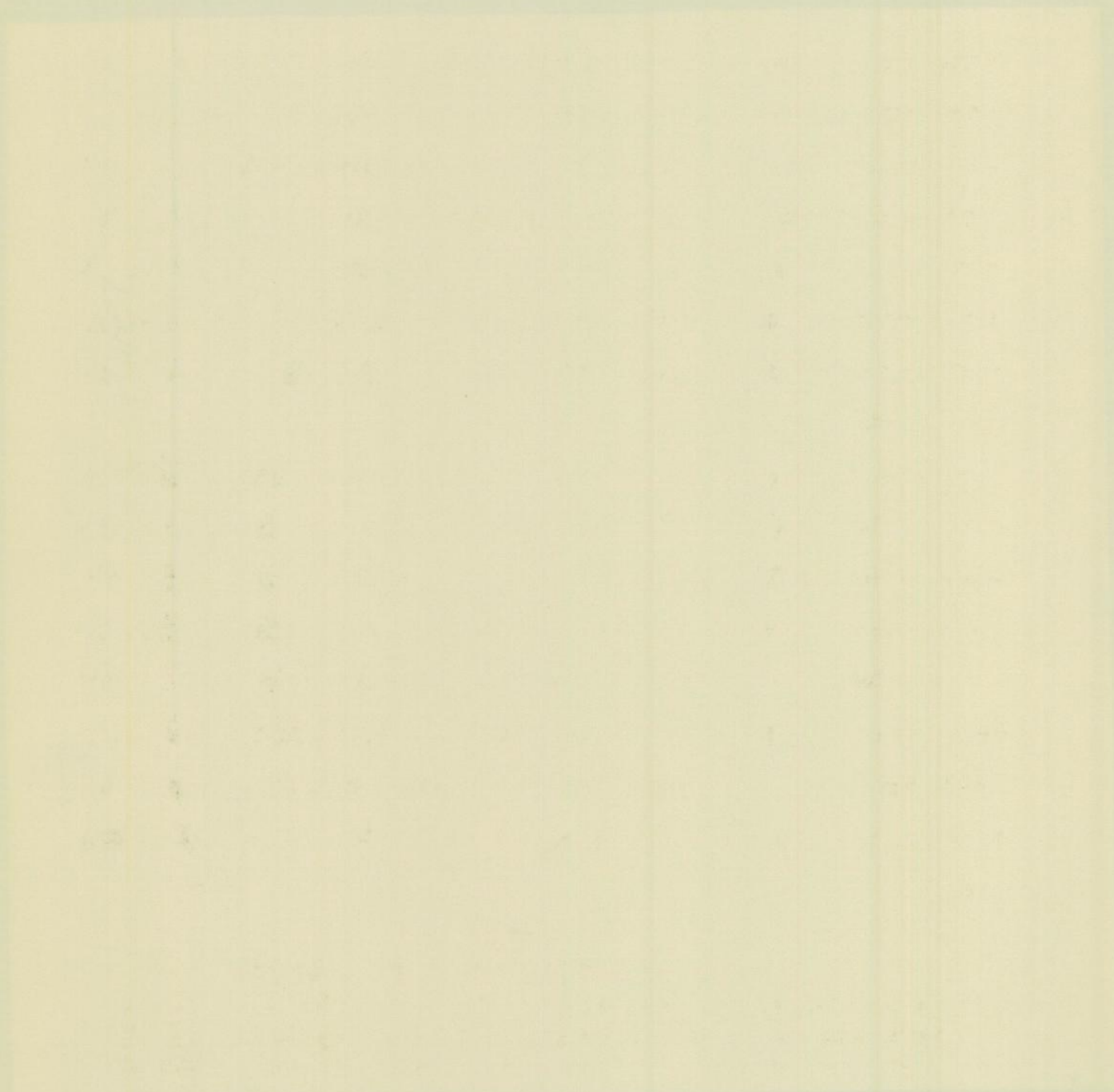
Plate 6. Peter Sterling, Photograph of David Chicadel, originally in People Weekly, Aug.3 1987.





● Photographer Jim Bell's picture of US AIDS patient Joseph — from San Francisco — several weeks before his death.

Plate 7. Photographer Jim bell's picture of AIDS Paitent , Joseph, form san Francisco, several weeks before his death. The Irish Times, 1988.



London for better healthcare, thus lessening Irish AIDS statistics. The photograph with the article was titled, "Photographer Jim Bell's picture of US AIDS patient - Joseph- from San Fransisco - several weeks before his death." (Holmquist,1988,p.13) (Plate 7.) The emaciated man stares out at us from his hospital bed. We know this is a photograph of a man now dead. The Irish Time's used this image of a dying American as the face of Irish AIDS. To counteract such horrific images of AIDS, activists made a public issue of some photographers' works.

In America the photographer Nicholas Nixon's work was used as an example by activists to highlight the problems associated with the representation of PWA. (Plate 8.) Nixon's photographs of People With AIDS are typical of the type of photographs described above. His exhibition of photographs in the Museum Of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York in 1988 became a scene of protest when members of New York's ACT UP protested inside the gallery and handed out a flyer where they gave reasons for protesting the right of Nixon to show this work. This is part of the text of that flyer:

NO MORE PICTURES WITHOUT CONTEXT.

In portraying PWA's as people to be pitied and feared, as people alone and lonely we believe that this show perpetuates general misconceptions about AIDS without addressing the realities of those of us living every day with the crisis as PWA's and as people who love PWA's. . . The PWA is a human being whose health has deteriorated not simply due to a virus , but due to government inaction, the inaccessibility of affordable health care, and institutionalised neglect in the form of heterosexism, racism and sexism.

We demand the visibility of People With AIDS who are vibrant, angry, loving, sexy, beautiful, acting up and fighting back. (Grover,1989,p.14)

Highlighting Nixon's photographs was an effective way of attracting public attention to similar representations of PWA in the mass media. A lot of controversy has been generated about such images. As a result of the publicity this and other demonstrations generated, images of ill and debilitated PWA alone are a lot less common. This is a result of the concerted efforts of photographers, video activists and groups like ACT UP.

Gypsy Ray and Jane Rosett began taking photographs of People With AIDS in the mid 1980's. Ray's photographs were used to illustrate fundraising and other appeals for the San Fransisco AIDS Foundation and the Hospice of San Fransisco.(Plate 9.) Her photographs showed people living with AIDS, usually in domestic settings. These photographs in context emphasised the participation of People With AIDS in normal life instead of divorcing them from it. Jane Rosett's photographs are more photojournalistic in style, showing PWA involved in protests and social activity of all kinds. "Rossett's photographs constitute a significant body of evidence for AIDS, not as an identity but as a condition people live with." (Grover,1989,p.14) A photographer using images of women with AIDS is Ann Meredith. Her work was part of an exhibition at The New Museum Of Contemporary Art, Broadway, New York and included videotaped interviews with some of the women photographed. Her use of the subjects' words, in quotations next to the photographs is a reminder of the ambiguity of pictures alone when, in the AIDS crisis, specific and direct meanings are sought.(Danzig,1989,p.7)

This work dates to the latter part of the 1980's, when the issues surrounding the power of photographs of PWA were first being brought to public awareness. Current photographs of PWA in the mass media *usually* give a different, more positive image of People With AIDS than those of only six or seven years ago. The Observer on Sunday 28 November 1993 had a full page article titled, "Courage that looks death in the face". (Plate 10.)

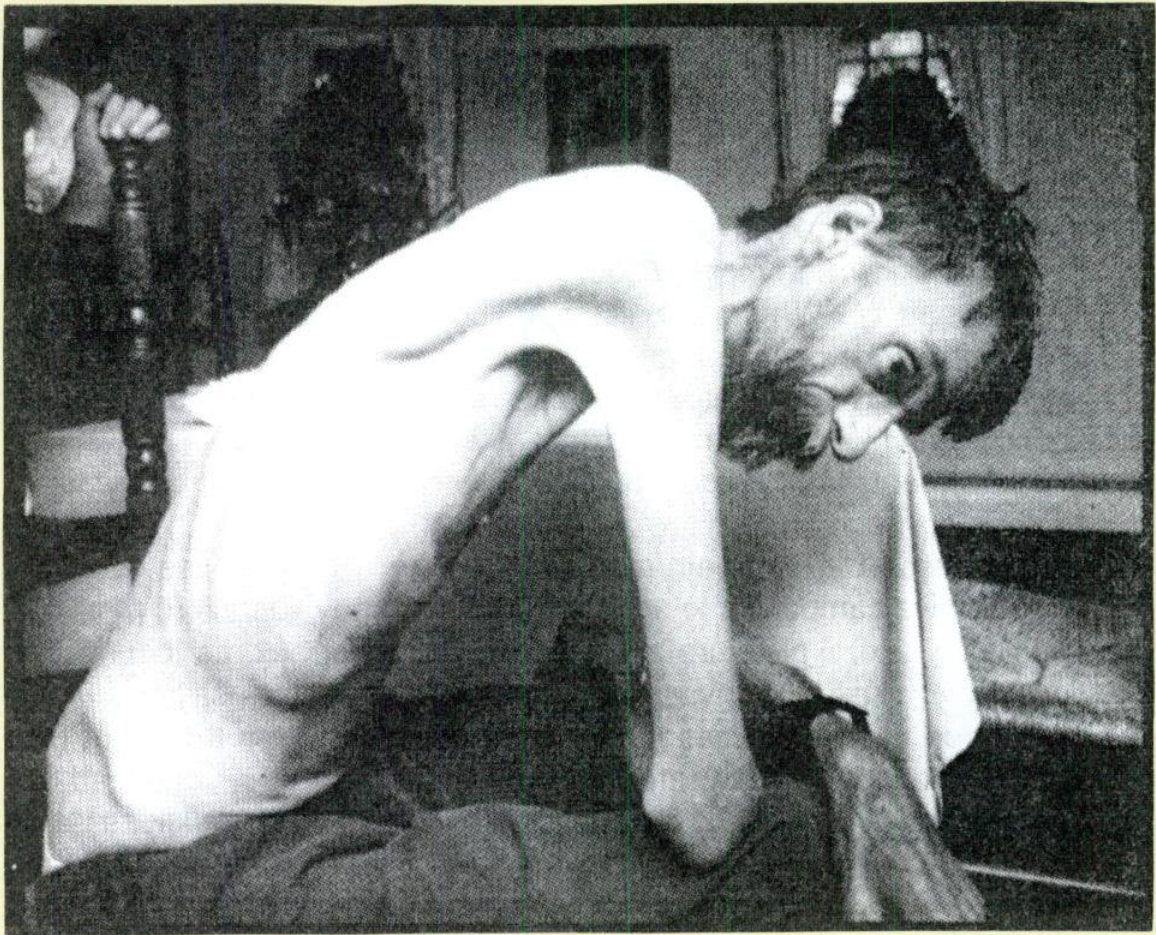


Plate 8. Nicholas Nixon, People With AIDS, Donald Perham. 1987. Photograph.

Plate 8

AIDS HOME CARE AND HOSPICE MANUAL



Developed by the AIDS HOME CARE AND HOSPICE PROGRAM
VNA of San Francisco
Sponsored in part by grants from
The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Caremark/Home Health Care of America

Plate 9. Gypsy Ray, AIDS Home Care and Hospice Manual.



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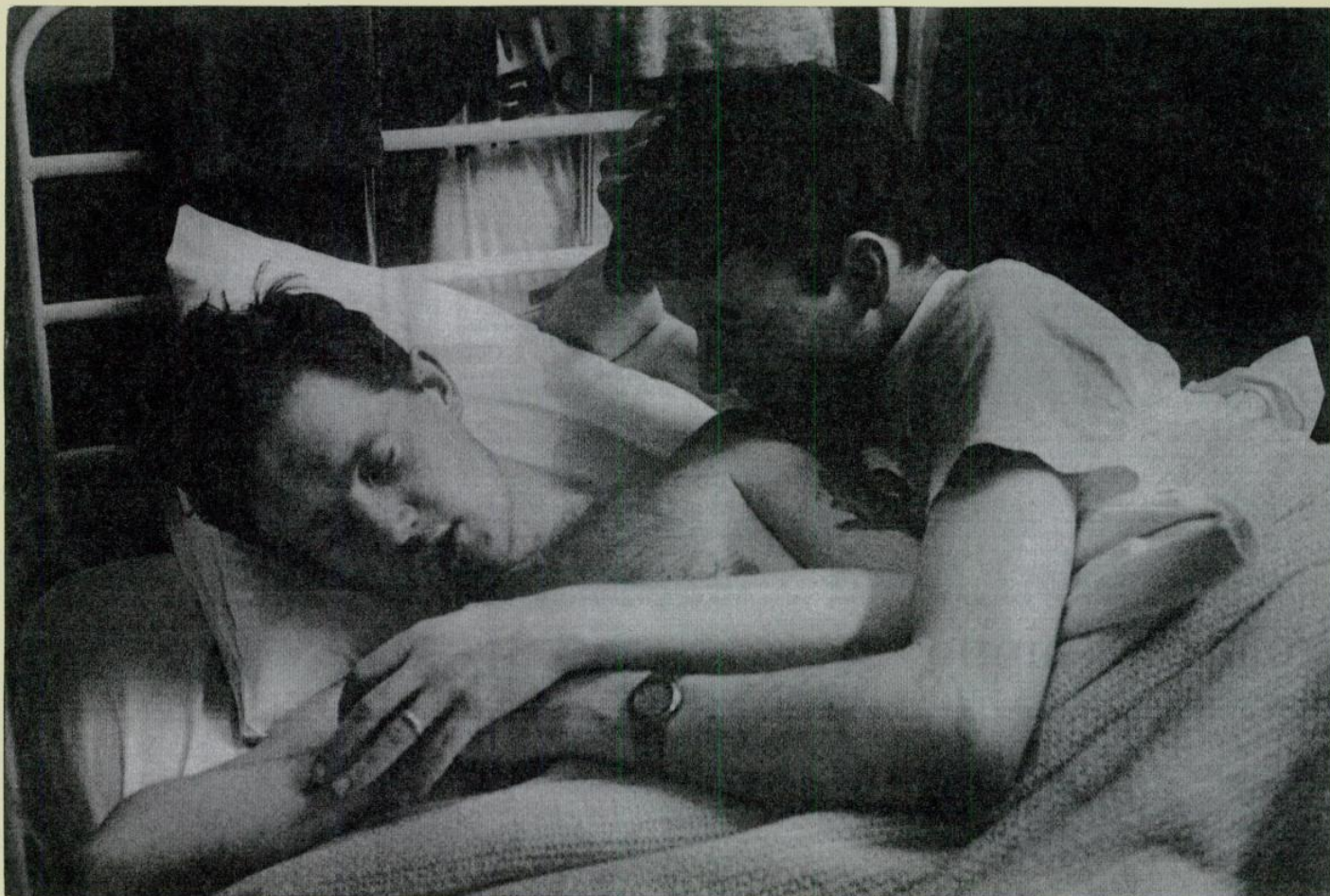


Plate 10, Gideon Mendel, John and his Partner. The Observer, 28 Nov. 1993.

Photo

1. The first part of the paper is a description of the
2. The second part is a description of the
3. The third part is a description of the
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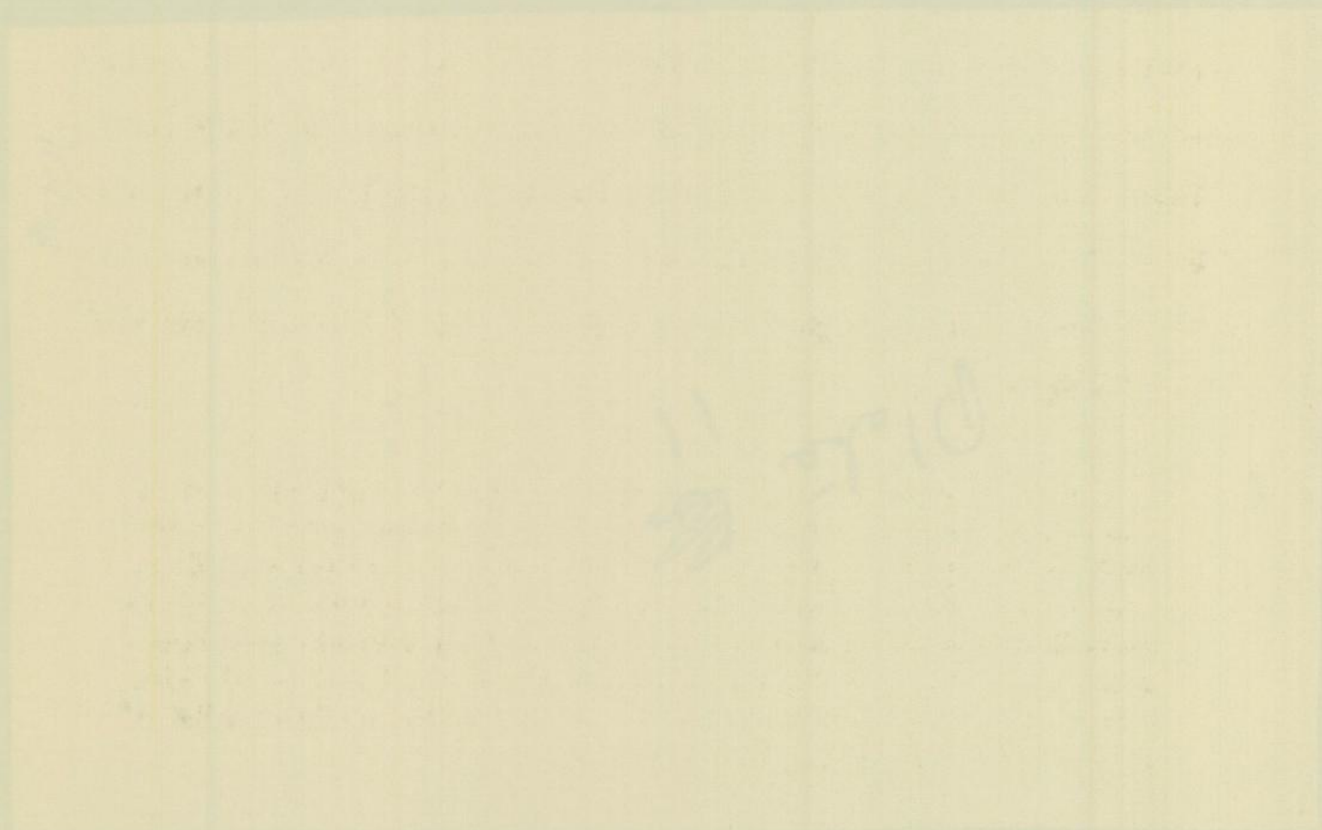
Over half the page was taken up with photographs of People With AIDS. None of the PWA are photographed alone or looking grotesquely ill. An article in the Irish Times on the 22 November 1990 called "The Final Days of My Brother Charlie" had a photograph of Charlie Gillespie sitting on a couch with a male friend and his little nephew, Patrick. (Plate 11) These examples are representative of changes in media photographs of People With AIDS in a relatively short space of time. Having looked at a considerable amount of media coverage of AIDS from 1987 to date in newspapers and television in Ireland and Britain, the changes in language and images are significant. It has not been possible to find any figures or evidence for a content analysis of media representations of PWA. This is not to say the situation has changed completely. the London Independent on Saturday 3rd April 1993 had an article entitled, "Treatment that left virus victim cynical". The photograph with it, by David Rose, showed Stephen Boyd, who is HIV+, standing alone in front of a brick wall. He stares out at the viewer holding box of AZT capsules in his hands.

Attempts to change the way HIV and AIDS are represented on television were made by those who used the "look" of the mass media when producing their own work. Ray Havarro and Helen Spirro are video activists associated with ACT UP. Television news coverage of ACT UP's public demonstrations often suffered because of lack of information and interest in the subject by those making the news. By making their own *sound bites* and footage of demonstrations available to television stations they were able to get some of their images of AIDS on television. Critics accused them of copying MTV because of the slick editing and "look" of the pieces. They used

this to their own advantage calling it More Than Virus activism. (AIDS in NY)



Plate 11. Charlie Gillespie. Photograph from the Irish Times, 22 Nov. 1991.



A number of videos about AIDS have been produced from within the activist movement. These videos document and inform about AIDS. The list of videos includes, educational tapes, documentaries portraying the vast range of AIDS service organisations and support groups, safer sex tapes, activist tapes, (documenting demonstrations and protests) and a growing number of tapes for PWA documenting treatments and AIDS related diseases. (Greyson, p.66,1990) One of these videos from the US is called, "Testing the Limits". It was produced by the Testing the Limits Collective in New York in 1987 and is described as providing one of the earliest and most broadly based and thorough framings of the impact of AIDS on New York City. (Danzig,1989,p.6.)

Testing the Limits catalogues not only the particular devastations the federal, state and local city governments have permitted and continue to permit to occur, but also the strong responses of the people in the communities affected. Its directness comes through in its willingness to represent anger undiluted, as viewers are shown articulate and active PWA's, service providers and activists linking issues of historic systemic abuse and neglect to the intricacies of current official disregard. (Danzig,1989,p.6)

The Testing the Limits Collective continues to work, producing videos as a voice from within the AIDS movement. These videos differ from the mass media representations of AIDS as they implicate the viewer in the epidemic. Supplying practical information and useful strategies for confrontation and change make video's like "Testing the Limits" an invaluable tool for informing and educating others in the struggle for change. The work of

"Testing the Limits" has been widely exhibited at film festivals, at health and media conferences and in museums and galleries throughout the US and Europe. Tapes have been broadcast on cable TV and public television and used by community groups as organising and advocacy tools. (Kenny,1989,p.4) Most of those involved with the Testing the Limits collective describe themselves as ,"creatures of the artworld; it's essentially from whence we came . " (Kenny, 1989,p.6)

"Living Proof, HIV and the pursuit of Happiness", is a documentary about people living with HIV. It records the preparation of photographs for an exhibition of the same name in the World Trade Centre, New York. These photographs are carefully constructed so as to show these PWA as they wish to be remembered, with what is important to them. A 15 year old Eagle Scout is photographed in full uniform, a Hispanic woman with her child, a gay couple are shown delivering lunches to others with AIDS as part of a buddy³ scheme. Another man wishes to be photographed in a suit covered with Red Ribbons⁴ . During the photo sessions each person discusses the changes living with HIV has made to his/her life. The messages are positive. Most say they are fitter and living a healthier lifestyle than ever before, although all add to this that they do not wish to be HIV positive. In the course of these conversations they talk about the stigma associated with being HIV positive. A homeless man says, "cancer would be easier." Many have changed careers, and are now pursuing their dream career. An illustrator decides to become a painter, a businessman a restorer of antique furniture. Generally the views

³ Buddy schemes are voluntary home help schemes whereby the PWA is assigned a 'buddy' who visits regularly and helps the PWA out with anything that needs to be done. Laundry, trips to the doctor etc. In Ireland the scheme is called Cairde, the Irish for friend.

⁴ A narrow piece of red ribbon, about 3" long and worn as a badge. It is a symbol of AIDS awareness.

expressed about the medical profession are not entirely trustful of it. These PWA are taking responsibility for their own treatments and are all well informed medically about AIDS.

The people shown are from all walks of life, a homeless man, a gay man, a heterosexual woman, a Hispanic mother, a haemophiliac. Tape time is fairly evenly divided so as to give equal representations of different PWA. Nonetheless, white middle-class Americans predominate, presumably because they were the largest group to volunteer for the project. The intention of the video was to show people living with HIV and that is exactly what all these people are doing. "AIDS draws this project together but so does life." (Cole,1993) The exhibition in the World Trade centre gave the subject importance. The photographs counter negative images of PWA. The book which accompanied the exhibition, also called "Living Proof", contained photos and profiles of all those involved. The book and the video made each photograph come to life, showing just how "real" each PWA is.

Gran Fury and other art groups have dismissed much of what the artworld has to offer them as irrelevant to their aims. What happens when the establishment decides to take Art About AIDS, "On The Road"? To ask artists to produce posters about AIDS for buses and billboards in cities in the US. AmFAR's Art Against AIDS project had organised a series of glittering social events, art auctions and art sales in San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York. These, their publicity firm described as, "upscale events", (Grover,1992,p.59) selling work by internationally known artists for large sums of money, some of which went to AIDS research. AmFAR's, Art Against AIDS project began "On The Road" as an attempt to bring "Art Against Aids" out of the gallery. This allowed AmFAR to approach other

donors in other cities in the US. Corporations that had not been "tapped" by AmFAR's large scale auctions (often because the work which had been donated was unsuitable for their corporate collections) were asked to contribute now. Larger contributors were offered site acknowledgement and no donor had the right to veto the work which would be exhibited. AmFAR also said that "On The Road", offered them the opportunity to invite local artists who had not been invited to partake in the upmarket art auctions and sales. (Grover, 1992, P.59) This is not what happened, most of the artists chosen for "On The Road" were, "artists that corporate sponsors or their curatorial staffs would be familiar with: Artists with national reputations who could draw corporations into sponsorship". (Grover, 1992,p.59)

Twenty-two posters were used. Each poster was a separate response to, or statement on AIDS. The only thing that held much of the work together was the Multi-coloured Art Against AIDS logo. In different cities the response to posters varied. In Washington, where AIDS is not widely discussed, the most didactic posters were considered most effective. These included Keith Haring's, AIDS: Get the Facts ... Understand it. Prevent it. and Erika Rothenberger's, Teenagers don't die of AIDS. Its usually a time-bomb that goes off in your 20's. USE A CONDOM. These same posters were considered irrelevant by many San Franciscans. A city that has been hit hard by the AIDS epidemic, San Francisco's population are well educated about the dangers of AIDS. Grover writes that San Franciscans found the more ambiguous work more affecting. (Grover, 1992,p.62) One of these more ambiguous pieces was William Wegman's Purple Netted, Fay Wray. This showed a dog, head down, buckling under the weight of a heavy purple net. Cindy Sherman's Woman, was coded by dress as middle class and middle

aged, she stood in a hallway, gazing into an off frame light source. Many found this piece a little too ambiguous. Enrique Chagoya's gigantic Mickey Mouse hand was shown flicking people like mosquitoes. This showed AIDS as an overpowering force, something we are all powerless against. Grover says that one of the reasons that artists responses may have stressed mourning, loss and truisms over other issues may have been an inevitability, given that most of them were inexperienced with AIDS and that the project was answerable to public sponsorship. (Grover,1992,p.67)

It seems unusual that many of the artists who were chosen for this project had not worked with AIDS as a subject before. This presumes that artists as a group have something to add to the experience of being HIV positive or having AIDS that another random selection of people do not have. There have always been difficulties making art work in the public place. It seems that the underlying problems are the organisational and conceptual problems that are part of all public art, its audiences and the effectiveness of its message in a public place.

Chapter 3.

Gallery Art About AIDS.

An assessment of the role of gallery art in the AIDS crisis.

Art lives on forever, unless we can find a cure for AIDS there will be no forever." Elizabeth Taylor turns and embraces the man about to give her a large cheque at the art against AIDS auction, New York, June 1987. (AIDS in N.Y., Video)

The gallery art system is capable of raising large amounts of money for charity. By 1987, millions had been raised for AIDS research through gallery sales, auctions and galas. In a review of the Art Against AIDS auction for AmFAR we are told that, "In a dazzling display of four decades of postwar art, major work from the artist's estates (from Dubuffet to Warhol), to contributions from living legends (de Kooning, Nevelson, Lichtenstein and Rauschenberg) will be exhibited for sale" (Tully,1987,p.54). Fifty percent of the sales proceeds go to AmFAR, "to encourage contributions of significant works."(Tully,1987,p.54) The remainder is split between artist and dealer.

Events such as this propose an art that can intervene directly in the AIDS crisis only by fundraising. This is not art *about* AIDS, this is art being used as a means of raising money for AIDS. Within the gallery system, there is a valid role for art which has AIDS its as subject. What gallery art (and the arts in general) can do is to provide a forum and a shelter within which AIDS and the many related issues can be dealt with openly. A place where what can be considered and called deviant by mainstream culture can be explored and accurately depicted from the inside out. A gallery can also be a place to commemorate those who are dead and to give time and space to many of the other issues that are part of this epidemic. Issues like the reality of living with

HIV and AIDS, what it is like to be gay in the time of AIDS and expressions of anger and frustration at the inadequacies of the medical profession and the governments involved. If there was no public space in which to see this work a valuable record of contemporary concerns would be lost to all.

Gallery Art About AIDS has been subjected to criticism from both sides. The establishment is inclined to say that good art cannot deal with a subject like AIDS, it is too specific and timebound to be of any lasting artistic worth. The activists say that although its interesting, it isn't activism, and cannot do any of the real things that actually save lives. Yet Art About AIDS plays an important role in this crisis. If some of the work survives the test of time like Picasso's, Guernica so much the better. However, if for all the usual reasons it does not, it is enough that this art fulfils these roles now, within a contemporary context.

Robert Rosenblum, professor of Fine Art at New York University puts forward a frequently held point of view when he says:

Art cannot save lives, we know now that art is not imbued with any magical spiritual powers, it is really just a minor fact of life compared to the realities of disease. Nobody was ever saved from cancer or TB by looking at a work of art, and I don't see how a work of art can save anybody's life these days unless by some crazy coincidence that work of art manages to convey a specific medical message... but then the major thing about the work would be its message ^{4.5} (AIDS in N.Y.)

Gallery art's strength in this epidemic is not that it can exhibit works of art which happen to give medical information and therefore save lives but, that

^{4.5} Cancer and TB are not communicable in the few, specific and direct ways that the HIV virus is: no artistic message could "save" you from these diseases. HIV, on the other hand, is not an easily transmissible virus and it is possible that the change(s) in lifestyle necessary to protect oneself from HIV infection could be brought about by witnessing works of art about HIV and AIDS.

it can commemorate and give its status to a group of people that society has ignored. Group exhibitions allow the inclusion of lesser known artists and can show a wide variety of responses to the epidemic. One of the most publicised and therefore best known group exhibitions about AIDS was, "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing", curated by Nan Goldin at the Artist's Space, a non-profit gallery in lower Manhattan from Nov.16 - Jan. 6, 1990.⁵ The show of twenty three artist's work:

Documented the way AIDS has shattered the lives of a community of artists and, by extension, has depicted the morbid dance between the unnecessarily stigmatised community of AIDS sufferers and the often hostile forces entrusted with combating the disease. (Loughery,1990,p.21)

Many of those involved with the show were HIV positive or have had first hand knowledge of dealing with HIV and AIDS. Some of the artists who were involved with the show are now dead. The types of work exhibited varied widely; memorials, political works and explorations of issues related to AIDS, "These works convey both the rage of those suffering from AIDS and the physic pain of those who care for them during their agonising physical decline." (Reid,1990,p.53)

In brief, the political situation in America had changed between the time the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) had passed the proposal for "Witnesses" and the time of the exhibition itself. The reasons for this change in practice are mostly due to the debates surrounding Serrano's, Piss Christ

5 There have been a large number of group exhibitions about AIDS. These include, "The Indomitable Spirit", "Fluid Exchanges", "Images and Words, Artists respond to AIDS", "Ecstatic Antibodies" and an Exhibition at The Milestone Art Centre, Edinburgh.. See bibliography.

and the Mapplethorpe debate, that is, the results of the new conservatism within the NEA. Problems with the catalogue essays and the content of some of the work almost led to the withdrawal of funds by the NEA. In the end, astute handling of the situation by Susan Wyatt, Director of the Artist's Space, led to a reversal of the decision by the NEA and a lot of publicity. An important result of all this controversy was the publicity the exhibition received. Over 1,000 people came to the opening and, the exhibition averaged 650 visitors a week in the first two weeks, 400 a week after that. The issues involved with Art About AIDS are not only those of the gallery, but also those of the wider debate. Gallery art is not unaffected by outside concerns. The change of decision by the NEA was brought about by astute handling of the issues involved, publicity was part of this. David Wojanrowicz wrote one of the catalogue essays for the "Witnesses" exhibition. Lashing out at cardinal John O' Connor for his efforts in blocking safe sex instruction, he called him a "fat cannibal", (Bolton,1992,p.127) and described a fantasy of dousing the conservative Senator Jesse Helms with gasoline. (Loughery,1990,p.122) It was this essay, in part, which led to the controversy which surrounded this exhibition.

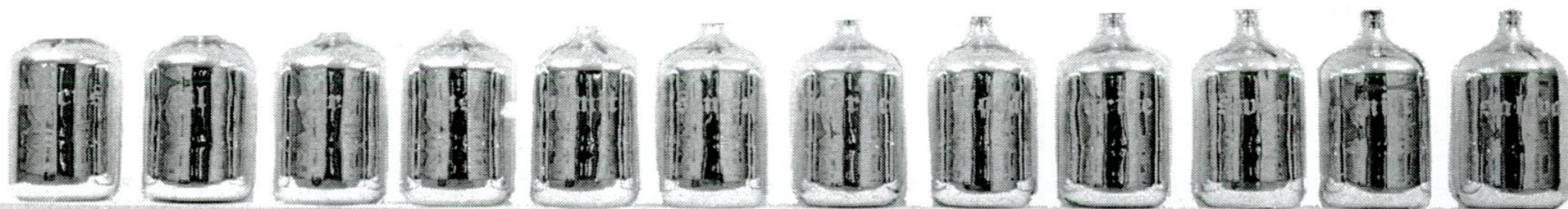
Kiki Smith's piece in "Witnesses", called All Our Sisters consisted of a banner covered with silk screened images of women and children. Each group of figures was accented by a small, heart shaped piece of bright red fabric. Suspended from the ceiling above the banner was a sculpted paper figure,"a symbol of the body's wholeness." (Reid,1990,p.55) Smith emphasised that there was no sector of the population who was not at risk and the inclusion of the (hollow) hanging figure displays the loss, the empty space for the, "absent space in my community, dead from AIDS but alive in me".

(Lyon,1990,p.106) Smith's ultimate aim is healing, she says, in a spiritual or social rather than a medical sense.

Another piece of Smith's work is relevant here, giving a fuller view of on-going concerns in her work. It was a 1986 series of 12 mirrored watercooler bottles. (Plate, 12) Etched on each bottle in elegant gothic lettering was the name of a body fluid; mucus, oil, tears, pus, vomit, sperm, diarrhoea, blood, urine, sweat, milk and saliva. The reference to the ancient theory of humors is evident.⁶ (Lyon,1990,p.104) The cooler bottles offer a more contemporary presentation of this reference. The fluids contained in the bottles must be feared, yet these are the fluids of life. In their modern watercooler bottles, these fluids look like specimens in a laboratory, as if the human aspects of disease have been removed in favour of medical analysis. The bottles could be little phials of poison, yet the virus does not survive for long outside the body, when removed, the body fluids are no longer poisonous. It seems as though it is the human part of this disease that makes it dangerous. Smith's interest in body fluids and fear of contamination could be a metaphor for fear of intimacy.

The L.A. activist art collective Powers Of Desire (POD) use the concept of body fluids very differently in their work. The "Molotov Cocktail Project" is an on-going project by the group. It started as a joke made by a HIV positive friend of theirs who said that the only commemoration he would like was a Molotov Cocktail. The group made simulated Molotov Cocktails and sandblasted the name of a person who had died of AIDS on each one.

⁶ In medieval medicine the four humors were blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. It was supposed that a person was healthy when the four humors were properly mixed in the body.



Clockwise , from top left: **Kiki Smith, *Untitled*, 1986**, mirrored glass, 19" x 11' x 13". Collection of Eileen and Michael Cohen, New York. **Kiki Smith, *Uro-Genital System (male)*, 1986**, bronze, 16 x 10". Collection of René Blouin, Montreal. **Kiki Smith, *Womb (open)*, 1986**, bronze, 15 x 22 x 6".

Plate 12

They used them as installation pieces to commemorate and raise awareness within their community. POD had a Molotov Cocktail Mausoleum as an installation at the 7th annuale at the Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibition (LACE). Each Molotov Cocktail was mounted on a square tile of marble with another tile alongside it that repeated the name which was sandblasted on the bottle. Below the name were the dates of birth and death. The effect was that of a mausoleum slab. Of the thirty such slabs grouped together in this installation, nineteen had names and dates, the other 11 didn't. How many more will die? The Molotov Cocktails are about anger and frustration. The fluid inside the bottles conjures up fear of body fluids, in the context of activism and anger. "But here the fluids don't spill; they ignite. I imagine throwing a bottle as symbolically hurling HIV back at the institutions that have allowed this crisis to take place." (POD,1992, p.14)

Even when an artist is not specifically working on AIDS, the cultural fears it has become a metaphor for reoccur, fears like that of intimacy and pollution. Cindy Sherman is no stranger to sexuality or metaphor in her work. Untitled 155, 1987, (Plate 13) evokes a fear of AIDS in a context where it is not made obvious that this work references AIDS. It shows a woman, buttocks up, "between dirt plastic and vegetables, undergoing some kind of painful metamorphosis." (Liu,1988,p.101) Whatever Sherman's intentions, the welts on the woman's buttocks look just like the lesions of Kaposi's Sarcoma (K.S.), a rare skin cancer now associated almost exclusively with AIDS. K.S. is a predominantly male cancer. Between the vegetables and the plastic, is Sherman making a statement about women and AIDS? Is she alerting us to the fact that the diseases and infections HIV positive women commonly get are not the same as men's? Diagnosis is often later in

women. Taking other social factors into account HIV positive women die 61% faster than HIV positive men. (Carlson,1991,p.3) One thing that Sherman is displaying here is a fear of the tainted community, fear of those who are easily recognised as being HIV positive .



Plate 13. Cindy Sherman, Untitled 1987. Photograph.

Plate 13

AIDS has shattered the illusion that modern medicine has widespread disease under control. More importantly, it has changed medical practice for all by the insistence of PWA that if medicine has no cure, the patient must have control over decisions on treatment. A number of artists have dealt with this unusual situation. Michael Tidmus exhibited in the "Against Nature" group show at LACE. Health and Morality: A Desultory Discourse, 1988, was an enlightening computer programme which questioned the effectiveness of modern medicine in the face of AIDS.

Statistics, quotes and graphics melt on and off the screen, making it all too clear that Burroughs Wellcome, the only drug company that makes AZT ... seems to have a dangerous stranglehold on control of the drug. There's a beautiful litany of substances enumerated in flashes: 'the urine of a lizard', 'the dung of an elephant', 'the liver of a mole'. This list draws a parallel between ancient medicine and current backward, half hearted or just plain helpless approaches to medicating AIDS. (Gerstler, 1989, p.87)

In many ways, some of the current attempts of the medical profession to treat AIDS are as effective as the use of the, "liver of a mole" to treat disease in the past.

The issue of who is "at risk" from HIV infection is central to many discussions about AIDS. It was one of all government's primary concerns in confining the epidemic. Health educators, AIDS activists and the gay community have all challenged the image of the "high risk group" as stigmatising sectors of the population. Gretchen Bender questioned the truth of the term by highlighting the inadequacy of it. In some of her pieces, television sets are tuned into local channels and short phrases or words are printed onto their screens.

Disengaged from their audio component, the images of the game shows, soap operas, broadcast news, etc ... flow unemphasised by sound in a constant stream, their original meaning changed by redirection through textual overlays. (Gudis, 1989,p.26)

The television screen reads, "PEOPLE WITH AIDS", a powerful reminder that AIDS can effect any member of the community . This is not a message of fear or hysteria about contracting HIV. This is a message about seeing "high risk groups" as an irrelevant term. Anybody can be HIV positive, even the characters on soap operas or the most respectable of newsreaders. The point that Bender makes is not that all of these people HIV positive but, that we do not know which people are. Therefore, terms like "risk groups" and "affected communities" are no longer applicable.

Vittorio Scarpati drew during the final months of his hospitalisation. In a drawing inscribed, Who's fallen asleep in his soup for the twentieth time? the artist depicts himself surrounded by IV tubes, hearts, lungs and arteries- the deteriorating components of a body racked with disease but still suffused with personal memories and a vivid sensibility. Scarpati's work is at once innocently humorous and frightfully knowing; it reveals him as far more coherent in the face of the general incoherence surrounding AIDS than most of us could hope in the same situation. (Reid, 1990,p.54)

Scarpati was not a "patient" in the face of AIDS. In these drawings which show his humour and cynicism, he defies conventional notions of somebody in the last stages of AIDS. He defies the use of the word "patient" for he is not patient. He defies the use of the word "sufferer" because he does not show himself as suffering and he defies,"victim" because he is not helpless. (Plate 14.)



Plate 14. Vittorio Scarpati, Untitled 1989, Black marker on paper, one of six drawings.

Handwritten text, likely bleed-through from the reverse side of the page. The text is faint and mostly illegible due to fading and the texture of the paper. Some discernible words or fragments include "O", "K", and "L".

David Wojnarowicz sees the epidemic from a gay male perspective. David Dietcher, in his article on Wojnarowicz , describes his "Sex Series, for Marion Seemana , 1989. (Plate 15) It consisted of eight unique photomontages. photomontages. The fairly large b/w prints were exposed using colour slides onto the photographic paper which gave a 'negative' look to the piece . On small discs of paper he then exposed other images. Read together they make intelligent statements about the reality of being gay in AIDS crisis. The main images are of motion, a steamship in a storm, bridges, a train.

The discs function as peepholes that open onto something approaching the diversity of human sexuality, that truly human diversity proscribed by our masters with the force of law. Thus high above the near intersection of the Manhattan and Brooklyn bridges a woman sits astride the face of another; a man sucks another's cock inside an opening that reads-suspended as it is halfway between building and watchtower-like a planet of inverted pleasure ; one guy fucks another while behind them, the sky is littered with falling parachutes....In one of six elements that flank the picture of the tornado, two women embrace. That an image of an embrace should be juxtaposed with one of nature out of control underscores the emotional sense of peril and ambivalence that suffuses the entire series... The juxtapositions approximate the sort of free association one might involuntarily make to any one of the images, leaving ample room for poetic correspondences and emotional effects... the series delivers its over-riding message with suprising urgency ... The contents of one person's 'private fantasy' have thus become the terms of 'public reality'(Dietcher,1989,p.124)

"Images & Words, artists respond to AIDS", was an exhibition of work by 47 artists and artist collectives, held in the Arts for Living Centre, New York, in December 1989 (New Art Examiner,1990,p.11) The exhibition was almost withdrawn by guest curator Humbert Chaver after he was informed by Barbra Tate, Chief Administrator of the centre that a banner by Gran Fury would not be hung outside the building. The banner read, "ALL PEOPLE

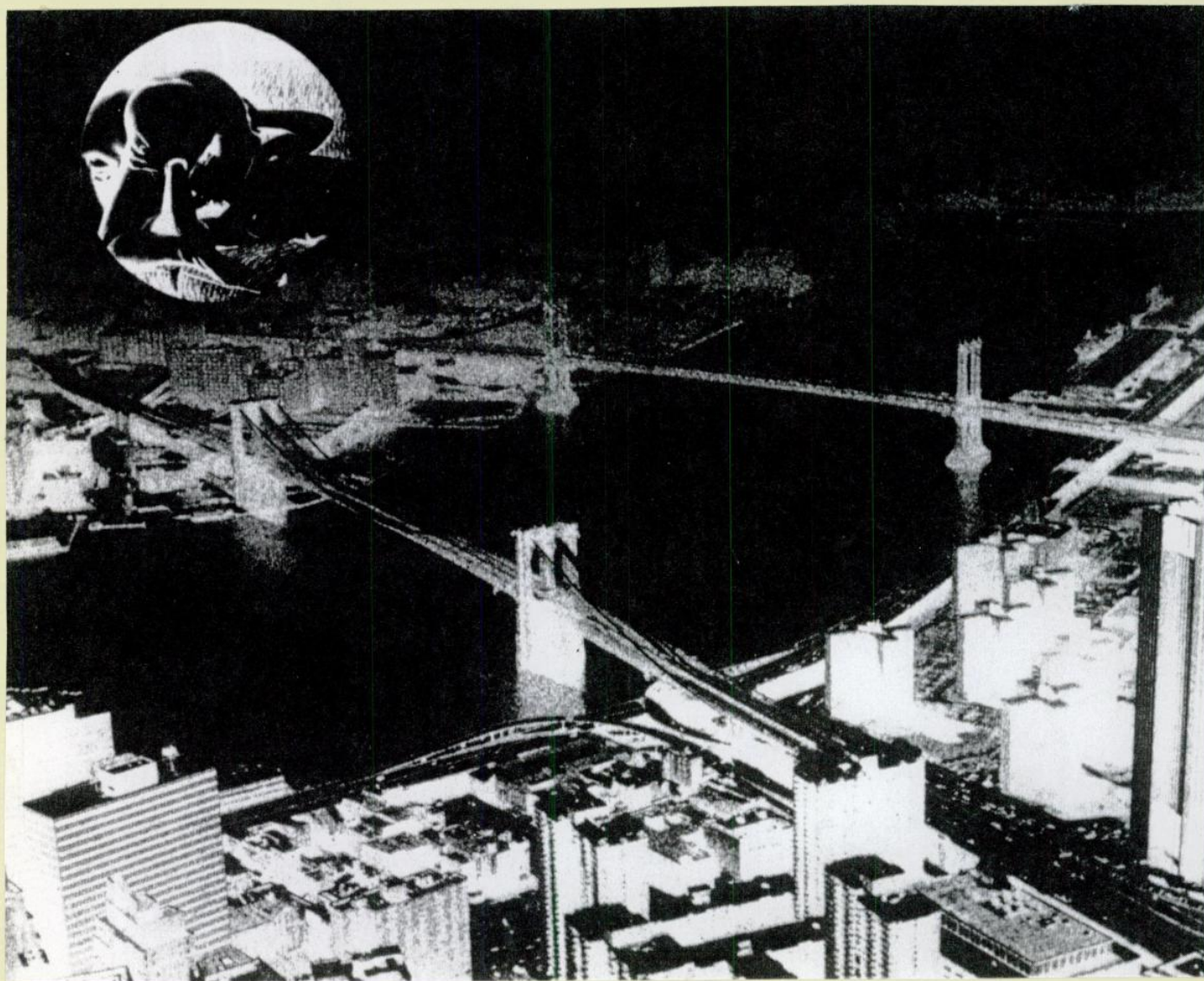
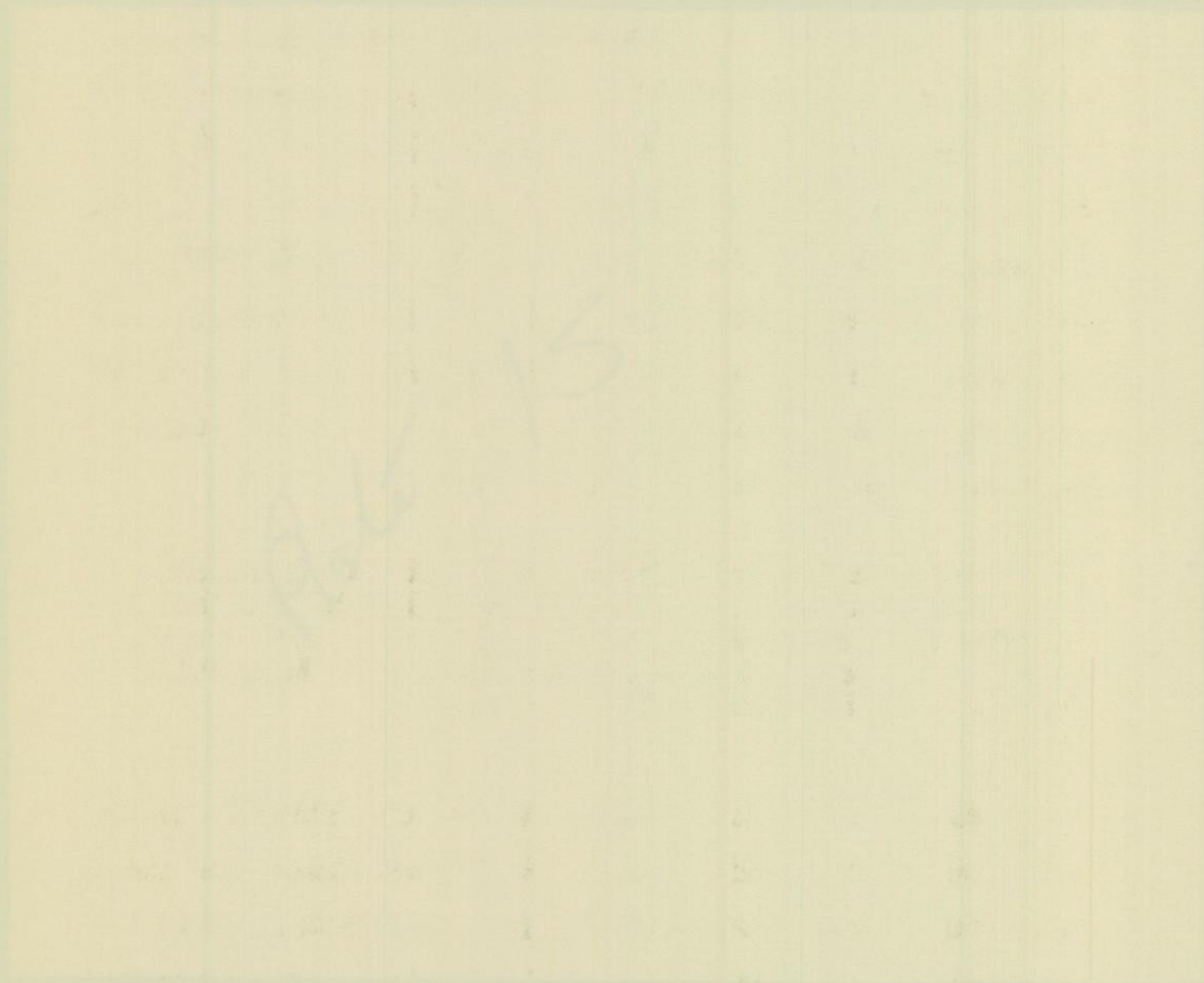


Plate 15. David Wojnarowicz, Sex series 1989, for Marion Seemana.
Photograph. (b/w)



WITH AIDS ARE INNOCENT"and was considered "too political"(New Art Examiner,1990,p.11). (Plate 16)There was concern about reactions from the community. The banner was hung and the exhibition went ahead as planned. But, continuing conservatism on the issue of AIDS within the artworld was evident. At the same time Gran Fury protested the exclusion of AIDS from a MoMA show, "Committed to Print: Social and political themes in recent American printed art." The show was divided into broad categories; gender, governments/leaders, race/culture, nuclear power/ecology, war/revolution and economics/class struggle/and the American dream. It was an excellent opportunity for MoMA to support contemporary social and political art. The singleness of gender on this list and the failure to couple it with something like,"sexuality", revealed the bias of the exhibition.

Although spanning the period from 1960's to the present, Committed to Print included no work about gay liberation or the AIDS crisis. When asked by a critic at the Village Voice, the curator blithely replied that she knew of no graphic work of artistic merit dealing with the epidemic. (Crimp & Rolston,1990.p.16).

The graphics included in the exhibition were executed by artists who are now well established. This included the work of Nancy Spero, Hans Haacke Barbra Kruger, Robert Rauschenberg and Leon Golub. The work by collectives that was included was that of or older, or well established collectives like, "Artists and Writers Protest Against the Vietnam War" and "Group Material". (Crimp and Rolston,1990,p.17). The ironic thing about this situation was that within the next two years Gran Fury would be invited to produce work for "The Artist's Pages" by the prestigious art magazine, Artforum and would

become widely accepted by the very artworld that considered the work, "of no lasting artistic merit." (Crimp and Rolston, 1990, p. 17)

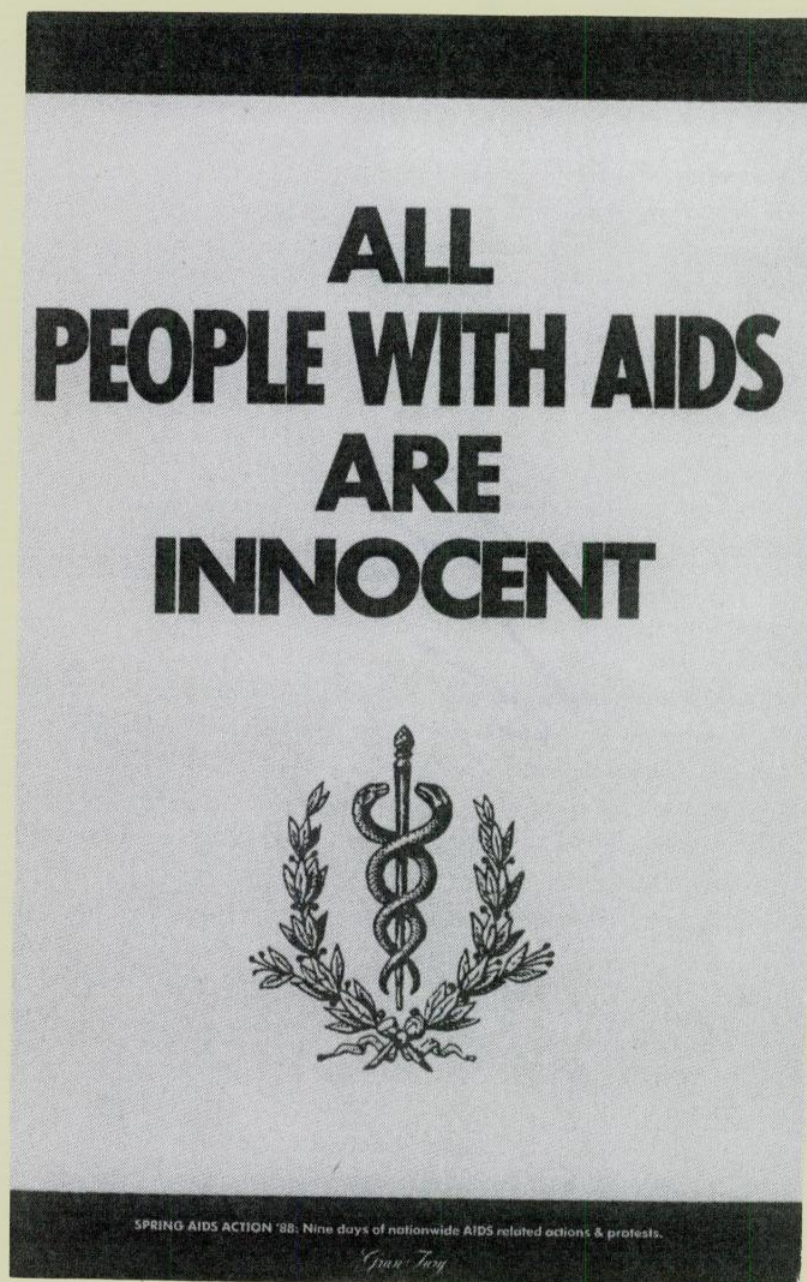
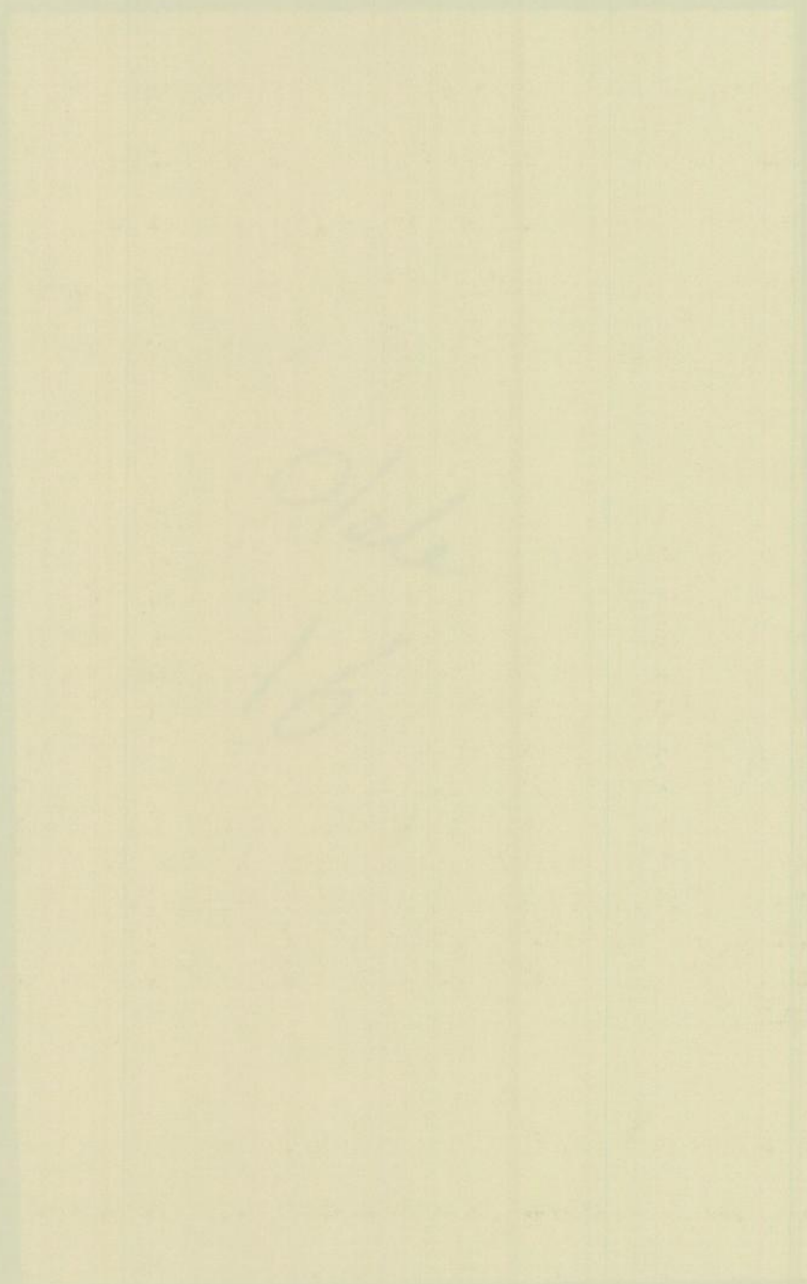


Plate 16. Gran Fury, ALL PWA ARE INNOCENT, 1988, Poster, offset lithography.



In Britain, Gilbert and George addressed the subject of AIDS in a series of 25 works, exhibited at the Anthony d'Offay Gallery in London in 1989. (Rosenblum, 1989, p. 153) The entire proceeds of the exhibition were donated to CRUSAIDS, an organisation which stresses the funding of resources to improve the real-life conditions of all those living with AIDS, including those in prisons. This amounted to £565,500, a considerable sum of money. Robert Rosenblum describes the work in glowing terms, remarking that the work is similar in style and motifs to Gilbert and George's other works. (Plate 17.)

In Flow, our artists' journey locates them on top of a pair of flexed male knees, which belonged, it turns out to their late friend, David Robillard.⁷ Beyond these human pinnacles, what might have been a welcoming view of the British landscape is instead a blighted panorama that takes its place beside the history scarred plains of Kiefer. Guided by a blood red barbed wire fence, we are forced into this vista of dying nature on a flame-red path that, with the rush of the proverbial railway tracks, converges on the horizon. There the road comes to an end under the huge red arc of a setting sun and a photograph of the stormiest of British Romantic skies. The red glow is so engulfing that it even illuminates, or perhaps better said, incinerates the tree branches that enclose the picture at upper left and right, with Gilbert and George's usual symmetry. (Rosenblum, 1989, p. 144)

Gilbert and George's work may accurately depict their feelings about the AIDS crisis. Their images of stormy landscapes, "the red of blood and fire colliding with the green of nature" (Rosenblum, 1989, p. 144), grotesquely blossoming flowers and blood soaked backgrounds may describe their fear of AIDS and the fears they have for society. Yet, the work does not engage with

⁷Died of AIDS related causes.

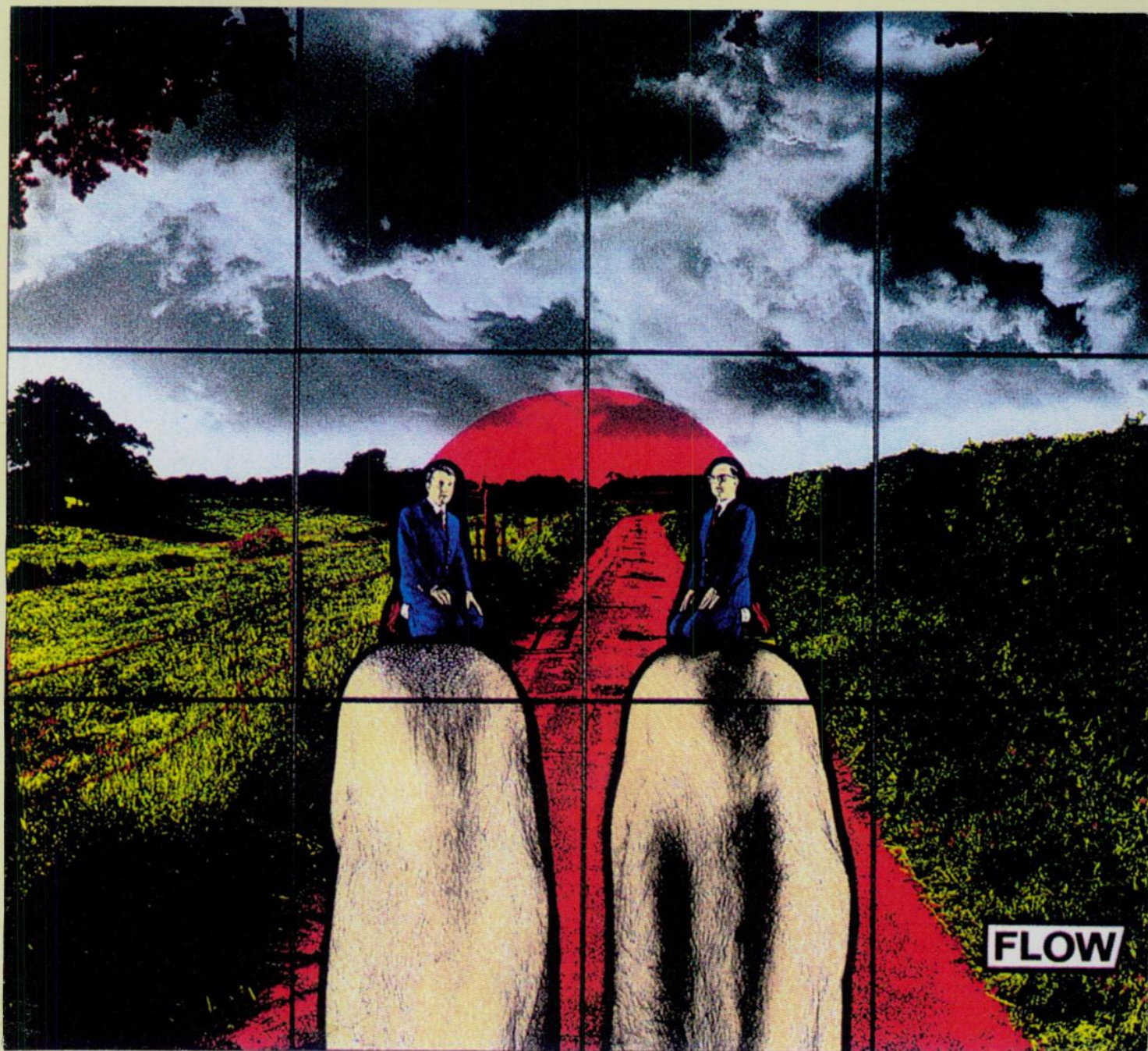


Plate 17. Gilbert and George, *Flow*, 1988. Photo piece.

Plate 13

AIDS except to describe the awfulness of the situation. In discussing the American, Art Against AIDS On the Road project, Jan Zita Grover remarked that one of the reasons that artists' responses may have stressed mourning and loss over other issues was almost inevitable, given that most of them were inexperienced with AIDS. (Grover,1992,p.67) While I am not claiming that Gilbert and George are inexperienced with AIDS, this is the first time they chose to work with AIDS as subject and perhaps this is the reason for the sense of futility in these works. If these works did nothing else they attracted media attention to AIDS and, to Gilbert and George's generous gift to CRUSAIDS, in money and in publicity.

By no means is gallery art the most effective way of raising public awareness about AIDS yet, it is not meant to be. The influence of gallery Art About AIDS is indirect. Within its own sphere of influence, the arts can commemorate and validate lives and ways of living that no other high status activity is doing. The fact that AIDS is considered a fit subject for art in some little way compensates for the loss of social status that accompanies HIV and AIDS. The opportunity to deal frankly with some of the issues of sexuality and intimacy that AIDS raises is not available in any other public forum except the arts. The gay community have been put under siege by this epidemic, the gay sexuality which relies on sexual contacts for reaffirmation of itself has been stamped out of existence for medical reasons.⁸ Only within the arts and the gay community can issues like gay sexuality be dealt with in a public place. Art About AIDS, "validates bonding between gay men at a time when such relationships are widely regarded as essential for survival, it

⁸ I'm speaking primarily about the bathhouses of the US. Here gay men had sexual contacts with as many others as they wished. The bathhouses were among the reasons why AIDS became a gay man's disease in the parts of the US.

creates an image of the gay community as an agency of support and nurturance ... and it seeks to empower People With AIDS both personally and collectively" (Goldstein,1991, p.30)

Conclusion.

In such a short space of time, just over 10 years there have been fundamental changes in society as a direct result of AIDS. Art About AIDS has played an important role in this. The AIDS Activist Movement has benefited from the active role artists and art activists play in this epidemic. Their ability to successfully subvert the forms of the dominant media has served them well. Activist art has made effective graphics, working methods and experience available to the wider AIDS Activist movement. This has enabled activists and artists to highlight problems, inform, publicise inadequacies and to produce and publicise positive images of PWA. Art within the gallery has given AIDS a status. Recognition of the validity of AIDS as subject by galleries and by the art world has given it importance. The gallery serves as a place where those who have died of AIDS related causes can be mourned and the loss to the community voiced. In his review of the work of David Wojnarowicz, David Dietcher remarked;

As disturbing as it is to find ourselves dependant upon art dealers, or for that matter, museum curators for such things, where else could people have gone to connect in this way with the experience, knowledge, anger and eloquence of a PWA" (Dietcher,1989,p.127)

When I began researching this project I expected to find information about AIDS, art and activism from Britain and Ireland as readily as I had with the USA. This was not the case. There have been some artistic and activist responses to AIDS in Britain although not on the same scale as those of the US. In Ireland there seems to be little record of the same. There is very little published work on AIDS in Ireland, even less on the social aspects of AIDS in

Ireland. AIDS healthcare policies here are left up to the health boards and hospitals involved. This unacceptable situation currently allows the Mater Hospital in Dublin, which "cares" for Aids patients the right to refuse to distribution of Eastern Health Board Safe Sex Information to it's patients. Within the art colleges there has been some response to AIDS but, there is little record of a response from practising artists in this country. This is probably as a result of lack of awareness in Ireland about the reality of AIDS

Nonetheless, the achievements of activists and art activists elsewhere has had its effect on this country. We have adopted many of the hard won changes in representation and language to do with AIDS. AIDS was an important aspect of campaigns calling for the free availability of condoms. Similarly, the homosexuality was eventually decriminalised in June 1993. This allows the Irish government to sanction safe sex information for gay men, a situation which would previously have been illegal.

Glossary

ACT UPA Collective of AIDS Activists.

AIDS.....Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome.

AmFAR.....American foundation for AIDS Research.

ARCAids related Complex, the symptoms of a person affected with the HIV virus without necessarily developing the disease.

AZT.....Azidithymidine, one of the drugs which is thought to have some effect against the onset of symptoms of AIDS.

CDC.....Centre for Disease Control , USA.

CRUSAIDS...A British Charity which helps people living with AIDS.

FDA.....Federal Drug Administration , USA

General Idea.Canadian Artists' Collective

GMHCGay Men's Health Crisis, US help group.

Gran FuryAn art activist group.

High Risk Group

The term used to denote someone whose lifestyle puts him/her at a higher risk (of HIV infection)

HIVHuman Immunodeficiency Virus.

I.V.Intra Venous

I.V.D.U.Intra-Venous Drug User

K.S.Kaposi Sarcoma a rare skin cancer usually diagnosed in men from Mediterranean region or of Mediterranean origin, now almost exclusively associated with AIDS.

L.A.C.E. Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibition

MoMAMuseum of Modern Art, New York

MTVMusic television

NEA..... National Endowment for theArts. USA

POD Powers of Desire, Los Angeles Art Collective.

PWAPerson With AIDS

STDSexually Transmitted Disease.

Testing the Limits...Video Activist Collective

WHO.....World Health Organisation

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