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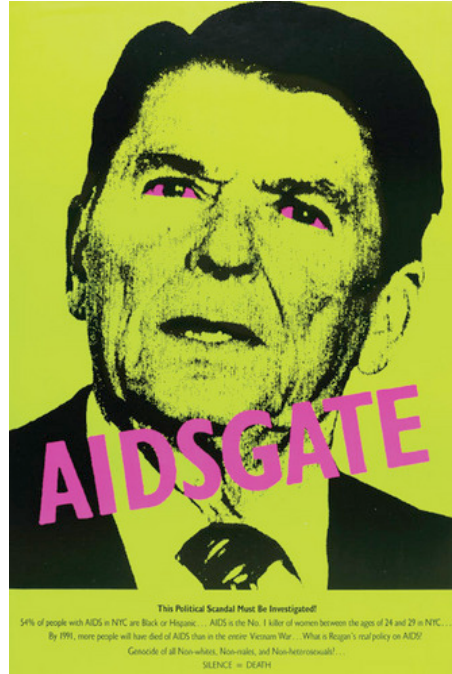
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MARCH 2010

Lest We Forget

EILEEN MYLES ON "ACT UP NEW YORK"



Silence = Death Project, *AIDSGATE*, 1987, offset lithograph, 34 x 22".

ACT UP DID POLITICS with an urgent Pop splash. Comic-book chromatics and rage tweaked Reagan's eyes pink and his face bright green; AZT, the first effective (and massively overpriced) AIDS drug to land on the market, got a Coca-Cola treatment in a red poster that urged us cheerily to ENJOY it. In the recent exhibition "ACT UP New York: Activism, Art, and the AIDS Crisis, 1987–1993" at Harvard's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, one's eyes grazed over an entire wall of posters—most in bold caps—full of information and accusations directed both to the half-awake people in the street and at a rogue's gallery of powerful men whose crimes of omission caused ACT UP to declare them "Deadlier than the Virus." Ed Koch, mayor of New York; Mario Cuomo, governor; Stephen Joseph, NYC Commissioner of Health; Cardinal O'Connor, one of ACT UP's prime targets: All fell down on the job during a health crisis, and ACT UP held them accountable.

In addition to the multitude of posters, this emotional feast of a show comprised video projections, handbills, stickers, T-shirts, buttons—all the paraphernalia of a daily, lived political movement filled the upper floor of the Carpenter Center, chronicling six years of adamant activity. Installed on the lower level was what Helen Molesworth (who curated the show with Claire Grace) called a "spatialized" oral history—a room full of video monitors showing interviews, produced by Jim Hubbard and Sarah Schulman, with more than one hundred of ACT UP's living members. Together, all these materials documented to great effect the huge accomplishment of ACT UP during the peak years of the AIDS crisis.

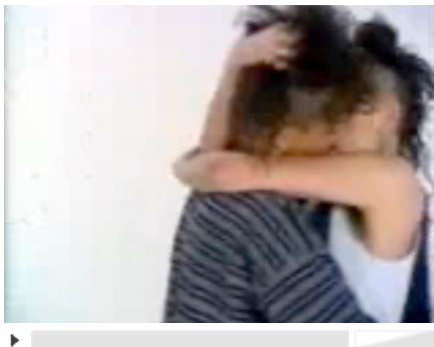
Molesworth's rationale for doing the show had everything to do with a sense that the legacy of ACT UP had not survived its own moment. "When I got to Harvard"—in 2007, as curator of the university's art museum—"I discovered that none of the undergraduates had even heard of ACT UP," she told me in a phone conversation. "The most important political movement of my generation hadn't made it into the curriculum. There was no antiwar movement to speak of at Harvard. It began to seem that the one great accomplishment of the Giuliani and Bush regimes was an image lockdown sanitizing the urban space of any hint of rebellion." The triumph, then, of the show mounted here is that the success of ACT UP—in terms of political organization, powerful design, and long-term impact on safe-sex education, health care, and the FDA protocols for releasing new drugs—is fully visible for the first time.

When the story is told it begins like this: ACT UP grew out of a question posed by playwright Larry Kramer to a crowded room at New York's Gay and Lesbian Community Center one night in 1987. "Do we want to start a new organization devoted to political action?" The answer was "a resounding yes," according to Douglas Crimp, and so ACT UP began. A crowd of artists, activists, and people with AIDS began meeting each week at the Center. Smaller affinity groups developed out of the mass in order to organize specific actions: The art collectives among these included the Silence=Death Project, Gran Fury, Gang, and Fierce Pussy, who all took it upon themselves to become the propaganda machine of ACT UP. The fact that the individuals who formed these groups were already artists and designers in New York, that they were trained to create and manipulate messages for the media, meant that their political interventions would practically be intravenous.

Of course, ACT UP was part of a long line of artist-activist groups. The stage had been richly set in the same dirty New York streets by the Guerrilla Girls, for instance, whose wheat-pasted graphics melded hard fact and design to critique the sexism of the art world. Barbara Kruger's ad art and Jenny Holzer's truisms were also strong influences on the work on view in the exhibition. So this new coalition stood firmly on a lot of public and social art history when it began to push its message forward. I can't help thinking that the vacuum this show addressed points to a need for a much larger exhibition that will fully document the secret history of political art in America. The reluctance on the left to "preach to the choir" is never echoed on the right by those who are hard at work inside the church selling their causes. Even the spate of recent feminist art shows were almost apologetic in their earnest insistence on the aesthetic value of the work, while the history of the women's movement is actually filled with posters and banners and sewn pillows, poetry and funky manifestos bursting with the libidinous encounter of art and political action.

Happily, the current show does not shrink from its own excesses. Like good stand-up comedy, much of the work sizzles with the pleasures of accusation. A diptych by Donald Moffett pairs an orange and black swirling target on one side with Ronald Reagan's tight-mouthed smile on the other. Moffett's flirtatious caption—HE KILLS ME—laughs darkly at the manly grimace of the once cute man—so confident of his own charm working always. If you think about it, Reagan did totally work America like a cheap suit during the '80s—to the extent that he made no public statement about AIDS until 1987, when more than twenty thousand Americans had already died. I suspect that when history finally figures out what to do with Ronald Reagan's head, it'll be clear that ACT UP got there first. Fittingly, Ronnie's face got thrown around like ACT UP's beach ball, on posters and T-shirts and, prominently, in a video from 1987 shot in Washington, DC. Reagan, the betrayer, bobs green-faced, decapitated, on the tops of sticks held by thousands of angry marchers.

ACT UP's own multiheaded approach, in all of its actions, was designed precisely so that the project as a whole could not be defeated, a web approach that preceded a web reality. The group set out to be at war with the powers that be because the people in the coalition were dying. And that fact was the centerpiece of all of ACT UP's messages. DURING THIS PROGRAM AT LEAST 6 PEOPLE WITH AIDS WILL DIE was Gran Fury's message in the program for the 1988 Bessie Awards; but Gran Fury wasn't raining on the dance world's parade. Instead they let the audience be complicit. To sit in their seats with such a message in their hands was to take part in an acknowledgment of what was happening onstage and off. In the famous long kissing video by Gran Fury, *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, 1990, girls and girls and boys and girls and women and men and men kiss, grope, and make out with each other longingly, voluptuously, teasingly, foolishly and awkwardly and bravely in the adamant spirit of gay activist-filmmaker Rosa von Praunheim's anthemic 1979 film *Armee der Liebenden oder Revolte der Perversten* (Army of Lovers or Revolt of the Perverts), which itself fragments an older gay liberation catchphrase (from Rita Mae Brown), "An army of lovers cannot fail." (Von Praunheim's work was shown in conjunction with this show.) Nobody in this pro-sex activist culture wanted to let the prevailing moral censure get anywhere near their daily living with and in sex. In the '80s and '90s, unbelievably, the messiness of love and sex was the deliberate context of their lives.



Gran Fury, *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, 1990.

If there's a missing link, a key to comprehending ACT UP's rousing affect, it could be found in all of the exhibition's video footage—almost like home movies in its familiarity and awkwardness—of all those kids and elders with their bushy fountain hairdos with close sides, the black jeans and high-tops and leather jackets, hugging each other and mugging. Younger versions of people we know. Like old photographs one gets swept up suddenly in a feeling while watching this often raw footage that so many of these cute kids just died.

Much of the challenge today of being in conversation with younger scholars, activists, writers, and artists who weren't present for the events that this show enacted is the struggle to find contemporary analogies. Things make quicker sense if we let America become the Americas. The work dealing with the "disappeared" by artists from Argentina, Chile, and other nations offers a multitude of examples of art's



response to political horror. But it is a poet and fiction writer—the late Roberto Bolaño, who worked for the last ten years of his life with the gun of a potentially fatal illness to his head—whose large and significant political oeuvre seems most analogous to ACT UP's. Bolaño's work is uncanny in its capacity to summon up the sensation of living in a time when one's goofy friends from poetry workshops and art openings might be suddenly yanked out of their beds in the night by the death squad. That's how living in the AIDS crisis felt. Impossibly violent and cruel. Violent (in its isolation) because it was only "true" for part of America. Jaw-dropping for many of those affected because they were people of some privilege, white homosexuals, even middle-class people, who were directly experiencing the monstrosity of their own culture for the first time—collectively. And so they began to make common cause with people who had known that monstrosity longer. Having the right to a collective experience, this show suggests, as does a lot of work we're seeing in the art world today, is the unspoken part of the American dream.

To spend a few hours sitting on a comfy stool in the lower level of the Carpenter Center listening to the Oral History Project was to quietly witness one of the most utopian public-art pieces imaginable. Each interview contains a moment when the speaker acknowledges that participating in the group was the most important thing he or she had ever done. "It was not an interesting political point," Maxine Wolfe said. "It was real." In many ways—in their teaching, writing, activism, and artmaking—those interviewed seemed to feel that ACT UP supplied meaning to everything they had done since, because they had had the experience of working collectively on something "utterly urgent, completely improvised, totally responsive and nimble [and] highly intelligent," said Tom Kalin. "You just kind of grabbed the tail of it and held on."

"It was easy to organize the show," Molesworth said, since everyone "who had anything we needed gave us whatever they had." "ACT UP," she explained, "was way ahead of its time in terms of open sourcing." The work was made, imagined, and distributed collectively, without any ownership or copyright issues. On the other hand, surprisingly—and maybe, when you think about it, a little ecstatically—very little material is still extant out of the enormous output of ACT UP's many individual artists and groups. So much work by these artists virtually disappeared into the very environment that spawned it. Their production was absorbed by the world of their time. In terms of radical distribution, that's an utter coup. Collectivity and relationality were the beautiful natural by-products of ACT UP's moment. The arms holding the signs, the voices chanting together were vastly more significant than either the signs or the words. These abstractions, it seems—collectivity and relationality—exist most truly in the face of a threat to one's being. And people, when that happens, will rise up again and again.

Eileen Myles's book The Inferno/A Poet's Novel will be out in the fall. She lives in New York.

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