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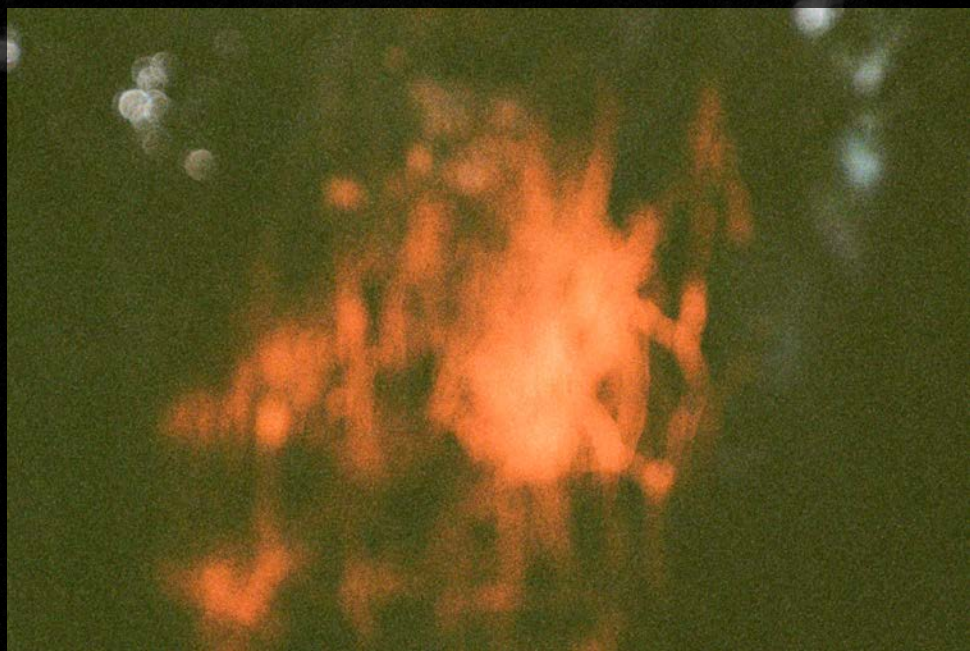
**Tommaso Speretta**

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**From the Logic of the Lure  
to the Force of the Erotic:  
Cruising a Personal AIDS Video  
Archive From a Curatorial  
Perspective**

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# Acknowledgements

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Any work that is the result of our creative impulse, critical thinking, and theoretical analysis is always and inevitably a big challenge; but, most importantly, it is always a debt to the intellectual performances and gestures of others whose commitment offers us guidance and encouragement. I am grateful to all of the authors whose writings have laid the foundations for my research, opened up scenarios I was not expecting, and ultimately changed my conception of academia, the world of ideas, and, most importantly, my self. They have taught me that thinking about identity in terms of coherence is a fiction—an ideological operation that I hope, with rigour and intellectual stubbornness, I have succeeded in calling into question.

Writing this dissertation has been a long and difficult process for me. It has very often been painful, too. My will to continue pursuing such a project has wavered on countless occasions, but it is exactly this sense of defeat, which many of us have no doubt experienced while researching and writing our PhDs, that kept me going. The purpose of a thesis's acknowledgements, however, is to pay gratitude to all those who have made the work imaginable, rather than possible. Instilling in someone the belief that something is possible is a powerful quality possessed by very few. For me, this sense of possibility entailed refusing to cede to anyone else the right to define my own object of desire, how to express it, and ultimately what form to give to it. For this reason, I am grateful to have encountered my supervisor, Dr. Dorothee Richter, whose kindness and support, encouragement and continuous critical council, have been my most important companion in these last years. Thank you, Dorothee, for pushing me to believe that my voice was worth listening to.

Now, reaching the end of this project that has occupied me—my body, my focus, my mind, and my energies—for more than a few years, there are too many individuals deserving special mention for their emotional closeness and support through this period of internal conflicts and divisions. They offered their time listening to my ideas, complaints, and insecurities, or trusted my intuitions and engaged me in ongoing conversations about art, politics, theory, culture, and sexuality. For this reason, I want to thank my big family of friends, who have always been on my side and convinced me not to give it up. In particular, thank you to my dearest Margherita, who like the kindest of sisters welcomed me in your place and made space for me in your heart when

I thought that nothing in life made sense anymore. Thank you Ana Maria, for offering me a space of expression and visibility, and for welcoming me in “your” museum not only as a colleague, but like a friend and a brother.

This PhD project began with a new presence in my life. Whether or not she helped me in taking the decision, after abandoning a PhD in London, to start a new one in Reading and Zurich, I cannot say—I should ask her. Nevertheless, thank you Donata, for having been next to me the last five years and for teaching me acceptance and forgiveness.

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# Introduction

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From its inception, the debate about the cultural meaning of HIV/AIDS was intimately and indissolubly intertwined with the call, urgent as never before, to take action. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s HIV/AIDS activism was not only a locus, one of many, for divorcing queer history from a narrative of marginalisation, deviance, and, shame, therefore of repression and persecution (it is so painfully sad to witness the innumerable attempts of the most recent right-wing turn to reintegrate such a narrative into today's political agendas worldwide); it also represented an intellectual history of wide-ranging and long-protracted debates about the rights and wrongs of the cultural production around and/or in response to the epidemic. These debates centred not only on the outlines and modalities that action should take, but also the possibilities for self-expression when it is oriented towards investigating both the process by which (sexual) identities are forged as well as that complex (yet fragile) and open-ended project that constitutes the movements and the operations of the individual's desiring ecosystem. Widely regarded as if it is exclusively linked to the body, human desire—and the rhythm and the pleasure attached to it—is also a place of struggle. But desire, as I came to experience it, is inhabited in a variety of ways that correspond to the ensemble of roles and relations constituted within it, beyond sexual fantasies. The object-choice of the queer subject (a choice that seems to be made a priori, dictated by a pre-constituted social plot) survives as the primary if not exclusive focus for its identification—i.e. the only term by which to name what such a subject is or is not, and therefore to perpetuate exclusion, marginalisation, and shame. It is tough to accept that, in order to respond to such logic, HIV/AIDS has become and, to a certain extent, remains the metonym for a shameful queer desire and that the attempt to resist it is, once again, performed as a re-narrativisation of its historical outcomes.

I am writing in 2023, from the present vantage point of the history of HIV/AIDS. It is difficult, and at times seemed almost impossible, to detach from the history that I have inherited—a history that I see enacted over and over again in those shadowy emotional hinterlands, at the margins of the social, where the queer subject has been positioned. But writing has indeed been a strategy, if not the device, with which to resist the spectres of this history. In the introductory pages of

*The Screwball Asses*, French theorist Guy Hocquenghem recalls two episodes, of particular interest to me because they both sounded very personal. Meeting around a tape recorder to discuss Hocquenghem's *Homosexual Desire*, a group of men, "professionals in the liberation of homosexual desire," find themselves stuck in the middle of an emotional impasse. The room freezes after one of the participants points to the necessity, before any conversation begins, to address a palpable tension arising from the desire that exists between them but is never acknowledged. The fact is, Hocquenghem writes, that these men share the same philosophical and political interests, but are unable, or more precisely too ashamed, to communicate them through their bodies. "The most stupefying atmosphere of repression of speech and self-censorship immediately settles in," he writes. "A situation of prohibited desire, in the middle of what we might call militants of desire."<sup>1</sup> The second anecdote involves Hocquenghem more directly. At the end of an open meeting organised by members of the Homosexual Front of Revolutionary Action at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, the author is taken by the arm and brought into the dark, humid, and smelly recesses of the university's toilets. "I recoil," he writes, "feeling guilty immediately." The comrade who took him there murmurs in his ear, "What? Are you ashamed?" "Well, yes, I was ashamed," Hocquenghem admits. "But I was ashamed of my shame. It is as if homosexual desire could only be inscribed where repression has inscribed it."<sup>2</sup>

Some years had passed since I re-read passages from Hocquenghem's book. I was on a bus directed to the Dalmatian coast to join some friends with whom I planned to spend the summer holiday. At the time, I was still collecting ideas for how to organise content for this dissertation, and I thought that after immersing myself in Mario Mieli, it would be a good idea to revisit Hocquenghem's writings. I had gone through *Homosexual Desire* already, for the book's focus on the polyvocality and multiplicity of forms of desire reminded me of Mieli's polymorphic drive—porous and boundless—of both love and desire.<sup>3</sup> But I still had not found the time to re-read *The Screwball Asses*, a book I first put my hands on more than a decade ago, when artist Bjarne Melgaard included it in the syllabus of a course we were teaching together. It is a small and short book (fewer than one hundred pages), though not an easy read. At the end of the day, I thought, it will not much affect the

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1 ———— Guy Hocquenghem, *The Screwball Asses* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010), 7.

2 ———— Hocquenghem, *The Screwball Asses*, 8.

3 ———— Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993).



economy of my already heavy backpack. During the seven-hour bus ride I did not pay much attention to what I was reading, and after a few pages I closed the book and decided to start reading volume one from the complete oeuvre of Pier Vittorio Tondelli, a formative passion of my teenage years.<sup>4</sup> At the time I could not have known that Hocquenghem's words would resonate in my mind some days after my arrival at the coast.

As Hocquenghem's *The Screwball Asses* begins with a personal anecdote—a sort of trigger for what he unfolds in the pages to come—so I began writing this dissertation with a specific experience in mind, trying to consider rather than to silence the immateriality, if not the inexpressibility, of my emotions and desires. Like almost everywhere else on the Mediterranean or Aegean coast that summer, the sky was shiny and blue and the sea was clear and green—one day, at sunset, I was taking one last swim when I saw a group of dolphins splashing in front of me. But unlike everywhere else there was a lot of sex on “our” beach. Ten to twelve kilometres away from the village in which we were staying, there was a well-known swingers beach. Not many rumours were circulating in town about that beach, but as one of my friends assured me “everybody knows it.” The bike ride to get there was already an experience in itself: once out of the village and past its outskirts, there was a busy highway to cross before turning left onto a narrow countryside road where old men and women, burnt by the sun, heads covered by either folded scarfs or wide-brimmed straw hats, sat on one side of the road, under colourful beach umbrellas, selling homemade olive oil, honey, and fresh eggs. At the end of the road, past a football field—recently repainted in shocking blue, with the addition of two rows of brand-new, fleshy, green chairs, where young boys played at every time of the day through the unbearable heat—we had to turn left again at a roundabout, into the woods this time, following the contours of a big campground that, as I later came to know, was hosting only naturist guests. Despite the beauty of the surrounding landscape, biking on the gravel road was not easy: the old bikes we had—mine with a baby seat on its back where I stored my bag, filled with food, water, towels, and Tondelli's book—barely made it over a series of small, intersecting, uphill roads, cobbled and furrowed, our eyes and mouths covered in dust. You have to be very committed to get to the beach, unless you decide to go by car, which needless to say makes the whole experience a bit less special. The beach was at the very end of the peninsula, in an area that locals call “the fjord,” for its U-shaped narrow coves, even though

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4 ——— Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Opere. Romanzi, teatro, racconti*, ed. Fulvio Panzeri (Milan: Bompiani, 2000).

it is not technically a proper fjord. It resembled an open hand, with stubby fingers, in between which were amusing bays. At the beginning the beach was pebbled. It started flat (like the last section of an arm before the hand) and continued at an incline on the rocks that circumscribed the peninsula and overlooked the sea. In the middle, the vegetation was dense. The trees were apparently old and big but not very high. I remember how beautiful it was to see the sunlight coming through their branches, tracing abstract shapes on the soiled ground. By day and by night, too, the beach was a cruising spot, for both heterosexual people and gay men. There was no room for homosexual women, inexplicably, even though there was a lot of sexual interaction between women, but not men, on the straight side of the beach. Indeed, though not strictly delineated, there was an invisible line that divided heterosexuals from homosexuals. Straight people had sex on the beach, while gays were hidden inside the woods. Interesting, I thought, that the expression of our desires is still confined to those places that historically have been assigned to us. “Capitalist society manufactures homosexuals just as it produces proletarians, constantly defining its own limits,” argues Hocquenghem. “Homosexuality is a manufactured product of the normal world.”<sup>5</sup> Despite an occasional afternoon walk in the woods, I never entered that dark space at night. I tried, very shyly. But the fear of getting an infection (even though the majority of the men there were surely on PrEP, if their Grindr profiles were to be believed), the idea of making out with men whose histories I couldn’t have access to, though exciting, scared me at first, accompanied by the same feeling of my own shame that Hocquenghem describes.

How could I transform that experience of shame into one of joy, beyond the accomplishment and the pleasure inherent in a sexual act with another man? How could I express and fulfill my most intimate desires for the others without satiating the need to know who and what these others are? In retrospect, I realised that I needed to leave myself behind, an impression that resonated from Leo Bersani’s idea of cruising as an exercise in “impersonal intimacy,” the shock of betraying any existential exigency for an intersubjective recognition, with which I grapple in detail in the concluding chapter of this dissertation. I don’t remember Bersani lecturing about it when Bjarne Melgaard invited him to participate in a weeklong seminar as a guest lecturer for the course we taught together.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, I clearly recall Bersani performing ideas about the question of unnameability in class—an act of

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5 ——— Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, 50.

6 ——— In 2011 I assisted Bjarne Melgaard, then a guest professor at the IUAV University in Venice, in teaching a master’s programme titled “Beyond Death: Viral Discontents and Contemporary Notions about AIDS.”

disappearance that, as with impersonal intimacy, can be both an experiment in relational transformations and an act of resistance to networks of repressive power. Being ashamed of my shame amounted to accepting the position that up to that moment had been historically assigned to me. Concurrently, it meant being afraid of who and what I could have become in the presence of the other—a project of transformation that would have eventually opened up to the unexpected. With this experience in mind, I wanted to account for the materiality of my body, taking a closer look at the corporeal matters that had also—in which way yet I was still unsure—contributed to the “intellectual” perception I had been forming of my self and of my relationship with academia. I could see so many points of convergence between this personal struggle and the practice of researching HIV/AIDS that I could not pretend to ignore it. I was committed to understanding how my failed experience of cruising at the beach could instead become a site of critical agency and to using this emotional investment in my research. The act of betraying the academic mandate I had been assigned could only bring me to territories I had not yet explored.

At the beginning of my academic journey, enrolled in a different university programme, and for not such a short period of time, I stayed within the subject of AIDS activism, focussing on video art and experimental filmmaking, a knowledge gap that needed to be filled. Abandoning my previous PhD programme had been a conscious decision; what was less conscious was the investment, more than the choice, to put aside the main focus of my research and use it in another way, seen through the lenses of a different analytical context. Without realising it, I had somehow come to refuse participation in the ambitious academic struggle to manage and control the subject of HIV/AIDS—“a struggle for intellectual hegemony,” as William Haver writes.<sup>7</sup> What I found was that if I wanted to position myself within the research—an urge that had always encountered the resistance of my previous supervisors—I could not rely on a predetermined approach to the study of HIV/AIDS. I did not feel comfortable moulding my ideas in the shape of the objects of a knowledge that I already had. I took from Haver the notion that (queer) research is a form of interruption and never of reproduction. Perhaps this is the reason why I kept losing track of the subject, too vast and too painful, which only later I realised I was so resistant to disciplining that this resistance itself became, metaphorically, the subject matter.

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7 ——— William Haver, “Queer Research: How to Practise Invention to the Brink of Intelligibility,” in *The Eight Technologies of Otherness*, ed. Sue Golding (London: Routledge, 1997), 278–79.

Thinking about the immateriality (but also the fragility) of my self inevitably moved me into other domains. Looking beyond the self and its boundaries seemed a natural move to make, for it appeared quite central to the knowledge I was trying to build—perhaps more for myself than for my eventual academic audience. My new project was very much focussed on the limits of intelligibility reflected through my personal experience of the unthinkability of HIV/AIDS as the object of my inquiry. The specific context of the PhD programme in Practice in Curating contributed to freeing me from certain sedimented ideological constraints. On the one hand, I was granted the possibility of positioning myself within the research and of not feeling ashamed to find joy in “queering” it; on the other hand, regular reading sessions and meetings with a group of peers whose research interests spanned a broad spectrum helped me to visualise intellectual scenarios I had not considered before. My ideas, inevitably, had been the result of a process of contamination and cross-pollination. My research originally centred on a systematic study of ten years of HIV/AIDS experimental filmmaking in the US. The objective was to compile the most extensive map to prove how counter-representations of AIDS objected, successfully, to society’s misperception of the epidemic and the (primarily) queer subject associated with it. The theoretical framework was grounded in the history of HIV/AIDS activism and its relationships with the visual arts. The geography circumscribing the research was also delimited by the historical trajectory defined by HIV/AIDS activism and the conceptualisation of AIDS as an American disease. Video, film, and television were among the media used by artists at the peak of the epidemic to present counter-discursive narratives of the AIDS crisis, and therefore to resist and interfere with the political status quo. As a reaction to the dominant “gay plague” narrative of the 1980s, artists and activists produced an overabundance of cultural work, resulting from a sense of emergency combined with an urgent need for critical analysis. Because of new technological advancements and new theory introduced within the field of AIDS activism, tactics improved in the 1990s. New forms of alignment between history and cultural production occurred and affected the practice, production, exhibition, and distribution of the moving image, but not only. While the social aesthetics paradigm of artistic AIDS activism from the early 1980s remained in place, it developed into a plurality of diverse but still oppositional practices. Cultural studies on the history of AIDS have produced literature unpacking how AIDS was theorised and put into discourse historically.

Anchored to this specific context, my initial research aimed at bringing to the surface lesser-known independent video works produced during and in response to the peak of the epidemic and rarely seen thereafter. Its purpose was not merely to preserve history, although this too is essential—needless to say, forgetfulness is a form of censorship. Rather, it was to embed these works in a different historical narrative and create a context—spatial, temporal, and theoretical—for unexpected relations to emerge, responding to the project of further exploring how and why video makers succeeded in renegotiating the largely accepted social and cultural meaning of AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s. Furthermore, it was imperative to highlight the speculative and conflictual nature of the majority of AIDS videos produced during the earliest phase of the epidemic as well as some of their successors. The AIDS video subculture gave voice to a multiplicity of dissenting positions and propositions, not always the expression of an absolute negation and refusal of societal power structures. By offering tangible possibilities or mechanisms for influencing the discursive space in which society represented AIDS, they offered video as a toolbox for effecting change. One major contribution of my research was meant to be an annotated videography, comprising a wide selection of videos produced mostly in New York in response to the American government and society's neglect in acknowledging the social and political effects of AIDS. The research and work conducted by filmmaker Jim Hubbard over the past twenty-five years was the foundational impetus for this videography. The question Hubbard faced of how to make the extensive body of AIDS videotapes accessible and, more importantly, relevant to a larger public is still a problematic one. Hosted by the New York Public Library, the collection of AIDS videos that Hubbard collated between 1985 and 2000 exists as a long list of titles. It is still missing a systematic study of how independent AIDS filmmaking engaged in a critical dialogue with society, and of how artists, activists, and practitioners thereby identified themselves in relation to the generalised image of AIDS, co-opting it as a signifying entity. Acting as both an archaeologist and a *bricoleur*, I glued together pieces of a puzzle that ultimately had to provide an overview of ten years of independent AIDS video making in the US but also, and most importantly, had to offer a database for researchers and curators to use without any historical and/or methodological constraints. The key point was to understand how AIDS videos can contribute to critical discourses other than those strictly related to the historical contingencies of AIDS.

The videography I created—which I called the “AIDS video archive”—includes more than one hundred videos, ranging from experimental film to video art, activist propaganda cinema, educational videos, and documentaries. Because of the conditions in which it was compiled, this archive is very much personal, situated, and inevitably incomplete. Each video and/or film is accompanied by a description and a critical annotation and is either put into a factual-historical context or in relation to other material (mostly theoretical) in the videography. The vast scope of this AIDS video archive shows not only the plurality and diversity of the collected material but also the existing connections between theory and practice in the production of the independent AIDS moving image. The principle guiding the selection was often informed by theories of dissensus and agonistic pluralism. The selected videos were intended as both political and aesthetic practices, all with a potentially high transformative power. By embracing different modes of production and levels of experimentation, and by openly addressing different communities, the selected works stand out for their contribution to fragmenting the mainstream discourse on AIDS as well as fostering a pluriversal rather than universal reading of AIDS. The videography acknowledges the diversity of this selection without dividing it into categories. The focus was on the discursive strategies deployed by AIDS independent videos in their conflictual relationship with society rather than on genre distinctions. Through a study of exhibitions, film festivals, and archives—not only in the US—combined with oral histories, I collected data for a comparative analysis highlighting how artists outside the US incorporated the AIDS video activism initiated by their American counterparts in their practices. Hence the decision to include in the videography a selection of videos produced in UK and to contextualise the research within the academic institution where I was conducting my PhD at the time. Due to the parallels between the conservative politics of the Reagan administration in the US and the Thatcher government in the UK—as well as the early presence of infrastructures of support for creative work—British artists (even then, only a few) were the first in Europe to include the AIDS crisis as a subject in their works. The disparity between the number of videos produced in the UK and the US seemed to confirm the historical circumstance according to which AIDS was initially conceptualised as an American disease. By including the UK, however, I attempted to transform the videography into a platform and perhaps set a method with which to explore other geographies of AIDS video practices from the 1980s onwards. I recognised that many researchers nowadays, wrestling with the lack of visibility given to twenty-first century AIDS culture, are focussing on the ongoing contemporary artistic response to HIV/AIDS

outside the geographical restrictions imposed by history. It is also true that AIDS has too often been mistakenly presented as an urban, middle-class, white, and gay-centric issue. The need to revisit this history and keep an eye on the present is crucial. Nevertheless, my original aims and objectives were to understand if and how the well-known historical nuances of the epidemic could still be relevant to investigate when inserted into a different analytical context. Is it possible to imagine, I asked myself, re-activating the archive by taking into account new intellectual trajectories and new modalities for conducting research and exhibiting the resulting narratives? The way in which the ongoing epidemic is often investigated, never detached from the history by which it has been excluded, I argue, might run the risk of perpetuating a nostalgic approach to the study of the culture and history of HIV/AIDS. I was also struggling with the effort to push the use of the archive beyond the boundaries of memory, history, and preservation.

My failure to fill in the gap separating me from the history of HIV/AIDS, which I had inherited but not experienced first hand, alongside the dissatisfaction that came with it, made space for new possibilities. When I decided to quit academia three years into my research and, a few months later, to apply to the PhD programme in Practice in Curating, I inevitably entered a new state of mind and made new encounters. This transition also coincided with new experiments in psychoanalysis as well as a new school of thought, the psychosynthesis of Roberto Assagioli, with which I came into contact almost by chance. I did not entirely abandon the work I had done and the material I had collected up to that point, but this body of research showed me a different trajectory that I could take and served a different scope. As the title of this dissertation implies, the writings of John Paul Ricco and William Haver have been guiding me since the very beginning of my new PhD project. The literary work of artist David Wojnarowicz has also been a necessary companion. These mentoring figures are worth mentioning. Among other things, their writings have pointed me to the necessity, rather than just the possibility, of welcoming the palpable tensions of desire as well as the conflictual relationship with the history of my queer subjectivity. At the same time, they have made me realise that the bodily expression of my ideas and intuitions is an equally relevant modality of knowledge production, and that it can be purposeful, and concurrently disturbing, even more so when applied in an academic environment.

The preface to Ricco's *The Logic of the Lure* starts with a series of "what if" questions, one of which struck me in particular and has not left me since then. "What if," Ricco asks, "we were to substitute something like a cruising ground for an epistemological ground?"<sup>8</sup> The Dalmatian beach suddenly came to mind. What if, I asked myself, I was to transform the epistemological ground into a cruising ground? So formulated, the question required embracing different modes of experiencing and analysing the object of my inquiry, and ultimately sublimating my shame and fear into the practice of both researching and writing. Thinking of epistemology in terms of cruising also meant entering a space of no resolution, thus of no definitive answers. In parallel, it echoed Bersani's idea of betraying the need for an intersubjective recognition and making space for new modalities of relating to the material of my research—a relationality that, analysed against Haver's idea of the erotic, always presupposes fragmentation and interruption rather than continuation, and always entails a loss of the self rather than its re-composition into an unitary entity, a transient state of being with no beginning and no end. "What if we neither began nor ended with identity?" reads the first line from Ricco's preface.<sup>9</sup>

The new PhD project began where the previous had been left. The AIDS video archive was the starting point from which I outlined a brief history of AIDS experimental filmmaking in the US to introduce this dissertation. It was necessary to write this history, not in order to reaffirm its hegemony, but on the contrary to recontextualise it from an intertextual perspective, momentarily cast doubt on the historical mandate to take action that works created amid the AIDS epidemic have often been required to serve. The archive now exists only as a ghost, whose traces are hidden between the lines of the entire thesis, almost to simulate the presence of some lovers with whom I had affairs. This notion calls to mind the epigraph of Renaud Camus's book *Tricks*. It is an excerpt from a poem written by Constantine P. Cavafy in 1911 and published in 1917. Translations of the poem vary slightly across several editions. I prefer the one used by Camus (though I have been unable to source where it originated from, I suppose it is most likely a translation from French by Richard Howard, the translator of *Tricks*). "Figures of love, as my poetry desired them...furtively encountered in the nights when I was young," the excerpt reads.<sup>10</sup> Inspired by Cavafy, I have looked at the moving images from my personal AIDS

8 ——— John P. Ricco, *The Logic of the Lure* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), xix.

9 ——— Ricco, *The Logic of the Lure*, xix.

10 ——— Renaud Camus, *Tricks* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981).



video archive as figures of both love and lust that I have encountered along my path. I have selected six of them and included them in the first chapter (i.e. Part I) as momentary interruptions (I called them “intermissions”) to disrupt the work of the history of HIV/AIDS as well as of AIDS experimental filmmaking and to blur the coordinates that have often risked reducing the comprehensibility of HIV/AIDS to its historical understanding. I am not taking an anti-historical position, but affirming instead the possibility of relying on epistemological experiences other than history and grounded in a more personal, but still scholarly significant, and queer-oriented analysis of HIV/AIDS. The six film intermissions also represent a metaphor of my continuous movement between the personal and the theoretical in an attempt to make sense of each one via the other. They recall my subjective involvement with the act of cruising the AIDS video archive, mirrored in the experience of the readers, who also move through a fragmented space in which they are always in transition between the inside and the outside, forever at the point of departure and never at the point of arrival. This idea was inspired by the figure of Franny, and her revisited oneiric vision, from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*;<sup>11</sup> by the intertwined energies which Roland Barthes names “studium” and “punctum” in *Camera Lucida*;<sup>12</sup> by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s encounter with the shamanic leader Uma Adang, an experience in which the interstitial spaces between the theoretical and the emotional are recollected by the author via personal commentaries that continuously, from beginning to end, fragment her essay “From the Margins”;<sup>13</sup> by the non-linearity of thought and the impossibility to think the impossible that Jacques Derrida reclaims in *Glas* through an amalgam of footnotes, marginalia, citations, and personal reflections that are indistinguishable from one another.<sup>14</sup> Both the conceptual and graphic structure of *Glas* is also the original source around which this dissertation is shaped. In order to mirror its structure, but without renouncing readability, each chapter of this thesis is dense in footnotes, some of which were originally meant to be side comments through which I wanted to understand how theory interacted with my emotional posture and affected my personal thinking. Footnotes originally intended as side comments are distinguished from bibliographic footnotes in this final version of the dissertation by means of a change

11 ——— Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

12 ——— Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang Pub, 1981).

13 ——— Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, “From the Margins,” *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (August 1994): 279-97.

14 ——— Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

in typeface. Furthermore, each chapter—except one—begins with a preface, a prologue, or both, in which I either share how I conducted the analysis that supports the chapter and why I did it, or I foreground an embodied mode of researching and writing, integrated with theory and autobiography, that pays tribute to the self-reflexive and performative ethics of auto-theory, of which I also make use. At the same time, such a structure is an attempt to practise the methodological promiscuity that sustains the research and that I write about in the concluding chapter (i.e. Part IV).

The second chapter (i.e. Part II) resulted from the experience of viewing Andre Burke's 1987 video *A*, after which it is titled. This experience was transformative for my research, contributing to it an understanding that the uncontainability of AIDS, along with the inadequacy of language to define it, is the fundamental attraction of AIDS as a subject of theoretical and artistic inquiry. Rather than fight to define the indefinable, I embraced the provisionality of the subject of my research. In this short film, Burke hints, as a provocation, at the hopelessness of getting rid of AIDS. For Burke, this impossibility is not only attributable to the almost nonexistent scientific and medical research advancements of the 1980s or the disinterest of local authorities to investing funds towards finding a cure. It is also the result of the inability of AIDS to leave the domain of discourse, another space of signification where AIDS ceases to signify. This chapter is not introduced by a prologue or a preface but is fragmented instead into short subchapters, each of which could function as an autonomous preface (each subchapter is indeed titled "movement"), to simulate the tension and the sense of anxiety that characterises the protagonist of *A* and, concurrently, the personal dissatisfaction accompanying the painful realisation of an irresolvable conflict between the ability to conceive AIDS and the impossibility of either theorising or representing it. The conceptual and methodological contributions that have contaminated the research include the Saussurian-inspired mechanisms of signification debated by Paula A. Treichler,<sup>15</sup> combined with Lee Edelman's theory of metaphorical substitution;<sup>16</sup> the Kantian mathematical sublime seen through the lens of Jean-François Lyotard's investigation into the

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15 ——— Paula A. Treichler, "AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification," in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 31–70.

16 ——— Lee Edelman, "The Plague of Discourse," in *Homographies: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 79–92

postmodern;<sup>17</sup> Thomas E. Yingling's experience of vertigo, similar to the feeling of being lost in a forest that I associate with the vastness of AIDS and its literature;<sup>18</sup> and Alexander Garcia Duttman's call to look for a supplement, or excess, of "impertinence" to face the question of AIDS, an idea he borrows and develops from Roland Barthes.<sup>19</sup> This chapter does not resolve the attraction of AIDS, nor the incapacity of the human mind to accept the incomprehensible. However, the metaphorical journey exemplified by the act of cruising the history of AIDS and my personal AIDS video archive culminates in the joyfulness of leaving my self behind, an experience that strongly resonates with Franny's dream. The perpetual motion of Franny's nomadic journey is epitomised by how the dream concludes. "Never again," Franny states, "will I say, 'I am this, I am that.'"<sup>20</sup>

Chapters three and four (i.e. Part III) put theory into practice, by means of a comparative analysis of two different curatorial arguments and methodologies as well as approaches to the representation of HIV/AIDS. Invited in 2018 by Henie Onstad Kunstsenter in Oslo to conduct research in their exhibition archive, I looked into the history of *Tema: AIDS*, an exhibition organised in 1993 by museum director Per Hovdenakk and NY-based independent curator Kim Levin. The museum did not grant external researchers access to the archive until 2015, when the curatorial department initiated the curatorial research residency "A Pendaflex for the Future," in which I took part. No one had previously expressed interest in *Tema: AIDS*, a large-scale exhibition devoted to the politics of HIV/AIDS, mostly from an American-centred and activist-oriented perspective. The show did not receive international acclaim, despite being the most comprehensive exhibition on the topic of HIV/AIDS organised in Europe in the 1990s, the main reason being, I argue, the peripheral artistic position of Norway at the time—a form of invisible yet widely accepted censorship that confirms the logics of inclusion and exclusion that the art world continues to perpetuate. This chapter remains, as of this writing, the only existing essay on *Tema: AIDS*. It reconstructs a precise description and analysis of the exhibition that I have contextualised within the art-historical discourse on HIV/AIDS, both in Europe and in the US. In chapter four I discuss the

17 ——— Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

18 ——— Thomas Yingling, "AIDS in America: Postmodern Governance, Identity, and Experience," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 291-310

19 ——— Alexander G. Düttman, *At Odds with AIDS: Thinking and Talking about a Virus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

20 ——— Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 29.

research methodology for *Every Moment Counts—AIDS and its Feelings*, an exhibition I curated in 2022 at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter with the support of Ana Maria Bresciani, at the invitation of Director Tone Hansen to organise an updated version of *Tema: AIDS*. My original idea was to rethink the 1993 exhibition in light of my personal AIDS video archive, giving the moving image a platform through which new affiliations among HIV/AIDS, history, political activism, the visual arts, and experimental filmmaking could eventually emerge. In *Tema: AIDS*, a selection of videos was shown in a separate space of the museum, as an educational appendix to the exhibition. They were thus not meant to contribute directly to the discourse and argument the exhibition was trying to move forward. I soon abandoned the project of contaminating the 1993 exhibition with a series of videos from my archive in favour of a more fluid but still heavily theoretical curatorial approach, which allowed me to experiment with ideas emerging from my research and writing conducted within the framework of the PhD programme in Practice in Curating. I almost betrayed any methodology of the “re-” (rethinking, reframing, revisiting) and together with it the ambition to grant myself a place in the historical discourse on HIV/AIDS. Fully embracing my position at the margins of such a discourse—both historically and curatorially—I chose to give voice to the personal experience of cruising the history of HIV/AIDS and my AIDS video archive, which arose from my failure to fill a historical gap in the attempt to connect with and be part of a larger community of AIDS cultural “experts,” with whom I sensed I had to align and whose contributions to the discourse on HIV/AIDS I felt I had to honour. Furthermore, I attempted to practise a “promiscuous methodology,” intended primarily as an interruption of both the widely recognised historical narrative on the AIDS epidemic and the disciplinary boundaries dictating who is and who is not entitled to speak and write about AIDS and its discourse. My objective was not to perpetuate any salvational project through the exhibition and the use of the archive. The show, in my intention, had to remain “unresolved,” in keeping with the fundamental linguistic-representational unsolvability of AIDS, which I write about in part two. Fully aware of the necessity of giving space to the “ongoingness” of the AIDS epidemic, and fully knowledgeable about the work of many peers who ground their research in the present in order to see what has been left out from the past, I decided to focus on the actuality of AIDS—a sort of “creative force” inherent in the subject of AIDS that, if liberated from the impulse to make sense of AIDS by inscribing it in history, can make space for the expression of other intellectual possibilities and scholarly scenarios offered by the study of AIDS and its visual representations. The chapter is divided in six sections,

each representing an argument I tried to build through the exhibition and the use of a promiscuous curatorial methodology. In “Cruising the Archive,” I briefly unveil the contribution of queer theory to the curation of *Every Moment Counts* and its impact on my research process. By foregrounding an act of interruption rather than of preservation, I resisted a systematic mapping of the representation of AIDS and instead explored the potential of no longer looking for the definitive object with which to theorise AIDS. Pursuing a promiscuous methodology also meant recognising a space of uncertainty underlying the state of permanent unrecognisability of AIDS. In the second subchapter, titled “Historical Coincidence,” I briefly analyse the implications of the historical contexts in which AIDS has been discursivised as well as in relation to the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, immediately after which this chapter was first drafted. In the following section, “Actual-ity,” I examine the risk of using the archive as a repository for a historical truth in light of which AIDS becomes an issue that needs to be either solved or repaired. Here I emphasise the decision not to “give AIDS a face” and to understand instead how the representational challenges posed by AIDS can help us imagine a history whose discontinuous circumstances force us to accept that there is no good versus bad way of seeing, thinking, writing, or existing with AIDS. In “Decentring” I acknowledge the urgency of removing AIDS from its American-centred historiography and introducing other forms of visualising AIDS that both diversify and, most importantly, fragment the visual leadership of the representation of HIV/AIDS. In “Holistic Reverberations” I unpack to the long-running conflict between the supposed “right” and “wrong” modalities of producing cultural work in response to the epidemic—a tension between the power of the indexical image to generate a revelatory truth on the one hand and, on the other, the self-conscious desire to indulge in an action that is more imaginative and less agitative but still addresses the critical impulse needed to face the question of AIDS. *Every Moment Counts* tackles this conflict through a choreography that is not only open and fluid but also permeable and in its spatial configuration—where there is no beginning or end—resembles the experience of entering a cruising space. In the last section, “Exhibition as Leverage,” I explore the possibility that the principle of curatorial promiscuity—one that requires surpassing the logic of pure representation—might introduce elements of divergence, or disruption, that eventually open a door to the direction of the not yet known. At the same time, I claim the force of the spiritual and the emotional—as well as that of the philosophical contemplation of my queer subjectivity and my critical affect in relation to the subject of my investigation—as sources from which to develop new research methodologies.

The concluding chapter (i.e. Part IV) is entirely dedicated to ideas sustaining the promiscuous methodology. The use of auto-theory is more prominent in this section. Following similar theoretical premises, the introduction and conclusion somehow contain the writing and in so doing give to the overall thesis a more conventional academic structure. At the same time, they outline the scholarly excursus through which I tried to queer both the research and the academic objective of contributing to original knowledge. The trauma inherited by the history of my queer subjectivity resurfaces in the concluding chapter in the form of a reversed plot, in which the traumatic experience becomes a joyful realisation of performing a different version of myself, not only in the context of my erotic drive and desires but also, and most importantly, in relation to academia. Each subchapter in this section corresponds to an imaginative theatrical act, acknowledging the contribution of auto-theory but also identifying the steps of my personal journey into the research. In writing this chapter I have been heavily influenced, once again, by William Haver. In particular, I followed his idea about “queer poiesis” as a tool of “unworking” to reveal the nostalgic fantasies around which “the cultural domus,” as he calls it, is shaped. Haver resists the idea that the production of knowledge, as the result of a thinking process, corresponds to the production of concepts and objects to be known, and therefore to be managed and controlled, with the scope of providing a better interpretation of the world. To the contrary, he argues in favour of a surplus of knowledge, meaning the uncontainable (and for this reason disobedient) proliferation of forces that are expelled from the research as excess. “What if,” Haver asks, “queer research actively refused to forget that perversity, that chaos of pleasures and affects, that anonymic existential exigency which has been the occasion of its emergence?”<sup>21</sup> The idea of a methodology that claims to be promiscuous is my attempt at a response to Haver’s question, to create my queer poiesis starting from the attraction of AIDS as a subject and the possibility it offered to explore the modalities by which I define myself in relation to the object of my desire. Informed by Michel Foucault, I tried to understand how the “affective and relational virtualities” I was experiencing in my non-academic life could offer a different analytical approach to the study of HIV/AIDS as well as my relationship to it. My personal unbecoming—the act of rejecting any necessary condition of belonging without renouncing the possibility to belong, the project of unforming my self in relation to the selves of others—has been mirrored, through the oneiric fantasy of an experience of cruising, in the process of researching and writing about

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21 ——— Haver, “Queer Research,” 278–79.

AIDS. “One writes to become someone other than one is,” writes Foucault. “Finally there is an attempt at modifying one’s way of being through the act of writing.”<sup>22</sup> I imagine this transformative journey through the lens of my own version of the schizo-dream that Franny is told to recount in Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*. The degree of uncertainty that this dream has brought about has not only contributed to making the failure of the effort to search for the truth of AIDS less definitive; on the contrary, by making this failure even more necessary, it left space for the possibility of a methodological approach that pretended to interrupt rather than to reproduce, and alongside it a field of potentiality that I had not considered before. The real salvational project has not been redeeming AIDS from its history, but indulging in a thinking process defined, as the experience of cruising often is, by a departure without a destination, in which the point of arrival dovetails with yet another point of departure.

To better investigate what, in this precise theoretical context, a promiscuous methodology entails, I looked for several interlocutors and ended up choosing two. The first is Natalie Loveless, who in her book-manifesto for research creation advocates for the use of a polyamorous methodology, one that she calls “polydisciplinamory”.<sup>23</sup> She draws the basis for her ideas from Deric Shannon and Abbey Willis’s theoretical polyamory, which declares an indissoluble connection between the way we love and the way we create knowledge.<sup>24</sup> Loveless grounds her argument in certain queer theory to expose the “monom-arital” conventions of academic research, but, I argue, she runs the risk of reintegrating her discourse into heteronormative logics that dictate what is acceptable and what is not. The attempt to institutionalise polydisciplinamory—by means of a strong commitment to honesty, fidelity, accountability, and truth—does not, in my opinion, fully take into account the potential of queer research to be a negativising force that resists, if not rejects, social expectations, i.e. the “cultural domus” that, according to my reading of Haver, makes the unacceptable acceptable and the unreadable readable. The idea of a promiscuous sex life, hence of a promiscuous methodological approach to academic research, is for Loveless highly problematic, for according to

22 ——— Michel Foucault, *Death and the Labyrinth: The World Of Raymond Rous-  
sel* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), 184.

23 ——— Natalie Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World: a Manifesto  
for Research-Creation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press,  
2019).

24 ——— Deric Shannon and Abbey Willis, “Theoretical polyamory: Some  
thoughts on loving, thinking, and queering anarchism,” *Sexualities* 13  
no. 4 (August 2010): 433–43.

her it disavows the ethical responsibility that only the consensus to be committed can grant. Only by committing to one or more sexual partners, she argues, can sexual and emotional intimacy exist. A promiscuous methodology attempts, instead, to experiment with the possibility of new academic vocabularies that emerge after the need to recognise one's self in the self of the other has been suspended, when all relations have been transcended. A promiscuous methodology does not require the encounter with the other to depart from the given assumption that the other is "just" a knowable entity as we are; in so doing it does not prioritise knowing over being. In other words, following Leo Bersani's argument about impersonal intimacy, a promiscuous methodology is not all about the necessity of knowing the other, of a personalising investment in the other—nor is it about the ethical need to establish a relationship of mutual transparency and commitment, one that is inevitably ruled by a pre-determined idea of how we perform honesty in a relationship—as much as it is about knowing what we are becoming in the presence of the other.<sup>25</sup> As an experiment in relational transformation, a promiscuous methodology is a provocation that can open up to scholarly scenarios with the evolving potential, as Haver's queer poesis advocates, to trace a plurality of directions other than conceptualising and objectifying the world. By abandoning any social necessity to be legitimised—here the negativising force of queer enters the picture—the subject who performs such a promiscuity is always on the move, in a state of unfinished flux and perpetual play. For this reason, it never achieves historical closure, i.e. truth. In this sense, a promiscuous methodology rejects any ambition to make the intolerable tolerable, unlike Loveless's appeal to commitment and accountability. For it is in their nomadic state of constant becoming and unbecoming, forming and unforming, that promiscuous lovers can test the potential of thought to be a site of resistance.

The second interlocutor I chose is Sam, a recent lover who one evening in bed started asking me about love. The conversation unfolds as a rehearsal of the key theoretical strings and traditions from which the idea for a promiscuous methodology emerged. In the epilogue adapted from this night spent with Sam, autobiography, fiction, and theory intertwine. I try to explain to him how the temporary dissolution of any notion of my pre-constituted self in my encounter with the self of another is something that needs to be celebrated rather than condemned. It is an experience of love but one that is unrelated to the need to redeem or restore identity. By deserting any condition of belonging that would force us to name one another, we can make

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25 ——— Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008).



experience out of a transformative, though risky and perhaps dangerous, project. But the a-temporality of this form of love—i.e. the emotional alertness and the momentary exchange in accordance with another human being—is exactly the logic of its attraction. Franny's vertiginous experience of her marginality, I think, is also very much about this. When transposed into the epistemological field, such a concept might eventually create a dissonance—one that is worth experimenting with, for it offers new possibilities of establishing relational affinities, or virtualities, between knowing and being, in that process of thinking and researching that, as a promiscuous methodology intends it, is not only about what we end up knowing (the concepts) but what we end up becoming (evolving yet anonymous and contingent multiple singularities). Freeing ourselves from the need for any intersubjective recognition—both Sam and I can fully relate to this—is a shocking experience and thus, contrary to what Loveless presumes, requires a certain degree of commitment. In order to clarify how this relates to love, I invoke Mario Mieli. A concept that very much resonates with Bersani's impersonal intimacy, the perverse polymorphous potential of love—porous, boundless, disjunctive, evasive—is, according to Mieli, surely the most preferred modality for a queer subject to resist the heteronormative values of capitalism and thus establish the foundations for a different model of society. This love isn't anything more than the discovery of the original communicative function of our bodies—obliterated by the rules that govern us—before the necessity of establishing an identity prevails. In it we take the conscious risk, in the presence of the otherness of the other, to betray the constituted subjects we—none excluded—always and already are. But, I think, it is exactly this surplus of knowledge that I as a queer subject want to look at. For, hopefully, only by affirming the power of my alterity, or marginality, can I at last find the joy to not be ashamed.



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## PART 1

# History Has Kept Me Awake, Not only at Night: A Brief (American) History of Independent AIDS Filmmaking<sup>1</sup>

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- 1 ——— The title pays tribute to an unpublished poem (“History keeps me awake some nights”) by artist and writer David Wojnarowicz. According to Hugh Ryan, the artist presumably wrote it for a poetry workshop he attended with poet Bill Zavatsky. The title recurs in both an unreCORDED song for the band 3 Teens Kill 4, of which Wojnarowicz was a member, and, slightly adjusted (by replacing “some nights” with “at night”), in a well-known painting after which the 2018 retrospective at the Whitney Museum in New York was named.
- Hugh Ryan. “Never Not a Poet. David Wojnarowicz is remembered as an AIDS activist and a visual artist. What about his poetry?” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/150527/never-not-a-poet>
- The poem has been reproduced for the first time to my knowledge, with permission from the Estate of David Wojnarowicz, in *Hold It Against Me* by Jennifer Doyle. It reads as follows: “On the floor of the unused room / there’s a scattering of photographs / of both of us walking in the sands / of a weekends wintered beach / through the light of late skies / wanting time and history to forget us / though we have such fears of not existing / we fuck constantly so as not to forget ourselves / this burning hunger for life not death / close up the world is so terrible and sad / that we invent small fictions of loving / on the edges of those cold oceans / while the cities lose themselves in evening / and stray dogs patrol forgotten streets / we have come out of our mothers bellies / to find ourselves at the end of ropes / strange how this sleep overtakes us / how we move sideways as our love dies / how you were once some guy / who knew neither my present or my past / whose eyes and hands worked in silence / as you turned me over and over / in the dim light of dusk / removing articles of clothing / watch these wet bodies on the sheets / watch how they slowly become history.”
- Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 145.

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## Preface

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The following essay has been developed in different stages and alongside the ongoing research I conducted in building my personal AIDS video archive. Written as a collection of annotations on the early history of the epidemic in the United States, it emerged in concomitance with the experience of watching more than one hundred independent videos and films about HIV/AIDS, the majority of which were produced in New York and distributed primarily in the United States. Artists and filmmakers have not always produced their work in response to specific events. Nevertheless, in watching this wide array of audiovisual material, I initially attempted to find traces of the social and cultural context in which or in response to which their works had been made. My original plan was to develop the most extensive American-centred annotated videography of the AIDS epidemic to date, realised by means of a symbolic performative gesture where I would oscillate between history and moving image—a project that would help other researchers access material that is often difficult to obtain and critically situate it in the specific context(s) of its production. Given the volume of independent AIDS moving images, the research had to be both spatially and temporally contained. Of the many geographies of HIV/AIDS, I took into account how the epidemic was staged in the Western world during the first decade of the crisis, namely between 1982 and 1992—although the focus of my archive is New York and to a lesser extent London, the narrativisation of the epidemic was consistent across more or less all areas of the Americas and Europe<sup>2</sup>. This scope should not be taken to mean that HIV/AIDS did not exist before and after the decade at the core of my research and the text that follows; recent scientific studies have suggested that the HIV virus started to circulate among humans in Africa at the end of the 1950s, in

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2 ——— Despite the same punitive and sexualised discourse within which AIDS was signified, the system of health and prevention infrastructures and AIDS service organisations in place since the beginning of the epidemic in countries such as Britain and Canada was for a long time unthinkable in the United States. The absence of socialised medicine in the US might be one reason for the explosion of alternative AIDS moving image and AIDS media activism, made not only as a counter-response to the mainstream mass media representation of the epidemic, but also and most importantly as a life-saving reaction to the specific American social and medical context.

the United States at the end of the 1960s, and in Europe in the mid-1970s. Historical conventions, the validity of which needs to be discussed, have set 1981 as the starting date of the epidemic. The fact remains that in the early 1980s AIDS began to enter the domain of literature, the visual arts, and academia. Furthermore, even though the scale of the epidemic has in many non-Western societies been much greater and more devastating than in American and European ones, material produced in this specific time frame outside the European–American axis is scarce and its accessibility limited in comparison to an explosion of critical literary and artistic work in the Western world that reached its peak in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Only very recently have researchers started to critique the “colonial heritage” of the HIV/AIDS historiography—as too white, gay, American, and middle-class.

Especially in the United States, the queer studies that were emerging at the beginning of the 1990s were soon assimilated and later institutionalised within the academic sphere. The practice of writing and producing work about HIV/AIDS has contributed to redefining gender and sexuality, and lately to relocating them at the centre of a theoretical space where new alliances and alternative relations to those advocated by the hegemonic structures of Western societies have been outlined. Furthermore, because of the militant cultural work created in response to AIDS, local administrations had to openly admit the political agency of the lesbian and gay movement and to deal as never before with the demands of several queer communities. Independent AIDS moving images have in part contributed to this process. Nevertheless, the activist rhetoric has often been taken as the primary and almost exclusive site of legitimisation for discussing, researching, thinking, and writing about AIDS. I am not underestimating the contribution of AIDS activism; to the contrary I am trying to account for the existing relations between different levels of cultural production about and around HIV/AIDS. By cruising the AIDS video archive, I have realised that the zones of contact among different cultural, social, and political identities (as well as artistic positions) are many, and it is likely in these interstices that analytical inquiry should take place. Along these interstitial fractures (which offer a glimpse of something yet to come) the moving image very often betrays its call to account for a piece of human history that went wrong and instead becomes a place where artists confront and negotiate their own subject positions beyond the historical traits attributed to AIDS and the traces that the history of AIDS has inscribed upon their (identitarian) bodies. I am not silently advocating for a de-historicisation of the history of AIDS, though I am not standing against it either; I am implying that looking at elements often overshadowed by history and acknowledging the

instinctual and affective trajectories that artists took to face the tragedy of AIDS is a worthy intellectual project and as such it needs to be taken into consideration, mainly for a younger generation, like the one to which I belong, that is temporally distant and removed from the peak of the AIDS epidemic. It is probably not through a systematic historical study of the independent AIDS moving image or in the space of a film marathon that this “historical distance” can be recovered and thus repaired, thereby unearthing an answer to the ontological question about the what and why of AIDS. In the intersubjective process (and the ‘I’ that is currently writing is one of the subjects involved) that occurs in these liminal spaces, affection (which may also be desire) becomes a force that challenges, transforms, interrupts, and realigns. The etymological root, from which emotion derives, implies per se a movement from the inside to the outside; inevitably this agitative gesture involves an action, whose final outcome always (in one way or another) entails some degree of transformation. Thereby, rather than struggling to fully make sense of AIDS, other questions might arise: What sort of new and unexplored relationships can we invent, forge, or modify to deal with AIDS? How can our identities—cultural, sexual, racial, or political—serve as a project through which to enter a different intellectual space and partake in this creative process of invention and/or revolution? Can this potential traction initiate other modes of relation to the worlds of AIDS and the politics of its representation? In taking a bit of distance from the lesson that history teaches, there would be no end to the process of writing AIDS; to the contrary we would experience a process that is in a continuous state of formation, one that at times cannot even be written because it still has yet to be imagined.

The moving image has indeed often been used as a tool to resist the mechanism of control perpetuated by mass media and the state, serving a variety of purposes, whether instructional, educational, or propagandistic; nevertheless, it has furthermore been a means to recontextualise the debates not only around sexuality, but also race, in light of consolidated historical contexts in which marginal communities are differently articulated (or “discoursivised”) against the accepted social norm. Presumptions about sex, sexuality, and gender, but also class and race, are endemic to the otherness with which the AIDS epidemic has historically been associated. In order to recognise the intertextuality of the independent AIDS moving image—as well as to critically engage with how artists merged texts, theories, and images coming from different sources and communities to create a complex body of works addressing the diverse aspects of the epidemic—I don’t deny that the cultural-historical factual circumstances of the AIDS crisis need to be acknowledged, hence the decision to offer such historical

context as part of this dissertation. I have done so by relying on the films and videos I have watched, looking at the existing archival material of a group of exhibitions in which these videos were originally shown, and aligning my critical analysis with the writings of authors who, since the early days of the epidemic, kept track of significant AIDS events and tried to outline if and how (e.g. by establishing categories) they were mirrored or translated into the medium of the moving image.

Independent AIDS filmmaking has been widely described as oppositional media. This opposition is in relation to the coercion exercised by governmental entities, with a health care system unresponsive on the basis of citizens' sexual and racial differences and a collective refusal to address HIV/AIDS as a political question. However, artists and filmmakers have taken different approaches to embracing this oppositionality and its call to militancy, for instance by transposing personal history into the public record, by seeking affirmation to their sexual and cultural identities on the screen, or by claiming self-determination and control over their own lives and bodies. Often, they voiced the identitarian subject positions of other people. They have not always opted for the immediacy of the documentary form or the analytical structure of the video essay but have also indulged in a more experimental, even eroticised, iconographic ethos. Despite its fundamental opposition to society's accounts of AIDS, this approach collided with the mission of the most fervent ranks of AIDS video activism, with which they nevertheless shared the same collective search for self-empowerment.

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## Prologue: I Begin with Love

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The AIDS video archive I put together, and through which I have outlined the brief history that follows, is personal—thus situated, non-definitive, incomplete, non-exhaustive—and therefore provisional. Built on the foundation of Jim Hubbard’s extensive research as well as the material stored at the New York Public Library, this archive includes more than one hundred moving image works, compiled by cross-checking Hubbard’s contribution with exhibitions, queer film festivals, records from other film and video archives, oral histories, and the critical texts of many AIDS writers. For each work I have produced short descriptions and critical annotations that collectively serve as a navigational tool. The experience nurtured during the making and the watching of the AIDS video archive manifests in the research as a ghostly presence, namely a fascination or a “force of relationality.”<sup>3</sup>

My affective posture had a structuring influence on this project and is often voiced in this essay in the form of ironic—at times even sarcastic—statements through which I point to some historical disarticulations and frictions concerning a continuous construction and deconstruction of the logics of representation, and thus of the different historical narrative developments of HIV/AIDS. Furthermore, my subjective position is echoed in the decision to include six film intermissions (they are not annexes) that, fashioned as strings of my stream of consciousness, both accompany and interrupt the main text. I conduct a personal yet critical analysis of these six films excerpted from the AIDS video archive. In each intermission, I oscillate between the content of the film itself and my own emotional trajectory as well as the theoretical references on my mind while watching and writing about the selected videos. This selection is not intended to exemplify the entirety of the AIDS videos that I have collected, nor does it serve as a synecdoche for my full experience of cruising this personal archive. Rather, it functions as a “performance,” an enactment of my positionality within the research and of my thinking, in practice, of a promiscu-

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3 ——— I am following John P. Ricco’s definition of attraction: “Less a form than a force of relationality, attraction is being-with that is also and at the same time being-with-out. It is an infinite unfolding of surfaces, textures, spaces, and forms that solicits a coming without arrival. [...] It is the interminable, insatiable intensity of erotic uncertainty, and its unmappable itinerancy.”  
John P. Ricco, *The Logic of the Lure* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 11.



ous methodology. It suggests a methodological model in which these interruptions (because they are not only interventions, but symbolically they are undisciplined breaches of disciplinary boundaries) do not appeal to the permanence and immutability of history and the historicity of AIDS; they offer no resolution to the fundamental questions or the historical perplexities of the subject who is writing and of its potential reader. On the contrary, they unveil the skeletons that persistently haunted me, as my original epistemological imperative to search for the final meaning of AIDS ended with an acceptance of thinking the unthinkable, of abandoning myself to, rather than resisting, the force of its attraction, and, ultimately, of finding pleasure in the uncertainty of this painful experience. For, "AIDS is a social condition that troubles representational logics," Adam Barbu wrote, "and insists we think at the limits of the sensible. It does not belong to any proper body or identity category."<sup>4</sup> By inserting the intermissions in a chapter about the history and theory of independent AIDS filmmaking, this methodological experiment represents a technique to break with the linearity of history; it is a symbolic act of unworking the work of history and dismantling the coordinates that have hitherto reduced the comprehensibility of AIDS to its historical understanding. Similarly to the act of cruising, the film intermissions do not trace a contour circumscribing the space of experiential involvement with the knowledge of AIDS, even though that space might be spatially located in an indefinite somewhere; instead, they outline a placeless place of discovery, in which the knowing subject moves from one point to another, each representing the beginning rather than the end of an (other) encounter. In so doing, they present a different spatialisation of (a moving beyond) and relationality to (a different way of unfolding) the disciplinary field of HIV/AIDS cultural studies.

There are precedents on which this idea relied as it took shape. I want to mention three. The intermissions are embedded in the main body of the text, following Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's example in "From the Margins." Tsing's exploration of marginality is interwoven with a commentary on her personal encounter with Uma Adang, the shamanic leader of the Meratus Dayaks people, a small community living in the Meratus Mountains of South Kalimantan, Indonesia. "My stories of Uma Adang show the strangeness and indeterminacy of our encounter," she writes, "to both support my arguments and yet deny them,

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4 ——— Adam Barbu and John P. Ricco, "Inheriting AIDS: A Conversation," in *What You Don't Know About AIDS Could Fill a Museum: Curatorial Ethics and the Ongoing Epidemic in the 21st Century*, OnCurating 42 (September 2019): 40–45.

too, the final word.”<sup>5</sup> Mirroring Tsing’s experience of indeterminacy, the intermissions call upon a state of transition between the personal and the theoretical, metaphorically disrupting the objectification of AIDS as a purely cultural/historical construct. In jumping from the main text to the intermissions, immersed in an itinerary that is nomadic yet fragmentary, the reader will always be at the point of departure and never at the point of arrival. As such, this disconnected itinerary is a symbolic indication of the impossibility of writing AIDS, i.e. giving full historical meaning to it. Through this lens, AIDS represents a limit to our ability to think.

In writing this essay, I experienced a discomfort similar to that described by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*. Amid his profound desire and epistemological mission to know all about photography, Barthes admits the “uneasiness of being a subject torn between two languages, one expressive, the other critical.” Caught between several discourses that have historically addressed the question of what photography is, but feeling dissatisfied with all of them, thus confessing their insufficiency to accomplish his objective, Barthes acknowledges his “desperate resistance to any reductive system.”<sup>6</sup> Despite recent re-readings of Barthes’s seminal book in the context of post-colonial studies,<sup>7</sup> which rightly critique an “anti-historical logic” and solipsism that characterise his analysis of photography, nonetheless I think that the affective model envisioned by Barthes—which takes shape in a relationship between two coexisting energies, the “studium” and the “punctum”—can offer an interesting methodological trajectory to look at.<sup>8</sup> While I am aware of the limitations and risks implicit in a method-

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5 ——— Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, “From the Margins,” *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (August 1994): 281.

6 ——— Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981), 8.

7 ——— For a postcolonial reading of Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*, see: Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa, “Sans Parole: Reflections on Camera Lucida, Part 1,” *e-flux journal* 124 (February 2022), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/124/445940/sans-parole-reflections-on-camera-lucida-part-1/> and Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa, “Sans Parole: Reflections on Camera Lucida, Part 2,” *e-flux journal* 125 (March 2022), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/125/452924/sans-parole-reflections-on-camera-lucida-part-2/>.

8 ——— The co-presence of “studium” and “punctum” is the methodological instrument with which Barthes conducts a personal yet rational investigation into photography. “My emotion,” he writes, “requires the rational intermediary of an ethical and political culture.” The connection between these two energies cannot be established a priori, however, nor can it be deduced scientifically. According to Barthes, “studium”—a term that he borrows from Latin, given the absence in French

ology reliant on Barthes's full trust in his subjective feelings—that for instance of legitimising certain cultural logics that differ depending on the affective context from which someone looks at and writes about photography—his sense of adventure (i.e. the attraction he experiences towards certain photographs) and animation resonate in my decision to include the film intermissions in this essay. To follow Barthes's "affective intentionality" responds to an urgent though unconscious linkage to the un-resolvability of the question of AIDS. "I wanted to explore [photography] not as a question (a theme) but as a wound," he writes, "I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think."<sup>9</sup> In this sense, the six film intermissions serve to acknowledge the presence, and the force, of that accident that Barthes calls "punctum." In my encounter with films from the AIDS video archive, I established a similar relation, where the "punctum" was relentlessly disturbing the "studium." The diegesis of this intersubjective experience has been about love, one in which I was simultaneously the subject and the object of the loving encounter; one that allowed a continuous yet temporary movement and made space for a discontinuous passage through which I both lost and recognised my self in the other (I became other). In this ecstatic metamorphosis, it is not the duration of the encounter that mattered to me; rather it is the acknowledgement of a symbolic bond I have established with the singularity of each work I have been

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of a word to describe this kind of force—is what motivates his interest in photography. It is the element that connects him to the discipline. "*Studium*," he writes, "doesn't mean, at least not immediately, 'study,' but application to a thing, taste for someone, a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment, of course, but without special acuity. It is by *studium* that I am interested in so many photographs." The "studium" is that through which Barthes can "participate" in the figures of an image and thereby recognise the "statements" embedded in that image; as such it carries traces of social, cultural, and/or political meanings that can be extracted through, for instance, semiotic analysis. The other element, which Barthes calls "punctum," serves a different function: it "punctuates," i.e. it breaks with or disturbs the "studium," interrupting (and therefore transforming) the reading. The "punctum" is not simply a point but also, metaphorically, a puncture that hits the viewer/writer. In other words, Barthes writes, the "punctum" is that "accident which pricks me, (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)." It does so not by means of "scientific" analysis; rather, it acts through an excess of vision, for it has the power to expand that vision. The "punctum" denotes a shock and creates a wound—precisely, in Barthes's case, the shock caused by the impossibility of overcoming the death of his mother, and ultimately the realisation that his mother's death implies his own.

Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 26-27

9 ————— Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 21.

attracted to. In this unregulated, limitless though imaginary experience, I could somehow make sense of the senseless.

The ungrounded movement traced by this promiscuous experience of cruising is best exemplified by *Glas*, a text (almost an academic experiment in concrete poetry more than a book because of its “unreadability,” in the most common sense of the term) that Jacques Derrida published in 1974.<sup>10</sup> The text is unorthodox and idiosyncratic. Divided in two main columns, the left one is primarily about Derrida’s reading of a selection of texts by Hegel, the right a selection of fiction and plays by Jean Genet. The columns are set in different typefaces and different type size. Each column weaves in around Derrida’s side notes. They are not technically foot or endnotes—not because they are not laid out at the bottom of the page or at the end of each chapter, which does not exist, but because they are interpolations. As such, they might or might not relate to any particular words, sentence, or concept discussed in the surrounding text. The lack of any citational details makes it impossible to distinguish Derrida’s writing from the writings of the authors he quotes, betraying any possibility of creating a self-contained text.<sup>11</sup> Rather than the impossibility of keeping language under control, I argue that *Glas* highlights the possibility of language (and the practice of philosophy) to imagine, and thereby to stage, multiple possible (an excess of) encounters. At the same time, I think, it points to the limits of knowledge as well as the essential difficulty and the non-linearity of thinking. In so doing, it disavows the classical structure of that intellectual project known as the reproduction of knowledge—namely to conceive an object to theorise about and a method through which to conduct the inquiry. Most importantly, I sense that Derrida’s *Glas* powerfully evokes some qualities of that which William Haver has called the erotic—“the accomplishment of sense and its excess, the fragmentation and proliferation of sensuous non-sense, the operation or work that simultaneously accomplishes a work and its unworking.”<sup>12</sup>

10 ——— Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

11 ——— For further reading on Derrida’s *Glas* see: Jessica Marian, “Styling against Absolute Knowledge in Derrida’s *Glas*,” *Parrhesia* 24 (2015), 217-38.

12 ——— William Haver, *The Body of This Death: Historicity and Sociality in the Time of AIDS* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 138. In a later essay, about the potentialities of queer research and pedagogy, Haver writes: “But it is in, and by means of, these stammerings, syncopations, caesuras, hesitations and paraproxes that the very possibility for any thinking lies; once we abandon this essential difficulty, this relation of non-relation to a queer, erotic, heteroclite sociality, we

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## Make it Ordinary (or: of Ronald Reagan's Silence about AIDS)

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“Six years into the epidemic and the Chief Executive of this nation has yet to utter the word AIDS.”<sup>13</sup> This chant resounded through the streets of New York in early 1987. By the time writer and activist Larry Kramer gave his much-cited speech at the Lesbian and Gay Community Center in Manhattan on March 10, 1987, almost 20,000 Americans had died of AIDS. “It’s our fault, boys and girls. It’s our fault,” Kramer upbraided the audience, calling for a civil disobedience movement to protest the government’s failure to address the AIDS crisis.<sup>14</sup> The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) was founded right after that speech, but Americans had to wait three more weeks before President Ronald Reagan publicly acknowledged AIDS, labelling it “public health enemy number one” at a luncheon at the College of Physicians in Philadelphia on April 1, 1987. In front of the members of the nation’s oldest medical academy, Reagan addressed the AIDS crisis for the very first time.

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become mere intellectual technologists devoted to the service of the concept. [...] One thinks where it is impossible to think, and to think where it is impossible to think is to sustain an erotic relation; this is not to transcend the concept, but to think the relation of the concept to that which is its occasion.”

William Haver, “Queer Research: How to Practise Invention to the Brink of Intelligibility,” in *The Eight Technologies of Otherness*, ed. Sue Golding (London: Routledge, 1997), 290-91.

13 ——— From a fact sheet that ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, distributed on the occasion of its first public demonstration on March 24, 1987, in Wall Street, New York.

14 ——— This speech is often credited for instigating the most impassioned and effective cultural response to the AIDS epidemic in the United States. “How long does it take before you get angry and fight back?” Kramer asked the audience. “I sometimes think we have a death wish. I think we must want to die. I have never been able to understand why for six long years we have sat back and let ourselves literally be knocked off man by man—without fighting back. I have heard of denial, but this is more than denial; this is a death wish.”

Larry Kramer, *Reports from the Holocaust: The Story of an AIDS Activist* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), 127–36.

Newspapers and TV networks reported at the time that he was still at the airport when he was asked by local reporters what schoolchildren should be taught about AIDS. “I think that abstinence has been lacking in much of the education,” he said. “One of the things that’s been wrong with too much of our education is that no kind of values of right and wrong are being taught in the educational process.” The idea that AIDS was primarily a moral issue was repeated by the President during his official speech: “Prevention is better than cure. And that’s particularly true of AIDS, for which right now there is no cure. This is where education comes in,” he claimed. “But let’s be honest with ourselves. AIDS information cannot be what some call ‘value neutral.’ After all, when it comes to preventing AIDS, don’t medicine and morality teach the same lessons?”<sup>15</sup>

By early 1987 the Gay Men’s Health Crisis was an established AIDS service organisation in New York City that had been operating since 1982; the American doctor Robert Gallo and the Institute Pasteur in Paris isolated the HIV virus in 1984; Larry Kramer’s play *The Normal Heart* premiered off-Broadway at The Public Theater in New York in 1985;<sup>16</sup> and Gaëtan Dugas, a gay Air Canada flight attendant, was soon to become the main target of the mass media’s grotesque rhetoric on the AIDS epidemic, branding him as “Patient Zero” or, as *The New York Post* later described him, “The Man Who Gave Us AIDS.”<sup>17</sup> At the time

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15 ——— “Remarks at a Luncheon for Members of the College of Physicians in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania,” Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, National Archives and Records Administration, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-luncheon-members-college-physicians-philadelphia-pennsylvania>.

16 ——— Larry Kramer was one of the founding members of Gay Men Health’s Crisis (GMHC), a not-for-profit community-based AIDS service organisation founded in New York in January 1982. *The Normal Heart*, which he authored, is one of the first plays about AIDS to be written and performed. It debuted off-Broadway at The Public Theater in New York on April 21, 1985. Shortly before *The Normal Heart*, William M. Hoffman had produced *As Is*, a less political and more intimately scripted play. It debuted a month before Kramer’s play, on March 10, 1985. Whilst Hoffman’s play was adapted for television as early as 1986, *The Normal Heart* was made into a film, premiering on HBO on May 25, 2014.

17 ——— From the front page of the *New York Post*, October 6, 1987. In the December 1987 issue of *People* magazine Patient Zero was named among “The 25 most intriguing people of 1987.” The myth of Gaëtan Dugas being the Patient Zero of AIDS was made popular by Randy Shilt’s book *And the Band Played On*, published in 1987 by New York-based St. Martin’s Press. In the press release accompanying the launch of the book, the author was credited for having found the man whom the Center for Disease Control had identified as Patient Zero. In March 1984 the CDC had published an article in *The American Journal*

of President Reagan's first public acknowledgement of AIDS, the disease was undoubtedly familiar to him.<sup>18</sup> It was the scale of the AIDS

*of Medicine* titled "Cluster of Cases of the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. Patients Linked by Sexual Contact." Within a cluster of forty homosexually active men, scientists were able to "link 40 AIDS patients by sexual contact to at least one other reported patient" and finally determine that "AIDS developed in four men in southern California after they had sexual contact with a non-Californian, Patient 0." A diagram accompanied the study in which a series of circles, representing each patient, were connected by lines representing the sexual exposures with the so-called Patient 0 at the centre.



John Greyson. *Zero Patience*, 1993. Screenshot. Courtesy of the author.

A quite recent study published in *Nature* proved that the HIV virus started to circulate in North America at the beginning of the 1970s and that there is "neither biological nor historical evidence that [Dugas] was the primary case in the US." Moreover, the study claims that Patient Zero "entered the literature with this title" because of a typo in the original CDC study. The zero was in reality meant to be a letter O, that is "the abbreviation used to indicate that this patient with Kaposi's sarcoma resided Outside-of-California." Whether or not this was actually the result of a typo, it is a fact that the mythology of Patient 0 originated from this study.

"1970s and 'Patient 0' HIV-1 genomes illuminate early HIV/AIDS history in North America," *Nature* 539, no. 3 (November 2016): 98–101.

In 1993 Canadian filmmaker John Greyson wrote and directed the feature-length film *Zero Patience*, a parody of the mythology of Dugas as Patient 0 performed in the style of a Hollywood-inspired musical mixing fact, melodrama, and science fiction.

For a detailed critical analysis of the film, see: Roger Hallas, "John Greyson's *Zero Patience*," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 16–37.

18 ——— In reality, President Ronald Reagan pronounced the word AIDS twice before 1987: on September 17, 1985, on the occasion of the President's 32nd Press Conference at the White House, in response to a reporter's question on the Federal Support for AIDS Research; and on February 6, 1986 during his Message to the Congress on America's Agenda for the Future. Transcripts of both speeches are available through the online archive of The American Presidency Project.

crisis that the Chief Executive of the United States still did not have a clue about.

The chants echoing through the streets of New York on the day of ACT UP's first demonstration on Wall Street powerfully evoke a picture of the political negligence of the US government. However, Americans would have to wait almost two more months before the Reagan administration publicly announced, on May 31, 1987, the establishment of a Presidential Commission on the HIV/AIDS Epidemic.<sup>19</sup> An executive order was released on June 24 and the Commission members named on July 23, but no one in the group—which included Cardinal John O'Connor, Archbishop of the Diocese of New York—was an

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“The President’s News Conference: September 17, 1985,” The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-951>.

“Message to the Congress on America’s Agenda for the Future: February 06, 1986,” The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/message-the-congress-americas-agenda-for-the-future>.

- 19 ——— President Reagan made this announcement in the context of his very first speech devoted exclusively to AIDS, delivered on May 31, 1987, at a dinner honouring the American Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR). The President had been invited by the actress Elizabeth Taylor, amfAR’s national chairwoman, to deliver the speech. The full transcript of the speech is available on the online archive of The American Presidency Project.
- “Remarks at the American Foundation for AIDS Research Awards Dinner: May 31, 1987,” The American Presidency Project, last accessed January 15, 2023, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-american-foundation-for-aids-research-awards-dinner>.
- In 1988 Paper Tiger Southwest, an affiliate of the New York-based collective Paper Tiger Television, produced a video titled *Transformer AIDS* in which Bob Kenny performs a critical re-reading of Reagan’s “infamous” speech. The tape is a “video essay” that operates, in a sarcastic and funny way, as a counter-narrative to the political and mainstream media construction of AIDS as well as an “activist classroom” grounded in deconstructivist methodologies built on the writings of Cindy Patton, Douglas Crimp, and Simon Watney.



Paper Tiger Southwest. *Transformer AIDS*, 1988. Screenshot. Courtesy of the author.



expert on HIV/AIDS. At the same time, the American Senate voted almost unanimously in favour of legislator Jesse Helms's amendment preventing the disbursement of federal funds to organisations involved in AIDS education or prevention campaigns that would "promote or encourage, directly or indirectly, homosexual activities."<sup>20</sup> Once again,

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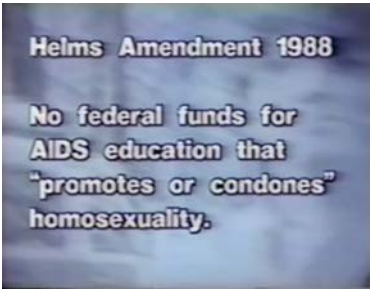
20 — Helms's rage and the subsequent decision to enact this amendment were triggered by a comic pamphlet, titled *After the Gym*, realised and distributed by Gay Men's Health Crisis to promote the use of condoms and safer sex practices, that portrayed anal sex scenes. Shortly thereafter, in May 1988, the British Government enacted an analogous legislative item, Section 28, stating that a local authority "shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality" or "promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship."

Three videos are worth mentioning:

1. Following the enactment of Helms's amendment, filmmaker Jean Carlomusto directed *The Helms Amendment* (USA, 1987), a short video produced by Gay Men's Health Crisis for the "Living with AIDS" cable TV weekly programme. It is a visual essay explaining the controversies aroused by the distribution of the safe sex comic booklet. It shows how AIDS was largely used by the Reagan administration to bolster legislation scapegoating those who were not considered "socially acceptable." As GMHC Director Tim Sweeney makes clear in the tape, although educational material addressing the sexual lifestyles of the communities most affected by the virus was an efficient means to encourage safer sex and therefore contain the spread of the virus, the decision of the Senate to ban it was another clear attempt to criminalise homosexuality and make it all a question of good versus bad morality.
2. The following year, Catherine Gund directed *Simon Watney speaks about Clause 28 and Homophobia in the United Kingdom* (USA, 1988). Produced by Paper Tiger Television, this home-made style video features gay and AIDS activist Simon Watney performing a critical analysis of the homophobia of Margaret Thatcher's governance and the inevitable consequences that Section 28 had on AIDS education and research in Britain. Watney's attack on the British conservative political establishment is ferocious: he confronts the manipulation of public opinion amid the ideological debate perpetuated by press and television against gays and lesbians, the historical lack of a political system able to deal with minority politics, and the non-existence of a civil rights tradition. He also fiercely criticises Thatcher's rhetoric about the fragility of the family, as an institution on which the entire society is built and that needs to be preserved, but that is imperiled, according to Thatcher, by the demonic threat of the homosexual lifestyle.
3. In 1991, Robert Hilferty and Robert Huff directed *TAG Helms* (USA, 1991), a five-minute video that documents the first action by ACT UP affinity group Treatment Action Guerrillas (TAG). On September 5, 1991, they wrapped Senator Helms's house in Arlington, Virginia, with

when it came to AIDS, medicine and morality seemed to teach the same lesson. But the truth is many would agree that if the Reagan administration contributed any legacy to the history of the AIDS epidemic, it is one of silence.

**Film INTERMISSION 1**  
**Zoe Leonard and Catherine Gund**  
***Keep Your Laws Off Our Bodies***  
 [USA, 1989, 12 min.]



Zoe Leonard and Catherine Gund. *Keep Your Laws Off Our Bodies*, 1989. Screenshot. Courtesy of the author.

In the early stages of her career, artist Zoe Leonard had experienced a palpable tension between artmaking and the call to activism. Leonard joined ACT UP NY very early on. On the ACT UP Oral History Project website, there are recordings of a young Leonard attending weekly ACT UP meetings as early as 1989 and giving presentations on AIDS, women, safe sex, and sex work.<sup>21</sup>

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a giant condom made from parachute material imprinted with the message, "A condom to stop unsafe politics. Helms is deadlier than a virus." The tape consists of three main segments: strategic preparations, interviews with members of TAG on the day of the action, and the action itself. Hilferty and Huff's video is not only an important documentation of an historical event. It shows how AIDS activists very carefully planned and staged their actions; mobilised an extensive and powerful network of supporters; emphasised community and coalition building; and appropriated slogans, techniques, and practices from different fields, using them efficiently within the context of political disobedience and AIDS activism.

21 ——— The ACT UP Oral History Project is an archive of approximately 200 video interviews with members of ACT UP New York, assembled by Jim Hubbard and Sarah Schulman. Interviews are available at the following link: [www.actuporalhistory.org](http://www.actuporalhistory.org)

She contributed several essays addressing these topics to the *Women, AIDS, and Activism* guidebook by The ACT UP/NY Women and AIDS Book Group, of which she was a core member.<sup>22</sup> In 1991, out of a shared commitment to AIDS activism, women's rights, and the representation and visibility of lesbian identity, she co-founded the art collective Fierce Pussy with Nancy Brooks Brody, Joy Episalla, and Carrie Yamaoka.<sup>23</sup>

In *Fire in the Belly*, Cynthia Carr's compendious biography of David Wojnarowicz, the author recounts an anecdote that Leonard, one of Wojnarowicz's closest friends, confessed to Anna Blume during a two-day interview conducted on January 18 and February 15, 1997.<sup>24</sup> In 1989 Leonard made an untitled series of beautiful pictures featuring off-kilter aerial views of clouds shot from and framed by an airplane window. "The window frame of that airplane came into the picture at a time in my life when I was dealing with a lot of very tangible horror in my own life because of AIDS," Leonard tells Blume. "I was beginning to become an activist and realizing that I just could not keep doing these ambiguous, beautiful, pictures anymore. I needed to do something that had the same kind of vitality that I had in my

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- 22 ——— ACT UP/New York Women and AIDS Book Group, *Women, AIDS, and Activism* (Boston: Southend Press, 1990).  
The core members of the group were: Marion Banzhaf, Cynthia Chris, Kim Christensen, Alexis Danzig, Risa Denenberg, Zoe Leonard, Deb Levine, Rachel Lurie, Monica Pearl, Catherine Gund, Polly Thistlethwaite, Judith Walker, and Brigitte Weil.
- 23 ——— Self-identifying as a "collective of queer women artists," Fierce Pussy uses low-key and low-budget techniques, such as Xeroxing, to produce works for public display that arouse political mobilisation around queer rights, freedom of speech, identity politics, and HIV/AIDS. Works by Fierce Pussy are available to download on their website. In so doing, the collective invites people to start their own local political campaigns: [www.fiercepussy.org](http://www.fiercepussy.org).
- 24 ——— Cynthia Carr, *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 419-20.  
The full interview is published in the exhibition catalogue for Leonard's solo show at Wiener Secession in Vienna (from July 23 to September 14, 1997).  
Zoe Leonard and Anna Blume, *Secession: Zoe Leonard* (Vienna: Wiener Secession, 1997).  
The same anecdote is recounted by Douglas Crimp in the catalogue essay for Leonard's survey exhibition at the Whitney Museum in 2018, organised by Bennett Simpson and Rebecca Matalon, Senior Curator and Curatorial Associate respectively at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.  
Douglas Crimp, "Zoe's New York," in *Zoe Leonard: Survey*, ed. Bennett Simpson (New York and London: Prestel Publisher, 2018).

personal and activist life.”<sup>25</sup> Leonard’s conflicting feelings concerning the scope of her work were triggered by the enduring generalised pressure to question the function and importance of a work of art at a time of political turbulence.

Leonard tells Blume about a lunch she had one day with Wojnarowicz, thanks to whom she had joined ACT UP. She brought test prints of the cloud pictures with her. She remembers timidly showing the prints to Wojnarowicz and almost crying. “David, what the fuck am I doing?” She had just been offered her first show in Germany, but she recounts the sense of guilt and sadness she felt in sharing the images with her friend. “I was finally being offered shows, but I somehow couldn’t enjoy any of it because I felt like, ‘Who am I to have these pictures of these cities from the air and I’m going to Germany to show them, and meanwhile, we’re protesting and shutting down the floor of Wall Street?’ Who was I to say, ‘I can’t go to Albany to shut down the capital because I’m going to Germany to do my art show.’ I felt guilty and torn. I felt detached—my work was so subtle and abstract, so apolitical on the surface. I remember showing those pictures to David and talking things over with him and he said—I’m paraphrasing—‘Don’t ever give up beauty. We’re fighting so that we can have things like this, so that we can have beauty again.’” Leonard concludes, “I felt like an asshole with these pictures of clouds, but David was right. You go through all of the fighting not because you want to fight, but because you want to get somewhere as a people. You want to help create a world where you can sit around and think about clouds. That should be our right as human beings.”<sup>26</sup>

When I was browsing my AIDS video archive to select works for *Every Moment Counts—AIDS and Its Feelings*, the exhibition I curated at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter in 2022, I picked two videos by Zoe Leonard.<sup>27</sup> My curatorial intention was for the show to reflect similar conflictual historical stances to those experienced by Leonard at the end of the 1980s. Leonard’s studio assistants had shared digital files of *Keep Your Laws Off Our Bodies* (USA, 1989) and *East River Park* (USA, 1991), both of which had rarely been shown before. In the exhibition, the two films were screened on separate monitors, placed on the floor facing one another, with a bench by artist Piotr Nathan between them, made from the discarded door of a toilet used as a cruising spot

25 ——— Leonard and Blume, *Secession: Zoe Leonard*, 13.

26 ——— Leonard and Blume, *Secession: Zoe Leonard*, 17.

27 ——— See chapter “Every Moment Counts—AIDS and its Feelings.”

in a Berlin park. Both films embody Leonard's commitment to AIDS activism as well as the formal beauty that characterises her photographic oeuvre.

The title of *Keep Your Laws Off Our Bodies*, which itself appropriates a feminist pro-abortion slogan, reminded me of another work by Leonard, a poster she made in 1992 for GANG, an activist collective which she co-founded.<sup>28</sup> Inspired by the inciting propaganda of *Gran Fury*, it shows a close-up of a vagina framed within the slogan "Read my lips before they are sealed." Clearly, the poster reclaims the right of women to exercise control over their own bodies and in so doing to resist interference by state authorities in their private and domestic spaces. Furthermore, by means of a metonymic connection, it associates the right to abortion with the freedom of speech.

Shot on super 8mm in black and white, *Keep Your Laws Off Our Bodies* is a meditation on same-sex desire in the time of AIDS. The film highlights how the US government has historically interfered with individuals' private lives and criminalised their sexualities, culminating in the exacerbation of homophobic and oppressive legislation during the AIDS epidemic. Leonard and Gund record themselves at home, naked in the intimate safety of their bedroom. They kiss, caress, exchange signs of affection, and make love. The tenor of the images is casual. The atmosphere is peaceful. The situation is realistic and full of romance. The mechanical sound of a film projector beats the time of their love and gives a rhythm to an otherwise silent film. The cadence is both domestic and alarming, evoking the clatter of a gun being triggered.

Suddenly, the sound of sirens, coupled with images of police barricades descending in force to confront and arrest AIDS activists on the streets of New York, brusquely intrude on the lovers' bedroom.<sup>29</sup> As the helmeted officers figuratively impinge

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- 28 ——— GANG was a multidisciplinary art collective formed in New York City in 1989 to support ACT UP with visual material. It was initiated by Adam Rolston, Wellington Love, Jeff Nunokawa, and Zoe Leonard under the name the Gang of Four. Artists Suzanne Wright, Martin McElheny, and Loring McAlpin later joined the group, and the collective was renamed GANG.  
Cfr.: Sarah Schulman, "Adam Rolston," Interview n. 101, ACT UP Oral History Project, August 27, 2008, <https://actuporalhistory.org/numerical-interviews/101-adam-rolston>.
- 29 ——— The footage was filmed by the two artists during ACT UP's demonstration at New York City Hall, on March 28, 1989. Transferred into video and accompanied by the music of the 1960s song "White Bird," per-

on the artists' private life, their arrested comrades summon their presence on the streets, symbolically calling upon them to join the protest.

Leonard and Gund make use of a private home movie to articulate their position, as both artists and women, in regard to the policing of sex, love, desire, and the body in the wake of AIDS. At semi-regular intervals, a legal commentary written in a condensed typeface appears above the images. It brings into the filmic storytelling the contingent yet very real risk of legislation, which historically has affected the freedom of individuals to express their sexualities and even to speak. On one hand, it gives the film a precise historical background; on the other, it clarifies the artists' analysis of the political crimes and corrupt power of the state. Their overview starts with the 1973 Pornography Law and the subsequent legal definition of obscenity. It continues with the Hyde Amendment of 1980, prohibiting the use of federal funds to support a woman's right to abortion. Next are the 1986 Supreme Court ruling known as *Bowers v. Hardwick*, which upheld a Georgia state law banning sodomy and denied constitutional protection for homosexual sex, and the 1988 Helms Amendment, preventing AIDS educational material from promoting examples of homosexual activities. Last in the sequence is the 1989 Helms Bill forbidding the National Endowment for the Arts to fund art considered obscene.

The film was originally presented as a video installation. It included a surveillance camera and a TV screen next to an empty bed whose sheets were silk-screened with the same legislations appearing in the tape. Interweaving recorded segments of daily life and documentation of political activism, *Keep Your Laws Off Our Bodies* beautifully addresses AIDS, homophobia, and state abuse of power. The juxtaposition of the two scenarios generates a meaningful contrast and creates connections that transcend the filmmakers' personal experience of the epidemic. Besides alluding to a shared sense of individual anger at the denial of freedoms to queer people, the film asserts the existence of at least one concrete possibility to resist the intrusion, namely to take action. At the same time, it is also a profound reflection on the emotional conflict and internal antagonism experienced by Leonard and others faced with a choice between the practice of "pure" art and that of art at the service of political activism.

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formed by the band It's a Beautiful Day, an excerpt was used by the video collective DIVA TV in one of the segments composing the documentary film *Target City Hall* (USA, 1989).

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## Rock, Dear Rock

### (or: of the Mass Media Representation of AIDS)

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What had changed by mid-1987, when Ronald Reagan finally decided the time had come to talk openly about AIDS? Probably the sense that “No one is safe from AIDS,” as *LIFE Magazine* reported on its front cover following the death from AIDS-related complications of Hollywood superstar actor and sex symbol Rock Hudson, one of the Reagan’s closest friends, on October 2, 1985. Suddenly, the famous scene from ABC’s beloved soap opera *Dynasty* in which Hudson rushes to the aid of Linda Evans after she falls off of a horse and kisses her with passion went “viral.” “After this *Dynasty* kiss, some actresses fear working with actors who might be gay,” reported *Us Weekly* in response to the news of Hudson’s death.

Long a role model of masculinity to millions of heterosexual American men and of a desirable, caring husband to women, Hudson’s moribund body rapidly became “both [the] signifier and [the] symptom of his almost certain homosexuality,” as Richard Meyer claimed.<sup>30</sup> Americans, sadly, had to process how to deal with an unthinkable state of affairs: they had been taught by a homosexual how to be heterosexual.<sup>31</sup> The signs of his unspoken—and unspeakable—deviancy took

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30 ——— Richard Meyer, “Rock Hudson’s Body,” in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss, (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 259–90.

31 ——— In 1992, filmmaker Mark Rappaport realised the experimental film essay *Rock Hudson’s Home Movies* (USA, 1992), in which he stitched together clips from more than thirty of Hudson’s movies into the form of a posthumous diary. The visual segments, collated by a voice-over



Mark Rappaport. *Rock Hudson’s Home Movies*, 1992. Screenshot. Courtesy of the author.

the place of the idealised image of masculinity that the American film industry sold its heterosexual audience with Rock Hudson. The media's disclosure of Hudson's illness gave AIDS a certain "legitimacy" as a newsworthy issue. Nevertheless, because of "Hudson's double coming out of the closet both as a PWA [person with AIDS] and a gay man [...] in the public eye, AIDS became the physical sign of a concealed deviance, the true manifestation of a secret perversion," film director Tom Kalin wrote.<sup>32</sup> Unquestionably, Hudson's death contributed to the publicity of that "secret perversion:" a disease, until then confined only to "others," began to penetrate the edges of the so-called general population. From that moment on, the scariest reality was that "gays are no longer the only ones getting [AIDS]," as journalist Dan Rather pointed out during his CBS News Special titled—evocatively enough—"AIDS Hits Home," aired on October 22, 1986.

If on the one hand the news of Rock Hudson's death dramatically increased the coverage of AIDS in the US mainstream media, on the other it secured pre-existing prejudices. Newspapers, magazines, and television programming largely conformed to the typical mass media narrative of the epidemic, which offered countless examples of the "moral panic" that, as Simon Watney has argued, created indissoluble connections between homosexuality, infection, AIDS, and death.<sup>33</sup> Mass media seduces and terrorises its audience, Paula A. Treichler once said.<sup>34</sup> The messaging was clear: "AIDS will kill you," followed by

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as if narrated by Hudson himself, are selected and rearranged to trigger a gay-oriented double meaning of the images of the actor's hyper-masculinised body. As Roger Hallas has pointed out, "In detaching popular film images from their original context and remodeling them, these works play with the dynamics of gay spectatorship [including fantasy, appropriation, fragmentation, and reconstitution] in order to constitute their aesthetic form."

Roger Hallas, "AIDS and Gay Cinephilia," *Camera Obscura* 18, no. 1 (May 2003): 92.

32 ——— Tom Kalin, "Flesh Histories," in *A Leap in the Dark: AIDS, Art and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Allan Klusacek and Ken Morrison (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1992), 129.

33 ——— Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and the Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1987), 38–57.

34 ——— Paula A. Treichler, "Seduced and Terrorized: AIDS on Network Television," in *A Leap in the Dark: AIDS, Art, and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Allan Klusacek and Ken Morrison (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1993), 136–51.

Television's strategy to seduce and terrorise is exemplified in John Greyson's video *The AIDS Epidemic* (Canada, 1987). This work was first exhibited as a thirty-six-monitor video wall installed in Square One in Mississauga, a Toronto suburban shopping mall. Staged in the style of an MTV music video, the five-minute edited video version is an ironic



the reassuring news that AIDS was largely confined to “others.” If medicine and morality were considered the only effective answer to AIDS, then the panic that television and mass media instilled in their audience was only momentary. As Reagan pointed out during his first speech addressing the AIDS crisis, there is no need to worry about the disease if we follow the right rules of morality. Many in the medical and political profession undoubtedly agreed with this argument. To take one example: in January 1988, *Cosmopolitan* magazine published an article by Dr. Robert E. Gould to comfort female readers about the risk of getting AIDS. “There is almost no danger of contracting AIDS through ordinary sexual intercourse,” the article states. Invited to take part in a nationally televised debate, the magazine’s editor, Helen Gurley Brown, claimed that her intention was to relieve women from fear, fright, and guilt.<sup>35</sup> It didn’t matter whether it was unsafe or with an HIV

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caricature of Gustav von Aschenbach, the main character of Visconti’s *Death in Venice*. During his trip to Venice, Aschenbach sees the young, gorgeous Tadzio and his boyfriend in a sexy pleasure-loving scene, and he suddenly succumbs to an attack of ADS, the Acquired Dread of Sex—something that in 1987 you can get from reading the homophobic news and watching TV reports about AIDS. The short film appropriates an idiom and a format familiar to young adults for the purpose of discussing, in the form of a parody, the paranoid media-induced hysteria about HIV/AIDS.



John Greyson. *The ADS Epidemic*, 1987. Screenshot.  
Courtesy of the author.

- 35 ——— Following the publication of this article, on January 19, 1988, 150 members of ACT UP, mostly women, staged a demonstration in front of the magazine’s New York headquarters. The protest is documented in *Doctors, Liars and Women: AIDS Activists Say No To Cosmo* (USA, 1988) a film directed by Jean Carlomusto and Maria Maggenti and produced by Gay Men’s Health Crisis. One key scene shows women AIDS activists participating in several TV programmes, including Phil Donahue’s *Nightline* and the local talk show *People Are Talking*, in which Chris Norwood and Denise Ribble took the stage when the host, Richard Wayne Bey, refused to let them explain to the public why women are at risk of contracting HIV.

positive partner; the important thing was to make it ordinary. More than six years into the epidemic, the principle governing the mass media's representation of the AIDS crisis was still informed, as Timothy Landers argues, by an adapted version of the historical "normal versus abnormal" paradigm.<sup>36</sup>

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A year later, on January 29, 1989, *The New York Times* published an article titled "Why Make AIDS Worse Than It Is?" that reiterated *Cosmopolitan's* position that AIDS is exclusively confined to specific risk groups. "Once all the susceptible members are infected," it reads, "the number of new victims will decline".



Jean Carlomusto and Maria Maggenti. *Doctors, Liars and Women: AIDS Activists Say No To Cosmo*, 1988. Screenshot. Courtesy of the author.

36 ——— Timothy Landers, "Bodies and Anti-Bodies: A Crisis of Representation," *The Independent* 11, no. 1 (January–February 1988): 18–24.

Landers argues that media representation of AIDS is based on a binary opposition: Body and Anti-Body. "The Body—white, middle-class, and heterosexual—is constructed in contrast to the Other, the Anti-Body (frequently absent in representation)—blacks, gays, lesbians, workers, foreigners, in short, the whole range of group that threaten straight, white, middle-class values," he writes. "The Body is, above all, *healthy*. The Anti-Body becomes, specifically, gay, black, Latino, the IV drug user, the prostitute—in other words *sick*. Tinged with the stigma of illness that dramatically destroys the body, what was usually absent from representation becomes spectacularly and consistently visible." This same paradigm has informed the historical representation of women's bodies "as pathological and contaminated."

Paula A. Treichler, "AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification," in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 31–70.

A similar argument is advanced by Leo Bersani. Supported by the manuscript of Charles Bernheimer's *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1989), he claims that "the public discourse about homosexuality since the AIDS crisis began has a startling resemblance to the representation of female prostitutes in the nineteenth century as contaminated vessels [of venereal diseases]." Bersani is referring to the spread of syphilis in the nineteenth century, which contributed to the public rhetoric of "female sexuality as intrinsically

In opposition to this dominant model, the first counter-representations and alternative images of the epidemic started to circulate and enter the public domain in the mid-1980s. Parallel to the formation of ACT UP—which situated the politics of representation as a primary mission—activists, artists, writers, and filmmakers began to produce work that reflected their personal and political experience of AIDS. They reclaimed power over their own images and, as Alexandra Juhasz has pointed out, committed themselves to “a concerted representational effort” whereby personal matters could be both individually and collectively expressed, allowing them to “[take] some control of the media ecology of AIDS, thus resetting the media agenda, vocabulary and iconography along activist terms.”<sup>37</sup> Since television was the main source of AIDS information for the majority of the American population (presumed by the mass media to be predominantly white, middle-class, and heterosexual), it is unsurprising that most of this representational effort referenced by Juhasz—herself a video maker—was done within the realm of video, documentary, and experimental filmmaking. The prevailing representations of AIDS on television centred on a series of common figures, which included: scientists and doctors surrounded by microscopes and test tubes; computer graphic reconstructions of what the HIV retrovirus looked like and how it attacked the human body;<sup>38</sup> experts explaining which people supposedly did or did not need to worry about AIDS as well as fabricating inaccurate information about the reality of those living with AIDS; footage of people from the so-called high-risk groups (intravenous drug users, homosexuals, people of colour, and prostitutes) engaged in high-

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diseased” and in the wake of AIDS reinforced the fantasy that rectum and vagina are “privileged loci of infection.”

Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 3-31.

- 37 ——— Alexandra Juhasz and Theodore (ted) Kerr, “Home Video Returns: Media Ecologies of the Past of HIV/AIDS,” *Cineaste* 39, no. 3 (2014), <https://www.cineaste.com/summer2014/home-video-returns-media-ecologies-of-the-past-of-hiv-aids/>.
- 38 ——— Simon Watney in particular has pointed out how the visual register of AIDS commentary very often assumes the form of a diptych. “On one panel, we are shown the HIV retrovirus (repeatedly misdescribed as the ‘AIDS virus’) made to appear, by means of electronic microscopy or reconstructive computer graphics, like a huge Technicolor asteroid. On the other panel we witness the ‘AIDS victim,’ usually hospitalised and physically debilitated.” Simon Watney, “The Spectacle of AIDS,” in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 71–86.

risk activities; and interviews with people with AIDS, in particular professed innocent victims of the epidemic such as hemophiliacs or the unsuspecting partners of closeted homosexual or bisexual men.<sup>39</sup>

“Can you get me a black prostitute with two kids who shoots drugs and is still on the street spreading AIDS?” Such was the kind of request that the San Francisco AIDS Foundation received from journalists and other members of the press, its President and Executive Director Pat Christen reported in 1989.<sup>40</sup> The mass media’s compulsive obsession with putting a human face on the AIDS crisis gave rise to recurrent narrative characters used to describe the epidemic: the moribund, emaciated body of the homosexual man dying in a hospital bed; the innocent, usually young victim who contracted the virus from a blood transfusion; the non-white prostitute depicted according to a representational regime that sees female sex workers, especially those of colour, as vehicles of infection and death. “We know that counter-examples of these canonical AIDS victims are systematically excluded from the reports of people with AIDS who are rejected by photographers because they do not look sick enough,” wrote Paula A. Treichler.<sup>41</sup> Concurrent with

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39 ——— The binary of the “innocent” versus the “guilty” victim of AIDS is the rhetorical framing against which ACT UP and AIDS activists staged most of their political battles. Two of the most famous stories of innocent victims, which gained major popularity in mass media, were those of Ryan White, an American teenager who became infected with the HIV virus after a blood transfusion, and Kimberly Ann Bergalis, a college student who contracted the virus as a consequence of a tooth extraction. On the occasion of a 15-second speech she gave before Congress on September 26, 1991, to plead for legislation that would provide protection in cases similar to hers, a visibly ill and despairing Bergalis played the card of the innocent victim, in contradistinction to the lifestyle of those who, unlike her, used IV drugs and “slept with anyone.” This reiterated a statement she had already made a few months before, via a letter she sent to Florida health officials in April 1991. Douglas Crimp analyses Bergalis’s story alongside a cartoon published on the front cover of *Campus Review* in November 1987 to accompany an article by Gary Bauer, assistant to President Reagan and spokesperson for the administration’s AIDS policy, making fun of the Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt inaugurated in Washington, D.C., the month before. Showing two quilts, one next to the other, bearing the words “Sodomy” and “IV Drugs” respectively, the cartoon clearly delineates, as Bergalis would later reaffirm, the guilty victims of AIDS—hence those who deserve to die. Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 198–99.

40 ——— Treichler, “Seduced and Terrorized,” 146.

41 ——— Treichler, “Seduced and Terrorized,” 143.

One important example comes from the Nicholas Nixon exhibition *Pictures of People*, which opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New

the actual epidemic, there was an epidemic of AIDS misinformation, one that Simon Watney called the “spectacle of AIDS.”<sup>42</sup>

## Film INTERMISSION 2

Alexandra Juhasz with Jean Carlomusto

*Prostitutes, Risk, and AIDS: It's Not What You Do,  
But How You Do What You Do*

[USA, 1988, 28 min.]



Alexandra Juhasz with Jean Carlomusto. *Prostitutes, Risk, and AIDS: It's Not What You Do, But How You Do What You Do*, 1988. Screenshot. Courtesy of the author.

Alexandra Juhasz belongs to a circle of activist filmmakers who see the camcorder revolution and down-and-dirty political video making as a salvific project. In the context of this movement,

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York in the autumn of 1988, enraging the local community of AIDS activists, who staged a protest in front of the museum. Protestors distributed a press release stating: “We demand the visibility of PWAs who are vibrant, angry, loving, sexy, beautiful, acting up and fighting back. Stop looking at us; start listening to us.”

Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism*, 83-107.

42 ——— “This is the *Spectacle of AIDS*, constituted in a regime of massively over-determined images, which are sensitive only to the values of the dominant familial ‘truth’ of AIDS and the projective ‘knowledge’ of its ideally interpolated spectator, who already ‘knows all he needs to know’ about homosexuality and AIDS. It is in the principal and serious business of this spectacle to ensure that the subject of AIDS is ‘correctly’ identified and that any possibility of positive sympathetic identification *with* actual people with AIDS is entirely expunged from the field of vision. AIDS is thus embodied as an exemplary and admonitory drama, relayed between the image of the miraculous authority of clinical medicine and the faces and body of individuals who clearly disclose the stigmata of their guilt. The principal target of this sadistically punitive gaze is the body of ‘the homosexual.’”

Watney, “The Spectacle of AIDS,” 78.

interestingly enough, salvation is achieved by means of a realist filmmaking ethos, in which reality is portrayed more directly (thus objectively) and with the purpose of challenging (or offering other interpretations contrary to) the depiction of the same portion of reality given by mainstream cinema and television. In the affirmation of a “for every reality a realist form” sort of approach, there are nonetheless margins for experimentation, and *Prostitutes, Risk, and AIDS* offers one such example.

Juhasz’s first book, *AIDS TV: Identity, Community, and Alternative Video*, published in 1995 following her doctoral dissertation, is indeed all about the (oppositional) power of independent AIDS media to precipitate change, hence to be salvational. *AIDS TV* remains one of the most comprehensive histories of American moving image AIDS activism from the 1980s and 1990s. Juhasz is an academic, a filmmaker, and an activist, but also a second-generation feminist whose research and work ethics are shaped by feminism. Much of her career has centred on analysing the cinematic and televisual representation of women and AIDS, which she has also counterbalanced by either making or endorsing feminist video documentaries. According to Juhasz, identification and self-recognition are two important elements through which a feminist approach to political filmmaking can eventually promote change: by offering alternative role models existing outside the hegemonic discourse of the dominant culture, video activism can help trigger a process of self-awareness and thereby constitute new forms of politicised identities. In other words, the camera is used as a tool for self-definition. “[With other feminist activist video makers] I share a kind of frantic desperation to get the real story out,” she claims in *AIDS TV*.<sup>43</sup>

But the collision of feminism and realism—one used to represent oppositional content—also means something else in Juhasz’s practice, i.e. to unveil the structural basis, the apparatus, and the formal mechanism of cinema and television to produce meaning. In *AIDS TV*, she makes it clear that an analysis of the conditions of its production is an integral part of both feminist film production and feminist film criticism. “Feminism has always emphasised process,” she writes, citing B. Ruby Rich. “Now it’s time that this process of production and reception be inscribed within the critical text. How was the film made? With what intention? With what kind of crew? With what relation to the subject? How was it produced? Who is distributing it? Where

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43 ——— Alexandra Juhasz, *AIDS TV* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 142

is it being shown? For what audience is it constructed? How is it available? How is it being received?”<sup>44</sup>

*Prostitutes, Risk, and AIDS*, co-produced with Jean Carlomusto, is the second of three tapes Juhasz co-directed for the Gay Men's Health Crisis weekly cable TV programme *Living with AIDS*, a project initiated by Carlomusto and Gregg Bordowitz to provide quality programming to people with AIDS. The original idea was to structure the documentary around direct interviews with sex workers, a project that failed despite countless attempts to meet with and record the words of prostitutes in New York due to their fear of exposure and being recognised on-screen. Despite the necessity of revising the talking-heads premise around which the tape was meant to be organised, the main objective still remained in place: to question how a sex-phobic society and the sex-shaming broadcast television industry control the representation of prostitutes, their storytelling, and their freedom of speech. Given the oppositional principle of Juhasz's video activism, the theoretical underpinnings of the project manifest in both Juhasz's and Carlomusto's open radical feminism and sex positivity throughout the film, not only in the specific context of sex workers' rights but also in response to punitive AIDS legislation affecting women's lives, bodies, and freedom of choice. In *Prostitutes, Risk, and AIDS*, the relationship between sex work and HIV/AIDS is presented within a precise analytical framework that questions the social and political implications of mass media's representation of sex and the epidemic, which fuels society's generalised criminalisation of prostitution. Concurrently, it presents the cultural, social, political, and economic implications of AIDS for the lives and livelihoods of both sex workers and their clients.

The final edited version of the film revolves around the character of Carol Leigh, a.k.a. Scarlot Harlot—a figure with whom Juhasz was unfamiliar at the time and whom she approached with the guidance and help of Carlomusto. Leigh, who died of cancer in November 2022, was an artist, sex worker, and sex workers' rights activist as well as a filmmaker, a “neo-feminist,” and a pro-sex advocate in San Francisco. She fought against the anti-sex positions of certain fringes of institutionalised feminism. One of the founding members of ACT UP/San Francisco, she also co-founded Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics (COYOTE), an organisation born in the early 1970s with the scope of decriminalising and destigmatising prostitution.

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44 ——— Juhasz, *AIDS TV*, 50.

The daughter of a TV repairman, Leigh grew up surrounded by televisions. She learnt video editing and production in a course offered and funded by a local cable TV network in Tucson, Arizona. The advent of affordable camcorders allowed her to produce videos independently, beyond the purview of the facilities accessible at the cable TV company. Sex work—i.e. women's freedom to control their bodies—was the main thematic focus and inspiration for all of her activism, artistic research, and creative work, through which she attempted to facilitate public discussion and action about the rights of sex workers and other marginalised communities. The scope of her work touched upon several other topics, however, including sexual health, homelessness, domestic violence, and HIV/AIDS. "I'm a propagandist for various subcultures," she told Juhasz in 2001.<sup>45</sup>

Her artistic work, pro-sex and neo-feminist positions, anti-moralist standpoint, and political battles conducted over almost two decades are the film's driving force and function as collating elements that bridge several viewpoints presented in the tape. Using video as her principal medium of expression, Leigh experimented with familiar televisual formats, such as the sitcom, the music video, and the public service announcement. She embodied the role of the provocative, smart, highly ironic, and funny outlaw to embrace the feminist cause and promote radical sexual politics. Footage from some of Leigh's most glorious performances and public appearances are intermittently interwoven, as a leitmotiv, into a well-organised flow of interviews with representatives from various not-for-profit AIDS organisations, including Juhasz and Carlomusto themselves.

Juhasz's mission, she admits in front of the camera, aligns with Leigh's cause. Sitting at her desk in the editing room, she explains the aims and objectives of the film as well as the theoretical foundations underpinning her research, namely the politics of representation. She looks at a series of monitors displaying scenes from old films portraying women. The images and stories of the mass media, she declares, shape society's understanding of prostitution and AIDS; thus, the major contribution of media activism is to deconstruct these cultural representations and the mechanisms of its production, designed to reinforce power and control.

By affirming her position as a filmmaker, a scholar, and a woman looking at the intersections of feminism, activism, and

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45 ——— Alexandra Juhasz, ed., *Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 201.



media theory, Juhasz campaigns for her political ideas and offers a solution that is both theoretical and pragmatic at the same time. Filmmaking, she argues, allows her to advance a radical critique from a non-mainstream point of view but in the dominant format of mainstream video culture. Bringing viewers in and out of the editing room, Juhasz fully acknowledges her positionality, a Brechtian gimmick that she uses extensively to disclose the artifice of the moving image, thereby involving viewers in the making and unfolding of her critical thoughts about television as both a medium and an apparatus for consensus. In so doing, she strengthens the contribution played by her presence in the film as both the author and a fully engaged and self-aware practitioner, whose involvement in the real world is not disguised but rather takes shape in accordance to her commitment for social change. She talks directly to the camera, guiding the audience through the fundamental pillars of her critical analysis and reading excerpts from letters written by prostitutes, including one by Rea Robinson, a Black sex worker who was arrested on a prostitution charge after testing positive for HIV during a chemical dependency treatment. The film ends with the camera directed at co-producer Jean Carlomusto in the editing room. She aligns with Juhasz and validates her work, advocating for safer sex and reiterating the intentions of the film, one that is made by women for other women: it is neither sex nor prostitution but the misrepresentation perpetuated by mass media that needs to be condemned.

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## The AIDS Crisis Revisited

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To resist the “sensational didactic pageant” of Watney’s spectacle of AIDS, which is “choreographed, with its studied emphasis on dirt, depravity, license, and above all promiscuity,”<sup>46</sup> Juhasz argues that “one of the [many] goals of the first generation of AIDS video activism was to show PWAs as brave (not victims) and being rewarded for their tenacity and power.”<sup>47</sup> Fascinated by the obstinacy and audacity of AIDS activists, the film industry has in recent years shown a renewed interest in the early days of American AIDS activism. This “AIDS Crisis Revisitation” largely places the history of AIDS activism within a register of remembrance, grief, and melancholia.<sup>48</sup> It functions both as an

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46 ——— Watney, “The Spectacle of AIDS,” 78.

47 ——— Juhasz and Kerr, “Home Video Returns.”

48 ——— Theodore (Ted) Kerr wrote extensively about what he calls the “AIDS Crisis Revisitation”

Theodore (Ted) Kerr, “Time is Not A Line: Conversations, Essays, and Images About HIV/AIDS Now,” *We Who Feel Differently Journal* 3, (Fall 2014), <http://wewhofeeldifferently.info/journal.php>.

According to Kerr this moment began in 2008 with a series of exhibitions mounted by major museums in the United States and documentaries produced by a large group of filmmakers to remember the early days of the AIDS crisis. For Kerr, these exhibitions and documentaries marked the end of the “Second Silence” of AIDS, a period starting in 1996 with the release of life-prolonging medication. The “First Silence,” of course, comprises the first six years of the epidemic when President Reagan refused to acknowledge the AIDS crisis. Kerr thinks of *Sex Positive* (USA, 2008, directed by Daryl Wein) as the first film of the AIDS Crisis Revisitation. He is quite critical of the revisitation’s artistic and cultural production for “primarily focus[sing] on the stories of white gay men and their allies”

Theodore (Ted) Kerr, “AIDS 1969: HIV, History, and Race,” *Drain* 13, no. 2 (2016), <http://drainmag.com/aids-1969-hiv-history-and-race/>.

Sarah Schulman seems to hold a similar position. When asked what she thought about David France’s film *How to Survive a Plague* (USA, 2012), she replied, “Well we call it ‘The Five White People Who Saved the World’—that’s our nickname for it.”

Sarah Schulman, “Writer and Activist Sarah Schulman on *The Normal Heart*, Being Friends with Larry Kramer, and the Whitewashing of AIDS History,” interview by E. Alex Jung, *Vulture*, June 1, 2014, <http://www.vulture.com/2014/06/writer-sarah-schulman-on-the-normal-heart-larry-kramer.html>.

The most recent examples of the AIDS Crisis Revisitation include,

exercise of cultural memory and an attempt to historicise and make sense of a traumatic human experience, which could eventually inspire present-day cultural activism and political movements. Jim Hubbard, author and director of *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP*, a documentary released in 2012 about civil disobedience in the group's heyday, draws parallels between ACT UP's organising and the 2011 Occupy Wall Street protests, which were taking place literally a couple of blocks away from his office while he was editing his footage for the film. The early responses of artists, writers and filmmakers to the negligence of the government and of society more broadly to effectively responding to the AIDS crisis were deeply rooted within a context of activism and direct action aiming to end the spread of the epidemic and change the cultural meanings and practices that defined AIDS. *United in Anger* is probably one of the few recent films "about AIDS" that takes into account the strong political commitment of the earliest community of AIDS activists. There is very little remembrance, melancholia, and nostalgia in Hubbard's film and much more militancy and rage, as its title openly suggests.<sup>49</sup> *United in Anger* uses original footage spanning the mid-1980s to the end of the 1990s, which Hubbard decided to keep in its original 4:3 format, and intertwines it with interviews with activists and early ACT UP members.<sup>50</sup> Structured chrono-

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among others: the HBO television adaptation of Larry Kramer's play *The Normal Heart* (USA, 2014, directed by Ryan Murphy); the films *Dallas Buyers Club* (USA, 2013, by Jean-Marc Vallée), *United in Anger* (USA, 2012, directed by Jim Hubbard), *How to Survive a Plague* (USA, 2012, directed by David France), *We Were Here* (USA, 2011, directed by Bill Weber and David Weissman); and the museum exhibitions *AIDS in New York: The First 5 Years* (2013, New-York Historical Society) and *Why We Fight: Remembering AIDS Activism* (2013, New York Public Library), as well as a pair of retrospectives on AIDS art collective Gran Fury (2012, 80WSE, New York University).

A recent Instagram account, *The AIDS Memorial*, provides an additional example of this revisitation, run anonymously by a Scottish man going by the name of Stuart, whose aim is to present stories of love, loss, and remembrance in order to preserve the legacy of the AIDS epidemic.

- 49 ——— Film critics have often juxtaposed *United in Anger* and France's *How to Survive a Plague*, both released in 2012 positioning them in a conflictual relationship.  
Ellen C. Feiss, "Get to Work: ACT UP for Everyone," *Little Joe* no. 5 (2015): 158–71.
- 50 ——— Some of the footage used by Hubbard for his film comes from filmmaker James Wentzy, who started documenting ACT UP and the AIDS Crisis in the very early 1990s. In 2002 Wentzy produced the film *Fight Back, Fight AIDS: Fifteen Years of ACT UP*, which documents the history of the organisation from its first demonstration on Wall Street in March

logically, the film documents almost two decades of demonstrations and zaps organised by ACT UP between 1987 and the mid-2000s. Even though Hubbard's documentary aligns with the canonical history of ACT UP and makes an almost academic use of the archive, it remains a helpful and honest source of knowledge for an audience unfamiliar with the history of the AIDS activist movement, all without renouncing a politicised reading of this significant moment. The film's timeline encourages the viewer to engage with the historical footage chosen by Hubbard in relationship to the spirit of 1980s AIDS activism, rather than as the result of a low-budget production. Moreover, the film presents a broader narrative of the AIDS crisis, the predominant accounts of which are sometimes criticised as overly male, white, urban, and American. Rather than imposing one narrative over another, the film grants viewers the opportunity to learn from multiple communities, each with their own stories, that shared a common goal. If, as Theodore (Ted) Kerr claimed, the story of "AIDS before AIDS" remains untold (much like that of AIDS after the AIDS crisis), then *United in Anger* offers a good starting point to dig into the present and "the past of the past" of the AIDS epidemic.<sup>51</sup> Continuing to look into the past, present and future, as well as the topographies of this history that have long been rendered invisible, is a responsibility that a new generation

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1987 to 2002. It is a compilation of clips mostly from amateur video recordings with no voice-over or text to contextualise the images. Most of the interviews present in the film, instead, come from the "ACT UP Oral History Project." Initiated in 2003 by Jim Hubbard and Sarah Schulman, with principal camera work by James Wentzly, the project comprises an extensive collection of interviews with surviving members of ACT UP. Available at: [www.actuporalhistory.org](http://www.actuporalhistory.org).

51 ——— Kerr refers to the fact that the history of AIDS commonly began in 1981 with the publication on July 3 of *The New York Times* article "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals." As recent studies have demonstrated, it is highly likely that the HIV virus reached North America as early as the beginning of the 1970s. Kerr mentions the case of Robert Rayford, a Black teenager from Missouri who died in 1969 from a viral infection that only later, in 1987, was discovered to be almost identical to the HIV retrovirus. Even though Rayford's story was presented to the general public in newspaper reports, it was largely ignored by the scientific community, including recent studies, which nevertheless acknowledged the story of Gaëtan Dugas, aka Patient Zero. Rayford's story is the impetus for Kerr to claim that, on one side, the history we know, beginning in 1981, "is not the history of HIV/AIDS; it is the history of our response to HIV/AIDS" and that, on the other, "in this history, race is not interrogated, whiteness and presumed whiteness is offered without commentary and homosexuality is emphasised." Kerr, "AIDS 1969."

of scholars and researchers have fully embraced.<sup>52</sup> It is only by first acknowledging the legacy and rich history that Hubbard's film presents that we can begin to comprehend the hidden realities of AIDS that still need to be unearthed. Any attempt to "destabilise and decentralise the dominant narratives circulating"<sup>53</sup> through this history is meaningless without taking into account the historical, socio-political and cultural factors that contributed to the profound influence of early American-born AIDS activism—an influence that, according to Juhasz, is meaningful only if it functions as a call to return to political activism.<sup>54</sup>

Among the questions that Hubbard's film might raise, some relate to the typology of images he selected and used. The cinematographic conventions of the documentary genre did not allow him to pursue an in-depth critical contextualisation of the footage. Even though the audience is given access—through the historical narrative trajectory of the film—to the socio-political environment in which those images were produced, it might still miss a full understanding of the contexts in which they were originally created, organised, and distributed. In a short essay accompanying the exhibition *Fever in the Archive* that

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52 ——— Examples include: the "AIDS Anarchive" project by Aimar Arriola, Nancy Garín and Linda Valdes, which investigates cultural responses to HIV/AIDS in southern Europe and Latin America, with a focus on Spain and Chile; and Conal McStravick's project, "Learning in a Public Medium," exploring the legacy of British filmmaker Stuart Marshall not only as an artist but also an activist and educator.

53 ——— From the press release distributed by The Showroom, London, to publicise the event "Other Stories of HIV/AIDS: Culture, History, and the Ongoing Epidemic," organised on August 24, 2017, by Aimar Arriola, Theo Gordon, Theodore (Ted) Kerr, Conal McStravick, Jaime Shearn Coan, and Dan Udy. The press release is available on The Showroom's website.  
"Other Stories of HIV/AIDS: Culture, History, and the Ongoing Epidemic," The Showroom, <http://www.theshowroom.org/events/other-stories-of-hiv-slash-aids-slash-learning-in-a-public-medium-culture-history-and-the-ongoing-epidemic>.

54 ——— Juhasz and Kerr, "Home Video Returns."  
Directed by Juhasz and released in 2005, *Video Remains* is an experimental documentary that interweaves clips from a videotape interview conducted by the filmmaker with her best friend, James Robert Lamb, a year before he died of AIDS in 1992, and interview footage with present-day characters about AIDS, death, activism, and video making. The film turns out to be an elegiac memorial to a lost friend but also an occasion to reflect on what remains of the early AIDS video activism. In this sense, Juhasz's research into the history of AIDS activism does not only offer a testimony of how AIDS activism has influenced an entire generation of cultural workers, but functions equally as a reminder that activism, because it has happened in the past, can still be possible in the future.

Hubbard curated at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in December 2000, he distinguishes three main periods in the production of independent AIDS moving images. This periodisation, borrowed in part from Juhasz's 1995 book *AIDS TV*, corresponds directly to the most significant cultural and political events that characterised the history of HIV/AIDS. It situates the development of independent AIDS videos in relation to the construction of the dominant discourse and rhetoric on AIDS in the mainstream mass media and television of the 1980s and 1990s, as well as to the advent of portable video cameras, which began to influence video art, experimental filmmaking, and the broader film industry from the end of the 1970s. While Juhasz looks at videos and films produced up until the end of the 1980s, Hubbard pushes the temporal framework of his categorisation to the mid-1990s. In addition, whereas Juhasz favours a methodological approach mostly grounded in a dialogic, conflictual relationship between the mainstream media representations of AIDS and the counter-images produced by a large community of alternative video makers, thereby corroborating the hypothesis of the largely corrective role of the latter, Hubbard, on the contrary, is more interested in understanding how far artists and filmmakers went in their representations of the political crisis engendered by the AIDS epidemic. Hubbard includes a series of examples of experimental films and video art that are more celebratory and emotional, without necessarily offering an alternative or a counter-response to the dominant image of HIV/AIDS. In these works, artists rely on their own voices to visually represent a differently articulated experience of living in the midst of this tragedy.

By contrast, Roger Hallas, who also makes use of the temporal framework presented by Hubbard, adds a third element: if on the one hand he fully acknowledges the "embodied immediacy" of AIDS video activism as well as the use of the moving image as an instrument to both move and politically mobilise its audience, on the other he brings to the forefront of his analysis the ability of these images to bear witness to the tragedy of AIDS.<sup>55</sup> He argues for a different terminology, preferring "queer AIDS media" to the more general "AIDS activist video." Moving images bear witness to AIDS, he claims, through "the aesthetic articulation of specific gay structures of feeling around loss and alienation"<sup>56</sup> In this sense, he answers the question that experimental filmmaker Jerry Tartaglia provocatively posed almost 25 years before to the readers of the *Millennium Film Journal* about whether

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55 ——— Roger Hallas, *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness, and the Queer Moving Image* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009).

56 ——— Hallas, *Reframing Bodies*, 187.

there is such a thing as a gay sensibility in avant-garde film.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, this is also one major limit of Hallas's argument: he takes for granted that all AIDS activist media is in some sense queer media, and thus carries the traces of an (homosexual) experience of loss both cultural and physical. From this vantage point, his analysis is very selective. However, it centres on an important aspect common to all AIDS moving images, i.e. different articulations of practices of postmodern re-signification, in particular discursive appropriation, that are a key element in the production not only of AIDS video activism but of artistic activism more generally.

Despite the diversity of their perspectives, the dynamic among Juhasz, Hubbard, and Hallas is not oppositional but rather intertwining. They all concur that the first period of AIDS video activism began in 1981 and lasted until 1985, corresponding to Rock Hudson's death. Prior to this event, AIDS was barely mentioned on television.<sup>58</sup> Hubbard notes that, "a handful of AIDS films and videotapes depicting the epidemic from the inside began appearing in 1984."<sup>59</sup> This coincided with the emergence of the "moral panic" model that was shaping the early mainstream media coverage of AIDS, as well as the first counter-images of the epidemic created by and circulated through the alternative (mostly gay and lesbian) press. But, the public disclosure of both Hudson's homosexuality and his HIV-positive status made AIDS a much more compelling issue for TV networks and print media.

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57 ——— Jerry Tartaglia, "Notes from the Homo, Underground," *Millenium Film Journal* no. 41 (Fall 2003),

<http://www.mfj-online.org/journalPages/MFJ41/tartagliapage.html>.

58 ——— According to James Kinsella, although Dr. James W. Curran from the Center for Disease Control had a forty-five-second spot to talk about the "newly discovered and mysterious disease" on ABC's *Good Morning, America* as early as December 1981, the first report on television about a new "rare form of cancer" aired on June 17, 1982, on NBC's *Nightly News*. The first TV series to include an AIDS plot was NBC's *St. Elsewhere* in the episode "AIDS and Comfort," which aired on December 21, 1983. John Erman's *An Early Frost* (USA, 1985, produced by NBC) was the first movie about AIDS made for US television.

For further reading see: James Kinsella, *Covering the Plague: AIDS and the American Media* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

59 ——— Jim Hubbard, "Fever in the Archive: AIDS Activist Video," ACT UP NY, <http://www.actupny.org/divatv/guggenheim.html>.

**Film INTERMISSION 3****Anna Thew*****Eros Erosion***

[UK, 1990, 45 min.]



Anna Thew. *Eros Erosion*, 1990. Screenshot. Courtesy of the author.

In November 2016, Vincent Honoré invited me to talk about AIDS, art, and activism at the David Roberts Art Foundation in London, of which he was then director and chief curator. The talk ended in a Q&A with Olivia Laing, who had just published *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone*, an autobiographical investigation of the sense of solitude she experienced while living in New York, where among the works of other artists she was struck by the AIDS activism of David Wojnarowicz.<sup>60</sup> After the talk, I met artist William Joys, who pointed me towards the work of Anna Thew, an artist and filmmaker who did “some films about HIV/AIDS,” Joys told me, and with whom he was working on a project for which she received a grant from Montez Press.

I met Anna for the first time a few weeks after the talk at the David Roberts Art Foundation. On December 9, The Cinema Museum was hosting a screening of four experimental films by Jim Hubbard from the 1970s and 1980s. I had already been in touch with Jim for several months. He was helping me fill in the gaps of my history of independent AIDS moving images in the US. Anna was attending the screening; she and Jim were long-time friends. The evening ended at a pub in North London, not far from Anna’s home, which I visited once in the ensuing months to talk about her films and to attend an open-air evening marathon of Kenneth Anger’s films.

Originally trained as a painter at the Chelsea School of Art,

60 ———— Olivia Laing. *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone* (London: Canongate Books, 2016).



Thew later studied Italian and German at Manchester University and spent considerable time abroad, in Perugia, Italy—that's why, I later realised, she could speak Italian quite well. She started to experiment with filmmaking and performing arts at the end of the 1970s. Anna was a former student of Anne Rees-Mogg, one of the pioneers of avant-garde cinema and alternative film practice in the UK, who directed the London Film-Makers' Co-Operative from 1981 to 1984. From Rees-Mogg, Thew inherited a very special thoughtfulness in representing the passage of time, memories, and human relationships. In Rees-Mogg's cinema, Thew discovered a new approach to cinematic practice, one that broke with the formalism of the dominant structuralist film tradition of the 1970s and opened up to other aesthetic horizons and cinematic moments—less formalist and more introspective—of meaning-making, a common characteristic of all of the films she had directed since the early 1980s.

Thew started to shoot *Eros Erosion*, her first film about HIV/AIDS, in 1989 and completed it in 1990. While the devastating effects of the epidemic are never openly described on-screen, AIDS remains an ever-present character heavily alluded to throughout the film. When I watched it for the first time, I emailed Anna. "Beautiful"—that's all I wrote. *Eros Erosion* is a well-balanced and thoughtful collage of fragmented yet allegorical and polysemic images. Some are staged and made with professional actors who follow a script; others are more abstract, instinctual, and abrupt. They have a highly evocative power—from the opening scenes, my body shivers and grasps feelings of desire, sex, love, solitude, alienation, and ultimately death. Mourning, grieving, and the impossibility of processing the sense of helplessness death leaves us with are key themes of the film.

*Eros Erosion* begins on a gloomy note: a pitch-dark sea; the sound of a drum made by the strings of a piano; people gathered at a candlelight vigil; the disconnected voice-overs of a man and a woman (Thew herself) speaking about loss and grief. These elements suggest metaphoric connections with the background images, but the relation is not yet clear. At the same time they hint at the disclosure of a personal story that resists offering a finite meaning. In the next scene, the camera moves between the walls of a hospital corridor. There is an empty bed. Thew's voice-over reads a poem thousands of years old, by Chinese poet Wei Wen Ti, about his father's passing. When someone dies, sorrow and loneliness are all we are left with. The following scene features a desolate and foggy dryland, with the sounds of birds and

geese in the background, as well as images of derelict factories in Beckton, a suburb of east London, overlaid with the voice of a man reading a note from his doctor. "I have been forwarded your letter, re: Kaposi's syndrome and AIDS," the doctor writes. "I regret to say that, as far as I am aware, there is no solid, confirmed medical information re: treatment for the above." Images function as metaphors of the fear to test HIV-positive; of the reaction to friends testing positive; of the stigma that society attaches to the virus; of the burden of keeping one's HIV status secret; of the dreadful thought of death by means of a disease no one seems to care about.

Although roughly drafted, there is a narrative plot that the film follows. The queer politics I see being enacted in Thew's film are not immediately visible. The storyline is not always clear, a cinematic device that exacerbates the sense of uncertainty characterising the film and the experience of watching it. The fragmented and interrupted images are glued together by means of a female voice-over that reads passages from Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, a collection of stories written during the fourteenth century Black Death in Italy, where images that appear in the second part of the film are shot. Now the unspoken connections with the AIDS epidemic become more evident, as does the link to the backlash of the political conservatism of Thatcher's government, against which Thew's practice as a filmmaker needs to be considered. Boccaccio's *The Decameron* functions as the ritualised telling of Thew's autobiographical yet experimental cinematic prose. "The story is used allegorically," Thew says at one point in the tape. The allegory of the plague was used by many other filmmakers (Thew's friend, Stuart Marshall, among them) to represent the experience of the queer community during the early stages of the AIDS crisis. "AIDS is a gay plague," "God's punishment for the deviant gay lifestyle," the homophobic and AIDS-phobic mass media reported for many years, pathologising queer people, alongside sex workers and drug addicts, as "AIDS killers."

In the second part of the film, someone reads excerpts from the tale of Lisabetta da Messina and Lorenzo. Lisabetta comes from a wealthy Italian family. In order to increase the family's wealth after the death of their father, her three brothers are keen to organise a convenient marriage for their sister. Lorenzo is a young man of modest origins who works for the lady's family and helps with the brothers' business. Lisabetta and Lorenzo have a secret affair, until Lisabetta's brothers kill Lorenzo to

preempt the threat of their love becoming public and provoking society's contempt. After finding his dead body, Lisabetta cuts off Lorenzo's head and plants it in a pot. She keeps it in her room, crying for days until she dies of passion and grief.

Professional actors enact the events. The storyline intersects with images evoking the evanescence of life—the sea, birds flying, a port and a train station, a hotel room where two men make love, the aging beauty of Rome and the suburbs of Naples—while interrupted voice-over recordings intertwine and allude to the loss and mourning of a beloved one. The narration unfolds at the nexus of the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real.<sup>61</sup> Again, Thew is acting in the domain of allegory. The rich

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61 ——— I am using this three-part structure, borrowed from Lacan, in not only the original Lacanian sense but also a more literal one. Taken literally, Thew mixes three different visual registers corresponding to these Lacanian categories, bringing the viewer in and out of (1) the tangible concreteness of the reality she addresses (the impossibility of love in the age of AIDS); (2) the symbolic power of the images she creates (for example, an abandoned industrial site symbolising the emotional desolation caused by the epidemic); and (3) the imaginative scenarios she develops that are sensuous and thus apparently not strictly related to HIV/AIDS. In this sense they are deceptive, in the promise of a truce that will not come. Thew's use of the imaginary is a portal into the deepest feelings of the human being grappling with the revelatory yet terrifying lack of any meaning of life in the time of AIDS. In Lacanian terms, Thew's HIV-positive subject (one that never appears but is constantly alluded to either metaphorically or allegorically) gives up its self as a means of survival, rather than in acceptance of the social bonds, socio-linguistic dynamics, and constellations of relationships with others that Lacan calls the symbolic order. In Thew's film, this allusion to a subject that is almost never shown symbolises an interruption of recognition: the formation of the queer loving subject remains unrealised in the time of AIDS. The invisible subject of the film implies an experience of total alienation. Denied the opportunity to undergo a process of identification (hence, for instance, the metaphoric use of Bocaccio's novella), they cannot fulfill the desired ideal image of themselves. The discursive field of AIDS that the subject is forced to experience unfolds in the film as a landscape of metaphors, rendered by visual shifts and fractures that symbolically stand for the "slipperiness" and "fragmentation" of the subject itself, whose effort to resist any form of social enforcement seems to be irremediably disavowed. In this sense, Thew incorporates the Lacanian Imaginary order. Lastly, in the film the Real takes the form of AIDS itself. The epidemic becomes the ungraspable entity that Thew struggles to represent, her subject suspended in an unthinkable state of things that is impossible to make sense of.

For further reading see: Jacques Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955 (The Seminar of*

mosaic of images that she creates convey a sense of affective excess embedded in the enabling force of a drowning present and a future in which the experience of love is slowly obscured by the shadow of AIDS. The moment of ecstasy and joy arising in the context of sex and pleasure, potentially charged with a transformative power, is superseded by the bad feelings that mark the lives of queer people who love amid the AIDS epidemic. The emotional surplus that her film produces is more than simply nostalgia; it is a depiction of queer politics and the structures of feeling that characterise it; it is the force of affect and the political desire to resist the dissolution of the experience of love and sex; it is a testimony to the oppressive coercion of both the state and society at large.<sup>62</sup>

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*Jacques Lacan: Book II*, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller (London and New York: Norton & Company, 1991).

- 62 ——— *Eros Erosion* is a film of moments that manifest—almost performatively—in a climax of visual sensations, which indistinctly carry traces of the feelings of loss, solitude, and isolation that the film articulates. Thew does not rely on the identificatory mechanism of classical/mainstream cinema. The dense expressiveness of Thew’s aesthetic vocabulary allows for a deeper articulation of AIDS-related and queer structures of feeling. In “AIDS and Gay Cinephilia” Roger Hallas analyses the visual excess of films by Mike Hoolboom, Jim Hubbard, and Michael Wallin, among others. Hallas uses the concept of structures of feeling as a methodology. “I am drawing from the conceptualization Raymond Williams offers in *Marxism and Literature*,” Hallas writes, “when he describes such structures of feeling as ‘specifically affective elements of consciousness’ and ‘meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt.’” Williams’s structures of feeling correspond to ongoing experiences within the private and personal domain that have yet to be recognised and formalised as universal social experiences. Still, they are “sematic formations,” and as such they produce meaning. “To look at these films now,” Hallas argues, “is to be reminded that below the emergent structures of feeling around the current notion of AIDS as a chronic, manageable disease, there are deeper, residual structures of loss.” The simultaneous presence and absence of AIDS—which appears only as a voice-over text—in Thew’s film leverages “the residual structures of loss” that Hallas writes about and which, I agree with him, resonate in all gay men and women who had to socialise and come out in a heteronormative society. In so doing, *Eros Erosion* does not depend on the empathic role-modelled self-recognition or identification of the viewing subject. By insisting on the endless, pervading, and haunting feelings of loss and alienation arising from the tragic experience of AIDS that the film lingers on, Thew creates a bridge between new and old configurations of similar feelings of loss and isolation, revisited in light of the psychic crisis that the AIDS epidemic had forced queer people to once again experience, one that has also to do with the impossibility to love. The title

For *Thew*, the film remains unfinished, and the closing scene presents a hiatus. Everything is left in suspension. The film offers no resolution. A beautiful sequence of images of the Italian Alps viewed from an airplane window is accompanied by the gentle voice of a man speaking. “The trees were all in blue and the lilac blossoms were covered with dust,” he says. “As I walked down the low road and turned to say goodbye to him, I saw a few of these blossoms fall down the road, and I was then aware of the transience of things, how impermanent everything is, except for memory.”

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suggests the destruction of this possibility, as does the allegorical function of Lisabetta and Lorenzo’s story. In this sense, *Eros Erosion* is a film of mourning and remembrance, which are not only materialised in *Thew*’s personal experience of the epidemic but also serve as a recurrent motif of any lyrical depiction of humankind’s vulnerability. Roger Hallas, “AIDS and Gay Cinephilia,” 85-126. Raymond Williams, “Structures of Feelings,” in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128-36.

## What Did AIDS Do to Handsome Kenny's Eyes?<sup>63</sup>

From an art historical standpoint, the advent of independent AIDS videos in the United States coincided with the broadcast in December 1984 of British filmmaker Stuart Marshall's movie *Bright Eyes on The Eleventh Hours*, a programme showcasing independent films on UK television's Channel 4. Generally referred to as the first full-length documentary about AIDS, *Bright Eyes* preceded by only a few months the outburst of the American camcorder AIDS activism of the mid-1980s.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>63</sup> ——— The title of this sub-chapter is an ironic yet dark meta-appropriation of the title of Stuart Marshall's documentary film, *Bright Eyes* (UK, 1984). "What the gay plague did to handsome Kenny," was the title of the July 24, 1983, edition of the British tabloid *The Sunday People*. Kenny Ramsauer, a freelance lighting designer, was among the first persons living with AIDS to receive national attention in the UK. *The Sunday People* spread features two photos of Ramsauer laid out one next to the other, showing the twenty-nine-year-old man "before and after AIDS." The bright eyes of a healthy Kenny in the picture on the left are juxtaposed with the evident marks of his weakness in the image on the right. By employing methods reminiscent of postmodern bricolage and intertextuality, Marshall brings to the surface the mechanism by which the mainstream narrativisation of AIDS takes shape around certain pre-established historical social attitudes. According to the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, who classified criminals according to their physiognomy and the truthfulness of the photographic mean, the eyes of sexual offenders are nearly always bright. In a key scene from *Bright Eyes*, Marshall alternates the two images of Kenny Ramsauer with caricatures and portraits taken from Lombroso's studies to identify different typologies of human abnormality.

<sup>64</sup> ——— As much as Stuart Marshall, Simon Watney played a very important role in establishing a productive connection between the US and the UK, initiating an osmotic process in the context of the cultural and artistic reactions to the AIDS epidemic. It is through his writings and research that the AIDS activist movement, which was developing in the early 1980s in the US, became known in the UK, especially in London. "AIDS: The Cultural Agenda," the series of talks that he organized at the ICA in London in March 1988, is one of the first and the few examples of an open discussion about the cultural policies responding to AIDS in a public institution in the UK. When the AIDS crisis exploded in the US in the mid-1980s, Watney was already known as an older Gay Liberation generation European activist. He witnessed the emer-

The research undertaken by Marshall during the script writing and production of *Bright Eyes* was re-packaged for *Journal of the Plague Year*, the five-monitor video installation he contributed to the *Video '84* exhibition at Galerie Optica in Montreal from September 24 to October 4 of that same year.<sup>65</sup> *Journal of the Plague Year* was more pre-

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gence of ACT UP in New York, where his early visits in the 1970s had introduced him to some of the most influential voices in the fight against AIDS in the US, including activist and film historian Vito Russo, writer Edmund White, and playwright and public health advocate Larry Kramer. From 1985 through the mid-1990s he was very active in the US AIDS movement. The only person who shared this experience was long-time friend Stuart Marshall, as Watney told me on the occasion of a private conversation we had in 2017. Furthermore, Watney's book *Policing Desire* (1987) had a profound impact in the US. Douglas Crimp, the most well-known, recognised, and distinguished voice in the history of AIDS activism, claimed that Watney's book and Marshall's *Bright Eyes* inspired the preparation of his seminal collection of essays commissioned by *October Journal* in 1987, *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*.

65 ——— This hypothesis is confirmed by Ian White in his 2007 essay "Stuart Marshall," [http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/stuart\\_marshall/essay\(printversion\).html](http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/stuart_marshall/essay(printversion).html).

A revisited version of this essay was published in *Afterall* no. 41 (Spring/Summer 2016).

*Journal of the Plague Year* is more precisely Marshall's second video contribution to the AIDS crisis, following *Kaposi's Sarcoma (The Plague and its Symptoms)* (UK, 1983). The title of this earlier film recalls "Living with Kaposi Sarcoma," an article by Michael Lynch published in the November 1982 issue of *The Body Politic*. Lynch argues that with the advent of AIDS homosexuals have submitted to medical authority and once again allowed it to "define, restrict, [and] pathologize" them. Presented for the first time at the Toronto International Video Festival in the spring of 1983, with a two-day workshop led by the artist, the film was lost after Marshall's death in 1993, and no copy remains in circulation. The only surviving document about this film is an interview that Marshall did in May 1983 at VIVO (at that time called Video Inn) in Vancouver. Conducted by Gayblevision, the city's LGBTQ-community cable show, the interview centred on "British gay TV." It includes a discussion of Marshall's overarching film practice as well as the limited resources available in the UK for the production and distribution of films about gay sexual politics and AIDS, and shows a few brief clips from the lost tape. Marshall describes the film as an essay about representation of AIDS by mass media, and medical journalism in particular, echoing Lynch's article. The driving force sustaining *Kaposi's Sarcoma*, Marshall points out, is that contemporary medical research is destroying the "autonomous, proud, homoerotic" body built up by the gay liberation movement. According to both Marshall and Lynch, medical authorities are using AIDS to reconstruct the gay subject as a pathological infected body as well as a carrier of infection, disease, and death.

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*Journal of the Plague Year* clearly borrows its title from Daniel Defoe's historical account of the Great Plague of 1665-66 in London. The rhetorical device of the year journal is the conceptual framework through which the installation asserts its critical rigor and contribution to the generation of theory. On a more practical level, it gives unity to an otherwise apparently disconnected set of visual depictions of the plague, namely AIDS, suggested by its title. Although there are no images fully documenting the original installation of the work in 1984, it was reconstructed and exhibited at London's Raven Row in 2015, for the show "The Inoperative Community" curated by Dan Kidner. The restoration was mainly based on a later version of the installation exhibited, and slightly altered by Marshall, in 1990 at the Oxford Museum of Modern Art, on the occasion of the show *Signs of the Times: A Decade of Video, Film and Slide-Tape Installation in Britain*. Each of the small monitors is embedded into a wall, partitioned in five parts, with texts typed over or handwritten in each section. The videos are silent. The overall structure brings to mind the cells of a prison or the cubicles in a public toilet, alluding to parallels with seminal queer films of the past, such as Jean Genet's *Un Chant d'amour* (France, 1950), reinforced by the diaristic contours that the installation reveals. The first video, and the corresponding text, refers to the 1933 Nazi raid of the Institute of Sexual Science, headed by Magnus Hirschfeld in Berlin, with piles of books and papers being burned in barrels. The second video shows images of an empty room in Paris, with an empty bed, still bearing the silhouette of a human body. The text above the screen reads: "It's been two weeks and three days now. His mother keeps trying to enter the apartment. She threatens to call the police." The third screen shows a sequence of press clips excerpted from tabloid front page titles, all presenting alarmist news framing AIDS as a gay plague. The monitor is embedded, on the top and bottom, with the title of a 1982 medical report on Kaposi's sarcoma, by Jerome E. Groopman and Michael S. Gottlieb. The fourth screen displays images of a sleeping boy, presumably Marshall's partner, in a London apartment. Inscribed on the panel, a handwritten text that the artist found graffitied somewhere in town reads: "AIDS: Arse Infected Death Sentence." The last video features naturalistic scenes of Flossenbürg and Nuremberg, accompanied by a text describing the personal experience of an internee from a concentration camp, about Jewish and homosexual prisoners assigned to the "quarrying, dynamiting, and hewing" of stones for "Hitler's great building projects." These internees either worked until death or were shot by the Nazi troops. In its experimental format, *Journal of the Plague Year* is a highly political work that anticipates and lays the foundation for many of the AIDS videos produced by artists and filmmakers, especially in the US, in the following years. Departing from his personal experience of AIDS and the reemergence of a reinvigorated and frightful hunt targeting gays in the 1980s, Marshall draws evident parallels with history, expressing the extent of fear, oppression, and violence that the gay community was again subjected to in the wake of AIDS. However, despite the video installation's cinematic experimentalism and gener-



cisely an elegiac video diary historically contextualising the English media's commentary on AIDS as a gay plague, placing it in a long history of persecution against homosexuals, as well as a documentation of the gay community's emotional experience of the early stages of the AIDS crisis.<sup>66</sup> Marshall was one of the first to begin developing a clear picture of the attempt by the medical and government establishments in the wake of AIDS to pull back from the hard-won efforts of the 1970s gay liberation movement to redefine the vocabulary and narratives around the representation of homosexual identity.<sup>67</sup>

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al sense of somberness, the signs of Marshall's involvement with AIDS activism remain strong. It is a call to experiment and initiate new critical contexts in the age of AIDS with which to resist and reshape society's long-operating representation of sickness in connection to abnormality and same-sex desire.

For further reading see: Dan Kidner, "The Exhibition of Political Film and Video" (PhD diss., University of Reading, 2018).

- 66 ——— As argued by Conal McStravick, Marshall's *Journal of the Plague Year* inherits its conceptual framing and visual economy from some of the filmmaker's previous works, in particular the *Mouth Works* series (UK, 1975–1977). Composed of three works—*Going through the Motions* (1975), *Arcanum* (1976), and *Mouth Room* (1976)—this series signalled Marshall's shift to single-monitor video after a decade in sound, performance, and installation. Alongside his latest project, *Pedagogue* (UK, 1988), these works "illustrate Marshall's debt to feminist video practice and the 'semanalysis' theories of Julia Kristeva, with art as a signifying and re-signifying practice, as conveyed through Marshall's video theory in development at the same time."

Conal McStravick, "Meet Stuart Marshall: AIDS film and video work 1984–1993," The Concordia University Community Lecture Series on HIV/AIDS, <http://www.concordia.ca/cuevents/main/2016/12/04/stuart-marshall-aids-film.html>.



Stuart Marshall. *Journal of the Plague Year*, 1984. Screenshot. Courtesy of the author.

- 67 ——— In Marshall's own words: "*Bright Eyes* took the form of a collage of different historical discourses, images and meanings about homosexuality and disease. [...] *Bright Eyes* is a kind of collage, a series of temporal juxtapositions of textual units. I choose this form because it allowed me to collide different historical episodes in such a way that the viewer

The early video experiments of Stuart Marshall lead to an argument for a less American-centric historiography of the AIDS video activist movement.<sup>68</sup> Marshall's relationship with the United States

would be presented with the problem of assembling their mutual relationships. The viewer would participate in the construction of meaning by juxtaposing large, seemingly self-contained units of discourse [...] My intention in 1984 was to draw out the historical continuity of anti-homosexual persecution."

Stuart Marshall, "The Contemporary Political Use of Gay History: The Third Reich," in *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object-Choices (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 65–67.

68 — According to Simon Watney, AIDS in the UK remained a private epidemic, largely invisible in the public sphere, given the lower number of cases and the virus being mostly confined to the demographic of homosexual men. Furthermore, the scope of the London gay community, in conjunction with its continued mobilisation and the government's introduction in 1986 of a national network of needle exchange for IV drug users, have contributed to "the relatively small scale of the UK epidemic."

Simon Watney, "Introduction: Epidemic! What epidemic?" in *Imagine Hope: AIDS and Gay Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000), 1–26. Simple as it may seem, these few key factors may be sufficient to explain why the response of artists and filmmakers to AIDS in London has not been so prolific as in New York. As filmmaker Constantine Giannaris—who was living and working in London during the 1980s—once told me, queer politics and gay culture rather than AIDS activism remained a more central focus of video artists in London at the time. Giannaris's only short video addressing AIDS, *Jean Genet is Dead* (UK, 1988), as well as Isaac Julien's *This is Not an AIDS Advertisement* (UK, 1987), are both grounded in a certain queer sensibility inherited from the early experimental works of Derek Jarman (especially *Sebastiane*, UK, 1976; and *Jubilee*, UK, 1977), in particular the sense of guilt that characterised homosexual desire and that grew intensively during the AIDS era, epitomised by Julien's video leitmotiv, "don't feel guilty in your desire." Both films stand out as elegies or memorials, inspired by and dedicated to a personal loss to AIDS, that of common friend Mark Ashton, gay rights activist and member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, whose story has been made popular by the film *Pride* (UK, 2014, directed by Matthew Warchus) which focusses on gay and lesbian support for the British miners' strike of 1984. In 1983, when Marshall



Isaac Julien. *This Is Not An AIDS Advertisement*, 1987. Screenshot. Courtesy of the author.



Stuart Marshall. *Bright Eyes*, 1984. Screenshot. Courtesy of the author.

dated back to the beginning of the 1970s. After meeting experimental sound artist and composer Alvin Lucier in London in 1969, he moved to Middletown, Connecticut, in 1971 to undertake a one-year master's programme in New Musical Composition at Wesleyan University under the supervision of Lucier himself.<sup>69</sup> As Peter Todd of the British Film Institute states, "Stuart Marshall served as an important link between the British visual arts scene of the 1970s and American experimental music of the same epoch."<sup>70</sup> From the mid-1980s, Marshall's travels to the US intensified until his death on May 31, 1993. Maya Vision producer Rebecca Dobbs reported that he died after returning to London as he was too ill to continue researching a film on the West Coast of the US for Channel 4's *Critical Eye* series. When Marshall began work on *Bright Eyes*, most of the independent literature and the counter-discourse on the epidemic initiated by the gay press in the US as well as not-for-profit organisations such as GMHC in New York was

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was undertaking research for his first AIDS video project (*Kaposi's Sarcoma*), Giannaris, Julien, and Ashton—whose connections to the US were not as extensive as Marshall's—initiated a common film project, once again centred on queer and gay politics, rather than the advent of the AIDS epidemic. Titled *Framed Youth—The Revenge of The Teenage Perverts*, the forty-five-minute documentary was realised and produced by the Lesbian and Gay Youth Video Project in London. It is a collection of interviews conducted over a period of six months by gay and lesbian teenagers with straight people on the streets of the British capital about their views on homosexuality, reminiscent of Pier Paolo Pasolini's documentary *Love Meetings* (Italy, 1965).

69 ——— Alvin Lucier, "On Stuart Marshall: Composer, Video Artist and Filmmaker, 1949-1993," *Leonardo Music Journal* 11 (December 2001): 51–52.

70 ——— Peter Todd, "Stuart Marshall's *Idiophonics*," *Leonardo Music Journal* 26 (December 2016): 97.

already circulating beyond national borders—among the talking heads to appear in *Bright Eyes* was Linda Semple, the manager of London's famous queer bookstore, Gay's the Word, which opened in 1979. By 1984 Larry Kramer was becoming a prominent figure in the fight against AIDS, following the publication of "1,112 and Counting," the first of his many celebrated articles, in the previous year's March issue of *New York Native* magazine. Alongside Richard Berkowitz, Michael Callen, another influential voice in the AIDS crisis, co-authored the first safer sex guide, *How to Have Sex in an Epidemic: One Approach*, published in May 1983. The speech that Callen gave on May 10, 1983 to the New York Congressional Delegation is a must read for anyone interested in gay politics and the history of the AIDS crisis. It was with a re-reading of this impassioned speech, shot in the arboretum atop the cruising ground on London's Hampstead Heath, that Marshall chose to end *Bright Eyes*. "I recall how sensitively I was treated by my friend Stuart Marshall when he did his AIDS video, *Bright Eyes*," remembered Callen. "He actually included me in the process of creating the video and we had many discussions, theoretical and practical. He discussed the concept with me beforehand and told me how my segment would fit in the finished project."<sup>71</sup>

*Bright Eyes* has been a pivotal work in the development of American AIDS video activism.<sup>72</sup> Marshall's initial semiotic and deconstructive analysis of the social and historical contexts in which the AIDS crisis took shape—informed, as Conal McStravick argues, by feminist

71 ——— Michael Callen, "Pinned and Wriggling," *Videoguide* 10, no. 3 (1989): 17.

72 ——— Even though, according to Martha Gever, *Bright Eyes* was not shown in New York before a series of museums exhibitions in 1987 (at the New Museum, MoMa, and The Kitchen), it was screened in 1985 at the VTapes's International Gay Association Festival in Toronto, Canada. What Gever does not mention is that *A Journal of the Plague Year* was in fact shown in New York as early as 1984 on the occasion of the exhibition *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality* (December 8, 1984–February 10, 1985), organised at the New Museum by guest curator Kate Linker and guest film and video curator Jane Weinstock. The exhibition travelled to The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, Illinois (March 3 to April 7, 1985), and to the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London (July 19 to September 1, 1985). Furthermore, the previous year Marshall was prominently involved in the "Britain Salutes New York" festival, curating the exhibition *Recent British Video* at The Kitchen and participating in the New Museum's panel discussion "A New Generation: Popular Culture In Britain Today" (May 24, 1983) about contemporary art, video art, and artists' practices and research in England. Martha Gever, "Pictures of Sickness: Stuart Marshall's *Bright Eyes*," in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 109.



Stuart Marshall. *Bright Eyes*, 1984. Screenshot. Courtesy of the author.

methods for the moving-image and Julia Kristeva's cross-disciplinary research in semiology and psychoanalysis<sup>73</sup>—became a common methodology that recurs in many of the alternative tapes produced within the American AIDS video activist movement. *Bright Eyes* also marks the beginning of the second moment of the production of independent AIDS moving images, which lasted until 1988. The third moment was defined by an explosion of AIDS activist videos, coinciding with the foundation of ACT UP New York in 1987 and culminating with a perceptible decline in the early 1990s, when, to quote Douglas Crimp, AIDS was normalised and the epidemic seemed to no longer be considered a health emergency<sup>74</sup>—corresponding to a greater institutionalisation of ACT UP as well as the concrete possibility of the group taking part in the political and electoral agenda.

73 ——— Writing about Marshall's early works, McStravick argues about "Marshall's attempt [...] to marry a deconstruction of language and subjectivity, the speaking subject, the body and video per se as a non-essential or non-essentialising form alongside parallel attempts at theorization [...] Marshall's research [...] indicate the breadth and depth of the artist's reading and the extent to which in the early to mid 1970s, his theoretical framework mapped onto the editorial concerns of *Studio International* and *Screen*, with structuralist and post-structuralist theory, psychoanalysis and a developing feminist psychoanalytical critique dominating." This approach clearly informed most of his later works, including *Journal of a Plague Year*, *Bright Eyes*, and *Over Our Dead Bodies* (1991), the latter documenting the origins of AIDS activism in the US and UK.

Conal McStravick, "Conal McStravick #2: Learning in a Public Medium, Stuart Marshall's Sound Works Part 2—The Queer Space of Sound and Video (1975-1978)," last modified March 2, 2016, <https://lux.org.uk/conal-mcstravick-2-learning-public-medium/>.

74 ——— Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism*, 175.

The majority of these videos were produced in New York, where there was already an infrastructure in place to support filmmakers, as well as educational programmes, such as the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program, which, as Hubbard notes, “was forging a theoretical underpinning for the endeavor.”<sup>75</sup> Moreover, “by the early 1980s,” as Lucy Lippard pointed out, “video was taught in all the art schools. Since the equipment has gotten so much cheaper and lighter, it was far more compatible with real-world forays and activist interventions.”<sup>76</sup>

Additional evidence of the cultural impact of the AIDS crisis in New York at that time is reflected in a series of exhibitions organised by major art institutes, in particular the New Museum, between 1987 and 1989, dedicated to film and video art and its relationship to AIDS and the representational politics of the epidemic. Curated by Bill Olander, *HOMO VIDEO: Where We Are Now* took place at the New Museum between December 11, 1986, and February 15, 1987. While AIDS was not the central topic of the exhibition, nevertheless “it dominates,” the press release reads, “as a subject or leitmotiv of many of the selected works.” Following Olander’s commitment to give a space of visibility to the artists involved in the epidemic, Marcia Tucker organised two complementary exhibitions, *Until that Last Breath: Women with AIDS* and *Overlooked/Underplayed: Videos on Women and AIDS*, that ran from February 24 through April 16, 1989.<sup>77</sup> Almost at the same time, the Whitney Museum of American Art was hosting *AIDS Media: Counter-Representations*, organised by the museum’s curator, Lucinda Furlong, from January 15 through February 5, 1989; and Jan Zita Grover’s *AIDS: The Artists’ Response*, which included a section devoted to film and video, was on view at the Ohio State University’s Hoyt L. Sherman Gallery. Kate Horsfield, co-founder of Chicago’s Video Data Bank, had an office in New York at the time and commissioned Canadian filmmaker John Greyson and curator Bill Horrigan to compile a three-part programme co-produced with Toronto’s Vtape titled *Video Against*

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75 ——— Douglas Crimp’s collection of essays for *October* journal, *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, was first published in winter 1987 and contributed to forging most of the theoretical background informing past and current historical and cultural analysis of AIDS.

76 ——— Lucy Lippard, “Too Political? Forget it,” in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 54.

77 ——— As stated in the press release, *Overlooked/Underplayed* in particular was a “program of videotapes that explore social and political issues surrounding women and AIDS, including prostitution and AIDS; pregnancy, abortion and children with AIDS; and the media coverage of women with AIDS.”

*AIDS*,<sup>78</sup> documenting the array of tapes produced between 1985 and 1989 and corroborating the idea that it was in video where “the most experimental work and the most urgent outcries could be found.”<sup>79</sup>

#### Film INTERMISSION 4

**Edgar A. Barens**

***Automonosexual***

[USA, 1988, 3 min.]



Edgar A. Barens. *Automonosexual*, 1988. Screenshot. Courtesy of the author.

As I sought to trace a chronological historiography of Jim Hubbard’s films, I came across the name of Edgar A. Barens, a director and producer based in Chicago. *Automonosexual* is Barens’s first short film on AIDS. He made it in 1988, when he was a stu-

78 ——— *Video Against AIDS* was available in a collection of three videocassettes, each divided into thematic categories and lasting approximately two hours—*Programme one: PWA power, Discrimination, and AIDS & women; Programme two: Resistance, Mourning, and Community education; Programme three: Loss, Analysis, and Activism.*

A year before, in October 1988, Greyson curated a six-night exhibition of twenty-five AIDS tapes at A Space in Toronto, Canada. Concurrently, he produced a compilation of clips from thirty-two AIDS videos for New York’s Deep Dish Satellite TV Network, founded by Paper Tiger Television in 1985, titled *Angry Initiatives, Defiant Strategies*, an acronym for AIDS. The fifty-eight-minute programme is narrated by two voiceovers mimicking Elizabeth Taylor and Libeace, who make their point clear from the very beginning: “We say no to hysteria and yes to anger.”

79 ——— B. Ruby Rich, “Part I. Origins, Festivals, Audiences,” in *New Queer Cinema: The Director’s Cut* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 10.

In October 1987, together with Bill Horigan, Rich co-curated *Only Human: Sex, Gender and Other Misrepresentations*, for the annual American Film Institute film festival in Los Angeles, where three of the eight sections in the programme were dedicated to videos about AIDS.

dent in Cinema and Photography at Southern Illinois University. The film was screened for the first time at the 1990 San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in the “New Experimental Short Films” category, alongside works by Warren Sonbert and Constantine Giannaris, as well as Hubbard’s *Elegy in the Streets* (USA, 1990). I got in touch with Barens, who shared a digital copy of the film. I had to watch it several times before I could make sense of it.

The concept of automonosexuality entered the domain of psychoanalysis through Magnus Hirschfeld, who used it to classify the erotic excitement provoked by the narcissistic act of self-admiration by male subjects experiencing cross-gender and transgender fantasies. “[Automonosexuals] feel attracted not by the women outside them, but by the woman inside them,” Hirschfeld states in *Sexual Anomalies*.<sup>80</sup> For Hermann Rohleder, from whom Hirschfeld borrows the term, automonosexuality is more generally used to identify sexual gratification through self-eroticism. According to Rohleder’s theory, there is a fetishist component to automonosexuality, which lies in between the impotence of an individual unable to fully embrace the desire to experience sex with another person, asexuality, and the perversion of making love with oneself by means of, for instance, watching one’s body reflected in a mirror while masturbating. By presenting masturbation as a perversion, Rohleder’s argument frames automonosexuality as a sex disorder. In discussing cross-dressing and transgenderism, Hirschfeld questions whether the transgender condition might be the consequence of a self-erotic drive, that is the anomaly of transgender people to be sexually aroused by the idea of themselves as their sex target.

In the context of a film that the director made to address HIV/AIDS, the terminology takes a different turn. The automonosexuality experienced by the protagonist of Barens’s experimental work stands out as the autobiographical account of a young and sexually hungry man consumed by the fear and frustration of exploring sex and erotic opportunities other than self-eroticism amid the AIDS crisis. When I watched the video for the third or fourth time, a memory resurfaced of a moment in Douglas Crimp’s *Mourning and Militancy* that I could fully relate to Barens’s solipsistic experience. Recounting the weekly ACT UP meetings in New York, attended by hundreds of people, Crimp is surprised by the youthfulness of the attendees. One evening, a

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80 ——— Magnus Hirschfeld, *Sexual Anomalies: The Origins, Nature and Treatment of Sexual Disorders* (New York: Emerson Books, 1948), 167.



small group of them meet up for drinks after watching a 1970s film at the Gay and Lesbian Experimental Film Festival. One young man, Crimp remembers, was very excited by an ordinary sex scene. “I’d give anything,” he said, “to know what cum tastes like.” “That broke my heart,” Crimp writes, “for two different reasons: for him because he didn’t know, for me because I do.” With such an anecdote, what Crimp attempts to describe is the feeling of grieving the loss of a “culture of sexual possibility” swept away by both AIDS and the eruption of anti-sex and homophobic policing of the epidemic by a repressive state apparatus that forced the closure of saunas, sex clubs, porn film theatres, and other queer sites for sexual encounters, rather than regulating safer sex within these public spaces.<sup>81</sup> Ultimately, the pervasive presence of an oppressive state authority had changed, irreversibly, the sexual geography of a city such as New York, and along with it the practices and conditions through which a certain gay subjectivity is continually being unfolded, constituted, negotiated, and even contested. The social bond formed by same-sex activities situated beyond the self-contained and secluded limits of the private sphere—one that has contributed, both before and after Stonewall, to the conception of a queer community—has been fully compromised.

In *Automosexual* Barens films himself masturbating in front of a mirror placed on the floor next to his bed, which, as he later revealed to me, had spots where the reflective material was either missing or damaged. “Having come out of the closet at the age of 21, during the AIDS crisis, I was frightened by the possibility of contracting the [HIV virus]. I was suddenly single,” he told me. “I was extremely fearful to venture out and meet other men. So, I basically focussed on myself and masturbation.”<sup>82</sup> This palpable sense of personal isolation Barens experienced was essential to the creative development of the project from the outset. Nevertheless, in watching the short film, I sense that his naked body is also an erotic fantasy, an object of sexual desire. Genitals are never clearly evident on screen; only details and portions of his body are fully shown. Still, the erotic tension in his masturbatory performance is tangible. The narcissistic yet nostalgic enactment of sexual pleasure is somehow already embedded in the voyeuristic gaze of the film’s potential viewer. Shot entirely through reflections in the mirror, the explicit sexual imagery is

81 ——— Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism*, 139–40.

82 ——— Edgar A. Barens, email correspondence with the author, September 2020.

made less obvious by the manipulation of light and texture. Barens optically prints the footage, reframes it, and colour inverts it from positive to negative in order to increase contrast and graininess. In so doing, the sharpness of the images is tempered—a stylistic choice that Barens uses to reveal the sense of obscurity and solitude he felt at the time. The presence of the mirror is never visually acknowledged in the film, making it almost impossible to distinguish whether the young boy is sharing his pleasure with another man or performing in front of someone's eyes—more likely those of his audience (I myself am caught in desire while watching these images) than of a possible lover. Furthermore, the choice of a damaged mirror is not accidental: the non-reflective spots, when inverted and perceived as floating in Barens's naked body, are a visual artifice the filmmaker uses to represent Kaposi's Sarcoma and the social stigma attached to it. The soundtrack is written by Brian Tibbs, who later became the filmmaker's partner. The drumbeat and the industrial undertone of the score emphasises the ritualistic and paranoid nature of the act of masturbating—performed almost compulsively by Barens in front of his camera—as well as the psychological effects that the AIDS crisis and the homophobia of American society had on the life of a young and healthy gay man at the end of the 1980s.

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## The AIDS (Alternative) Moving Image Archive, 1982–1992

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The vast amount of audiovisual material produced in this very short period of time is characterised by the shared commitment of a large community of video makers, artists and activists to criticise and deconstruct the prescribed roles into which mass media forced people living with HIV/AIDS. In addition, it testifies to the efforts made to create alternative distribution channels and resources for this material to connect with other communities, and thereby effect positive change. However, this material also posed certain archival and art historical issues. As early as 1996, Jim Hubbard was already facing the problem of storing and archiving a massive body of work that, in most cases, was made “under conditions that did not consider longevity as a pressing issue.”<sup>83</sup> He also had to grapple with the inability to determine the precise volume and nature of the total amount of material that existed. The heterogeneity and diversity of the narratives, strategies, and purposes utilised in the many independent AIDS videos produced between the beginning of the 1980s and the mid-1990s make it difficult to provide a univocal definition of, and criteria for inclusion within, this movement. John Greyson has identified at least nine categories of AIDS tapes: cable access talk shows; documents of performances and plays addressing AIDS; documentary (memorial) portraits of people with AIDS; artistic experimental works; educational tapes; tapes documenting the work done by the vast range of AIDS service organisations; safer-sex videos; footage documenting the civil disobedience protests of AIDS activists; and tapes outlining the issues of alternate

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83 ——— Jim Hubbard, “A Report on the Archiving of Film and Video Work by Makers with AIDS,” ACT UP NY, Media Network, <http://www.actupny.org/diva/Archive.html>.

The problem of longevity and preservation is of fundamental importance for Hubbard, who served as Project Director of the Royal S. Marks AIDS Activist Video Project Collection 1983–2000. This project was supported by the Estate Project for Artists With AIDS hosted by the NY Public Library. The collection put together by Hubbard is one of the most reliable and valuable research instruments available today. The videotapes in the collection are organised by name of donor, which in most cases is also the author of the video, rather than by thematic categories or chronology.

treatments for HIV positive people.<sup>84</sup> Less descriptive and more critically engaged is the system of classification outlined by Paula A. Treichler, who offers three macro-categories of analysis: documentaries; independent and alternative videos that self-consciously manipulate existing narrative genres; and experimental videos that deliberately depart from conventional narrative structures.<sup>85</sup> Even though both Greyson and Treichler acknowledge the oppositionality of independent AIDS moving images to the mainstream media, Treichler's analytical approach highlights the discursive strategies that these tapes rely on to articulate this conflictual relationship, rather than their content. Juhasz takes this oppositionality as her starting point in defining "alternative AIDS media" as the "the use of video production to form a local response to AIDS, to articulate a rebuttal to or a revision of the mainstream media's definition and representations of AIDS, and to form community around a new identity forced into existence by the fact of AIDS." She concludes by arguing that, "producing alternative media is a political act."<sup>86</sup> No one would disagree with this. Following

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84 ——— John Greyson, "Strategic Compromises: AIDS and Alternative Video Practices," in *Reimagining America: The Arts of Social Change*, ed. Mark O'Brien and Craig Little (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1990), 61.

85 ——— Paula A. Treichler, "AIDS Narratives on Television," in *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis*, ed. Timothy Murphy and Suzanne Poirier (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 190.

86 ——— Juhasz, *AIDS TV*, 3.  
 In other words, if we consider AIDS activist videos within the specific context of their production and most importantly of their use, they become the locus of antagonism, of a relation of "we versus them." In this sense, according to Juhasz's perspective, the practice of alternative AIDS video making is a political one. Chantal Mouffe's extensively cited argument regarding the inseparability of art from politics, and the antagonistic struggle that constitutes any democratic articulation of the political, is clearly mirrored—in retrospect—in Juhasz's analysis. It is exactly because of the oppositionality (or agonistic confrontation) within which Juhasz roots her argument and the attempt, performed by artists and other cultural workers, to undermine the social relations that have been symbolically constituted by society's discourse on AIDS. Alternative AIDS videos constitute collective forms of production translated into collective forms of identification that forge different political identities. In this movement towards a place where new possibilities of coexistence can be advocated, alternative AIDS media is not the expression of an absolute refusal of the status quo, but rather it becomes a political platform where the conception of plurality that sustains Mouffe's argument on democracy can be fostered. Furthermore, in the impossibility of overcoming the we/them dichotomy, their heterogeneity is strategic not only in presenting diversified subjective positions, but also in understanding the ways in

artist and writer Gregg Bordowitz, “its production is part of a larger effort to organise [an] increasing number of people to take action.”<sup>87</sup> In this sense, the process of distribution and reception takes on a paramount importance, shaping how the spectator is addressed and inscribed within these tapes. However, Juhasz’s inclination to position all “alternative AIDS media” in a binary system reliant upon an oppositional relationship to the mainstream media may run the risk of reproducing the “us vs. them” paradigm of the mass media representation of the epidemic. Moreover, it is important to take into account the fact that multiple, diverse and sometimes contradictory identities and communities were brought into existence by the AIDS epidemic, reflected in the inconsistent and non-homogeneous techniques and languages of “alternative AIDS media.” Juhasz very rarely acknowledges the personal artistic subjectivity of video producers. As a result, it is sometimes difficult to find in her analysis an account of how the most experimental AIDS video functions within this oppositional logic where “alternative AIDS media” serves the purpose of educating its

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which such opposition can otherwise be established and take place, granting political agency to their addressees. Given the precariousness of every social order, there are myriad discursive surfaces and symbolic battlegrounds within which AIDS video activism performs. This depends on the type of “them” from which the “we” are trying to be differentiated as well as the temporal framework within which several identity positions, in turn, are conferred varying degrees of legitimacy—or to the contrary, are denied the possibility for confrontation. The endless chain of proliferation of counter-images or signifiers of AIDS is directly related to the failed attempt to reach a point—a “master-signifier”—around which a consistent and commonly agreed upon field of meaning of AIDS can finally emerge. In so doing, by nurturing the permanence of a space of dissensus, AIDS artistic activism has prevented the development of political terrorism, the formation of armed alliances, and other violent forms of resistance. Mouffe’s analysis of agonistic democracy can be one of the many possible methodological approaches to critically (re)think artists’ complex and differently articulated commitment to social change in the age of AIDS—acknowledging that activism is one possible form of political intervention for artists, not the only one. On the one hand, it offers a conceptual framework within which to problematise the historical contingencies that gave rise to the emergence of AIDS video activism, while on the other it might shed light on whether and how such alternative artistic practices succeeded in fostering different forms and levels of opposition to the political status quo and therefore in deconstructing society’s power relations.

Chantal Mouffe, “Agonistic Politics and Artistic Practices,” in *Agonistics: Thinking The World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013), 85–107.

87 ——— Gregg Bordowitz, *The AIDS Crisis is Ridiculous and Other Writings: 1986-2003* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 51.

community and galvanizing people to act. In the specific case of experimental film works, an identificatory function, typical of the immediacy of most AIDS activist videos, is superseded by the expressiveness of the imagery and iconography that artists create, appropriate, and adapt to affirm their personal artistic poetics. As Hallas suggested, citing British filmmaker Derek Jarman, this is a “cinema of small gestures [where] films invest stylistic form with greater significance than narrative, relying on the expressivity of their distinctive cinematic devices to engage their audience, rather than on the conventional identificatory functions of narrative and character.”<sup>88</sup> The postmodern techniques of appropriation, pastiche, allegory, and irony—as well as the reworking of history and post-war popular culture that Hallas argued was crucial in the development of the alternative AIDS video movement—sometimes seem to escape Juhasz’s analysis.<sup>89</sup>

### Film INTERMISSION 5

Rosa Von Praunheim in collaboration with Phil Zwickler

*Silence=Death. Artists in New York Fight Against AIDS*

[USA and Germany, 1989, 60 min.]



Rosa Von Praunheim in collaboration with Phil Zwickler. *Silence=Death. Artists in New York Fight Against AIDS*, 1989. Screenshot. Courtesy of the author.

*Silence=Death* is the first film of Rosa Von Praunheim’s AIDS trilogy, followed by *Positive* (Germany and USA, 1990) and *Fire Under Your Ass* (USA and Germany, 1990). It documents the contributions of artists and activists who fought the AIDS epidemic in the United States. Making extensive use of the talking-head technique, the film presents a collage of interviews with a group

88 ——— Hallas, *Reframing Bodies*, 188.

89 ——— Even though Hallas’s analysis is primarily focussed on how postmodern techniques of appropriation and the reworking of popular culture have contributed to reframing the representation of the “queer body” of the AIDS “witness,” it is important to point out that they have greatly influenced not only the most radical experiments in AIDS video and film, but also the most conventional and narrative forms of alternative representation of the epidemic such as documentary.

of artists whose lives have been affected by the epidemic, but in particular by the American government's negligence in the face of the AIDS crisis. Phil Zwickler's voice-over guides the viewer from one artist to another, occasionally accompanying the images with his commentary. The documentary includes footage of the AIDS Quilt Project displayed in Philadelphia; a gallery opening of an exhibition by Donald Moffett, one of the founding members of artistic collective Gran Fury; ACT UP's March 1989 demonstration at New York City Hall; DIFFA's (Design Industries Foundation Fighting AIDS) 1989 Love Ball benefit; and a series of obituaries of people from the art scene who died because of AIDS. Contributions come from Allen Ginsberg, Keith Haring, Bern Boyle, Peter Kunz, and David Wojnarowicz, among others. Wojnarowicz is a prominent protagonist of the film—the official promotional poster features an image of his lips stitched shut. As a sweeping historical document, *Silence=Death* has become a research tool. Borrowing ACT UP's slogan as its title, the film stands out as a moving image campaign to resist silence and speak up against the prejudice and moral shame with which mainstream culture has stigmatised AIDS. I have watched Von Praunheim's film several times. Each time, I find myself entranced by Wojnarowicz's astonishing voice. I never tire of listening to his ferocious—now legendary—speeches and poetry against politicians; the pharmaceutical industry; the religiously fanatical, heterosexist, mass media-brainwashed, white middle class American culture; and the “killing machine” that was Ronald Reagan's administration during the AIDS crisis. I always follow with affectionate devotion the story about his friendship with artist Peter Hujar, which began as a short love story and developed as a mentorship. I cannot help but feel emotional watching the slow motion, blue-tinted images of David undoing the belt of a lover—enacted by artist Paul Smith—with his mouth. He moves his tongue on the young man's lingering skin, up to his chest, around his nipples, his cheek and ear, into a passionate kiss. It is a pure celebration of love, corporal lust, and sexual drive in the age of AIDS.<sup>90</sup>

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90 ——— *Silence=Death* includes selected material used by Wojnarowicz in other experimental video works. In particular, it features scenes from *The Death of Peter Hujar* (USA, 1987), a black-and-white elegiac video diary composed as a collage of images from Hujar's archive and photographs that Wojnarowicz took of his mentor on his deathbed intermixed with super 8mm footage of urban landscapes. Furthermore, it presents one of the three existing versions of *Fire in my Belly* (USA, 1987), an unfinished film that Wojnarowicz edited on several occasions

It is the opening sequence of *Silence=Death*, however, that always triggers the most controversial feelings for me. I encountered poet, artist, performer, and director Emilio Cubeiro for the first time thanks to Von Praunheim's film. He worked extensively with Lydia Lunch and acted in some of Richard Kern's experimental films. He also directed Annie Sprinkle's *Post Porn Modernist Show* (1989), a one-woman autobiographical play about her careers as a sex worker, feminist pro-sex activist, and artist. Interestingly, it is with Cubeiro that *Silence=Death* begins. He is shot in a dark and gloomy domestic setting, presumably his apartment in New York. A light projects his shadow on the white-brick wall. Immediately, I sense a discomfoting feeling,

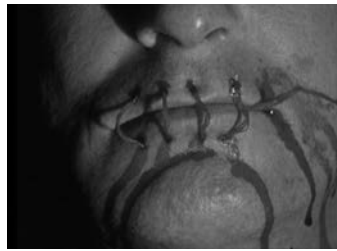
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and used in other projects. The one that appears in *Silence=Death* is a re-edit of a previous version the artist did for Michael Lupetin, the producer of Rosa von Praunheim's documentary. Images are accompanied by the powerful and terrorising voice of Diamanda Galás singing "This is the Law of the Plague," a song composed in 1986, when her brother died because of AIDS. This third and final version, which now circulates as an autonomous film, was done with the help of Marion Scemama in April 1989, following von Praunheim's invitation to participate in the documentary. Wojnarowicz and Scemama shot new original sequences for *Silence=Death*, all of which were later used to produce other film projects, such as *When I Put My Hands on Your Body* (USA, 1989), made with footage of David making out with artist Paul Smith. At that time Wojnarowicz had already been diagnosed HIV-positive, while Smith was negative. This factual element gives an additional meaning to the video, aside from the inevitable dissolution of love into death, that the film addresses metaphorically. It resurfaces in a different fashion the psychological and psycho-social implications connected to the disclosure of one person's HIV-seropositive status, the central theme of another project, a collaboration between Wojnarowicz and Phil Zwickler titled *Fear of Disclosure* (USA, 1989). In the film, Wojnarowicz recites a powerful and shivering poem he wrote about the persistence of desire in the age of AIDS, excerpts of which are also used in *ITSOFOMO* (USA, 1989). Originally a multimedia performance made in collaboration with composer Ben Neill—and later, after the artist's death, presented as a four-screen installation—*ITSOFOMO* is Wojnarowicz's only fully realised video, composed in tandem with Zwickler and featuring a large amount of material from *Fire in my Belly*, including the controversial scene of a crucifix devoured by ravenous ants and a split loaf of bread stitched together in parallel with the artist's lips, two of Wojnarowicz's most iconic images. As a reflection on theories of speed, acceleration, and their manifestations in evolutionary societies, *ITSOFOMO* is filtered through the lenses of the AIDS crisis, the artist's personal experience of the epidemic, and his call for political action.



implying something I don't yet know is going to happen. The artist stands up, sits down, and stands up again. Visibly nervous, he rubs his hands one against the other. He talks in front of the camera. Presumably, he will share his personal experience of the epidemic. He has recently been told that he has developed AIDS, he declares, hence the decision to change his plan for how the interview should unfold. At first he talks directly to an interviewer off-screen; but soon thereafter he addresses the audience and performs his monologue, a prelude for what has yet to come.

It lasts a little bit longer than three minutes. The artist speaks of the refusal to fall victim to a disease whose harmful effects have been more so the result of a cultural construction and the people's neglect than of its viral load. When the monologue ends, Cubeiro takes a gun from the nearby cupboard and undresses. He shows his back to the camera, and by inserting the gun into his anus, he performs the most radical act of protest: the voluntary death—the only, yet paradoxically the most transformative, gesture of power to survive the violence perpetuated against the homosexual AIDS subject by the government and society at large. His frozen body lies on the floor as blood pours out of his anus. A telephone rings. No one answers, but we hear Cubeiro's voice through an answering machine. It is the last thing that the artist has to say. A second short monologue begins, a thoughtful yet angry speech on the symbolic power and attraction of the anus, the homophobic forcefulness experienced by the HIV-positive subject, and the heterosexist fascination with the death of the homosexual as a refusal to accept the temptation of homosexual desire.



left: David Wojnarowicz with Marion Scemama. *When I Put My Hands on Your Body*, 1989. Screenshot. Courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz, Marion Scemama and PPOW Gallery, New York.

right: David Wojnarowicz. *A Fire In My Belly (Film In Progress)*, 1986–1987. Screenshot. Courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and PPOW Gallery, New York.

The performance was presented a year before as part of “Carnival of Sleaze,” an evening of performances organised by The Kitchen in February 1988, according to their online archive. Presumably adjusted for inclusion in *Silence=Death*, the anguished shock of watching it remains the same. By taking his own life, Cubeiro inverts his position from that of a victim to that of a force. However, it is not merely the force of a tragic gesture that responds to an ongoing need for self-definition (“I am not the victim that you want me to be, and that’s not how history will remember me”); it is also the negative force of the subject who takes their own life embracing self-deliverance (that is both the end assured by death and a liberating ritual of purification) as the only ultimate act to interrupt history and the downward spiral of a future that is impossible to predict. Cubeiro’s homosexual anus is both the locus of homophobic abjection (that the artist kills) and an attractive site of pleasure (that the artist fulfills with penetration). In this sense, as complex as his performance is, Cubeiro tests and turns into aesthetic action the question—“Is the rectum a grave?”—around which Leo Bersani wrote one of his most provoking essays about same-sex *jouissance* and its emancipatory potential.<sup>91</sup> “But if the rectum is the grave in

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91 ——— According to Dylan Evans, in Lacan the concept of *jouissance* has evolved alongside various stages of definition. Pertaining to the domain of orgasmic excitement, *jouissance* is the enjoyment that surpasses the “pleasure principle.” According to Lacan, there is only a certain level of pleasure that the subject can enjoy. Once that threshold has been surpassed, pleasure becomes pain. In other words, *jouissance* is the pain that derives from an excess of pleasure that the subject attempts to experience. The constant desire the subject has to transgress and surpass the limit of pleasure is the death drive. Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 93–94.

In “Is The Rectum a Grave?” Leo Bersani concludes that *jouissance* is a form of ascesis: “Male homosexuality advertises the risk of the sexual itself as the risk of self-dismissal, of losing sight of the self, and in so doing it proposes and dangerously represents *jouissance* as a mode of ascesis.” Bersani envisions the possibility of an idea of *jouissance* freed from the masochistic element that seems to characterise the original Lacanian use of the term. In this sense, I see more clearly the possibility that this desire for pleasure beyond pleasure can be celebrated for its potential. In “Sociability and Cruising,” Bersani writes: “The intimacy with an unknown body is the revelation of [a] distance at the very moment we appear to be crossing an uncrossable interval. Otherness [...] is made concrete in the eroticised touching of a body without attributes. A nonmasochistic *jouissance* (one that owes nothing to the death drive) is the sign of that nameless, identity-free contact—contact with an object I don’t know and certainly don’t love and

which the masculine ideal of proud subjectivity is buried,” Bersani writes towards the end of his essay, “then it should be celebrated for its very potential for death.”<sup>92</sup>

Cubeiro’s gesture is also one of pure and unbearable violence—terrorising for the viewer—even though it is both liberatory and invoking some form of resistance. Symbolically speaking, it represents the violent history of which the artist had become a recipient. Using ideas developed by Arthur Sabatini around terrorism and performance, James Tobias discusses the voluntary death of marginalised sexual subjects in the context of HIV/AIDS through an astute comparison of Cubeiro’s performance to the televised suicide of Daniel Jones and Essex Hemphill’s poem “Vital Signs.”<sup>93</sup> “Cubeiro’s spoken word performance,” he writes, “now describes precisely the symbolic

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which has, unknowingly, agreed to be momentarily the incarnated shock of otherness. In that moment we relate to that which transcends all relations. For me, this illuminates the connection I have previously made, and which has always remained somewhat mysterious to me, between *jouissance* and asceticism. The *jouissance* of otherness has as its precondition the stripping away of the self, a loss of all that gives us pleasure and pain in our negotiable exchanges with the world. In the *jouissance* of otherness, an entire category of exchange is erased: the category of intersubjectivity. This erasure is an ascetic (not a masochistic) practice. [...] In ascetic erotic contact, we lose much that is presumed to be ‘good’ in sex [...] but the nonattributable intensity I’m attempting to evoke also makes impossible that envy of the other’s different *jouissance*, which nourishes homophobia and misogyny. In ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’ I speculated on the fantasy, in heterosexual men, of an intolerably alien ecstasy inherent in female sexuality and in gay male sexuality. I now think that the hateful envy of that ecstasy is the envy of a certain kind of death. The association of sex with death is familiar; I suggest that this association is made when we feel that we can’t profit from it. More specifically, it is the association of sex not with death but with dying. The envied sexuality is the *lived jouissance* of dying, as if we thought we might ‘consent’ to death if we could enter it orgasmically.”

Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?*, 30 and 61.

92 ————— Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?*, 29.

93 ————— After testing positive for HIV on April 30, 1998, Daniel Jones took his own life on a Los Angeles free way interchange as a form of protest. After parking his truck, he menaced drivers with a gun, attempting to instigate them to call the police. He later called 911 and displayed a banner on his truck, which read “HMO’s are in it for the money. Live free, love safe, or die.” Surrounded by police agents and helicopters, Jones set himself on fire before shooting himself with a gun. The suicide was broadcast live by several local and national television outlets. “Daniel Jones killed himself so as not to live out a death of neglect,” Tobias writes.

James Tobias, “Meditation on a freeway suicide: the sacrifice of autobiography,” *Jump Cut* 47 (Summer 2005),

<https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc47.2005/tobias/index.html>.

exchange formulated around the punishing of the positive body as an act of sodomy.” “The insertion of that gun in his rectum,” he continues a few lines further down, “mimes the symbolic exchange by which the receptive male body is made to suffer at the hands of homophobic desire.”<sup>94</sup> What I find most interesting about this excerpt from Tobias is the particular way in which Cubeiro’s body is made to suffer. I was struck once by a short statement from Teresa de Lauretis that, despite being used outside of its original context here, aptly describes the sodomitical gesture Tobias is talking about. “When a male is raped,” de Lauretis writes, “he too is raped as a woman”—namely, by an unconsented violent act of penetration, which insults the victim’s body.<sup>95</sup> The insult comes on the basis of a pleasure that is transformed into a painful terror—the same terror enacted by Cubeiro. “You wanted your own dick up your own asshole,” his voice claims towards the end of the performance, “and I got in the way.” In taking his own life by means of a violent gesture of rape, Cubeiro asserts the high representational value of the anus. In particular,

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94 ——— Tobias, “Meditation on a freeway suicide.”

95 ——— Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 37. The unconsented act of penetration, which is rape, is materialised differently in homosexual men and women. Because of the “male homosocial” assumption that the anus is not a locus of active pleasure and desire for women, it is less often the target of violence on the body of a woman raped by a man. The relation that male anality and female anality have with rape differs—a difference that is motivated by different cultural constructions and regulations of the female (either heterosexual or homosexual) subject and the male homosexual subject. “One of the few topoi in which the female anus ever becomes sexually visible is that of a woman ‘being used as a man,’ as a receptive homosexual man or a man who is being raped,” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick wrote. “The sexual act is, in this topos, invariably seen as degrading to the woman, when not presented simply as punishment. The more assertively ‘heterosexual’ of the available topoi,” she continues, “is the (pseudo)metonymy by which women’s *genitals* receptivity is described as ‘ass,’ as in ‘a piece of.’ What can be said about this usage is, in the first place, that it does indeed display the linguistic traces of the male-homosocial structure whereby men’s ‘heterosexual desire’ for women serves as a more or less perfunctory detour on the way to a closer, but homophobically proscribed, bonding with another man: the phrase itself, for instance, is never addressed to a woman, but ‘used behind her back’ to another man.” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “A Poem in Being Written,” *Representations* 17 (January 1987), 129-30.

he testifies to the male heterosexual's "perverse" desire for sodomy as well as to the homophobic refusal to recognise the existence of such a desire—one that can only be materialised in a sadistic act of rape, a displaced yet consciously denied impulse to kill in order to preserve the ideal of his selfhood.<sup>96</sup>

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96 ——— In "The Power of Evil and the Power of Love," the third chapter of *Intimacies*, Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips address the moral unacceptability of Jeffrey Dahmer's murders. In particular, they look at how the horrifying satisfactory aggressiveness of the serial killer is accompanied by a high level of erotic excitement. Dahmer admitted to enjoying sex with body parts of his victims, including being overly excited by a plan to eat the heart of a young man he killed had the police not caught him right before he attempted to enact it. Most importantly, they claim, his drive to torture and kill produces a narcissistic *jouissance*—"the extraordinary narcissistic enjoyment that accompanies [...] the death drive as a drive to destroy others." In Cubeiro's performance, I see this narcissistic enjoyment as both a destructive and self-destructive *jouissance*, two of the highest moments of power that human vulnerability can eventually reach. "*Jouir* is the French word for coming, for having an orgasm," Bersani and Phillips write. "Lacanian *jouissance* unavoidably evokes orgasmic pleasure, but it is a sexual pleasure that sex can't give; indeed, it pushes pleasure beyond itself, to the point of becoming the enemy of pleasure, that which lies 'beyond the pleasure principle.' 'My neighbor's *jouissance*,' Lacan writes, 'his harmful, malignant *jouissance*, is that which poses a problem for my love'—the insurmountable problem of an ecstasy dependent (for both my neighbor and myself) on my being destroyed. *Jouissance* accompanies the 'unfathomable aggressivity' at the heart of both the other's love for me and my love for the other; [...] to conclude that 'we cannot avoid the formula that *jouissance* is evil.' It is this intractable and ecstatic destructiveness that we refuse to acknowledge by projecting it, as evil, on others, thereby denying our own ineradicable guilt."

The murderous relation that Cubeiro establishes with the other, symbolised by a gun that rapes and kills him, both contains and mirrors the desire for the other as well as the desire that the other is irremediably moved by, one that is of a sort exactly identical to the artist's own desire (to feel pleasure and to kill). In so doing, he makes evident the "ecstatic destructiveness" that equally characterises the two figures, the killer and the killed; in the artist's staged universe they have a perfectly symmetrical and interchangeable suicidal relationship.

Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 60–69.

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## Queer AIDS Pirates (or: of the Camcorder Revolution)

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In 1992 film critic B. Ruby Rich published their seminal essay “New Queer Cinema” in the September issue of *Sight & Sound* magazine, tracing the influence of 1980s independent AIDS media on the birth of a new kind of cinema. Emerging at the beginning of the 1990s, it was characterised not only by a strong queer sensitivity but also a savvy re-adaptation of the visual vocabulary and concerns of postmodernism. Writing about Laurie Lynd’s short film *RSVP* (Canada, 1991), Rich argues that in response to “the trauma and tragedy of AIDS [New Queer Cinema] takes up the aesthetic strategies that directors have already learned and applies them to a greater need than art for its own sake. This time, it’s art for our sake, and it’s powerful.”<sup>97</sup> The queerness that Rich sees independent AIDS media contributing to cinema does not merely have to do with a categorical gay politics. Arguably it has more to do with an ability to renegotiate subjectivities, revise histories, and assemble images that present identity and sexuality not as homogeneous entities, but, echoing Michel Foucault, always as the result of society’s cultural constructs. This expanded sense of queerness is evident as early as 1984 in Marshall’s *Bright Eyes*.

Limiting the subversive potential of independent AIDS media simply to its oppositionality to mainstream media risks reducing its complexity and obscuring the full spectrum of intersecting and mutually influential narratives and discursive strategies. Motivated by a common urgency—be it personal, political, or merely artistic—all of these videos took advantage of the technological novelties impacting filmmaking practices from the end of the 1960s—namely the introduction of portable cameras and the advent of public access television—and drew from the work that artists and activists had already done with new audiovisual technologies as well as alternative forms of communication and information distribution.<sup>98</sup> This is arguably one of the

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97 ——— B. Ruby Rich, “New Queer Cinema,” *Sight & Sound* 2, no. 5 (September 1992): 32.

98 ——— Gay Men’s Health Crisis was among the first to have a thirty-minute weekly cable TV programme about AIDS. Initiated in 1987 by filmmaker Jean Carlomusto, *Living with AIDS* ran until 1997. As early as 1984, GMHC was already experimenting with the possibilities offered by

main reasons why art world circles were among the first to welcome and offer a space of visibility to the profusion of independent AIDS tapes in the 1980s. In the midst of the AIDS crisis the boundaries between artistic experimentation and activism were highly porous. The inseparability of art from life seemed to have been fully realised. Jim Hubbard himself, for instance, has been making experimental films integrating lesbian and gay activism and community building with his personal artistic research since the mid-1970s. When, in 1989, AIDS explicitly appeared as the subject matter of one of his experimental videos, *Elegy in the Street*, he was already fully aware of and knowledgeable about his predecessors, as were the majority of filmmakers and cultural practitioners producing work in response to AIDS before him. The chain reaction of grassroots video production, which followed the early mass media responses to the AIDS crisis, was therefore provoked not only by a common political agenda but also the successful examples offered by previous artistic movements of creating collective works, deconstructing and reinterpreting the artistic tradition through an assemblage of moving images and a new visual vocabulary, and exploiting the potential of new technological instruments to take control over the content, resources, and distribution channels of the information industry. All of this contributes to a clearer definition of the role and impact of independent AIDS media in both specific communities and the wider media ecology.

When the video collective Paper Tiger Television was established in New York in 1981, almost a decade had passed since the publication of Michael Shamberg's *Guerilla Television* and the emergence of the main journal of the 1970s video art movement, *Radical Software*. Video art collectives such as TVTV, of which Shamberg was a co-founder, and Videofreex, credited for having launched the first American pirate TV station in 1972, had already contributed an extensive body of video work whose creative potential was there for the new generation of media makers to access. Even though Paper Tiger Television did not produce AIDS-related work until the mid-1980s, activist and filmmaker Catherine Gund writes that this group of "media agitators [...]" has influenced the evolution of many New York City video collectives

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public access television, paying Gay Cable Network to produce and air a sporadic five-minute talk show called *Outreach*. In 1985 GMHC started a thirty-minute programme called *AIDS Network*, which was a precursor to Carlomusto's *Living with AIDS* show. According to the organisation's records hosted at the NY Public Library, *AIDS Network* included thirty-one shows, the first being aired on December 16, 1985, and the last on October 13, 1986. Hired at the beginning of 1987, Carlomusto created a stable Audiovisual Department.

and should be rightfully credited as a model for much quick-and-dirty [alternative AIDS] media that evolved later in the decade.”<sup>99</sup> In other words, alternative AIDS media arguably absorbed and embodied the previous political and cultural movements that had embraced the spirit of the camcorder revolution: first and foremost second-wave feminism and feminist video art and film, as well as avant-garde cinema, from the New American Cinema Group to gay and lesbian experimental film. In particular, the self-conscious activism of much alternative AIDS media is a natural extension of the way that video, in the hands of feminist artists and filmmakers, became an instrument of self-representation that ran counter to the stereotypical roles women had been assigned by a (white) patriarchal society, and was therefore a mechanism to achieve social transformation. Writing about the ideological representation of gender in her seminal essay “The Technologies of Gender,” Teresa de Lauretis argues that the ongoing project of feminism revolves around the pursuit of a ‘space-off,’ which she defines as “the elsewhere of discourse [from whence] the terms of a different construction of gender can be posed.” De Lauretis borrows the term ‘space-off’—or off-screen space—from film theory: it delineates that space which is not visible in the frame but that can be deduced. While mainstream cinema almost never shows the space-off, opting to contain or hide it through the use of a series of ad hoc narrative maneuvers, avant-garde cinema, according to de Lauretis, “has shown it to exist concurrently and alongside the represented space, has made it visible by remarking its absence in the frame or in the succession of frames, and has shown it to include not only the camera but also the spectator.”<sup>100</sup> This is why, she continues, avant-garde cinema must be seen as deeply political and not merely an artistic statement. The conflictual relationship between that which is included in representation and that which is left out and therefore made “not visible,” is exactly what the alternative AIDS media of the 1980s—both in its most radical experimental manifestations and in its more conventional and narrative outcomes—inherited from feminist video art and the experimental underground cinema of the 1960s. In retrospect, it is clear that in the 1980s the artistic potential of the previous two decades of experimentation in video and film had not yet been fully exhausted. The alternative stories that independent AIDS moving images presented, as well as the different narrative registers and genres it manipulated

99 ——— Catherine Gund, “On the Make: Activist Video Collectives,” in *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*, ed. Martha Gever, John Greyson, and Pratibha Parmar (New York: Routledge, 1993), 24.

100 ——— De Lauretis, *The Technology of Gender*, 25.



and reinvented, constitute the manifold blind spots, or space-off, from which the independent AIDS media posed its questions. Revisiting these videos from the vantage point of the present, it is undeniable that they operate and exist independently from the oppositional structure they have historically been placed within.

### Film INTERMISSION 6

**John Sanborn and Mary Perillo**

**(in collaboration with Bill T. Jones)**

*Untitled*<sup>101</sup>

[USA, 1989, 10 min.]



John Sanborn and Mary Perillo (in collaboration with Bill T. Jones).

*Untitled*, 1989. Screenshot. Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix, New York.

I came across the work of Bill T. Jones through Keith Haring via Tseng Kwong Chi. In the autumn of 1983 Haring was in London preparing a solo show at the Robert Fraser Gallery. Tseng Kwon Chi was present, having photographed Haring's work and documented his developing career since 1979. Dancer and choreographer Bill T. Jones was invited to pose, naked, and offer his body as a canvas for Haring's drawings. Jones and his life partner and collaborator Arnie Zane would later extend an invitation to Haring to design scenography, including the poster and promotional cards, for *Secret Pastures*, a complex experimental ballet about politics, race, sexuality, and the power of economy that debuted at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in November of the following year. This was Haring's first foray into set design. A tent covered in his outlined human figures, whose poses were echoed by the

101 ——— A previous version of this text has been published in *CAS Journal* on March 21, 2022, under the title "If it hurts to love. You better do it anyway," <https://www.contemporaryartstavanger.no/if-it-hurts-to-love-you-better-do-it-anyway/>

dancers dressed in Willi Smith's costumes, was placed at the centre of the stage.

Sadly, there was something else that linked the lives of these artists aside from their creative force. "We all knew what was going on," Jones told the Smithsonian curator Kelly Elaine Navies. Soon after *Secret Pastures* premiered, both Jones and Zane were diagnosed with HIV. "We expected we're all gonna die. You know? [...] It was a terrifying moment. [...] Willi was the first one. [He] died in [19]87. Arnie died in March of [19]88. Keith Haring died in 1990. Boom boom boom."<sup>102</sup>

The Haring/Jones drawing performance took place on a Saturday morning in 1983 in an empty London studio.<sup>103</sup> Tseng Kwong Chi took exquisite pictures, some of which would end up in the exhibition at Robert Fraser Gallery. Zane filmed the four-hour-long session. Retrospectively, I realised that the sensuous force of Jones's corporeality in Tseng's stills carried the traces, unexpectedly and prophetically, of the prelude of a catharsis that was still to come. Tseng's images opened the doors to new discoveries.

In 1989, six years after the photo shoot in London, Jones stood in front of John Sanborn and Mary Perillo's camera, performing a lyrical dance to grieve the loss of Arnie, who had died the year before from AIDS-related lymphoma. *Untitled* is indeed the first work that Jones choreographed after his partner's death. I watched the video for the first time in 2016. *Untitled* is not con-

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102 ——— "Bill T. Jones on *Secret Pastures*: Interview by Kelly Elaine Navies," Willi Smith Online Archive, <https://willismitharchive.cargo.site/Bill-T-Jones-on-Secret-Pastures>.

103 ——— Undoubtedly, the resulting images pose questions about the objectification of the choreographer's Black body by a white artist and risk reinforcing general stereotypes around cross-racial erotic fantasies and desires. This does not deny that an "erotics of spectatorship" is a ground on which these images find one of their interpretative analytical readings. The collaborative nature—the "negotiating complicity"—of this project, as well as of the relationship between the two artists, Haring and Jones, goes beyond such an act of possible objectification. I want to be clear that "collaboration" is not a way out of a problematic question, which has been posed by others, lately and from an interesting perspective by Ricardo Montez in *Keith Haring's Line: Race and the Performance of Desire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020). Such critiques pertain not only to the Black body of Jones, but more generally to certain racial dynamics implicated in the "primitive line" that characterises Haring's art. I am limiting myself, however, to disclosing a circumstantial fact relating to these images, one which guided me to the discovery of Bill T. Jones's work and the short film, *Untitled*, that I am writing about.

sidered one of Jones's major works. Thus, I was not surprised by how little academic writing existed about the work. A film archive in New York generously gave me access to the video. Originally produced for *Alive from Off Center*, a PBS arts anthology television series, the piece was later presented in theatres. The live version is four minutes longer than the original video. Jones, in this case, performs nude. The naked body fulfills the erotic remembrance of his lost partner as well as the act of self-eroticisation, an element that is less predominant in the television adaptation. The provenance of Jones's movements is rendered more evidently in the live performance—gestures are partially derived from *Hand Dance*, a solo that Zane performed in 1977 and that Jones revised in 1991 as a group work.

*Untitled* is a dense and touching work. Jones himself was HIV positive at the time. AIDS is never mentioned directly, only alluded to, although not so openly. The piece alternates dance with Jones's own speech—a powerful mix of anger, lament, and melancholia encompassing the incommensurable size of his grief and the impossibility of healing. Jones is a distraught lover. Making sense of death is always the result of the incomprehensible incompleteness of life. Could it be precisely because of this incompleteness, however, that we remain able to hope and, eventually, to love and be loved?<sup>104</sup>

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104 ——— This question is reminiscent of the Lacanian understanding of love as inextricable from lack, an endless longing that cannot be fulfilled. “[...] to love is always to give what one does not have, and not to give what one does have,” Lacan writes in Seminar V. “To love is to give to someone who has or doesn’t have what is in question, but it is certainly to give what one doesn’t have. To give, on the other hand, is also to give, but it is to give what one has. There’s a world of difference.” Lacan continues later on: “[...] to give one’s love is to give nothing of what one has, for it’s precisely insofar as one doesn’t have it that love is at issue.” In other words, love is about giving—and reciprocally, pretending to receive—what someone does not have. In this sense, the act of declaring love is a deceptive one—i.e. it is to declare that what I have to offer is a lack (a nothing) that I, the loving subject, am looking to fulfill by searching for it in my beloved object. At the same time, it is to recognise a lack and locate it in the other, who respectively locates their lack in whomever they think they love. The beloved object acquires value insofar as it can potentially replace a lack. Concurrently, by showing love I both declare and eventually give that which I don’t have to offer. This endless search is what I have termed the “incomprehensible incompleteness of life.” Jacques Lacan, *The Formations Of The Unconscious, 1957-1968 (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book V)* ed. Jacques Alain-Miller (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 201 and 368.

The video starts with a voice-over of Arnie Zane recounting a catastrophic dream—a bulldozer pushes a pile of burning logs against him. Jones moves with the rhythm of a sort of marching dance, his gestures neat and sharp yet dramatic. Somehow ordinary and mechanical, they are powerfully expressive of Jones's distress. He looks into the camera, grinding his teeth in anguish. His movements are synchronised with Zane's ethereal voice. Once the dream is over, Zane awakes in fear. Jones walks straight towards the camera and starts a monologue. It sounds defiant and accusatory at the same time. "You said: A system in collapse is a system moving forward. Do you remember..."—a series of names of friends and events from the life they shared together follows.

[...]

Do you remember Tye, the little half-wit who cleaned our room in Amsterdam?

Do you remember Lavonne Campbell, who said two young men shouldn't make such a commitment so early—they didn't know what they were doing?

Do you remember Keith? He loved those Puerto Rican boys.

[...]

You said, "A system in collapse is a system moving forward."  
You said.

In the background ghostly portraits are projected of the people whose names Jones lists in front of the camera. The promise of death being the evolution, rather than the dissolution, of the opportunity for life to move forward has tragically been broken. After death nothing seems forward-moving. Jones is stuck in the repetition of the same movements, looking for a way out. Suspended in this repetitive obsession and stream of fetishised memories we, the viewers, are also called upon in the act of remembering. Perhaps Jones looks at us in search of Zane. We too become ghosts, an unearthly presence on the other side of the stage evoking the absence of his lost love.

Zane's voice-over returns. This time, he reports on a tragedy that occurred during the construction of a house. He enters the scene as a holographic image. He executes a few movements. Jones picks up where Zane leaves off, beginning his danced meditation on loss and memorial to his lover. Régine Crespin sings "Absence" from Berlioz's "Les nuits d'été". Jones's disoriented dance is drenched in melancholy. The erotic sensuality of his

muscled, shirtless body is choreographed in melancholia too. It moves in a vortex of roiling pain and desire. Shot from behind, Jones beats the sky with his right arm. He lingers in the emptiness of this lonesome space. He is lost. Lost in grief.

When the music ends, Jones stops and breathlessly recommences his monologue. The tone is no longer accusatory. He shares another sequence of memories, interwoven with vivid moments of gay life in New York and abroad. In mourning his lover, Jones also mourns the end of his freedom to enjoy erotic pleasure.

I think we're alone now.

There doesn't seem to be anyone around.

[...]

Do you remember Amsterdam, and the lights are playing, and all the places you can smoke all day long and have sex all night long?

[...]

Do you remember Man's Country?

Do you remember St. Mark's Baths?

[...]

Do you remember sex with strangers?

Do you remember audiences?

Do you remember the first time we heard the word "homoerotic"?

[...]

A collage of images of Jones and Zane animates the background. Slowly, Jones dresses in everyday clothes. This is his mourning outfit, with which he re-enters the real world. The chain of recounted events approaches Zane's death and its aftermath.

Do you remember Roosevelt Hospital?

Do you remember the cemetery?

Do you remember your mother ripping her blouse?

Do you remember the ambulance drivers who wouldn't touch your body?

The performance ends. Jones pounds his chest with his right fist and silently disappears from the scene into the darkness. "A system in collapse is a system moving forward," resounds as a mantra in my mind.

In *Untitled*, the universal threat and impact of the AIDS epidemic, although never directly articulated, is made violently tangible and personal. AIDS is an incomprehensible entity, even more incomprehensible than death per se. Jones struggles to reconnect with the soul and memory of the person he has lost. The private, inscrutable dimension of his own grief, the celebration of a mourning that resists its end, becomes a work of artistic expression, the only thing that still gives meaning to his life. But isn't Jones's cathartic ceremony more than an individual act of mourning? Is it not also an invitation to find a way to process the nostalgia and loss of our own beloved ones? Sitting at my desk, I re-watch *Untitled* a long time after originally seeing it. And I, the audience, am breathless. A new song by Beach House plays in the other room: "If it hurts to love / You better do it anyway / If it hurts too much / Well, I loved you anyway."

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## Is It All Just a Gay (Male) AIDS Melodrama?<sup>105</sup>

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Despite the fact that the majority of the independent videos produced in the midst of the AIDS crisis were documentaries (often to conform to the format imposed by the public access television channels on which they initially circulated), Hubbard argues that most still remain

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105 ——— This sub-chapter is titled after Thomas Waugh's essay "Erotic Self-Images in the Gay AIDS Melodrama" in *The Fruit Machine* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 218–35.

I have been using this title to ironically allude to the historical debate between those who firmly believe that art in the time of AIDS had to take the route of (urban) activism and those who have instead relied on a more self-reflective and experimental approach to the representation of HIV/AIDS—a hostility that I discuss in greater depth in the chapter "Every Moment Counts—AIDS and Its Feelings." I align myself with Waugh's argument, according to which the affirmative representation and celebration of gay sexuality, including the sexualisation of the person living with AIDS, have been important symbolic agents and have offered the queer community one possible yet powerful vehicle to deal, both culturally and emotionally, with the loss and the trauma of the AIDS epidemic. In this sense, eroticism and sexual potential become representational tools for regaining a sense of self in a context where desire and sexual energy are not only denied but also vilified. Furthermore, they account for a form of queer temporality in a Western society where—I take it for granted—our conception of time as well as space is socially constructed. The tragedy of AIDS has limited the possibility to plan the future. Reaffirming the value and the pleasure of sexuality emphasises the current moment (the transient), against the normative capitalist logic that requires adjusting to a pre-established scheme of how time and space have to be used and developed. Therefore, placing emphasis on sexuality is not a project that undermines the real work done by AIDS activism; to the contrary, it is a political project per se, even if differently (though no less importantly) articulated. "Queer subcultures," Jack Halberstam argues, "produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their future can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic makers of life experience—namely birth, marriage, reproduction, and death." In so doing, I argue, they reclaim a position of resistance.

Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005), 2.

highly experimental. “Out of a sense of urgency and necessity,” writes Hubbard, “AIDS activist videos pushed and pulled the documentary form to places it had never been before and that is the very essence of experimental media.”<sup>106</sup> While documentaries succeeded in marking the presence of different AIDS subjects and subjectivities within society’s ideological representations of the epidemic, the videos of experimental artists fully realised the medium’s possibility of imagining and producing a space—an elsewhere of discourse—for the innermost personal feelings, emotions, expectations, and desires of the AIDS subject. Writing about Isaac Julien’s *This Is Not An AIDS Advertisement* (UK, 1987) and Tom Kalin’s *They Are Lost To Vision Altogether* (USA, 1989), Ann Cvetkovich suggests that the fragmentation and visual excess that characterise experimental AIDS video—embodied in its use of fantasy, desire, and the erotic, alongside the pictorial distortion of reality—are in fact central to the politics of AIDS.<sup>107</sup> By dismissing the binaries of a society that constitutes individuals as either heterosexual or homosexual, normal or abnormal, healthy or diseased, innocent or guilty, these videos revive an affirmative representation of sexuality. Beyond this, they also offer a positive means of reclaiming a sense of self and strength at a time when the magnitude of loss, grief, and melancholia often fills individuals’ emotional landscapes with an overwhelming sense of failure and alienation. Not only do they celebrate the power of this sexuality, but by confusing the boundaries between the licit and the illicit as well as dissolving any self-assured distinction between the normative and the non-normative, the realist and the anti-realist, they disrupt the terrain of the dominant culture in which the meaning and image of AIDS have been produced and made to signify.

As Stuart Marshall noted, “what has been so powerful about the independent film movement from the 1970s on is that it offered the opportunity for [theoretical practices and video practices] to come together.”<sup>108</sup> The independent AIDS media arguably gave rise to video practice and theory intersecting more profoundly than they ever had before, and with more productive and successful results. What began with the urgency and necessity of resisting the mass media rhetoric of AIDS ended up revealing a discursive space-off, where alternative images and representations of AIDS could take shape and circulate, and artists, activists, and filmmakers could suggest new forms and

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**106** ——— Jim Hubbard, “Introduction: A Short Personal History of Lesbian and Gay Experimental Cinema,” *Millenium Film Journal* no. 41 (Fall 2003), <http://www.mfj-online.org/journalPages/MFJ41/hubbardpage.html>.

**107** ——— Ann Cvetkovich, “Video, AIDS, and Activism,” in *Art, Activism, and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage*, ed. G. H. Kester (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 182–98.

**108** ——— Marshall, “The Contemporary Political Use of Gay History,” 65–89.



strategies of critique as well as opposition to the political status quo. This is what Bordowitz and Cvetkovich meant when they both argued that independent AIDS media carries performative effects: it is not merely an object but rather an event that both embodies and enables coalition politics and community organizing.<sup>109</sup> By collapsing the positions of producer, subject, and audience, documentaries and experimental videos resisted the “ethnographic fascination”<sup>110</sup> of the mainstream mass media reports on AIDS and were able to effect political change within the communities that these videos aimed to represent and to whom they sought to give a voice. “Alternative AIDS media is explicitly political, necessarily critical,” Juhasz wrote. “By claiming a self-identified position of anger or love in opposition to the ‘objective’ norm, community identification and building begin.”<sup>111</sup> Despite the oppositional paradigm that informs her analysis, Juhasz’s point is an important one: this commitment to self-expression and recognition together with the “confident insider vernacular”<sup>112</sup> of independent AIDS video—meaning not only the narratives documented by independent video makers but also the codes and conventions, as well as the challenges of the medium—had the effect of producing an array of different images that entered the public domain, offering multiple sites for viewers to challenge, and eventually change, the stability and strength of certain established cultural positions. Furthermore, the fact that the majority of these videos were produced collectively adds another level of political engagement, both from the perspective of their means of production but also from that of the contexts of their reception. The “quick and dirty” aesthetics, rough editing, and directly recorded sound of the video collectives DIVA TV and Testing the Limits, for instance, both of which were born within the civil disobedience barricades of ACT UP, not only document the movement’s demonstrations and public disturbances, but also work as an advertisement for activism and a call for action. Video essentially becomes a mobilising tool that attracts and simultaneously instructs its audience with the same emotional appeal and immediacy of the event that it documents, extending the life and concerns of a public protest beyond the physical presence of those who were there fighting on the streets. Nevertheless,

109 ——— Cvetkovich, “Video, AIDS, and Activism,” 192.

Gregg Bordowitz, *The AIDS Crisis is Ridiculous*, 51.

110 ——— Hallas, *Reframing Bodies*, 6.

As pointed out by John Greyson, this ethnographic fascination consists of the fact that mass media “always speaks about AIDS from its mythical ‘outside’ position of objectivity [...] to erase any sense of being *inside* the community.”

Greyson, “Strategic Compromises,” 63.

111 ——— Juhasz, *AIDS TV*, 5.

112 ——— Greyson, “Strategic Compromises,” 63.



Tom Kalin. *They Are Lost To Vision Altogether*, 1989. Screenshot. Courtesy of the author.

it would be a mistake to assume that education remains the sole focal point of the politics of independent AIDS media. It wouldn't be powerful enough. "Just as activist can range from street protests to peer education, what we might call 'oppositional' media means different things across different communities," Tom Kalin writes, reflecting on the perception of his own body as both a physical and a political battleground and on how profoundly it has been changed by the AIDS epidemic. "Senator Jesse Helms's amendments make it clearer than it already was that merely representing my own sexuality is a form of oppositional media, a reminder of the urgent need for a diverse, vital, and strategic media of resistance."<sup>113</sup> This ethos is reflected in the coexistence and entanglement in alternative AIDS media of realism and fantasy, the literal and the figurative, documentary and artistic experimentation, as well as in its use of the critical lexicon of postmodernism, such as parody, allegory, appropriation, bricolage, displacement, and simulation. It suggests that new and original connections exist between theory and practice, provoking the dissolution of binary systems that would otherwise end up being replicated in the mainstream cultural approach to defining AIDS. It threatens established patterns of thinking, including those related to the role and purpose of art—for example: "art resides outside reality"; "art for the sake of art"; or "art cannot effect social change". It complicates and deepens the strategies available to developing communities' sense of self-understanding and representation as well as their collective search for empowerment. As art historian and critic Richard Noble notes, artists can open up new possibilities "for imagining, and therefore thinking about, the political [and pushing] against the boundaries of the social imaginary."<sup>114</sup>

113 ——— Kalin, "Flesh Histories," 120–21.

114 ——— Richard Noble, "Some Provisional Remarks on Art and Politics," *The Showroom Annual 2003/04*, ed. Bridget Crone (London: The Showroom, 2005), 51.

By refusing to serve existing authorities, he continues, artistic experimentation can contribute to political debate. It is in this refusal to serve the purpose of the institutions that uphold society's power relations, as well as the attempt to open these same institutions up to democratic contestation, that independent AIDS media finds its purpose. Its articulation of resistance is brought about by the multiplicity of strategies of enunciation that define subjects across a wide range of discourses, personal and political positions, visual tactics, and cultural meanings, many of which are contradictory or in conflict.

Contradictions existed and persisted within the AIDS video and AIDS activist movements. The intensity with which artists in the 1980s embraced cultural activism would be unimaginable without the urgency and sense of emergency brought about by the advent of the

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Noble identifies four different ways in which art can be political, a classification that Chantal Mouffe also relies upon: art can critically engage, more or less directly, with political reality by drawing attention to capitalist strategies of subjugation and control (art as political criticism); art can explore subject positions or identities defined by otherness, marginality, oppression, or victimisation by challenging the logics of representation that prevail in Western societies (art as subject position); art can use utopian experimentation to imagine alternative ways of living, by suggesting the feasibility of projects in opposition to the ethos of late capitalism, that as such unveil the contradictions and the limits of our current social arrangements for coexistence (art as utopian experimentation); art can investigate its own political conditions of production and distribution, by unveiling the mechanisms of the art system, which dictates what can be exhibited and therefore circulate as a commodity, and thus establishes traditional and authoritative artistic canons (art as investigation of its own political condition). Noble's argument is grounded in the idea, inherited from Clement Greenberg, of the autonomy of art (its "integrity" as well as its professionalism, at least in liberal democracies), independent from the political context of its production, even though, he admits, it can be inspired or "animated" by political events. For this reason, artistic activism is not included in the taxonomy he outlines, limiting the activist artistic discourse to amateurism, propaganda, or advertising and thus reaffirming the authority of the historical art canon. According to Noble, in order to conceive of how art can be political, its development independent of the political must be taken into account, and the evaluation must rely not on the subject matter but on art's "ontological integrity"—something that Noble neglects to fully explain. I do agree with Noble that "artists have political obligations as citizens, not as artists." Nevertheless, I think that activism is one possible way in which art can perform political demands and push the boundaries of a pre-constituted social order (even animated by the utopic yet conceivable desire to imagine a revolution against the capitalist society), without necessarily losing its "status" and "integrity."

AIDS epidemic. Nevertheless, even though activists and artists shared much of the same political agenda, they did not always share the same ideological assumptions. For instance, experimental filmmakers had to deal with the question of whether or not to conform to common activist practices, such as direct action, street protest, and the production of educational, communicative, and easily accessible media. Talking about *They Are Lost To Vision Altogether*, Tom Kalin once admitted the pressure he felt to create work that was directly political, more didactic, and less elegiac. The most well-known version of this video, produced in 1989, is in fact a re-edit of the 1988 original, which Kalin revised to conform to certain activist expectations.<sup>115</sup>

Furthermore, although artists were unified towards the common strategic purpose of speaking back to AIDS, the broader community—as well as the conception of which issues were the most pressing to address and discuss—remained fragmented into smaller groups. In spite of this, the theoretical foundations underpinning the work of artists and activists alike remained largely the same. As Douglas Crimp wrote in his impassioned introductory essay to *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, “AIDS does not exist apart from the practices that conceptualise it, represent it, and respond to it. [...] There is an underlying reality of AIDS, upon which are constructed the representations, or the culture, or the politics of AIDS. If we recognise that AIDS exists only in and through these constructions, then hopefully we can recognise the imperative to know them, analyse them, and wrest control over them.”<sup>116</sup> Understanding that a disease is socially constructed involves embracing the possibility that it can also be deconstructed. From this model of cultural activism envisioned by Crimp emerged the complexity of the diverse and heterogeneous responses of artists to the AIDS epidemic, as well as the theoretical contribution that sustained these responses. It is impossible, and would in fact be meaningless, to try to answer the question, “which came first, the art or the theory?” Instead, it is worth acknowledging the indissoluble relationship that art and theory were able to forge in the wake of the AIDS epidemic. “Let us say,” wrote Jan Zita Grover in 1989, “that AIDS has produced not only an *interruption* in many artists’ personal lives, but also an *eruption* into their professional lives: a revelation of the applications and limitations of previous theory and practice.”<sup>117</sup>

115 ——— John Greyson, “Scoping Boys: Tom Kalin, Andy Fabo, and Mike Hoolboom in Conversation,” *MIX* 23, no. 1 (Summer 1997): 47.

116 ——— Douglas Crimp, “AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism,” in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 3.

117 ——— Jan Zita Grover, *AIDS: The Artists’ Response* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1989), 2.

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## You Still Talking about AIDS? Too Many Words for Saying AIDS

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The linguistic paradigm that Crimp identified in 1987 became hugely influential for many artists of this period. Treichler's "epidemic of signification," Watney's "spectacle of AIDS," and Edelman's "plague of discourse" were key contributions to the discussion of AIDS as a social construct.<sup>118</sup> What they revealed to the eyes of a highly politicised artistic community is that the language, metaphors, and representations with which the mass media, scientific establishment, and the government depicted the epidemic, and through which they made it intelligible, not only mirrored society's power structures, but also played an active role in creating and reproducing them. When, for instance, Treichler decided to collect from different printed sources thirty-eight distinct ways in which AIDS was described in mainstream popular culture, she did so to demonstrate that the complex pattern of unreasonable equations produced by this AIDS commentary was almost infinite to the point of becoming infectious. "Until we understand AIDS as both a material and a linguistic reality," she writes, "we cannot begin to [...] formulate intelligent interventions."<sup>119</sup> By insisting on Crimp's theoretical assumption, Treichler brings forward an important hypothesis: language, she argues, not only reflects the meaning of the epidemic, but rather and most importantly, it produces the epidemic. Even though her argument mostly departs from an analysis of the biomedical discourse around the disease, which also gives the title to her essay, it reaches far beyond this specific field. Science and medicine, she contends, need to be understood along cultural lines in the interest of working against the dichotomies that have characterised the public discourse on AIDS since its very early days. The prolifera-

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118 ——— Even though the earliest version of Edelman's "The Plague of Discourse. Politics, Literary Theory and AIDS" was presented at the 1987 MLA Convention in San Francisco, it is not among the essays included by Crimp in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*. Crimp's initial scepticism toward this essay came from the deconstructive analysis that Edelman did of the AIDS activist slogan "Silence = Death." Edelman's essay was first published in 1989, in the journal *South Atlantic Quarterly*, no. 88.

Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism*, 18.

119 ——— Treichler, "AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse," 40.

tion of meanings around AIDS—this “discursive jungle”<sup>120</sup>—Treichler says, must be understood within a binary logic that becomes the site from which the rhetoric of AIDS can be first analysed and then deconstructed. This is what she means when, at the end of her essay, she calls for an “epidemiology of signification”<sup>121</sup> as one of the possible theoretical instruments to understand the “provisional and deeply problematic signifier”<sup>122</sup> that AIDS is and to intervene effectively. Along the same lines, Watney, echoing Guy Debord’s most famous book, uses the metaphor of spectacle to analyse how AIDS has been staged by the mass media as a gay plague. In the eyes of the general public, AIDS becomes a sign and symptom of homosexuality, and therefore reinforces the old paradigm of sexual diversity as a threat to the stability of society’s family structure and founding principles. On slightly different terms, Watney reiterates Treichler’s “call for action.” There are many examples of independent AIDS videos in which linguistic approaches found a practical application. Barbara Hammers’s *Snow Job: The Media Hysteria of AIDS* (USA, 1986), for instance, translates in images what Treichler and Watney did in writing. Collating headlines from popular media, computer-generated images of a snowstorm, radio and TV soundbites, as well as scenes from Brent Nicholson Earle’s “American Run for the End of AIDS” (1986), the quick-cut montage and pre-internet, low-tech aesthetics of Hammer’s video reflect the mass media landscape of the time: a confused, inappropriate, imprecise, and scary assemblage of disparate ideas that have superseded the actual facts. The experimental format and non-linear structure of the video amplify the psychological pressure of an epidemic of signification that is inevitably already internalised. In a similar vein, but with a more complex, elegiac, and, in my opinion, powerful arrangement, Andre Burke’s video *A* (USA, 1986) features the superimposition of the letter “A” over a collage of images, storytelling, computer-generated graphics, and a voiceover continuously repeating other words beginning with the same letter as AIDS, suggesting, as Roger Hallas writes, “the radical polysemy of the sign, as well as its arbitrary signification. [...] The cumulative intensity of sound and images forces us to recognise that in the context of AIDS, we do not speak its discourse: it speaks us.”<sup>123</sup>

**120** ——— What Treichler means here by “discursive jungle” is that the meaning of AIDS is always unstable, because it depends on the contexts in which that meaning is generated.

Treichler, “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse,” 48.

**121** ——— Treichler, “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse,” 68.

**122** ——— Treichler, “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse,” 70.

**123** ——— Roger Hallas, “The Resistant Corpus: Queer Experimental Film and Video and the AIDS Pandemic,” *Millenium Film Journal* no. 41 (Fall 2003), <http://www.mfj-online.org/journalPages/MFJ41/hallaspage.html>.

Even though Lee Edelman's analysis bears many similarities to those of Treichler and Watney, his is grounded in psychoanalysis and literary theory. Edelman explores the connections among language, disease, and infection, arguing that a deconstructive approach is the only possible methodology to search for the ideological investments of the dominant discourse around AIDS and to create sites of resistance to it. From his perspective, the ideological operations constituting the AIDS discourse, "can work at cross-purposes to the explicit political agendas of those who attempt to deploy them against the dominant institutions of power."<sup>124</sup> This reverse logic—alongside his thoughtful comparison of the way in which the HIV retrovirus attacks the immune system to a process he calls "metaphorical substitution,"<sup>125</sup> in which the discourse of AIDS replicates itself in language and representation as a virus—provides the key to accessing and better understanding Burke's short film. The mechanism that Edelman defines as "the plague of discourse," echoing Treichler's "the epidemic of signification,"<sup>126</sup> is rooted in one fundamental principle: the transference of meaning from the reality of AIDS to its representation is achieved through a complex process in which the supposed congruence between representation and reality is only apparent, but the apparatus of "illusory imitation" is never revealed. The intricate layers of linguistic and visual associations that abound in Burke's *A* seem to function exactly in the precise direction indicated by Edelman. Perhaps this is why a voiceover of an adult man recounting his personal experience of AIDS at the end of the video envisions only one possible cure: "only then, I knew, when there is no more word for it and no way of saying it even, only then would I be rid of this disease that afflicts me."

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124 ——— Lee Edelman, "The Plague of Discourse," in *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 80.

125 ——— Edelman, "The Plague of Discourse," 90.

126 ——— Edelman does not acknowledge Treichler's "epidemic of signification" in his essay, even though it was published two years after Treichler's appearance in the winter 1987 issue of *October* journal, edited by Douglas Crimp.





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**PART 2**

**A [After Andre Burke]**

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# Part 1

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## **First Movement**

### **Introduction: The Jungle**

HIV/AIDS is not going to end, not in the nearest future at least. As a consequence, whatever discourse on AIDS the epidemic generates is not on track to end either. Anyone interested in HIV/AIDS runs the same more or less conscious risk. There is always an excess of knowledge that exceeds the knowledgeable; an excess of discourse that exceeds the intelligible; an excess of representation that exceeds the presentable. Any experience with AIDS, as the object to theorise, is a failure at best, an obsessive irrational fetish at worst. Making sense of AIDS, I came to the conclusion, is a no sense. There is no way out, unless to confront the chaos. Whenever I think of my relation to this chaos and engage with the impossibility of picturing AIDS, I invariably return to the allegorical vastness and denseness of the image of a jungle. When I imagine it from a bird eye's view, I feel I am losing my sense of sight; when dreaming of adventuring through it, I feel I have to wrestle with a labyrinth of jumbled trees and other vegetation. All jungles are different but equally impossible to describe straightforwardly. The jungle, inhospitable and uninhabitable, is a place of absolute and unexpected risk, hence of fascination and seductive pleasure.

## **Movement 2**

### **Am I in trouble too?**

In my attempt to address the question of what AIDS means and looks like, I sought to produce knowledge based on how the epidemic has historically been visualised, by artists and other image-makers as well as image-thinkers and AIDS writers. This epistemological, though inevitably also personal, challenge sometimes opened up to nostalgia, other times to a fully inconsolable archive of emotions, and very often to unverified speculations. Lately, and definitely, I ended up adventuring into more chaos. I finally accepted the idea that AIDS is not a fully intelligible entity. AIDS, I realised, is not rational. It is uncertain and undecided, indeterminate and indefinite, contingent and contextual. It is precarious, unstoppable, and interminable. It is undisciplined, hence out of control. As with the forest, so too does AIDS overflow the banks of space and time, the ink, the theory, and the images it occupies. Whatever the field or system of knowledge, AIDS is always simultaneously within and beyond its spatial and temporal limits. It reflects and expands symbolically as the splash of a rock thrown into the river propagates its circles. It is there even when it is elsewhere. It is present

even when it is not visible. It speaks even when it stays silent. The most interesting attraction of AIDS, I have found, is ironically its well-accomplished absurdity. By resisting any possibility of being represented, AIDS was over-represented. AIDS very much exists because of the representational logics it tried to escape. Representation, I argue, is the ultimate *raison d'être* of AIDS, as well as its failure. "Only then [...] when there is no more word for [AIDS] and no way of saying it even, only then [I know] would I be rid of the disease that afflicts me," Jamie Bozian's raspy voice proclaims at the end of Andre Burke's experimental short film *A* (1986).<sup>1</sup> When the object to be represented remains unrepresented, and the object to be named remains unnamed, therefore recognising its own excess, only then will AIDS likely cease being the trouble it became. In this sense, we who have been persistently seduced by AIDS are all in trouble, and to it we contribute. "It is an

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1 ——— The question of unnameability is at the centre of a lecture Leo Bersani delivered in Venice in June 2011. Citing the final words of Pierre Bourdieu's 1997 English edition of the *Pascalian Meditations*—"The state creates us by naming us"—Bersani, similarly to Burke's main character, poses the following question: "How can we become unnameable?" According to Bersani, this question is far from strictly philosophical; to the contrary, it carries within itself a certain sense of empirical urgency. "The question," he argues, "is relevant if, as I believe, unnameability can operate as an effective form of resistance to networks of repressive power." How Bersani formulates his questioning of the power of the institution to either legitimise or delegitimise individuals might sound paradoxical and therefore impossible to answer. Nevertheless, it shows a direction worth looking at and pointing towards, in particular when discussing the formation of an AIDS subject by the hands of governments and the mass media from the 1980s onwards. The weight of forms of legitimation enacted through naming and enunciation, as Burke states in his short experimental film, is clearly unbearable and toxic. By confronting the protagonists of two films, Divine in Jean Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers* (France, 1943) and Carol in Todd Haynes's *Safe* (USA, 1995), Bersani comes to a potential answer to his original question, which also agitates Burke. He seems to predict the impossibility of any form of social viability or compromise, the consequences of which entail a "potentially irreversible negativising" of both the world and the self. This corresponds to an act of disappearance as well as the total abandonment of the name—therefore the identity as well as the place—that society has assigned to the individual. In this sense, Bersani's provocation echoes that tension towards an outside—a "future without futurity," an anonymity of the self and its incessant itinerancy—in which John Paul Ricco too sees one, if not the only, possible way to refuse, and hence resist, repressive power.

Leo Bersani, "Illegitimacy," in *The State of Things*, ed. Marta Kuzma, Pablo Lafuente, and Peter Osborne (London: Koenig Books, 2012), 39–70.

attraction-unto-negligence that operates *through*,” to cite John Paul Ricco, “and that is, the full force of [...] the logic of the lure.”<sup>2</sup>

### Movement 3 Seduced but Not Terrorized

I first entered this space of seduction more than a decade ago, intrigued by the strangely erotic work of a group of American artists who died at a young age because of AIDS. I soon began to experience a sense of inadequacy, coming from a tangible debate regarding who is and who is not entitled to speak, question, or write about AIDS, to deal with the politics of AIDS and to look towards its future with what has been inherited from the past. For a moment, the historian and the art historian in me had to doubt, and reconsider, their point of view. History is always in a process of constant revision; thus at intervals it has to make an effort to transcend its boundaries. When in need, I have often

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2 ——— John P. Ricco, *The Logic of the Lure* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), xx.  
In the preface to *The Logic of the Lure*, Ricco reflects on his writing as an articulation of the “persistence of the thought in those very instances at which thought becomes nearly impossible,” a persistence that informs the logic of the lure. William Haver, in *The Body of this Death: Historicity and Sociality in the Time of AIDS*, seems to take a similar position. Examining the limits of the thinkable in relation to the force of the need to give AIDS a meaning, Haver too discusses a certain degree of attraction, one that manifests in forms of “intervention” or “guerilla questioning.” According to Haver, this intervention is not aimed at offering a more convincing representation of the world, nor at establishing the “intellectual hegemony” of a thought in conflict with another—a theoretical assumption that defies Chantal Mouffe’s model of political agonism. AIDS in particular presents Haver with the evident necessity of questioning the entire system of philosophical aspirations that sustains our conviction of the world being an object possible of knowing. This corresponds to the admission that a question questioning itself is the only question worth asking. “Any serious [...] engagement with [...] AIDS,” Haver argues, “will be possible [...] only in a radical questioning of what we take [...] too often to be the unproblematic ground of knowing.” This move towards a questioning of the question, Haver admits, may be an impossible one to take; therefore it will necessarily open up to instability and fragmentation. “Such an engagement,” he continues, “demands an openness to the radical insecurity of a futurity for which we must refuse to be prepared, an openness to a revolution that would be at once political, economic, social, cultural and intellectual.”  
William Haver, *The Body of This Death: Historicity and Sociality in the Time of AIDS* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), xvii–iii.

been comforted by art history; its contradictions have reassured me about the existence of a potential alternative to the existing history. The osmotic relationship between the inside and the outside of history, and so art history, will never cease to be. The praxis of inclusion/exclusion is the condition for both history and the outside of history to exist.<sup>3</sup> Following an irrational passion for the photographs of Mark Morrisroe, the paintings of Hugh Steers, the stitched fruits of Zoe Leonard, and the works of many other talented artists—some well-known and others less so—I developed an interest in the boundless visual and literary territories of AIDS stronger than ever before. I discovered the overwhelming volume of words, images, concepts, ideas, and theories produced by AIDS and its “devotees.”

## Movement 4

### The Promising Outcome of History

Michel Foucault was the first known internationally acclaimed public intellectual in Europe to contract the virus that leads to AIDS and to die of it. But he didn't utter a word about it.<sup>4</sup> In 1984, scientific research

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3 ——— This is confirmed by the resurgent interest among researchers and art practitioners in both the history of AIDS and its artistic representations as well as the urgent need to revisit its historical narrative. Following a methodology of the “re”—i.e. to reorganize, reconfigure, reshape, reframe, relocate, rebound—this historical revisitation often takes the form of an exploration of non-white, non-gay, non-middle class, non-American-centred experiences of AIDS, one that also does not exclusively pertain to the domain of political activism. In the context of this essay, what I am interested in pointing out is that this historical re-balancing seems to confirm that the cultural boundaries delimited by history are the condition sine qua non of pushing the limits of the history of AIDS and its discourse as well as reframing AIDS as a historical construct. Without discussing this revisitation in detail, I acknowledge and value the work of many colleagues whose research goes exactly in the direction described above—a direction that I also took in previous research and curatorial projects.

4 ——— At the time of Foucault's death in 1984, AIDS was still a history-less phenomenon, which according to his partner Daniel Defert, on the occasion of his last trip to San Francisco in the fall of 1983, the French philosopher took as a serious matter but also as a “limit-experience.” James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 380.

James Miller has interrogated himself extensively on the meaning of “limit-experience.” Presumably because of his premature death, it was time, rather than interest, that prevented Foucault from engaging with the writing of AIDS. Nevertheless, some have timidly sketched the traces of an undeveloped Foucauldian position on AIDS, including

about HIV/AIDS was still at a very early stage, especially on the other side of the Atlantic. Only one year prior the medical team at Institut Pasteur in Paris had isolated a virus they called LAV from a patient affected by AIDS.<sup>5</sup> According to the French philosopher's long-time partner, Daniel Defert, Foucault never fully acknowledged having developed AIDS, although he knew it.<sup>6</sup> He neither spoke of it nor wrote about it. When I became aware of the recent publication of *Confessions of The Flesh*, I expected to find a concrete answer to the question of Foucault and HIV/AIDS in this final, posthumous text.<sup>7</sup> He had planned

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his closest friend, Hervé Guibert; his biographer; and Philip Horvitz, more precisely in a short text/interview—"Don't Cry for me Academia"—that he wrote for the fanzine *Jimmy & Lucy's House of "K"* in the summer of 1984. Horvitz reports Foucault's disappointment towards certain fringes of the gay community relying on "outside authorities" in search of guidance to deal with AIDS and its crisis. "How can I be scared of AIDS when I could die in a car?" he tells Horvitz. "If sex with a boy gives me pleasure..." he concludes (echoing what the philosopher once told Miller—"Besides, to die for the love of boys: What could be more beautiful?"). Entering the Downtown Berkeley BART Station, Foucault wishes Horovitz good luck and salutes him with one last remark: "Don't cry for me if I die." Though it does not reveal much of Foucault's ideas on AIDS, this anecdote at least seems to suggest that for the French philosopher AIDS was an historical accident, and as such it needed to be questioned and investigated. At the same time, it confirms that for Foucault the mainstream discourse on the epidemic circulating at the beginning of the 1980s was deeply rooted and already sedimented in the institution's attempt to, once again, regulate sex and transform the sexual conduct of the individual.

5 ——— In 1987 President Ronald Reagan and French Minister Jacques Chirac signed a formal agreement to share credit for the discovery of the HIV virus and for the use of the scientific technologies required to detect the virus through a blood test. The cooperation included a sharing of royalties between the two countries, 80 percent of which had to be reinvested in establishing and supporting an International AIDS Foundation. The dispute regarded not only the discovery of the HIV virus but also the competing nomenclatures used (LAV versus HTLV-III) by the medical groups in France and the US, guided by Luc Montagnier and Robert Gallo respectively.

Lawrence K. Altman, "U.S. and France End Rift on AIDS," *The New York Times*, April 1, 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/04/01/us/us-and-france-end-rift-on-aids.html>.

6 ——— Miller, *The Passion*, 380.

7 ——— I must admit that my expectations were presumably shaped by the experience of making notes for this essay during the COVID-19 pandemic, the emotional instability of the moment, and the effort carried out by all national governments to contain it, against the sharp and conscious blindness perpetuated for years by both the political and medical establishments in acknowledging the disastrous effects of the HIV virus.

to submit a finished, edited version of the manuscript to Gallimard by October 1984, but he died in June. Although Foucault did not directly address the historical accident of AIDS in his writings at all—not even in the text he had in his hands on his deathbed—still he set in place a speculative model, and a methodological itinerary, encompassing many fields of knowledge, including the study of the politics of AIDS. Foucault had spent his entire life investigating how and why systems and forms of thinking have generated certain ideas and practices rather than others at specific historical and geographical moments. The theoretical model investigating how sex is historically articulated into discourse that he advances in Volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality* has largely been used to study the effects of the power invested in the discursive productions of AIDS and their formulation as universal truth in the 1980s and onwards.

In the eighteenth Century, Foucault points out, the proliferation of public discourse regarding sex corresponded to a stringent policing of sex and its vocabulary, arising from the need to manage and administer it at its best. This mechanism was at the service of the economic and political interests of fledgling capitalism. All of the distortions that were not deemed useful, which constituted society's "peripheral sexualities," were first banned, then kept under strict control, and later used to please the needs for self-affirmation of the nineteenth century bourgeoisie.<sup>8</sup> There is an evident parallelism between the AIDS discourse,

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8 ——— According to Foucault, in the nineteenth century the various codes, whether religious or legal, that governed sexual practices determined the division between the licit, i.e. the normal heterosexual, and the illicit, or the other, i.e. the abnormal homosexual. The norm was affirmed by means of a policing mechanism centred on marriage and the family. The entire familiar apparatus was at the service of the self-affirmation of capitalist society, which recognised in the heterosexual union the primary locus for exercising control and perpetuating the power of the dominant political class for posterity.

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 77–131.

Similarly, Bersani argues, in the twenty-first century the institution of same-sex marriage is yet another expression of society's attempt to police homosexuality and keep it constrained within the discourse that has historically excluded, condemned, and disqualified the homosexual subject, hence to exercise its power and leave him/her/them vulnerable to the appeal of subverting the future categories with which society will define "us." For Bersani, even though it presumably makes the institution more inclusive, same-sex marriage is not destabilising the institution's privileged and exclusive right to authenticate and testify to the recognised attributes by which participants are included in a relational hierarchy, hence in a system based on oppressive intelligibility.

Bersani, "Illegitimacy," 39–70.



including the idea of the queer outlaw, and Foucault's theory of sex and sexuality, as well as his original investigation of structures of power relations and systems of knowledge. The discourse on AIDS, following the trajectory of the discourse on sex, has multiplied rather than rarefied because, as Foucault points out, it is in "discourse that power and knowledge are joined together."<sup>9</sup> In other words, AIDS, as with sex, could only be blamed, controlled, exploited, and eventually redeemed through discourse. Any critical investigation on the cultural phenomenon of AIDS has been very much shaped by similarly configured theoretical models. To adopt Foucault's contribution is to acknowledge that the social and the linguistic are always and inevitably tightly connected as well as embedded in history. As an outcome of this set of connections, power is produced and transmitted. In the specific context of HIV/AIDS, to embrace this logic is to recognise that any systematic study of AIDS begins where the investigation of AIDS as a material object to theorise ends. It has to be abandoned in favour of an analysis of the ways in which society formed and figured the nature, the shape, and the thought of AIDS through its discursive practices. In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault had the methodological necessity to establish sex and sexuality as historical constructs. It is through the process of historicisation that incomprehensible phenomena are made,

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By claiming that in the neoliberal society the queer subject has become a way to further capitalist exploitation, Ryan Conrad and Yasmin Nair, co-founders of the Against Equality online archive, reframe in similar terms the process of assimilation that Bersani describes. The anthology *Against Equality: Queer Revolution, Not Mere Inclusion*, edited by Conrad, brings together a series of texts from different perspectives that collectively stand against the queer politics that from 2010 onwards promoted and funded the same-sex marriage campaign in the US. The authors do not deny the legitimate right of people to get married; rather, they call for a radical reorientation of the world, politically as well as economically, that according to them can happen only through the exercise of queer resistance—i.e. an anti-normalising queer politics. Far from granting everybody equal rights, the state-sanctioned legitimisation of same-sex marriage would risk exacerbating the ability of marriage to discipline class structures and to reinforce the logics of capitalism. Not only would it enlarge the gap between those who are included and those who remain excluded (based on their class or for not identifying with a specific gender, for instance), but it would also erase the historical anarchic effort of the queer community to create an alternative form of society, one that does not mimic the heteronormative capitalist society.

Ryan Conrad, ed., *Against Equality: Queer Revolution, Not Mere Inclusion* (Edinburgh, Chico, and Baltimore: AK Press, 2014), 1-95.

9 ——— Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, 100.

or rather promised to be, intelligible. History becomes a practical tool for the study of systems and networks of relations in which knowledge, as Foucault advocates, is constructed and through it power is exercised. “Every historicization,” William Haver argues, “holds out the promise of intelligibility and sense. [...] In this work of historicization,” he continues, “[...] the unspeakable is spoken, the unimaginable imagined, the unthinkable thought, the unrepresentable represented—and the unbearable rendered bearable for an ‘us’ constituted in what is presumably the communion of communication.”<sup>10</sup>

## Movement 5

### Postscript: Shall We Be Unfaithful to the Promises of History?

Likewise, tracing a history of AIDS (retrospectively) has been a methodological need and a salvational project too, the only one we have found so far “designed” to confront the intolerable sense of loss caused by AIDS. “If AIDS had been comprehensible only in terms of natural calamity, it would not have called for a critique,” Avital Ronell writes. “But catastrophe, folded over by traits of historical if not conventional markings, calls for a critique, it demands a *reading*.”<sup>11</sup> The relationship of AIDS with history is a problematic one. There seems not to be a ground of resolution yet, not even a provisional one, to the conflict between the historical qualities attributed to AIDS and the will to betray them, i.e. the attempt to rationalise its existence within a recognisable history, a history that ends when AIDS begins.”<sup>12</sup> This tension

10 ——— Haver, *The Body of This Death*, 17–18.

11 ——— Avital Ronell, “A Note on the Failure of Man’s Custodianship: AIDS Update,” *Public: The Ethics of Enactment* 8 (Fall 1993): 57–66.

12 ——— In “The Epidemic as a Rupture in History,” Alexander Garcia Düttman conducts a critical analysis of the historical interpretation of AIDS as a rupture in history as well as within the individual and of the individual with the other—a rupture that provokes urgent testimony and confession as attempts to acknowledge, and therefore make sense of, this same rupture. Testimony is always a promise of intelligibility, therefore a search for truth. Confronting AIDS as a historical disruption, Düttman argues, is a big epistemological mistake, one that “seem[s] to erase precisely the very thing to which [we] wish to testify and for which [we] wish to give justification.” For him, the historical and the social are always constituted as a narrative, one in which our social identities find validation. Only by confronting AIDS as the undetermined, the uncircumscribed, the undelimited, and the provisional, which is its primordially “impertinent” existence, will we be capable of “measuring up with the destructive force of the virus.” I recognise in Düttman’s use of “impertinent”—which he borrows from Roland

corresponds to Haver's provocative but nonetheless tragically authentic proclamation that "it will always be impossible to write *the* history of AIDS."<sup>13</sup>

## Movement 6 A Vernacular Myth

To complicate things further, the way in which truth is historically modelled against or in relation to falsity is not immutable. The present of the past is, historically speaking, always simultaneously both true and false, or neither. Consider, for instance, the epidemiological history of HIV/AIDS. Compared to other similarly devastating infectious diseases, such as the plague or the Spanish flu, HIV is a relatively new discovery. According to the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, HIV made its appearance in Central Africa around the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> The virus, epidemiologists say, spread from primates to humans, moved from Africa to Haiti, and ended up in North America. The first report of HIV infection in the United States, we have

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Barthes's introduction to Renaud Camus's *Tricks*—an attempt to acknowledge the ultimate unintelligibility of AIDS.

Alexander G. Düttman, *At Odds with AIDS: Thinking and Talking about a Virus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 27-41.

13 ——— Haver, *The Body of This Death*, 15.

The emphasis on *the* is by the author and not present in the original text.

14 ——— The rhetoric of HIV/AIDS as a disease naturally belonging to the other has a history that refuses to die. Since the very beginning, the AIDS pandemic has been epidemiologically constructed around ideas of cleanliness, whiteness, and sameness. The body, in its encounter with the other, has been described as the primordial site of infection, and therefore as the locus of processes of cultural immunisation performed in order to prevent the risk of contamination from the virus and the AIDS epidemic. Despite HIV's non-exclusive and global character, its history has been sharpened around a precise logic of separation, which identified in the historical "social surplus"—i.e. people of color, homosexuals, IV drug users, and sex workers— and the risk of this demographic's geographical expansion, the source of a genocidal attempt to enter and infect the "one-tribe nation" (a term coined by artist David Wojnarowicz to describe the white, male-centred, right-wing, heteronormative American society) and the clean body politics of Western society. Interestingly, as Susan Sontag points out, by claiming that the HIV virus entered the "First World" from the outside, it became a historical phenomenon, an event of history. Only in the West do catastrophes create history, while in the poorest countries, such as those in Africa, they remain the domain of the natural or the divine. Susan Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 83-84.

always been told, dates to 1981. In recent years, a team of medical researchers found out that the HIV virus arrived in North America sometime between the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, where it made its silent course before being clinically isolated for the first time in 1983 and identified as a bridge to AIDS. Nonetheless, the origin of HIV still remains unclear. From the point of view of history, and in light of Foucault's power-knowledge paradigm, this scientific speculation has enormous cultural/historical repercussions. In this new etiological study of HIV/AIDS, scientists claim that the strings of virus present in a blood sample of the man whom the CDC presumed had introduced AIDS in America, belonged not to the base of the US evolutionary tree of HIV, but to its middle. As soon as this was announced to mass media, the Patient Zero theory was suddenly dismantled. Gaëtan Dugas, the gay Air Canada flight attendant whom Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post* labelled "The Man Who Gave Us AIDS," was finally redeemed. Had the editors of *People Magazine* only known about the so-called silent decades of HIV, AIDS icon Patient Zero would not have claimed a top place on the list of the twenty-five most intriguing people of 1987.<sup>15</sup> It took more than thirty-five years to turn an erroneous medical research finding into a vernacular myth.

## Movement 7

### AIDS Before AIDS

Artist and scholar Theodore Kerr is a long-time advocate of a revisionist approach to the revisitation of the history of AIDS and its implications. A year before Dugas's public redemption in 2016, Kerr realised the work *AIDS 1969*, in which he overlays an image of the iconic Gate-

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15 ——— Alongside Patient Zero are Ronald Reagan, Mikhail Gorbachev, Princess Diana, and Vincent van Gogh, among others. American writer and journalist Randy Shilts is to be credited for the invention, and popularity, of the Patient Zero myth, as well as the final relief, after six years of a silent epidemic, of all the anxieties of the heterosexual American population. Shilts's book *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York: Martin's Press, 1987) popularised the Patient Zero narrative. As Crimp pointed out, "Shilts's painstaking effort in telling the 'true' story of the epidemic's early years thus resulted in two media stories: the story of the man who brought us AIDS, and the story of the man who brought us the story of the man who brought us AIDS. Gaëtan Dugas and Randy Shilts became overnight media stars." Douglas Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 242.

way Arch against the blue-purple sky of St. Louis, Missouri, with the message “AIDS 1969” in bold white lettering, as a critique of how the history of AIDS has been and is currently being discussed. The graphic arose from a precise historical fact. In May 1969, an African-American teenager from St. Louis named Robert Rayford died. Doctors were not able to identify the cause of the sixteen-year-old boy’s death, beyond acknowledging that his immune system was highly compromised. Almost twenty years later, in 1987, following the most recent scientific discoveries on AIDS, doctors from City Hospital in St. Louis were able to identify that antibodies to the HIV virus were present in Rayford’s blood at the time of his death. The discovery confirms that up to that moment Robert Rayford, and not Gaëtan Dugas, was the earliest known case of HIV/AIDS in the US. The news was made public only a few days after the disclosure of the fictive Patient Zero anecdote but, as Kerr has rightly argued, “Patient Zero filled a cultural void that Rayford could not have”—i.e. that of the queer promiscuous outlaw.<sup>16</sup> Aside from sending back the lancets of the AIDS timeline, Kerr’s research points to the history of AIDS, which exists outside of history, before the historical rupture engendered by AIDS. Furthermore, it illustrates effectively the mechanisms through which power permeates discourse and therefore knowledge is propagated. According to Kerr, digging into the stories of the presumably many HIV-positive people who died before 1981, and therefore making space for them within the AIDS archive, is a necessary starting point for questioning the cultural tradition and history of AIDS as well as its literature.

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16 ——— Sixteen-year-old Rayford was not exempted from being immediately inoculated within the narrative of the homosexual infected body. As reported in 1987 by John Crewdson in *The Chicago Tribune*, doctors suspected that Rayford had experienced anal sex, either consensual or related to prostitution, due to two facts that appeared in their eyes to be crucial, but which didn’t have any scientific foundation: while he was still alive, doctors knew that the teenager would have refused to undergo a rectal inspection; when his body was retrospectively re-examined at autopsy, they found signs of Kaposi’s sarcoma on his rectum and anus. Dr. Marlys Hearst Witte admitted to Crewdson that this confirms that most likely the boy “engaged in practices that one would now associate with transmission of AIDS.” Theodore (Ted) Kerr, “AIDS 1969: HIV, History, and Race,” *Drain* 13, no. 2 (2016), <http://drainmag.com/aids-1969-hiv-history-and-race/>.

## Movement 8

### AIDS Signifier

The historical mythological depiction of Patient Zero is just one of countless other equally mythological explanations of the origin and, more generally, the narrativisation of AIDS. To address the “symbol-inducing power” of AIDS and reflect upon the “lack of social consensus around its meaning,” in 1987 Paula A. Treichler published the seminal essay “An Epidemic of Signification.” The text begins with a list of thirty-eight different ideas associated with AIDS collected by Treichler from various printed sources since 1981. The narratives range from the gay plague to the CIA plot, from experiments in genetic mutation to God’s punishment for anal intercourse.<sup>17</sup> By dissecting the cultural politics surrounding the AIDS epidemic, Treichler highlights how AIDS “facts” are not inherent to the disease itself, but to the contrary are the result of pre-existing discursive practices that make AIDS signify in one way rather than another. The study of the social intervention mediated by language—i.e. what language is doing, not only what it is saying, and therefore the power it exercises—is one of Treichler’s most important contributions to the study of AIDS. Furthermore, by borrowing the Saussurian framework of “signification,” which Treichler’s title suggests is infectious and spreads rapidly, she calls attention to how language organises the experience of certain phenomena at a given historical moment and in a specific cultural-political context. As the conditions determining the time and space of our experience change, so too does the experience itself, including the effects of the enunciations and confrontations occurring within the network of power relations that, as Foucault speculates, are always established by discourse. Hence, signification becomes a strategic entity, a process instrumental in establishing multiple relationships of meaning, which are distributed in and through discourse. In the circumscribed system of Saussurian signification that Treichler uses as a general framework, AIDS equates to a combination of infinite possibilities of either/or, neither/nor, and both/and. Simon Watney and Lee Edelman have each

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17 ———— Treichler intentionally puts together a very idiosyncratic list of ways in which AIDS has been named, with the purpose of showing the dramatic symbol-inducing power of the epidemic, and how it has consequently been narrativised. Her chaotic assemblage of “stories” about AIDS includes: “The result of genetic mutations caused by mixed marriages;” “The result of moral decay and a major force destroying the Boy Scouts;” “A disease that turns fruits into vegetables;” “The price paid for the Sixties;” “A terrible and expansive way to die.” Paula A. Treichler, “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification,” in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 31–70.

come to similar conclusions in parallel to Treichler, the former through a critical analysis of mass media in the AIDS era, and the latter by means of literary theory. Watney focusses on a study of the “visual register of the AIDS commentary,” both in the UK and the US. He compares the indistinctive colours and odd forms of a series of “technicolor asteroids,” computer-rendered graphic representations of how the HIV retrovirus attacks the human body at the cellular level, to the “regime of massively over determined images” produced by the highly choreographed “Spectacle of AIDS” and designed to blame homosexuals and other 4 H villains for the epidemic (hemophiliacs, heroin addicts, homosexuals, and Haitians).<sup>18</sup> Edelman, meanwhile, in “The Plague of Discourse,” uses an expression that echoes Treichler’s title to frame his argument. He contends that AIDS cannot be disentangled from the linguistic operations in which it is implicated and in doing so acknowledges the opportunism of language suggested by Treichler.

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18 ——— Simon Watney, “The Spectacle of AIDS,” in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 71–86.

In “Our Immune System: The Wars Within,” published in the June 1986 issue of *National Geographic*, Peter Jaret “reports on the [AIDS] battlefield” and uses a war metaphor to describe the reverse transcription of the HIV virus and the process by which it infects a healthy cell. “Like Greeks hidden inside the Trojan horse, the AIDS virus enters the body concealed inside a helper T cell from an infected host. [...] In the invaded victim, helper T’s immediately detect the foreign T cell. But as the two T’s meet, the virus slips through the cell membrane into the defending cell. Before the defending T cell can mobilize the troops, the virus disables it. [...] Once inside an inactive T cell [...] the AIDS virus also begins to multiply. One by one, its clones emerge to infect nearby T cells. Slowly but inexorably the body loses the very sentinels that should be alerting the rest of the immune system. Phagocytes and killer cells receive no call to arms. B cells are not alerted to produce antibodies. The enemy can run free.”

Peter Jaret, “Our Immune System: The Wars Within,” *National Geographic* 169, no. 6 (June 1986), 702–35.

As the Greeks guided by Odysseus in Virgil’s epic poem *Aeneid* won the war against the city of Troy, so the HIV virus conquers the human immune system, and ultimately kills the adversary and wins the war. The article abounds with images of infected human cells, obtained by using a scanning electron microscope, including that of an ovum penetrated by human sperm, building an exclusive relationship of sex with HIV/AIDS. The scans have been magnified between four to 30,000 times. Some were transformed from black and white to colour by Swedish artist Gillis Håågg using an enhancement technique based on light filters and dyes. The visual apparatus is striking and frightening. When I first came across this article, I could not help but think of Watney’s “Technicolor asteroids” of the spectacle of AIDS.

He calls for a deconstructive analysis of the AIDS text as the only possible methodology to look for the forming and functioning of the ideological sites where the meaning of AIDS is being determined. Edelman frames AIDS as a literal construction, an object that does not exist outside of the discourses of science, medicine, art, or politics, which create it and give rise to its history. Thus, he rejects any possible equation that presents itself as truth and feeds the public discussion on AIDS. By practising within Derrida's research domain, Edelman investigates the fields of force between the literal and the figurative that inform the discourse on AIDS and its political repercussions. "The most disturbing feature of the Western discourse on 'AIDS' is the way in which the literal is recurrently and tendentiously produced as a figure whose figurality remains strategically occulted," he argues, "and thus a figure that can be used to effect the most repressive political ends."<sup>19</sup> For Edelman, no discourse on AIDS can escape this mechanism. Concurrently, given the instability, openness, fragmentation, and ambiguity of the Derridean text, Edelman seems to suggest that there is no end to the chaotic process of meaning-making in which AIDS is involved. To opt for literary deconstruction will not stop AIDS from reproducing in meaning, but will at least disclose the mechanisms of its production.

## Movement 9

### Reverse Transcription

One interesting example that Edelman writes about to confirm his thesis is the "Silence=Death" slogan, with which the birth of American AIDS activism and AIDS activist art is commonly associated. Paired with a highly symbolic inverted pink triangle, the poster collects all of the fury that artists called for in resisting the mainstream discourse on AIDS. Technically, "Silence=Death" uses the name of one thing to mean another—it defines silence as death. If we stay silent, we will die; if we are actually silent, the reason will be that we are already dead; therefore we have to speak up. As Edelman points out, the slogan denies the

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19 ——— Lee Edelman, "The Plague of Discourse," in *Homographies: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 80.

In the first footnote to "The Plague of Discourse," Edelman explains his decision to always place AIDS within quotation marks, i.e. to "resist its reduction to a singular coherent medical phenomenon and to call attention instead to its status as the ideologically determined site at which a variety of medical, social, and political crises historically converge."

Edelman, "The Plague of Discourse," 255.



literalness of the word “silence.” In doing so, it operates as the precise opposite of what silence does. It demands more words, more text, and, as a consequence, it makes any attempt for AIDS to leave the domain of language and discourse impossible. From the point of view of artistic production, it fosters a greater hybridisation of theory, language, politics, and practice.

The mathematical is translated into the poetical, the literal into the figural. The call to discourse happens through a metaphoric exchange, Edelman writes.<sup>20</sup> The truth of AIDS does not exist; it is always and irremediably represented as a figure. By employing a “metaphorical substitution” in order to establish a figurative association, the activist slogan carries within its equation more than one hidden message—beyond the necessity to not be silenced, it is a call to look for the hidden meanings of AIDS perpetuated by any discourse on AIDS bar none. Furthermore, it is an appeal to unveil the parasitic opportunism of each segment of the AIDS discourse, whatever field it comes from, whether serving the most repressive and virulent goals or attempting to stand against the dominant exercise of power. Just as the gay plague is one in a long list of narratives initiated by the medical establishment to make sense of AIDS, the “Silence=Death” poster belongs to a long-lived series of works produced by AIDS activists and the artistic community in response to the dysfunctional governance of AIDS by local politicians. Edelman’s “plague of discourse” very much recalls the replication cycle of the HIV virus when it enters the human body, a phenomenon known as reverse transcription.<sup>21</sup> Once it has infected the genetic code of a cell, the virus substitutes, like a metaphor, its own infected code for the original healthy code of the cell it entered, to the point that the cell won’t recognise it as a menace. The cell will then do the rest.”<sup>22</sup>

20 ——— The original quote reads as follows: “The rhetorical form of ‘Silence=Death’ thus translates the mathematical into the poetic, the literal into the figural, by framing the call to discourse in terms that evokes the distinctive signature of metaphoric exchange.” Edelman, “The Plague of Discourse,” 88.

21 ——— Edelman writes: “At issue in the disease itself are questions of inscription and transcription, questions of reproduction and substitution. The virus engenders precisely it produces a code, or speaks a language, that can usurp or substitute for the genetic discourse of certain cells in the human immune system. [...] HIV, like a metaphor, operates to naturalize, or present as proper, that which is improper or alien or imported from without. [...] HIV is subverting the capacity of the immune system to read the difference between what is proper to the body or ‘literally’ its own, and what is figural or extrinsic.” Edelman, “The Plague of Discourse,” 90–91.

22 ——— “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” is the concluding line from William Butler Yeats’s poem “Among School Children.” Paul de Man

has used it as an example to explain his thesis of allegorical illegibility—i.e. the indissolubility of the literal from the rhetorical in the structural interference that is allegory—a thesis shared by Craig Owens in his seminal essay “The Allegorical Impulse.” I am bringing in Owens here because, it seems to me, the reverse transcription process of the HIV virus that I have briefly described carries some traits of the “allegorical impulse.” In giving a critical definition of allegory, Owens identifies a series of functions that it serves both in language and in the visual arts. First of all, Owens argues, allegory is a procedure, which occurs “whenever one text is doubled by another.” “In allegorical structure,” he continues, “one text is *read through* another,” a proposition that in the case of HIV is undermined by the impossibility of distinguishing the literal (the healthy cell) from the figural (the infected cell that presents as a clone of the healthy cell). “The allegorist,” Owens suggests, “does not invent images but confiscates them. [...] The allegorical meaning supplants an antecedent one: it is a supplement.” But the surplus of allegory is not an ornament or just some extra equipment; it generates a sequence of linguistic activities that often repeat the confiscating procedure of the allegorist in ritualistic formats and without defined limit of “magnitude.” Interestingly, to repeat and to endlessly expand is the logic that feeds the reverse transcription of the HIV virus once it has entered the human body. However, the un-readability of HIV by the immune system is the direct result of another, more interesting, characteristic of allegory, which also disambiguates de Man’s theory. “In rhetoric, allegory is traditionally defined as a single metaphor introduced in continuous series,” Owens writes. “If this definition is recast in structuralist terms, then allegory is revealed to be the projection of the metaphoric axis of language into its metonymic dimension. [...] Allegory implicates *both* metaphor and metonym.” An allegorical impulse, according to Owens, is exercised when one primary text is being rewritten in terms of its figural meaning. In this sense, allegory has a transformative power. As such, it implies that all the meanings subtended in the allegorical structure are equally possible, and ultimately also undetachable, for “the allegorical supplement” Owens writes, “is not only an addition, but also a replacement.” The “monstrosity” that Benedetto Croce attributed to allegory is explained by Owens in the following terms: “[The allegorical supplement] takes the place of an earlier meaning, which is thereby either effaced or obscured. Because allegory usurps its object it comports within itself a danger, the possibility of perversion: that what is ‘merely appended’ to the work of art be mistaken for its ‘essence.’”

Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism (Part 1 and 2),” in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, ed. Scott Bryson et al. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 52–87.

## Movement 10 Towards an Outside

I must confess that discovering Edelman's radical theory was liberating but not always reassuring. While Treichler appeared to be concerned with making order, Edelman looked more inclined to embrace chaos. This was both therapeutic and destabilising: my natural inclination to search for the truth of things suddenly gave way to acceptance of the failure of AIDS. Edelman shows how to recognise certain ideological operations, but not how to stop their proliferation or make positive use (if any is possible) of the figural paradigm. If the truth of AIDS would be its non-discursive meaning—i.e. that outside of discourse that Burke hoped for in his short film—then the mechanism of substitutive or metaphorical transcription at play in the discourse of AIDS, it appears to me, would not easily let it go to an outside, an elsewhere of discourse, to that virtual space which comes to be when all has been said or exists prior to anything being said. And conflict between forces, the tension between the inside and the outside of discourse, would remain in place. In other words, discourse will persist in being the privileged site of AIDS contestation, therefore of both power and resistance.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, reading Edelman enabled me to clarify the overwhelming feeling I had during my research into different visual and artistic manifestations produced around and/or in response to AIDS, which continued to affect me even when I limited my range of action to a restricted decade of AIDS video art and filmmaking. The growing volume of academic writing on the subject of AIDS was even more energy consuming, testifying to the inevitable failure of any attempt to historicise AIDS. Edelman encouraged me to accept the chaos. I made sense of questions that I couldn't always understand, posed by artists and authors to whom I sensed being close. Where is the gay and anti-AIDS terrorism, Bjarne Melgaard asks Leo Bersani?<sup>24</sup>

23 ——— This tension, which occupies the uncertain space of the AIDS discourse, is never theorised by Edelman in "The Plague of Discourse" in terms of hegemonic contestation. To do so would signify a potential resolute way out. His writing is strictly focussed on the unfolding of the figurative mechanisms within which the AIDS discourse takes place. Nevertheless, it seems to me that his philosophical speculations find an echo in Laclau and Mouffe's theory of political agonism and the transient hegemonisation of the discursive space as the guiding principle for the formation of the public sphere, hence of the democratic society. Both Laclau/Mouffe and Edelman's contributions sit within an intellectual history that has its roots in Derrida's articulation of deconstructivism and its political potentialities.

24 ——— In 2011 I co-organised the exhibition *Baton Sinister* in Venice with Bjarne Merlgaard. One of the centrepieces of the show was a video interview

In Edelmanian terms, the answer would be that this is a paradox: if a war on AIDS exists, it exists in discourse. Individuals, paraphrasing Foucault, have been given discourse to express their most frightening desires. James Robert Baker's literary work speaks to the exclusive opportunity of expressing in words what cannot be expressed in practice: "In a novel, I can do whatever I want."<sup>25</sup> Only in literature could

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the artist had conducted with Leo Bersani that same year. Part of the conversation turns around Melgaard's disappointment with the AIDS activism of white-collar Americans, lamenting the non-existence of a terrorist movement never embraced by the gay community against the oppression exercised at the hands of the homophobic fear and rage of the heteronormative society, especially during the AIDS epidemic. Oppressed minorities very often responded with murderous violence and terrorism. Why is it that the queer community, the oppressed minority in this case, never turned if not to terrorism then at least to an aesthetic of violence? Melgaard's question remains unanswered, but Bersani offers illegitimacy, the radical project of becoming unnamable, as a possible solution to resist the oppression of social heteronormativity.

Leo Bersani, video interview with Bjarne Merlgaard, 2011.

25 ——— This is taken from an interview that Baker granted to Rich Grzesiak in 1993 following the publication of the novel *Tim and Pete*. The author states: "The arguments for political violence in the book are ultimately emotional and existential. You notice there's a sense the wrong people are dying; AIDS has killed the wrong people. The wrong people are still alive. [...] Why are those people still alive? That's the question the book asks. So the anarchists who decide to kill these people are doing it for a kind of existential rationale rather than because it would be politically prudent. You could make a strong case it wouldn't be, that if somebody actually did that, it would freak everybody out and cause a tremendous backlash. That's a valid argument. In a novel, I can do whatever I want." Baker's *Tim and Pete* offers the possibility for the gay violence advocated by Melgaard to be performed and expressed. Furthermore, it speculates on the vulnerability of the self when seduced by the erotic attraction of violence. According to Baker, the book also attempts to question the internalised homophobia of the gay community and the urgent necessity to re-exteriorise it. As with Wojnarowicz, for Baker the figure of the gay criminal crossing the line of political violence is not romanticised; it is neither a hero nor an anti-hero. Rather, it is a project or a movement, which carries within itself the traces of the only possible space for the radical gesture—i.e. the ungoverned imagination of literature and art—and in doing so it distances, and therefore relieves, the outlaw from the seductiveness of his (out)rage.

Nevertheless, as a project or movement, hence as a potentiality that takes the shape of an aesthetic object—an object that stands as the enunciation of a threat—the imagined violence of the artist and the poet, and that "place of rage" it creates, serves as a ground for resistance, one that can still have the power to produce change. The

Baker fantasise about a band of AIDS kamikazes as well as the kidnapping and bloody murder of a prominent and powerful homo- and AIDS-phobic American politician. Such radical gestures, David Wojnarowicz writes, can truly be realised only in the “ungoverned imagination, [where he can] douse Helms with a bucket of gasoline and set his putrid ass on fire. William Dannemeyer off the Empire State building. These fantasies give me distance from my outrage for a few seconds. They give me momentary comfort.”<sup>26</sup> Next to the radical gesture that is

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“place of rage”—an expression borrowed by Jack Halberstam from June Jordan—is the “highly ambiguous place that we call fantasy,” where “expression threatens to become action.” In discussing the work of David Wojnarowicz alongside images of girls with guns in *Thelma and Louise* and *Basic Instinct*, Halberstam sees in the expression of fantasised violence one effective means of making queer rage not only palpable but terrifying. “The power of fantasy,” they argue, “is not to represent but to destabilize the real. [...] Imagined violences create a potentiality, a utopic state in which consequences are imminent rather than actual, the threat is in the anticipation, not in the act.”

Halberstam, in their enunciation of imagined violence, offers a different answer to Melgaard’s original question: “The failure of nonviolent resistance to register anything but the most polite disapproval, I suggest, is the effect of glaring lack of imagination on the part of political organizers, and an overemphasis on organization itself, which often produces determinate efforts to eradicate expressions of rage or anger from political protests.” This argument clearly alludes to the disintegration of ACT UP as a result of its transformation into a highly organised and partitioned political agent.

Jack Halberstam, “Imagined Violence/Queer Violence: Representation, Rage, and Resistance”, *Social Text*, No. 37, (Winter, 1993): 187-201

26 ————— David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2017), 126–129.

This incitement to fury is largely present in Wojnarowicz’s writings and films. On one hand, it is a ritual of life, the artist’s personal gesture to stave off and deal with the experience of loss and death. On the other, it functions as a bonding factor connecting him to the world that denies him and ultimately exploding into manifest political action. “Rage may be one of the few things that binds or connects me to you, to our preinvented world.” As Jack Ben-Levi argues, Wojnarowicz’s “fantasized violence” is also a practice of *détournement*, i.e. of reorienting the expressions of rage by the American capitalist society and its media culture against itself. Through Ben-Levi’s lens, this hijacking is a method of propaganda too. “In his fantasies,” Ben-Levi writes, “Wojnarowicz serves an oppressive state power, so to speak, with a taste of its own medicine. [...] It is one small gesture of poetic justice against an agent of a government that actively permitted so many people with AIDS to be reduced to the status of memories.” These fantasies, Ben-Levi points out, externalise violence and return it to its source. But they are not always limited to just an aesthetic stance in

the imaginative capacity of even the most frightening fantasy to be expressed—therefore actualised—stands the enunciative potential of language to recognise its operations, therefore the possibility to perform resistance.

As Jeffrey Weeks points out when discussing Foucault's contribution to historians, "if we can never escape the grid of language, we can at least see its effects."<sup>27</sup> The originality of Edelman's foray into the

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which the political subtending the imagination of the artist emerges. They are places where a concrete political aspiration is at work. The political funeral, advocated by Wojnarowicz, is one example. The act of carrying the body or scattering the remains of the dead in front of the institutions that need to be charged for that death is an act of public mourning in a society that has confined grief to the hidden and, because of AIDS, shameful domain of the private. More than that, as Ben-Levi argues, it is an act of public marking and a "reminder of accountability" that deploys "the very evidence of the tyranny" of these institutions and transfers it within "a space of social visibility." As such, it is the very possibility of the political potential of the aesthetic act.

Jack Ben-Levi, "From Euphoria to Sobriety, From Reverie to Reverence: David Wojnarowicz and the Scenes of 'AIDS Activism,'" *Public: The Ethics of Enactment* 8 (Fall 1993): 139–59.

27 ——— Jeffrey Weeks, *Making Sexual History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 120.

This quote is excerpted from "Foucault for Historians," an essay in which Jeffrey Weeks builds a subtle critique of Foucault's theory of power. According to Foucault, social relations are the effect of language and the endless exercise of power. With no escape from discourse, there is no end to power. In this sense, Foucault argues, any political struggle is about reversing discourses, i.e. thinking of different definitions and therefore different power relations. How exactly this can be done, Weeks points out, Foucault never fully acknowledges. Weeks laments that Foucault does not bring forward any political strategies with which to effectively transform the mobile force that is power. Indeed, Foucault does not deny that his interest is to understand the mechanisms through which power is exercised and the conditions of its emergence, rather than to set in stone some practical scheme for acting upon the teleology of power. Lee Edelman takes the same philosophical approach. Nonetheless, it seems to me that by appropriating the reverse transcription process of the HIV virus to explain his theory of metaphorical substitution, Edelman puts one foot out of this *cul de sac* in which Foucault, according to Weeks, also found himself stuck. As with Foucault, Edelman acknowledges that there is no separation between the linguistic and the social. He presents an example of how the relationships between the discursive and the extra-discursive can take shape (as in the case of "Silence=Death"), not to construct a different definition of AIDS that might resolve the powerful process by which AIDS subjects and their subjectivities are consti-

domain of literary theory, post-structuralism, AIDS, and psychoanalysis achieves exactly this—by evidencing the social-political repercussions of the linguistic mechanisms at play in the narrativisation of the epidemic, he has offered individuals the opportunity to choose whether to stand around, within, or against the dominant historical discourse on AIDS. Furthermore, he has opened up a space for imagining new possibilities of interrupting, re-arranging, displacing, and eventually transforming the power relations implicated in the discourse of AIDS. Personally, I accepted that the limit of my ability to fully grasp AIDS—the impossibility of making sense of it as both a historical fact and as the ambiguous object of my art-theoretical search—was not only totally fine but, I realised afterwards, also shared by others.

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tuted but, to the contrary, to explain why the metaphoric contestation he talks about does not have to leave the domain of language, and instead proliferates in an endless circuit of appropriation, substitution, and transcription. As HIV enters the immune system by means of camouflage and disables its capacity to discern between the healthy and the infected cell, so the discourse on AIDS can exercise its counter-power only by constantly fuelling confusion between the literal and the figural, the inside and the outside, the proper and the alien, to ultimately alter the “genetic message” that is transmitted through language.

With this in mind, I would like to offer a provocation: it can be said that, given the logic by which HIV acts on the immune system and disables its participation in the defensive process, it is a “terroristic” virus. Terror, according to Lyotard, is the “efficiency gained by eliminating, or threatening to eliminate, a player from the language game one shares with [them]. [They are] silenced or consent, not because [they have been] refuted, but because [their] ability to participate has been threatened.” This definition of terror does not leave space for the antagonistic confrontations that are the starting point for Chantal Mouffe’s idea of the political, for any form of terrorism denies the very principles of the game (even though projected towards antagonism in order to achieve a new hegemony and not consensus) and the moves playable within it. However, translated into the domain of Edelman’s theory of AIDS metaphoricity, this notion of HIV as terroristic could be another possible answer to both Weeks’s skepticism and Melgaard’s equally provocative question of “where is the queer terrorism?”

Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 63-64.

## Movement 11

### Vertigo

When I tended to associate my experience of parsing AIDS with the image of a forest, I recognise that I was doing so by means of a metaphor too. The forest is more than a near-infinite collection of trees. All forests are different configurations of vegetation, living organisms, bacteria, and ecosystems of varying scale. Likewise my experiential knowledge of AIDS was more than a tangled *accrochage* of words and images. My preoccupation with bridging the historical distance, my own personal distance, to the early days of AIDS was not only bewildering and irrational but a failure too. What was that feeling of losing sight? Where did it come from? Thomas E. Yingling gives the answer. Discussing Neil Hertz's concern with the difficulty of handling the almost grotesque proliferation of academic writing in the mid-1980s, Yingling writes that "anyone interested in AIDS must suffer from a similar vertigo."<sup>28</sup> The painful experience of knowing my inability to handle the enormity of AIDS—the tremendous number of essays, articles, images, artworks, events, theories, and contradictions of which AIDS was a subject—was simply vertiginous. So it was to accept the impossibility of following a logical linearity in my project to investigate and inherit the history of the AIDS epidemic, despite limiting its scope to artistic expression. My question of what AIDS looks like, how I should imagine it, what it really means—and with that my desire for unity and therefore identity—had to remain unanswered.

## Movement 12

### Are We Afraid of Failing?

Hinting at Hertz's vertigo, Yingling recalls the great magnitude of Kant's theory of the "mathematical sublime." According to Kant, when our imagination—i.e. our sensory abilities or intuition—is confronted by an aesthetic experience too vast to handle, it fails to satisfy reason's demand for comprehension, and the phenomenon experienced cannot be translated into understanding. This cognitive failure of imagination manifests in a sense of inadequacy as well as displeasure. As a result, our imaginative potential is stretched and expanded to the limitlessness of infinity, and that is when the subliminal moment happens. The individual's painful conflict between the faculty to conceive

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28 ——— Thomas Yingling, "AIDS in America: Postmodern Governance, Identity, and Experience," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 291.



something and the failure to represent it is finally resolved through pleasure. In his touchstone publication *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard relies on the Kantian sublime to explain the impetus and logic of modern art. The failure that precedes and gives rise to the sublime concerns “Ideas” that are impossible to present. Our imagination is limited in its capacity to “present an object which might, if only in principle, come to match a concept.”<sup>29</sup> Artists from the modernist movement, Lyotard points out, have long been in search of a solution to the irresolvable dilemma of how to represent something that can be imagined, i.e. sensed, but cannot be seen. With Kant in mind, Lyotard finds an answer to this enigma in the black-and-white squares of Kazimir Malevich—thus, and more generally, in the enduring epitome of avant-garde modernist art, i.e. monochrome. By avoiding figuration and abstracting representation, the Russian modernist’s paintings allude to that which cannot be presented. Malevich’s “negative presentation,” Lyotard writes, “[enables] us to see only by making it impossible to see; it [pleases] only by causing pain.”<sup>30</sup> If modernism has performed the unrepresentable, and the powerless faculty to represent it, by means of allusion, I argue that AIDS, to the contrary, has resolved Lyotard’s quandary of modernism (the painful inadequacy of the unrepresentable) in the exact opposite way. With AIDS, an overabundance of discourse and the visible has taken the place of the “absence of form” associated with the modernist aesthetic and evoked by Lyotard through the lens of Kant as the only possible “index to the unrepresentable.”<sup>31</sup> The preoccupation with unitary truth in both history and the modernist conception of being finds in AIDS its most absolute negation. The entanglement of terror and delight in Kant’s sublime is never fully accomplished in the representation of AIDS. AIDS is perpetually suspended in terror, in a state of cognitive failure that announces the momentary subliminal experience advocated by Kant but never achieves it. In other words, AIDS is permanently caught in a status of inadequacy. According to Lyotard, modern aesthetics is an experience of the sublime in which the unrepresentable is put forward, i.e. made intelligible, only as the “missing content,” i.e. its alluded presence. By establishing connections with the individual’s pre-existing experiences, this allusion enters the domain of knowledge. So do the identificatory

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29 ——— Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 78.

As an example, Lyotard shows the historical impossibility of illustrating the idea of what the world is or how the concept of the simple might look. “We have the Idea of the simple,” he writes, “but we cannot illustrate it with a sensible object which would be the ‘case’ of it.”

30 ——— Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 78.

31 ——— Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 78.

structures that sustain the representational process. They attempt to establish accurate correspondences to a reality already known in order to move towards the domain of what is being considered truth.<sup>32</sup> In this sense, Lyotard argues, the modern is nostalgic. In the postmodern, instead, the unrepresentable, Lyotard writes, is embedded in the presentation itself. No way out is offered. There is only the pain but not the pleasure. Andre Burke's call for an AIDS beyond AIDS becomes clearer in this context.

### Movement 13 The Unrepresentable

The film *Blue* (UK, 1993), by the late Derek Jarman, represents an attempted movement towards an elsewhere, one that performs an experiment of reversed postmodernism, the last that the British filmmaker could think of before his death the following year. In the film Jarman addresses the limits of the visual representation of AIDS by presenting nothing more than a Yves Klein-esque blue screen. *Blue* acknowledges and fully accepts the impossibility of, and therefore the failure of any attempt at, representing AIDS (i.e. Lyotard's unrepresentable) as well as the incommensurability of the sense of loss coming from the promise of certain death. Interestingly, Jarman goes back to the "missing content," the imageless white square of Malevich, in which he recognises the only thinkable place from which to reach an outside of AIDS. In his refusal to accept the referential mechanism of the representation of AIDS, Jarman attempts to betray the exigency, hence the possibility, of positing AIDS as an object to "visualise."<sup>33</sup>

32 ——— "Knowledge exists if, first, the statement is intelligible, and second, if 'cases' can be derived from the experience which 'corresponds' to it." Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 77.

William Haver seems to echo Lyotard's argument, when for instance he addresses the failure of the identificatory mechanism, which pertains to the field of education when experienced in relation to AIDS. On the basis of "authorized knowledge," i.e. the ritualised experience that authorises knowledge, education produces, for example, the good citizen. In education we are asked to identify, or refuse to identify, with the object of a certain recognised experience. With AIDS, because of its tendency to incessantly break the structures of representation, this identificatory process is put at stake. Therefore, by betraying what one knows and experiences, AIDS limits the possibility of reproducing forms of knowledge.

Haver, *The Body of This Death*, 23.

33 ——— Jarman's is not an isolated case. In a similar fashion, General Idea's *Black AIDS* (1991) and *White AIDS* (1993) series, part of the broader

By deciding to not show anything, Jarman succeeds in problematising the excess of AIDS, the hegemony exercised by both its visual representation and historical trajectory, and thereby shows AIDS in all its impossibility. Jarman denies that AIDS can be seen; nevertheless he still reveals the allusion of a form, although non-pictorial, one that is made tangible by the narrative context offered by his spoken words. Nino Rodriguez's short video *Identities* (USA, 1991) takes a similarly radical approach. In this case it is the capacity for speech not for sight that is lost. The film's protagonist, Thomas Padgett, performs silence. Hours of taped interview footage have been cut and edited by Rodriguez and reassembled in a seven-minute video where only the extra-discursive moments of the conversation are shown, in a crescendo of emotional tension that culminates with Padgett's abandonment to tears. Rodriguez treats his representation of AIDS as a progressive reduction in the ability to narrate that ultimately reaches the point of an irremediable speechlessness. Both Jarman and Rodriguez accompany the viewer to a nowhere that, while still recognisable (the sense of loss is so vast that I cannot bear to see it anymore, I cannot or refuse to speak of it), nonetheless unveils the deconstructive potentialities of the act of not showing and not speaking of AIDS, as well as of its resistance to leave discourse, therefore to disappear.

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*Imagevirus* project, is comprised of both large- and small-scale black or white canvases overlaid with the black-on-black or white-on-white word AIDS. The series is a clear example of modernist abstraction in the context of postmodernist appropriation, by means of which the artists turn Robert Indiana's famous *LOVE* into AIDS, reorganising it into a logo and extending it into multiple forms, including paintings, sculptures, jewelry, stamps, posters, installations, and wallpapers. In this process of customising an existing design, dating to 1987, the artists openly address the invisibility of AIDS, which is meant to be made visible through their idea of the image becoming a virus, hence infectious. The gesture of replacing the red, blue, and green colour palette of the previous iterations of this work with the monochromatic one of the modernist avant-garde changes the meaning and perception of the work, inasmuch as it is supposed to be visible and loud. But, most importantly, it is perhaps the effect of an experiment with the alienation of the meaning of AIDS, from the conscious loquaciousness of Pop Art to the will-to-silence of Modernism.

## Movement 14

### Excess

The conjunction between AIDS and postmodernism has been postulated by Treichler, Watney, and Edelman, among others. In reference to Lyotard's fragmentation of the so-called "grand narratives," Edelman argues that AIDS has never been a stable and linear narrative. The uniformity of AIDS is disavowed by the infectious mechanism of metaphoric substitution. "Metaphoricity," Edelman writes, citing Derrida, "is the logic of contamination and the contamination of logic."<sup>34</sup> The disguising principle of the virus enables HIV to evade antibodies, propagate contamination, and sabotage the immune system's capacity to distinguish an infected cell from a healthy one. The infection process escapes detection so naturally that the virus continues to perpetuate the hidden genetic code of the infection inside cells in good health. "In the case of AIDS," Edelman writes, "[...] infectious endlessly breeds sentences," and for this reason he concludes, "there is no available discourse on 'AIDS' that is not itself diseased."<sup>35</sup> For Edelman there is no distinction among discourses on AIDS: all of them follow the figurative model he has theorised. The ground of contestation on which conflictual discursive positions on AIDS face one the other is metaphorical and thus "volatile and uncontrollable." AIDS remains excluded from any possibility of either leaving the domain of discourse or being inscribed in a Malevichian white or black square. It is given innumerable precarious forms but never exhausted by any of them in full. Fluctuating in the space of discourse, AIDS generates meaning continuously, denied a predetermined end. In 1992, five years after "The Plague of Discourse," Edelman begins a new essay by claiming that AIDS "[remains] a signifier in search of the determinate condition or conditions it would signify."<sup>36</sup> The search for a context of signification contributes to the dismantling, and therefore the fragmentation, of the

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34 ——— Edelman, "The Mirror and The Tank," 91.

35 ——— Edelman, "The Plague of Discourse," 91–92.

36 ——— Lee Edelman, "The Mirror and The Tank," in *Homographies: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 93.

This passage acknowledges the fact that AIDS poses serious problems for a structure of language, and therefore of knowledge, based upon signifier, signified, and referent. As a consequence, the reality of AIDS, which is the object to be theorised, is transformed into images. However, precisely because of this impossible movement towards the signified, which is missing, they are fragmented and suspended in a state of perpetual searching, and the power of the indexical image to reveal the truth is tragically failed.

“grand narrative” promoted by modernism. According to Lyotard, the prefix of “postmodern” does not designate a phenomenon that exists beyond or against the modern. To the contrary, “postmodernism is not modernism at its end,” he writes, “but in the nascent state, and this state is constant”<sup>37</sup>—i.e. postmodernism comes first, modernism afterwards. This means that the “grand narratives” that postmodernism is supposed to fragment are not yet in place; they do not exist. Hence, they are purely a modernist invention. Through this lens, AIDS is a phenomenon whose postmodernism never comes to a full and final completion. AIDS is an unmanageable, if not impossible, subject to theorise—i.e. to write, represent, and discuss. In other words, it is unknowable. It presents itself as either elusion or excess and will always inevitably do so. Nevertheless, even when it eludes discourse, AIDS produces meaning. The attempted trajectory towards the outside of discourse, i.e. to become itinerant and anonymous, is missed, as Andre Burke shows metaphorically in his video, titled *A* not simply by chance.

### **Movement 15** **No Redemption is Needed**

The overabundance of both visual and theoretical/literary work on the subject of AIDS testifies to this epistemological necessity to render the unthinkable thinkable, i.e. to reduce AIDS to an object accessible to thought as well as representation. Sadly, our aspiration to experience a total knowledge of the world disintegrates with AIDS. Not solely our bodies, but also humanity’s entire system of knowledge and its functioning, were irreversibly threatened by the advent of the AIDS epidemic. As Haver suggests, the problematic nature of grasping AIDS renders any attempt to know the world an effort not worth making. This, I think, is exactly AIDS’s law of attraction: “the relation of the essential difficulty of thinking to the force of certain determinate exigencies, the force of the existential.”<sup>38</sup> Without openly addressing it, Haver also speculates on the postmodernity of AIDS. Its objective impossibility, Haver argues, relies on a radical and originary quality: its singular multiplicity and multiple singularity. AIDS is simultaneously singular and multiple. In this sense it is global, or, to quote Haver, “pandemic.” This exclusive ability of AIDS has nothing to do with condensing multiple interpretations in one single object. Like Edelman, Haver attributes the multiplicity of AIDS—that “massively overdeter-

37 ——— Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 79.

38 ——— Haver, *The Body of This Death*, xvii.

mined object”<sup>39</sup>—to the opportunism of the HIV virus.<sup>40</sup> The opportunistic process Edelman summarises in his analysis of metaphoric substitution explains the multiplicity of AIDS and reinforces that it is not the “degeneration or fragmentation of a prior unity” or stability.<sup>41</sup> The opportunism of HIV makes it a very contingent virus, and so is AIDS, as Edelman has already argued. The promise of intelligibility offered by history, Haver writes, is dissolved in the contingency of AIDS. As the site of an infinite proliferation of opportunistic, or metaphoric, discursive infections, the discourse on AIDS disavows any attempt to secure its teleology. Furthermore, it testifies to a refusal to accept the limits of human thought as well as its own failure to make AIDS a definitive, comprehensible, and comprehended object. With AIDS there is always “something more to be said, nothing has been, or can definitely be said.”<sup>42</sup> The force of this contingency makes the “historical phenomenological apprehension” that is the will to achieve the historical meaning of AIDS impossible, other than through nostalgia. Hence, AIDS cannot be redeemed.<sup>43</sup>

39 ——— Haver, *The Body of This Death*, 2.

40 ——— From a medical and scientific perspective, Edelman’s referential inadequacy of AIDS translates in the struggle to find a decisive clinical definition. The devastation of the immune system caused by AIDS is marked by a long list of opportunistic infections and conditions, such as cancer and pneumonia, indicative of an advanced HIV infection. In 1991, epidemiologists at the Centre for Disease Control proposed expanding the fourteen-page, government-sanctioned definition of AIDS, first developed in 1987, to include disorders beyond the twenty-three conditions it had originally encompassed. This proposal would have increased the number of people considered to have AIDS by thousands, especially among intravenous drug users and women, in whom, recent studies had discovered, the frequent occurrence of certain gynecological conditions—such as cervical dysplasia and pelvic inflammatory disease—could likely be associated with an HIV infection. The new definition would have provided access to treatment to people who were otherwise excluded from receiving medical care. At the same time, it would have generated a more narrow instrument of surveillance for the spread of HIV-related diseases in the American population and drastically changed the diagnostic criteria. AIDS not only “resists our attempts to inscribe it as a manageable subject of writing,” as Edelman suggests, but also as a manageable object of scientific knowledge, and as such it continues to defy an already dense and contradictory range of medical diagnoses. Edelman, “The Plague of Discourse,” 94.

“The CDC’s Case Definition of AIDS: Implications of Proposed Revisions,” UNT Libraries Government Documents Department, last modified June 1992, <https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc39694/>.

41 ——— Haver, *The Body of This Death*, xiii.

42 ——— Haver, *The Body of This Death*, 4.

43 ——— Haver, *The Body of This Death*, 17.

According to Haver, the un-objectification and irredeemability of AIDS resides in its radical singularity, too. Everything that comes forward as excess or surplus is singular. The relation of the singular to the multiple is not, he points out, identical to that of the particular and the universal or the specific and the general. Precisely because of its contingency, the singular is that which is ineluctably irreducible to the specificity of thought and representation. It is the incommensurable, the unaccountable. The singular always points to the limits of our ability to shape a thought for the unthinkable, a representation for the unrepresentable. “The thought of AIDS,” Haver writes, “[is] the limit that is at once the failure of thought and the sole condition of possibility for thought.”<sup>44</sup> Therefore, in this enunciative excess, i.e. the opportunistic contingency of AIDS, in its incomprehensibility, the image of the forest, and the vertiginous and perverse experience of it, ultimately appears. But it is exactly in such a place of absolute risk that the political emerges.

## Movement 16 The Impertinent

In criticising the theoretical position of those who believe that AIDS marks the end of an epoch—one that Düttman refers to as the epoch of the “trick”—the Spanish philosopher argues that only by looking for a surplus of “impertinence” can we confront the question of AIDS.<sup>45</sup>

44 ——— Haver, *The Body of This Death*, 1.

45 ——— As an attempt to make sense of AIDS, this idea of a historical demarcation conceived as a rupture conceals signs of its inevitable irreparability. “If AIDS appears to us an event within history,” Avital Ronell writes, “or even an *historical* event, this means that it cannot be seen, as a misfortune, to come from elsewhere; it comes from man. Situated within the limits of a history gone bad, revealing its infirmity, AIDS for us does not come from God. But because it is not (yet) curable, it is perceived as a kind of self-destruction of a society abandoned to its own immanence.”

Ronell, “A Note,” 60.

Since its first appearance in the US, AIDS has been narrativised as a story of gay men and has imposed itself as the point of departure from which to construct a new (male) homosexual subject. In this sense, AIDS has historically been a sexualised disease—“the disease of the diseased,” Jeffrey Weeks writes. In a moment of profound cultural crisis in the Western world, one posed by a diversity in manifesting cultural and sexual understandings, AIDS represented the coming to terms with a particular way of life, one that challenged the acceptable order of things and of social decency. Conceived as such, the irreparability of this historical rupture that is AIDS (the pre-AIDS and the post-

According to Düttman, trick, which comes from Renaud Camus's sex journal, is a specific experience of (homo)sexuality.<sup>46</sup> It is built upon a first encounter, one that happens only once: after it has begun, it develops and remains unique. "In order for a trick to happen," Düttman writes, "there must be cum."<sup>47</sup> Surely, because of AIDS, the relationship of the individual to the anonymised experience of the trick has changed. From the moment when the magnitude of AIDS was publicly recognised, for many of us the trick has borne witness to a past without AIDS and its history. Cum, the sine qua non of the trick, has become an element of risk. Nevertheless, such a dialectical distinction between a pre- and post-AIDS era—a precisely bordered temporality of AIDS—risks, in retrospect, legitimising a historical narrative that feeds a politics of shame and in which the prophecy of the God punishment is fulfilled. In the preface to the first edition of Camus's *Tricks*, Roland Barthes claims that the experience of the trick is that which refuses to "be determined" and as such carries qualities of *impertinence*. The provisionality of the *impertinent*, which Düttman borrows from Barthes, denies the narrative that claims to make sense of AIDS by insisting that the epidemic marks a historical rupture. While it is commonly used to express the assertiveness of the insolent, the word's Latin origin indicates a different meaning. The verb *pertinere*, followed by the preposition *ad* in the accusative case, literally means, "to belong to; to fit into." The prefix *im-* has a negative function, hence, *im-pertinere* means "to not belong to; to not fit into." The act of not belonging, not pertaining, presupposes the existence of both a delimited space and an outside, a tension to reach another space that both acknowledges and disavows the "inside" to which the impertinent either does not belong or refuses to belong. It represents a different mode of relationality to the realm of knowledge, asserting the possibilities and potentialities of not merely the unknown, but also a yet-to-be-known or not-yet-known. The theory of the *im-pertinent*, in Düttman's argument, is related to the concept of the limit. He recurs to the Kantian idea of the limit to assert its qualities of heterogeneity, anti-referentiality, and instability. For Kant the limit is not that which delimits—instead he calls this the bound, and it presupposes a certain degree of

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AIDS era) offers a chance to devise a new identity and therefore a new role, but most importantly a new responsibility, assigned in society to the queer outlaw—from the sexual libertine to the newly born AIDS criminal. In this sense, AIDS marks the beginning of a new history of sexuality.

Weeks, *Making Sexual History*, 149.

46 ——— Parenthesis are not in the original text but added by the author to affirm the universal experience of the "trick."

47 ——— Düttman, *At Odds with AIDS*, 29.



“pertinence,” hence homogeneity. The limit is that which extends beyond or outside the bound. “Limits concern extended beings,” Düttman writes.<sup>48</sup> Yet any form of extension still maintains a connection with the space from which the being stretches or pushes towards an outside. Therefore the experience of the absolute limit, as we conceive it, remains marked by an impossibility in Kantian terms. In Düttman’s notion of the heterogeneous, however, there is always something that interrupts, something which remains disconnected, “without relation.” This liminal space—a space of cruising, promiscuity, and contamination—is, I argue, the yet-to-be-known of AIDS, that which transcends historical finitude, that which calls for the unnameable. It is both the failure and the most attractive condition of thought, as Haver pointed out.

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48 ——— Düttman, *At Odds with AIDS*, 31.

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# Part 2

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## Movement I

### Cruising the AIDS Video Archive

In my attempt to cruise the first decade of the AIDS film and video archive, searching for an answer to what AIDS looks like as well as to how artists seized control of the AIDS discourse and the epidemic in representation, I made the mistake of looking for an either/or of AIDS.<sup>49</sup> I confronted myself with the profound disappointment and defeat of not finding an answer to my question—how should I represent or imagine AIDS?—and, later, the realisation that there is no single answer to be found.<sup>50</sup>

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49 ——— As I have pointed out in the introduction to this thesis, the AIDS moving image archive, the compilation of which informed my research, is American-based. Not because I wanted to reduce the political potential of the AIDS moving image archive to a single geographical area or location, but because the archive-based component of this research is circumscribed within a limited time frame, one that coincides with the first medical report on HIV/AIDS, the birth of ACT UP and its reconfiguration from a grassroots organisation into a well-structured political agent in 1992, as well as the emergence of queer theory as a discourse in the academic world—all events that happened in the United States in a period of time that has come to be known as the first wave of HIV/AIDS. The majority of the video works that I am looking at from the AIDS moving image archive are connected with the opportunities for visibility and critical inquiry offered by the advent of ACT UP New York and the original contributions of AIDS literature and critical theory. Furthermore, it coincides with my own personal experience of failure, the impossibility of fulfilling my original mission of building an extensive database (or a complete cartography) for others to use. This does not mean that the AIDS moving image archive ends in 1992 and in the United States; to the contrary, it continues to grow, and it is still as alive today as it was back in the mid-1980s and 1990s. That said, I am not denying that AIDS existed outside the US at the time. It very much did. But the scope of this research is not grounded in a methodology of the “re-,” and my objective is to understand the logic of representation of AIDS rather than to re-write the history of AIDS according to all that the inherited, official history of AIDS has left behind and ignored.

50 ——— This question is bounded to my curatorial practice. If we agree that curating is first of all a performative act, situated in a specific place and time, one that experiments with the possibility of bringing a thought or an idea into materiality, it comes as no surprise that the acceptance of a non-answer to my question had repercussions on my approach to the practice of curating the AIDS archive. The two exhibitions *Tema: AIDS* and *Every Moment Counts: AIDS and its Feelings*, which I discuss in the next chapter, embody how my approach to curating HIV/AIDS has changed and will continue to transform. Beyond its more evident analytical approach, the latter exhibition carries more clearly the traits of the theory that has informed my research in

In my investigation of the AIDS moving image archive I relied on a visual-based methodology of knowledge production, one that was deeply rooted in history and aimed at creating a cartography, a “historical document,” a sort of algorithmic database, for posterity to use. I had to accept the fact that this is a no-sense challenge, that AIDS is a subject too vast and heavy to carry on my shoulders alone. There was at once too much and too little knowledge. The more I dug into my research, the more the video database grew, to the point where it became out of control and ultimately an experience of failure and frustration. Without a doubt, there is a form of ecstatic pleasure in persisting to think about an object that makes thought almost impossible. Once we confront the insufficiency of our thinking, however, this experience of the erotic becomes, I must confess, way more pleasurable<sup>51</sup>—and this pleasure is exactly that provisional space of *impertinence*, of being-not-one, that Barthes, and Düttman after him, explicate. In order to confront AIDS, Düttman advises, we must step back from the compulsion to decipher, and instead embrace the uncertainty, the instability, the inconsolability, and the interminability of the event that we call AIDS. Acknowledging the existence of a place of potential unnameability changed the course of my investigation into the AIDS moving image, establishing a new relation between the AIDS moving image and this *elsewhere*, which is at the same time a *nowhere*, towards which AIDS tends to move but never fully arrives. In its attempt to reach another space of signification, an outside of discourse, corresponding to Burke’s “no way of saying it” and Ricco’s “relation without a context,”

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its later stage. I explicitly embraced promiscuity in the way that I conceptualised and organised this exhibition, a process that echoes Haver’s refusal to think of community as being constituted in “the intersubjective recognition of an essential similitude” and instead calling for the “non-relating relation of infinite singularities, the infinite proliferation of difference,” i.e. promiscuity.

Haver, *The Body of This Death*, 120.

My approach to *Tema: AIDS*, by contrast, is more clearly situated in the original attempt to search for the intelligibility of AIDS through representation, a process in which I often got caught up in the seductiveness of nostalgia, looking to confine myself to a comfortable zone of my queer subjectivity.

That said, the performative act of writing this thesis is also a gesture, in some instances a poetic one, of risk and therefore transformation.

51 ——— I aligned myself with Haver’s idea of the erotic as a force in which we lose ourselves and, needless to say, that does not underscore the pornographic. The erotic is the place where we defamiliarise that which is familiar, where we abandon the coordinates of comprehensibility by which navigating the world has been safeguarded for us. In this space of transition and metamorphosis perhaps lies the necessity, hence the possibility, of inventing a new language.

AIDS was faced with the tragic fate of being kidnapped inside the same discourse it was trying effortlessly to escape.<sup>52</sup> This fate was accelerated by mass media, politicians, the medical establishment, literature, academic research, and artistic production. AIDS is an entity that, as I argued before, defies any representational logics. This, however, is the very logic of AIDS. To a certain extent, this fact corresponds to the provocative claim that AIDS has been an ongoing condition and a site for aesthetic production.<sup>53</sup> The force of Düttman and Haver's notions of the *im-pertinent* and of excess respectively served a specific function in the context of my research. I was looking at a huge volume of moving images, both from the perspective of an aesthetic judgment and of a historical revisitation, acting within a territory extended around a dualistic logic of inside-outside, we-them, good-bad. Delving into the AIDS video archive to find who achieved an exemplary solution regarding the epistemology and representation of AIDS, as well as why and how, could not be other than a paradox. The practice of art making and research creation is a mode of relationality rather than a project to resolve a question in the form of representation, behind which one can find relief and self-reassurance. The arguments of Haver, Düttman, and Ricco are precisely rooted in their resistance to accept similar criteria

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52 ——— Ricco, *The Logic of the Lure*, 4.

"The Outside," Ricco states, "might be understood as that which exists prior to and stands in the wake of every inside-outside opposition. It is what remains before and after all is said and done." This idea builds on Foucault's notion of heterotopias, which according to Ricco, "like the Outside, cannot be said to be outside of anything; they are solely and solitarily outside. As the refusal of the inside-outside logic," he continues, "nothing comes in from, or out of, the Outside, except for *coming*, which comes as the Outside." By alluding to Foucault's heterotopia, Ricco grants the Outside the status of a transformative experience.

53 ——— According to Dennis Altman, the paradox of the first decade of the AIDS epidemic was also that AIDS endorsed—in certain Western countries only—a process of "legitimization through disaster," to the extent that many queer AIDS professionals, at least in the US, were included in the government's policy-making. Even though the queer community may have gained major public exposure and visibility because of AIDS, nonetheless this process of legitimisation did not guarantee equal rights to all members of the community and failed to stop society from prioritising a moral agenda that increasingly insisted on a heteronormative regulation of sexuality. Most importantly, despite this paradoxical legitimisation, the cultural function of AIDS has been consolidated rather than diminished: the truth of queer identity is death and it resides in AIDS, hence AIDS remains that specific cultural identity that "others" possess.

Dennis Altman, "Legitimation Through Disaster: AIDS and the Gay Movement," in *AIDS: The Burdens of History*, ed. Elizabeth Fee and Daniel M. Fox (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 301-15.

of judgment—i.e. to project an image for representing HIV/AIDS. The point is not how artists and filmmakers represented AIDS, but what sort of relationship they established with the impossibility of representing its unrepresentability.

## Movement 2

### Disappeared Aesthetics

Citing a passage from Derrida's *Aporias*, Ricco echoes Burke's unfulfilled prophecy for a day when there will be no way of saying AIDS: "There, in sum, in this place of aporia, there is no longer any problem. Not that, alas or fortunately, the solutions have been given, but because one could no longer even find a problem that would constitute itself and that one would keep in front of oneself, as a presentable object or project, as a protective representative or a prosthetic substitute, as some kind of border still to cross or behind which to protect oneself."<sup>54</sup> Clearly, Ricco is not denying that HIV/AIDS is a problem. To the contrary, he is envisioning, as Burke did, a way to resist the problematic issues at stake when we deal with the topic of AIDS in representation—all of those semiotic interactions that we experience in the word AIDS and that construct our subjectivities. He is not offering a solution either; rather, his project entails experimenting with disappearance—along the lines of Bersani's unnameability—as an act of resistance to escape representation and its semantic effects. In the specific context of the AIDS moving image, the central concern is not merely to address the issue of "indexicality," which often took the shape of an unspoken conflict between those who firmly believe in the indexical capacity of the image to reveal the "truth" and those who did not silence the desire for conceptual and/or aesthetic experimentation (an approach which did not seem to find a place in the activist rhetoric, whose contribution to the fight against HIV/AIDS is not put in doubt here). More specifically, the issue at stake is not only about a dispute between positive and negative representations of AIDS or a struggle to choose between the eye-opening power of the indexical image to be politically effective—i.e. giving a face to AIDS—and the political incorrectness of an image without a clear referent that often follows a metaphorical instead of a "narrative" logic. The primary question concerns representation itself, as a result of AIDS existing in a state of constant appearance and thereby becoming a condition for aesthetic production.

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54 ——— Jacques Derrida, *Aporias* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 12.

Moving a step closer towards Ricco's idea of a "disappeared aesthetics," the most self-reflective and experimental AIDS moving images have performed an attempt to betray representation through representation; to expose the friction between the realm of the visible and that of the invisible; and to not replicate preexisting discursive forms.<sup>55</sup> As is the case of Derek Jarman's *Blue*, AIDS disappears by means of not making itself visible, in an effort to make possible the impossibility of representing AIDS. Without fully achieving the project of reaching an outside of representation, Jarman's *Blue* and Burke's *A* both to a certain degree acknowledge the fragmentarity, indeterminacy, unthinkability, obliqueness, and incessant itinerancy of AIDS. Furthermore, both filmmakers challenge the logic of validation that ascribes the status of social subject only to those inscribed within a (hi)story. As Foucault has pointed out, the social is always constituted as a narrative, within which social identities are validated and individuals become official citizens of a universal "we." Nino Rodriguez's short film stands as a full rejection of such logic. If decontextualised from the discourse on AIDS, the loss reflected in the protagonist's inability to speak is incomprehensible, the apparent manifestation of an experience of an "absolute wrong" which the protagonist has no language to articulate. Thomas Padgett not only does not have the words to express his pain, but he re-

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55 ——— The disappeared aesthetics is, in Ricco's theory, the refusal of dialectic thinking, of positive versus negative, of any either/or logics. It is not an act of escaping representation, but of becoming-disappeared, a movement towards a placeless place. "The blind spot obliquity," Ricco writes, "which is the path of becoming-disappeared, is that trajectory that runs alongside vision while remaining just out of view [...] It approaches the limits of the visible without being invisible [...] It thereby disrupts the discourse of the visual by effectively making vision and representation impossible. A disappeared aesthetics visualizes this impossibility (this disaster or crisis) of vision and representation, in its very impossibility. [...] In terms of visibility," he continues, "disappeared aesthetics is neither a matter of the visible nor the invisible, but of the imperceptible. In terms of aesthetic judgment, disappeared aesthetics is neither a matter of the good nor the bad, but the neutral. And in terms of verification, including that of knowledge, disappeared aesthetics is neither a matter of that which is avowable nor disavowable, but of that which is unavowable." Disappeared aesthetics, Ricco points out, must not be confused with the aesthetics of disappearance. He argues that the former is an act of evacuation for that which allows aesthetics, while the latter is exactly the opposite, a recuperation of this content, in the form of an act of aestheticisation of that which has disappeared. In this sense, the aesthetics of disappearance can be an aesthetics of either anything or nothing, hence insists on determining the qualities or the contents of the aesthetic act.  
 Ricco, *The Logic of the Lure*, 40–43.

fuses to speak, and in so doing he disconnects his self from the narrative structure and from the subject position of alienation (i.e. Foucault's discursive monopoly of power-knowledge) that would eventually redeem him. He remains in an un-narrativised status of non-relation.

Artists from the AIDS moving image archive have envisioned an alternative narrativisation of the epidemic, incessantly vigilant and uncompromising in its refusal of society's storyline of HIV/AIDS. Furthermore, they ventured into a different form of relationality than that which characterises the cinematic, based on a fiction that maintains separation between the position of the viewer and that of the object to be viewed. By inscribing the viewer *within* the viewing process or by constructing another object of the visible, they have somehow produced new conditions of visibility for a different social subject. It appears to me, however, that they still performed this will to resist within the normalising (and narrativising) apparatus enforced by society, without fully expressing the potential behind the undoing of the visual representation of AIDS, the eviction of its content, as a way out from the regulatory regimes of social identities.<sup>56</sup>

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56 ——— This is perhaps more evident in those moving images that have glorified the lives of those who died of AIDS or that have found in documentary language the only possible form to counteract the mainstream AIDS narrative—i.e. to show the truth of AIDS. Often, the plot functions within a logic of restitution or reconstitution of certain societal values (such as the good family that in spite of everything takes care of their son/daughter or friend) that legitimises the life of the AIDS subject. The risk in such cinematic endeavors is sentencing the AIDS subject to a narrative logic that retrospectively induces shame and fulfills the AIDS- and queer-phobic prophecies. Drawing on Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation, Teresa de Lauretis explains how the question of an alternative construction of gender can be posed only at the margins of the hegemonic structures of discourse. She claims an elsewhere, a series of interstitial spaces, of chinks in the power-knowledge apparatuses, where the terms for other perspectives on gender can be defined. What I think is interesting to point out is that de Lauretis describes this better elsewhere using a cinematic expression. "Space-off" is a term often used in film theory to identify the space not visible in the frame but made indirectly present by that which the frame makes visible. The avant-garde cinema, she claims, has successfully made use of the space-off, which is usually erased in commercial cinema. The space and the space-off exist concurrently and often in a relationship of contradiction. Nevertheless, the movement between the two spaces, she argues, "is not that of a dialectic, of integration, of a combinatory, or of *différence*, but is the tension of contradiction, multiplicity, and heteronomy." Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Film, Theory, and Fiction* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 25–26.



Nevertheless, if Ricco considers Jarman's blue screen a pragmatic example of a disappeared aesthetics, I think of it as a pragmatic exception, proof of the hyper-appeared aesthetics that the AIDS moving image performed exactly as a consequence of its failure to fully realise the potentiality of a disappeared aesthetics, i.e. to renounce that which allows for aesthetic production and therefore for representation, or in other words, as Ricco has argued, to betray the work of art in order to see AIDS.<sup>57</sup> But it is also the aftermath of a departure from the margins of the hegemonic discourse, hence the unlikelihood of renouncing investment in discursive positions as well as the relative power they promise and the implications of that power in giving agency to those who had been disempowered. The hyper-appeared aesthetics that followed, should we be faithful to Düttman's rationale, is nothing more than an effect of the unrealised impetus of AIDS towards the *impertinent*.

### Movement 3 Where Is This Elsewhere?

In the moving image, perhaps more so than in any other field of artistic production, this (failed) attempt to represent the unrepresentability and vastness of AIDS is present. The necessity that artists had to problematise the hegemony of the visual representation of AIDS also manifests powerfully, very often with the mission of dignifying or de-stigmatising shame, an identity position that queer people had been forced to occupy before, during, and after the AIDS epidemic. To a certain extent, as Altman has argued, despite how tragic this is, AIDS has contributed to legitimising the existence of queer identities.<sup>58</sup> The

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Many AIDS moving images have made use of the space-off. But this is not the point, though it brought to the surface a new locus of articulation for the discourse of AIDS. Those who have adopted a more experimental approach to the cinematic representation of AIDS—and thus have clung to the potential rather than only to the technique of the space-off— have, in my opinion, more successfully performed the movement from representation to that interstitial and fragmented elsewhere, the blind spot obliquity of Ricco's path to the disappeared aesthetics.

57 ——— Ricco, *The Logic of the Lure*, 50.

58 ——— To a certain extent, the normalisation of AIDS bemoaned by Douglas Crimp might also be understood as a result of this process. Crimp laments a political indifference that towards the beginning of the 1990s and under the presidency of George H.W. Bush reduced AIDS to just one out of a long list of social problems and permanent disasters. Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 175.

AIDS moving image is a site where the entanglement of theory and practice happened more effectively, and where artists could perform promiscuity more freely, catalysing different intellectual and visual energies and experimenting with the radical gesture of imagination with the clear project of escaping the normalising discourse and the symbolic order perpetuated by civil society. At the same time, it is also a place of impasse, where the aporias of Ricco's disappeared aesthetics are situated. The fundamental ungraspability of AIDS provokes a chain reaction: the aspiration to turn the uncertain into the certain has found in artistic creation its most fertile terrain. Even when artists have attempted to use the moving image as a door out towards an Outside of discourse, attracted by the possibility of reaffirming the itinerancy of AIDS, they have often been caught by theory, representation, and/or narration, or at least in a dualistic and conflictual relationship between a positive versus a negative affirmation of the AIDS subject, with the latter fuelled by mainstream society. Embracing the full abomination

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The artistic strategy of seizing control of AIDS through representation and the abundant production of images that followed, despite being the effect of a survival necessity, has also contributed to an assimilation of AIDS into the agenda of those institutional agents that have historically delegitimised all of the subjects associated with AIDS—socially, morally, and sexually. Equally, the grassroots political force of the first wave of AIDS activism at a certain point lost its power; from being a space for social transformation it was turned into a political agent invested with authority and competence and therefore able to intervene in the electoral process.

Michael Warner, in the same vein, laments the resurgence of a neo-queer conservatism when the emergent queer theory was assimilated into the American academic world around 1992, contributing to a process of institutionalisation of queer thought, research, and writing. Concurrently, the process of destigmatisation, hence recognition of queer identities, and the ensuing move towards “normalcy,” he argues, did not happen without a high cost to pay: by abandoning the fight against the stigmatisation of sex, thus rewarding society's policing of sexuality, certain fringes of queer activism have dignified the politics of shame and the stigma associated with it.

Michael Warner, *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

The positive outcomes of such recognition are not put in doubt here; arguing the contrary would risk engaging in discriminatory hierarchies to assess the freedom of every single individual, queer and not, to choose what is best for them. Nonetheless, this assimilation with an imaginary mainstream in order to achieve legitimisation has undoubtedly favoured a depoliticisation of AIDS at the hands of queer activism, at least in the sense that Bersani might intend it—as a structure that, by its refusal to be domesticated, stands out as an effective form of resistance to the oppressive social order that wants to name us.

of AIDS, the act of unbecoming rather than that of becoming, is a considerable risk to take.<sup>59</sup> As a result, their mission to disrupt certain discursive procedures, as well as the normalising apparatuses that call for the verifiability of our identities and actions, succeeded only in part. From the very beginning, AIDS has been theorised on the basis of a dualistic/dichotomous protocol: they/us; saints/perverts; straight/queer; healthy/infected. The social symbolic, as Ricco argues, always operates through a series of dialectical distinctions. The moving image has stood against this logic by overproducing counter-discursive representations of AIDS, attempting to leave this representational territory without being able to.

There is no doubt that representation has offered artists in the age of AIDS a highly productive as well as rewarding platform from which to continue their struggle for recognition, one based on a long history of queer identity politics. Often caught up in the pursuit of social validation, they never truly abandoned the system of referentiality and the identificatory process on which cinematic representation in particular—and to a certain extent aesthetic production too—relies. However, precisely because of this need for recognition, for claiming a form of expression and narrativisation, for refusing a logic of desubjectification, and ultimately the human desire to leave a trace (to not be “infamous”), the moving image has failed to open a portal (a third trajectory of an inside/outside logic) to an *elsewhere* of discourse where AIDS could remain unnameable. Nevertheless, in this failure they also found their power. But the act of disappearance, the state of absolute otherness that Leo Bersani envisioned as the most radical gesture to resist systems of repressive power, was not completed. And it never will be. For the movement towards Ricco’s notion of disappearance is an ongoing experience with no end.

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59 ——— This unbecoming, as a “radical loss of self,” as “a celebration of perpetual movement,” is the erotic according to both Haver and Ricco. The erotic is that which constantly evades signification and meaning, and as such it designates the force of the Outside. “The erotic,” Haver writes, “appears, as it were, only in and as the synopses of the transgression of the order of the preinvented Other World, which in fact occludes the erotic. The erotic, therefore, cannot be a ‘state of being,’ but is only disclosed as the ekstasis that is the cutting edge, the bite, of metamorphosis, the very transitivity of be-ing.” Thus, by propelling other forms of transitional relationships with the preinvented world, the erotic opens up the possibility for the political to emerge. Haver, *The Body of This Death*, 15–16 and 138–39.

## Last Movement

### Finale: The Logic of Attraction

AIDS is an unthinkable subject, and as such it resists its objectification. Only the impossibility of expressing it can be expressed—an inexpressibility that can refuse language altogether, as Jarman did, or continue to incessantly proliferate in language, as Edelman argued. To refuse language is to resist its agency, to reject being named in AIDS, being identified, discoursed, and narrativised in it, as is evident in Rodriguez's short film. In this sense, AIDS has triggered a crisis of signification, not one that dismantled society's urgency for verifiable content, but one that disclosed the mechanisms of language when it comes to the epistemological limits of the human being to speak the unspeakable. AIDS remains a discursively constituted subject whose discursive logics can be challenged, Düttman argues, only by acknowledging its state of impertinence (its tension to be outside, to not belong, to not be one). An existence that is *im-pertinent*, he writes "[is] an existence that [...] claims no right to existence." In order to be impertinent, he continues, "it would not only have to resist all attempts to circumscribe and delimit it; to pin it down; it would also have to be a limit that through its lack of discursive meaning makes discourses impossible."<sup>60</sup> Düttman's theory of the *im-pertinent* and the limit disavows the subject/object relation, which is forged from a knowing subject capable of interpreting the objects of the world. In this relation, the objective/denotative function of language exercises its control. "Just say 'I am', and you will be socially saved," Roland Barthes writes in his introduction to Camus's *Tricks*. The interruption of this relation is the end of referential language, in favour of a state of constant provisionality in which the object remains undiscursive, undistinguished, discontinuous, and without relation to either the knowing subject or to that which has been known from and within the world. This new form of relationality is non-relational, the force of the un-becoming, or what Haver calls the erotic.

But this inadequacy of language to represent AIDS is also the attraction of AIDS, the same erotic attraction I myself was not able to fully reject. "Attraction," Ricco makes this very argument, "is no more and no less than whatever lures you to walk through just one more time, to linger a few minutes longer, to go back again and again, just as you were about to leave, or quit, each and every time."<sup>61</sup> In the case of the tragedy of AIDS, that "whatever-lures-you-to-go-back" is precisely the insufficiency of language, the incapacity of the human mind to

<sup>60</sup> ——— Düttman, *At Odds with AIDS*, 30.

<sup>61</sup> ——— Ricco, *The Logic of the Lure*, 11.

accept a state of not understanding. “I’m a prisoner of language,” David Wojnarowicz writes, “that doesn’t have a letter or a sign or a gesture that approximates what I’m seeing.”<sup>62</sup> In this enunciative attraction, unmappable and uncontainable, through which I cruise, an itinerancy that is always coming but never arriving, one that is permanently on the verge, I will not be saved, but I can perhaps finally experience the frightening joy of not saying “I am.”

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62 ——— Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, 126–27.



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**PART 3**  
**Curating AIDS**

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# Tema: AIDS<sup>1</sup>

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**1** ——— The original version of this essay was published under the title “I Am Ready for a Revolution” in *It Must Out—Making Exhibitions Since 1968*, a reader published by Henie Onstad Kunstsenter at the end of 2020, edited by Ana María Bresciani.



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## Preface

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At the time when this essay was drafted, in the winter of 2020, I had just been accepted into the PhD program in Practice in Curating. Material compiled for this text was gathered a year and a half before, on the occasion of a month-long curatorial residency at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, at the invitation of Senior Curator Ana María Bresciani to unveil previously unseen archival material related to the exhibition *Tema: AIDS* (1993). My initial idea was to create a new expanded version of this exhibition as part of my PhD curatorial practice, incorporating the extensive research on 1980s and 1990s American AIDS experimental filmmaking that I had conducted in the previous years as a state-funded doctoral researcher at Central Saint Martins College in London. How could I reactivate the museum's archive by introducing it to new art-historical narratives and findings, which arose from my study of AIDS moving images? The exhibition *Tema: AIDS* treated a small selection of HIV/AIDS video art and experimental films as educational material, suggesting to me the existence of a gap in academic as well as curatorial research, which needed to be questioned and further investigated. Enrolling in the PhD program in Practice in Curating had contributed to a drastic shift in my ideas around the curation of HIV/AIDS. Furthermore, it affected the way in which I conducted academic research, anchored by the possibility of overtly situating myself within the research process, by means of the personal, historical, cultural, bodily, and emotional contexts in which I as a knowing subject act and from which I attempt to produce knowledge.<sup>2</sup> When in

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2 ——— “Positioning,” Donna Haraway claims, “implies responsibility for our enabling practices.” This “embodied vision,” which has contributed to giving shape to a major part of my PhD project, is partly built around Haraway’s argument for situated and embodied knowledges—an argument, she claims, that stands against “various forms of unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims.” According to Haraway, the search for a universal objectivity, in which the scientific authority of universalist theories is rooted, disguises the “knower’s” positionality as universality in the process of knowledge production. In so doing, not only does it disallow situatedness, but also it strongly affirms a very specific position, that of the white, male, heteronormative, Darwinian subject. Similarly, the everywhere and nowhere paradigm of scientific relativism denies the possibility of both critical inquiry and responsibility, for it is in the epistemology and politics of partial perspectives that, according to Haraway, the objective inquiry rests. “I want to argue for a doctrine and practice of objectivity,” she writes,

2022 Tone Hansen, Director at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, invited me to curate and organise an exhibition on HIV/AIDS as part of the Queer Culture Year in Norway, I decided to abandon the original idea of a remake—to the point of almost betraying any methodology of the “re-” —and instead produce a new exhibition that could echo the theoretical approach I was following in my PhD research and writing. Concurrently, there was an important aspect that I wanted to acknowledge in my research, which despite being fully aware of I did not openly welcome in my research practice when I looked at the *Tema: AIDS* archive for the first time—i.e. my personal experience as a sexually active queer person, who had come of age in a heteronormative and Catholic society at a time when the AIDS epidemic existed more as a frightening spectre than a concrete health emergency, struggling to fill in a historical gap and connect to a larger community of queer people with whom I sensed I had to align, whose contribution to the history of HIV/AIDS I felt I had to honour, a commitment which I was not always fully able, or perhaps willing, to make. In this sense, the AIDS video archive I was trying to compile, by gluing together the smallest pieces of a puzzle too enormous to complete, was not there to give me answers or grant me a specific place within the historical discourse on HIV/AIDS from which to stand. Rather, it was to make me realise how my personal experience—one often characterized by failure, betrayal, disempowerment, and fear—of writing and understanding HIV/AIDS

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“that privileges contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing.” Without denying or dismissing objectivity as an epistemological necessity, in her much-cited essay, “Situated Knowledge,” Haraway grants agency to both the knowing subject and the object of their inquiry. Arguing in favour of a mobile and locatable position from which “we” speak (“embodiment,” she writes, “is significant prosthesis”), corresponds to recognising that our bodies are objects of knowledge and as such they are “material-semiotic generative nodes [whose] boundaries materialize in social interaction.” The resulting view of the world is therefore provisional and contingent, depending on the historical context. The practice of situated knowledge can be contradictory, contested, and paradoxical. Nevertheless, it is ultimately political. “I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. [...] I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity.”

Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 575-99.

was both mirrored and shaped in response to the more than one hundred videos and films that I cruised, watched, discussed, loved or disliked, questioned, and wrote about over a period of two years.<sup>3</sup>

Finalised more than two years ago, at the beginning of my PhD research in Practice in Curating, the following essay differs from other chapters (the previous and the next) included in this thesis. The version presented here has been revisited, with the addition of several new footnotes. The art-historical ground, the art critical approach, and the stylistic structure remain untouched, so as to reflect a change in both curatorial and academic perspective between my reading of *Tema: AIDS* and the curation of *Every Moment Counts–AIDS and its Feelings*, the main research project for my PhD curatorial practice. No literature exists, apart from the exhibition catalogue in Norwegian, on *Tema: AIDS*. Furthermore, only recently and after the media attention garnered by *Every Moment Counts*, have researchers shown interest in accessing the *Tema: AIDS* archive, to which Henie Onstad Kunstsenter had not granted third party access until 2018, when I was invited as curator-in-residence. At the moment I am writing this preface (February 2023), this is the only existing essay that traces a precise description and analysis of how *Tema: AIDS* was organised and that contextualises it within the historical discourse on HIV/AIDS, both in Europe and the US.

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3 ——— I can't express my current feelings better than through the words of Ed Cohen. Very often, I have to admit, I doubted my good intentions. And I am glad I did. By trying to find a space for my own voice within a cohort of illustrious other voices who discussed and theorised about HIV/AIDS, wasn't I just getting caught up in addressing, once again, "an imbalance that has plagued me since adolescence, when I became painfully aware that my feelings for other men and boys were a 'problem' and as a consequence I retreated into the acceptability of intellectual –if not biblical– 'knowledge'? However, I am taking the risk of seeming 'overly naïve' here in affirming the importance of theorizing '(e)motion' because I believe that my experience, rather than being anomalous, is at once personal and political, individual and collective." Ed Cohen, "Who are 'We'? Gay 'Identity' as Political (E)motion (A Theoretical Ruminant)," in *Inside/Out. Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 92.

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## Introduction

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In 1992, when Per Hovdenakk, director of Henie Onstad Kunstsenter from 1989 to 1996, started to think about organising a series of thematic exhibitions to reflect on the world's increasing social and political frictions, the first topic that came to mind was, surprisingly, AIDS.<sup>4</sup> *Tema: AIDS* opened on May 8, 1993, one month after the Norwegian Parliament passed an act that made Norway the second country in Europe, after Denmark, to allow same-sex couples to enter into registered partnerships. Hovdenakk co-curated the exhibition along with Herlof Hatlebrekke, librarian at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter; Kim Levin, New York-based curator and freelance writer at the *Village Voice*; and Sven Christensen, head of Bergen Kunstforening, who joined the group later on, at the beginning of 1993. *Tema: AIDS* marked a turning point in the history of AIDS-related exhibitions in Europe, despite Norway's peripheral position, both geographically and culturally, in relation to the AIDS epidemic and to artistic activism on the subject. The making of the show and other behind-the-scenes developments were scrupulously recorded. The documentation stored in the museum's archive provides evidence of the enormous amount of research conducted by the exhibition's organisers, as well as the various financial investments that enabled the institution to put forward a diversified and well-articulated exhibition about the historical, social, and political aspects of AIDS.<sup>5</sup> After premiering at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter in May 1993, *Tema: AIDS* travelled to Bergen Kunstforening (September 1993); the Karl Ernst Osthaus-Museum in Hagen, Germany (December 1993–January 1994); Stavanger Kulturhus (March–April 1994); and the Nordic Arts Centre in Helsinki (October–December 1994).

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4 ——— This course of events is confirmed by both Herlof Hatlebrekke and Kim Levin, co-curators of *Tema: AIDS*, with whom I had a series of conversations during the research period I spent in Oslo as a guest of Henie Onstad Kunstsenter. Levin, in particular, remembers being approached by Hovdenakk, who passed away in 2016, about the urgent need to organise an exhibition on the AIDS epidemic after a lecture she gave at the museum on the occasion of the opening of *American Figurations* (1992), in which she addressed issues of postmodernism, identity and body politics, feminism, as well as AIDS and the AIDS crisis.

5 ——— *Tema: AIDS* was funded by the Norwegian Directorate for Health and Social Affairs, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, and the City of Oslo, along with a series of local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Surprisingly, it did not receive support from Arts Council Norway.

Following the curators' objectives, which were clearly stated in all the official documentation that went out to lenders, galleries, and other institutions, the exhibition was structured in three main sections, showing works by more than fifty artists, including some new commissions for site-specific works by the Norwegian and Norway-based artists Per Barclay, Kjell Erik Killi Olsen, Mi Qiu Ling, Fin Serck-Hansen, Wera Sæther, and Sissel Tolaas. The archival materials housed at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, as well as interviews I have conducted with curators and artists, trace the ways in which *Tema: AIDS* enacted an unprecedented standpoint on AIDS, art, and society, first and foremost within the Norwegian context but also for the wider European cultural milieu.

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## Don't Ever Wipe Tears without Gloves<sup>6</sup>

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Beginning in the early 1990s, people in the United States found themselves facing a new kind of indifference, which the art historian and critic Douglas Crimp has termed “the normalisation of AIDS.” “If, for the first eight years of the epidemic,” Crimp writes, “indifference took the form of callously ignoring the crisis, under George Bush AIDS was ‘normalized’ as just one item on a long list of supposedly intractable social problems. . . . AIDS is no longer an emergency. It’s merely a permanent disaster.”<sup>7</sup> Although AIDS never reached the scale of a health emergency in Norway, the federal government nevertheless faced the initial spread of an epidemic at the beginning of the 1980s. The social-democratic country’s commitment to the principle of access to health care for all, based on the underlying ethics of the European Convention on Human Rights, has been one of the pillars of rights-based responses and risk-management approaches to HIV/AIDS in Norway. Mandatory name-based reporting of AIDS was introduced in Norway as early as 1983, as was individual HIV testing and mandatory anonymous clinical care reporting in 1986.<sup>8</sup> Unlinked anonymous testing (UAT)—screening

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- 6 ——— *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves (Torka aldrig tårar utan handskar)* is a three-part Swedish TV drama from 2012 about the impact of HIV/AIDS on Stockholm’s gay community in the 1980s. *Tema: AIDS* was largely built around artists whose work was grounded in the American social and political context. How the epidemic has been handled in the two countries, Norway and the US, is shockingly different. I briefly discuss this later in this section. Nevertheless, how society reacted and the media machinery depicted HIV/AIDS and the lives of those affected by the epidemic was very similar indeed. As the nurse in the Swedish TV drama rebukes her colleague for not using gloves when wiping a tear from a patient affected by AIDS, so police officers in the US wore plastic gloves when facing the barricades of AIDS activists seizing the streets of several American cities to claim their rights for access to health care. The idea of catching AIDS through bodily contact is part of a hard-to-die mythology, one that still persists today.
- 7 ——— Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 175.
- 8 ——— Preben Aavitsland, Øivind Nilsen, and Arve Lystad, “Anonymous Reporting of HIV Infection: An Evaluation of the HIV/AIDS Surveillance System in Norway 1983–2000,” *European Journal of Epidemiology* 17, no. 5 (May 2001): 479–89.

blood samples, drawn for any reason, for HIV without informed consent of the patient—has never been considered epidemiologically necessary and was not implemented. By the spring of 1985, most laboratories in Norway could offer HIV testing with commercial antibody tests. Despite being a form of surveillance, the stated objectives of this HIV/AIDS system were to offer public health officials an overview of the spread of the disease, to avoid the risk of an epidemic, and to adopt reduction and prevention measures to mitigate HIV infections and plan the distribution of resources accordingly. Funds were allocated to NGOs such as Helseutvalget (Gay and Lesbian Health Norway), an association founded in 1983 that is still active today, which took responsibility for educational and prevention programs for men who had sex with men, working in collaboration with the Norwegian Institute of Public Health and the Oslo Health Board. In 1986, the first official government campaign to promote safe sex appeared on billboards across the country, and the following year, central hospitals in Norway received financial assistance to improve their staff capacity and know-how in dealing with HIV/AIDS.<sup>9</sup>

*New Scientist* magazine reported that, as of May 12, 1987, fifty people in Norway had been officially diagnosed with AIDS and that the HIV virus was evenly distributed among homosexuals and heterosexuals, confirming that AIDS should not be perceived, and as such treated,

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Mandatory HIV/AIDS reporting is a delicate issue, one that relates not only to a violation of citizens' privacy, but also to identity politics.

Forcing people living with AIDS to report on their status might run the serious risk of assigning them no other identities than as "victims" of AIDS. Furthermore, AIDS has been primarily narrativised as a gay disease, a historical fact confirmed by the first scientific name given to AIDS—gay-related immune deficiency (GRID)—corroborating that the social perception of the epidemic was very much rooted in the prejudice about AIDS being a gay disease. There is the evident risk that a name-based reporting mandate could be dysfunctional, by assuming the existence of a deep-rooted "sickness" residing in the homosexual subject. Nevertheless, despite acknowledging it as a form of severe surveillance and coercion, the Norwegian federal government determined that the impact of this HIV/AIDS control scheme outweighed the privacy violations it necessarily entailed, on the condition that data collected by the national health system remain confidential, preventing social backlash against people living with AIDS.

9 ——— In 1988, the City of Oslo, in accordance with the federal government, financed the AIDS Information Bus project to provide free clean needles and syringes to intravenous drug users on an anonymous basis. The project arose from the decision of most pharmacies in Oslo not to sell syringes or needles to drug users as a way to pressure the municipal administration into initiating a correct care program.

as a “gay disease.”<sup>10</sup> But despite the Norwegian government’s rights-based prevention and risk management policies, the country was not exempt from acts of discrimination and prejudice. One notable case is Henki Hauge Karlsen, the first person in the Nordic countries to publicly disclose his HIV-positive status. After losing his job as a bartender at the Papillon restaurant in Fredrikstad amid fear of infection, Karlsen, with the support of his attorney, Tor Erling Staff, took the matter to the Supreme Court and won his case in October 1988. Before he could get his job back, the owner of the restaurant requested a letter from a doctor confirming Karlsen was not contagious to customers. He died a few months later of AIDS-related complications and never went back to work at the restaurant. Because of Karlsen, the disease made headlines across the Scandinavian news media. Around this same time, Norway also had the attention of the academic press, in particular scientific journals whose contributors were investigating the epidemiological history of the HIV virus and the so-called pre-AIDS era. By the end of the 1980s, medical researchers had discovered that Arne Vidar Røed, a Norwegian sailor and truck driver from Borre, a small village south of Oslo, who died in 1976, probably had the earliest case of HIV in Europe. Researchers came to believe that it was likely during one of his expeditions to West Africa that Røed contracted the virus. After his return to Norway, he infected his wife, Solveig Oline Røed and, in utero, their youngest daughter, Bente Vivian Røed, who died a few months before her father, at the age of nine.<sup>11</sup>

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10 ——— “Equal Spread in Norway,” *New Scientist*, July 23, 1987, 23.

The Norwegian Institute of Public Health reports that the total number of AIDS cases in Norway in the period between 1984 and 2002 was 775. The rate of infection has drastically decreased from 2003 to the present day. “HIV Infection by Source of Infection and AIDS, by Year of Diagnosis,” Statistics Norway, <https://www.ssb.no/a/english/aarbok/tab/tab-126.html>.

11 ——— There are several perspectives that I have not included here. In no way do I claim to have fully described the Norwegian context. Instead, my intention is to succinctly contextualise the conditions under which the country was struggling with its response to HIV/AIDS. For a detailed reference on the Norwegian context, see Olav André Manum, *Kjærlighet, kunnskap og kondom: Den hivpolitiske kampen i Norge* (Oslo: Pax, 2010). I would like to thank Petter Dotterud Anthun for his generous guidance on the subject matter from a Norwegian perspective.



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## The Peace and Comfort of the Ivory Tower

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There is reason to believe that Per Hovdenakk's decision to organise *Tema: AIDS* at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter was rooted in the director's involvement with the experimental and avant-garde movements, particularly Fluxus, and in his attempt to introduce to the Norwegian contemporary art scene a stark criticism for failing to reflect the international artistic mandate to commit to social and political issues, which followed the example of a large part of the artistic community in the US since the late-1960s. The underlying objective of the exhibition was to urge the Norwegian art world to participate in political struggle as well as to resist and comment on the political establishment; the AIDS activism of the 1980s was one of the most powerful expressions of this ethos. "The dominant values and norms of Norwegian art in the '70s," curator and critic Ingvild Krogvig writes, "were in many ways antithetical to the idea of conceptual art. In a climate where simple, understandable figuration was the ideal, it is no surprise that conceptual art [...] seemed irrelevant to the majority of artists and critics. [...] The most publicly visible political artists were working in the intersections between art and activism. [...] By contrast, early Norwegian conceptual art was quiet and anti-authoritarian."<sup>12</sup>

Hovdenakk travelled extensively to the United States, as well as to Brazil, where he was involved with the São Paulo Art Biennial. During the 1990s, he initiated a series of exhibitions at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter that were very much American-centred, including solo exhibitions for Yoko Ono (1990) and Geoffrey Hendricks (1994), who was deeply involved in the New York AIDS activist scene and with whom Hovdenakk had been close since the mid-1980s. Furthermore, considering the different layers of analysis, curatorial choices, and critical instances advanced by *Tema: AIDS*, as well as the diverse range of artists involved and the connections presented between their works, it seems clear that Hovdenakk was attempting to historicise a movement and a new artistic tendency that had, until then, received little

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12 ——— Ingvild Krogvig, "Viggo Andersen's Vigelandsinstallasjon: The History of a Forgotten Anti-monument," in *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries, 1950–1975*, ed. Tania Ørum and Jesper Ols-son (Leiden: Brill; Boston: Rodopi, 2016), 697.

attention from either museums or curators in Europe. At the same time, the exhibition was also meant to impel the local art milieu to embrace a less “quiet” attitude, as suggested by its commission of new works by a small group of Norwegian artists and its primary focus on art being produced on the other side of the Atlantic. “There is no strong tradition [in Norway] that involves art institutions opening up for social debate and the discussion of controversial issues,” Hovdenakk states in his introduction to the exhibition catalogue. “The majority prefer the peace and comfort of their ivory towers.”<sup>13</sup>

By combining artworks, educational materials, historical documentation, an AIDS video program, and almost weekly seminars and performances, *Tema: AIDS* succeeded in comprehensively framing the epidemic as a social and political crisis and, most importantly in the context of Henie Onstad Kunstsenter standing as a cultural institution with a sociopolitical objective, in showing the deep historical connection of art to politics and society. The museum archive doesn’t show any evidence of direct contact between Hovdenakk and William Olander, who was appointed in 1985 as senior curator at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City and was one of the first curators to show the works of AIDS activists at a major institution in the United States. Regardless, with *Tema: AIDS* Hovdenakk clearly seemed to share the same critical principles and intentions as his American counterpart. “All periods of intense crisis have inspired works of art whose functions were extra-artistic,” Olander writes in the brochure for the New Museum’s 1987 window installation by the Silence=Death Project.<sup>14</sup> Hovdenakk might have been trying to voice a

13 ——— Per Hovdenakk, “Introduction,” in *Tema: AIDS*, ed. Per Hovdenakk and Herlof Hatlebrette, trans. Karen Monica Reini (Oslo: Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 1993), 2.

14 ——— In November 1987, Olander invited the artist collective Silence=Death Project to realise a site-specific installation for the museum’s Broadway window. Under the title *Let the record show . . .*, the work presented, for the very first time in an art institution, ACT UP’s pink triangle framed by the “Silence=Death” statement, used to expose, and publicly accuse, six symbolic “AIDS criminals” from the US political and media establishment. Olander writes in the exhibition leaflet: “I first became aware of ACT UP, like many other New Yorkers, when I saw a poster appear on lower Broadway with this equation: SILENCE=DEATH. Accompanying these words, sited on a black background, was a pink triangle, the symbol of homosexual persecution during the Nazi period and, since the 1960s, the emblem of gay liberation. For anyone conversant with this iconography, there was no question that this was a poster designed to provoke and heighten awareness of the AIDS crisis. To me, it was more than that: it was among the most significant works of art that had yet been done which was inspired and produced within the arms of the crisis.”

precise theoretical statement with *Tema: AIDS* along these lines, considering the position of Henie Onstad Kunstsenter as a prominent and highly regarded art institution in the Nordic countries as well as the figurative tradition that many artists in Norway continued to gravitate to as late as the 1990s. Ten years after art critic Hal Foster wrote the preface to the anthology *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Henie Onstad Kunstsenter's *Tema: AIDS* seemed to function as a curatorial example of Foster's analysis of and academic position on the tendencies of postmodernism. Against the presentation of postmodernism as an epistemological break with, and repudiation of, the aesthetic traditions of modernism, which Foster calls the "postmodernism of reaction," his essay introduces the possibility of an alternative way of looking at postmodernism in art and culture: as a cultural shift resulting from the feminist and civil rights liberation movements of the 1970s. According to Foster, the objective of this "postmodernism of resistance" is to grasp the nexus that keeps culture deeply interconnected with politics and to act as a counter-practice of interference. That is to say, postmodernism's relationship with reality is not only one of opposition, but also one of rupture and critique. The argumentative force of the postmodernism of resistance, in Foster's analysis, lies in "its desire to change the object and its social context." More specifically, "a resistant postmodernism is concerned with a critical deconstruction of tradition, not an instrumental pastiche of pop- or pseudo-historical forms, with a critique of origins, not a return to them. In short, it seeks to question rather than exploit cultural codes, to explore rather than conceal social and political affiliations."<sup>15</sup> In this sense, *Tema: AIDS* presents a paradigmatic model for how research and hence knowledge can be produced in the practice of curating, and how it can interfere locally with the hegemonic exercise of the status quo, of which art exhibitions are undoubtedly a part—an objective that clearly responded to Hovdenakk's original mandate.<sup>16</sup>

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William Olander, "The Window on Broadway by ACT UP," in *Democracy: A Project by Group Material*, ed. Brian Wallis (Seattle: Bay, 1990), 277–81.

15 ——— Hal Foster, "Postmodernism: A Preface," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Seattle: Bay, 1983), xii.

16 ——— Foster's analysis of postmodernism is clearly foregrounded by theories from the academic field of post-structuralism. In *Tema: AIDS*, Hovdenakk attempts to voice the contribution of deconstructive techniques, both in theory and practice, with which the postmodernism of resistance had already become almost synonymous. By including works that challenged the indexicality of the sign and the "supremacy" of the signified, he attempted to stage a commentary on the role of language in shaping identities and subjectivities. Reinforced by the peculiarities of the sociopolitical contexts from which they arose, most

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of the exhibited works both exposed and problematised the ideological state apparatus that contributed to the formation, and circulation, of the “AIDS subject.” Without creating an oppositional stance between representational practices and articulatory practices—two modes of political representation that Mouffe and Laclau have written about extensively—Hovdenakk had tried to transform the museum into a stage of critical enunciation where practice and theory inform, combine, and contaminate each other, and ultimately make space for the critical instrumentality of Foster’s original idea of a resistant post-modernism. In this sense, resistance, dissensus, or conflict become the method rather than solely the object of both the theory and the practice of art created amid the AIDS crisis. In retrospect, this echoes Jacques Rancière’s idea that there is no such thing as a political life, but rather a political stage. When the boundaries between political actions and social, public, or domestic actions are blurred, then there is politics. This is why, he argues, politics “generally occurs out of place, in a place which was not supposed to be political.”

In the specific context of an exhibition such as *Tema: AIDS*, the spatial concern of Rancière’s idea becomes a concrete possibility. But there is an additional concern, which matters Rancière thinking of politics and aesthetics under the concept of dissensus, and has to do with how we sense the world in which we live—something that he terms the “distribution of the sensible” and that is exemplified in his theory about “politics as an aesthetic affair.” According to the French philosopher, this has nothing to do with the politicisation of art or the aestheticisation of politics. On the contrary, it has to do with politics being a driving force for shaping our experience of the world, for giving to this experience a specific form. Politics and aesthetics have never been two separate entities or “spheres of experience,” but operate as interconnected agents, each “doing politics” in their own distinctive way. Jacques Rancière, “The Thinking of Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics,” in *Reading Rancière*, ed. Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp (London: Continuum, 2011), 1–17.

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## The Ethics and Aesthetics of the AIDS Crisis

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*Tema: AIDS* was not the first exhibition about AIDS to be organised in Europe. Nevertheless, it stands out for its presentation of a set of different voices that, despite not taking a unified direction, still clearly acknowledged their shared position of resistance in relation to contemporary politics and society. In this way, *Tema: AIDS* offered an outlet for the most radical stances in cultural politics, theoretical research, freedom of expression, and political activism. “It was a huge exhibition,” co-curator Kim Levin recalled during one of our many phone conversations. “It would never have been possible to do in [the United States] at that time, due to issues of puritanism and censorship.”<sup>17</sup>

In 1992, one year before the opening of *Tema: AIDS*, curator Nicola White organised *Read My Lips: The New York AIDS Polemic* at Tramway Arts Centre in Glasgow.<sup>18</sup> Borrowing its title from a work by the art collective Gran Fury and depicting the AIDS epidemic as mainly an “American disease,” the exhibition presented mostly New York-based artists whose works reflected the response and reaction of the art

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17 ——— Kim Levin, interview by the author, November 2018. Two notable examples are Andres Serrano’s exhibition at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina (1989) and Robert Mapplethorpe’s exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia (1989), both sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Both artists were accused of indecency, of promoting homosexual acts, and, in the case of Serrano’s *Piss Christ* (1987), of religious intolerance. Senator Jesse Helms exploited the controversies initiated by the two artists’ works to request the closure of the NEA. For more on this topic, see Carole S. Vance, “The War on Culture,” in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 220-31.

18 ——— Herlof Hatlebrekke attended the exhibition opening, in order to familiarise himself with the works exhibited as well as with the curation of the show. During the same trip, Hatlebrekke went to London to meet with Simon Watney, who helped him compile an extensive research bibliography that he later used to write his catalogue essay on the history of AIDS art activism in America. See Herlof Hatlebrekke, “All People With AIDS Are Innocent: Aktiviskunst,” in *Tema: AIDS*, ed. Per Hovdenakk and Herlof Hatlebrekke, trans. Karen Monica Reini (Oslo: Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 1993), 4–11.

community to the US government's neglect of the AIDS crisis.<sup>19</sup> "Here in Scotland, the AIDS epidemic is critical, but as yet is far behind the American epidemic in terms of numbers affected, and there has been no cultural response to speak of," White writes in the catalogue. "The point of this exhibition is not to set it up as an example of cultural practice which could be imitated here, but to use it as a sounding place for our own assumptions about AIDS, and our expectations about what role artists can play in a social and political crisis."<sup>20</sup> Earlier that year, in June, German artist Tom Fecht unveiled his public installation *Namen und Steine* [Names and Stones] in front of the Fridericianum in Kassel on the occasion of documenta 9, curated by Jan Hoet. A "mobile monument," to use the artist's own words, made up of 250 cobblestones, each engraved with the name of a person who had passed away because of AIDS (predominantly artists), that together give form to a twenty-seven-meter basalt-and-granite pathway, acting as a memorial for all those who had died in the epidemic.

At almost the same time, from May to June 1992, the Kunstverein in Hamburg held *Gegendarstellung. Ethik und Ästhetik im Zeitalter von AIDS* [Counterstatement: Ethics and Aesthetics in the Age of AIDS]. Curated by Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen, the exhibition travelled to the Kunstmuseum in Lucerne in October that same year. As the title suggests, the exhibition tried to shed light on the ethics and aesthetics that came into being because of and in response to the AIDS epidemic. It showed works by mostly artists based in the United States, including Robert Gober, Félix González-Torres, and David Wojnarowicz, as well as the art-group Tim Rollins and K.O.S., whose work was not extensively known or exhibited in Europe, beyond their appearances at documenta 8 in 1987 and the Venice Biennale in 1988. Schmidt-Wulffen's attempted to push the AIDS discourse beyond activist terms through the invited artists' critique of mainstream models of representation and of the ways in which cultural values were built and circulated in society. They did not assert any total denial of representation but rather

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19 ——— Most historical accounts of AIDS begin with the publication of the article "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals" in the July 3, 1981, edition of *The New York Times*. The expression "American disease," which was popularised by a series of books published in the United States beginning in the early 1980s, did not refer to the idea that AIDS had originated in America. Rather, it was acknowledging that the first cases were reported in that country and that most of the deaths in Western countries happened there. The fact that the first efforts to conceptualise and study the epidemic were made in the United States also contributed to the public perception of AIDS as an "American disease."

20 ——— Nicola White, ed., *Read My Lips: New York AIDS Polemics* (Glasgow: Tramway, 1992).

questioned the idea of a privileged aesthetic realm and showed that the practice of art is cross-disciplinary by nature, and thus open to engagement with political discourse. In other words, Schmidt-Wulffen's exhibition attempted to complexify the analysis that curator Frank Wagner and the RealismusStudio group had already begun at the end of 1988 with the exhibition *Vollbild AIDS. Eine Kunstausstellung über Leben und Sterben* [Full-screen AIDS: An Art Exhibition about Life and Death] at the neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst (nGbK) in Berlin, among the first exhibitions about AIDS at a major art institution in Europe. Presented as a show "about life and death," it successfully challenged the very idea of art being separate from the social and political contexts in which artists live and therefore operate, and instead gave, as its title suggests, a full picture of the political implications of the AIDS crisis. As Wagner explains, "AIDS also became an occasion to reflect on questions of social ostracism, as well as beauty, transience, pain and psychological repression."<sup>21</sup> A particularly salient aspect of the exhibition's approach was its intention to shake up public opinion in Germany and break the "business as usual" flux of information, by using public space for display, among other strategies. One notable example is a big billboard by Gran Fury, titled *When a Government Turns Its Back on Its People, Is It Civil War?* Installed in the tunnels of Berlin's subway network, the poster made the reality of AIDS conspicuous to an audience that still seemed unaware of the crisis, or at least insensitive to it. It is not by chance that public visibility played a similarly major role in a later project of Wagner's, *AIDS PROJEKTE—Get better soon*, which he and the research team he was part of organised at nGbK in early June 1993, almost concurrent with *Tema: AIDS* in Oslo. Works were displayed outside the gallery space, namely at the Babylon Cinema in Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, the Berlin University of the Arts, the Tränenpalast [The Palace of Tears], and the former border crossing at Berlin Friedrichstraße station, as well as in pubs, bars, and cafés around Nollendorfplatz, Berlin's foremost gaybourhood.<sup>22</sup>

21 ——— Frank Wagner, "Introduction," in *Vollbild AIDS* (Berlin: Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, 1988), 41.

22 ——— In 2013, almost twenty-five years after *Vollbild AIDS*, nGbK mounted the exhibition *LOVE AIDS RIOT SEX*. Divided into two parts, the exhibition examined the historical legacy of AIDS artistic production from 1987 to 1995 alongside our contemporary perception of the AIDS epidemic with works produced from 1995 onward.

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## Goodbye Yellow Brick Road

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The institutional framework within which Per Hovdenakk organised *Tema: AIDS* was surely different, namely more museum-oriented, than the one managed by his Irish and German colleagues. It was, at least, larger in terms of space. The exhibition was divided into three main parts, occupying both of the Prisma exhibition spaces and the foyer of Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, as well as the adjacent studio, which was used to screen a series of films and videos. The aim of *Tema: AIDS* was to introduce both the Norwegian and broader European audiences to the work of those artists that Wagner, White, and Schmidt-Wulffen had left out of their shows and to place them in a precise historical context.<sup>23</sup>

One section was purely educational. An extensive selection of didactic material covered the walls of the studio space from floor to ceiling, alongside smaller objects such as stickers and buttons, often about safe sex, prevention, and support systems, which co-curator Herlof Hatlebrekke had collected from governmental offices and NGOs based all around the world over nearly a year of research. Local agencies and not-for-profits organised public seminars and workshops throughout the exhibition, confirming its strong educational mission and evidencing the collaboration with the Norwegian health department and other NGOs.

A second section, installed in the small Prisma room, presented activist art from New York: posters, placards, stickers, pins, T-shirts, and printed matter—often produced in support of ACT UP’s public protests and demonstrations by the artist collectives Silence=Death

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**23** ——— A series of black-and-white images in the archive at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, in tandem with the personal memories of Herlof Hatlebrekke, Kim Levin, and the museum’s project coordinator Kathrine Ringnes, are what helped me to orient the exhibition space, as well as wayfinding devices I have been using to “accompany” the reader through the show. No copy of an exhibition plan exists that could confirm the precise position of the works in the two Prisma rooms, the foyer, and the studio. Hatlebrekke reports that works were also installed in the lobby downstairs outside the auditorium and the library reading room, but no visual evidence or other records confirming this have been found. Nevertheless, photographs are helpful enough to trace a general sense of the order in which works were installed in the museum’s space and, most importantly, to identify relationships among them, as well as to support certain curatorial choices, which I delineate in this section.



Project, Art + Positive, Gran Fury, Fierce Pussy, and Gang—as well as graphics by Richard Deagle and Victor Mendolia, Vincent Gagliostro, Donald Moffett, Keith Haring, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and David Wojnarowicz. Among the most provocative pieces was a diptych by Gran Fury. Alongside the widely known *Kissing Doesn't Kill* poster, the curators decided to exhibit a work that the group had presented at the



Installation view of the exhibition *Tema: AIDS*, Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 1993.  
Photo: Jacky Penot. Courtesy of Henie Onstad Kunstsenter.

Venice Biennale three years earlier, which had caused a series of controversies, among them a threat by the Biennale's director, Giovanni Carandente, to resign should the work be included in the exhibition. Comprising two big billboards, the original installation was presented in the huge space of the Venetian Arsenal. It openly attacked the position of the Catholic Church towards the epidemic and safe sex and called for much-needed AIDS education and prevention policies around the world. One billboard featured a photograph of an erect penis surrounded by a clear message, in big black letters, that men should use condoms or otherwise "beat it." The second billboard, superimposed on a photograph of Pope John Paul II, had a quote from a speech given by Cardinal John O'Connor, archbishop of New York, on the occasion of the first Vatican conference on AIDS in 1989, which read: "The truth is not in condoms or clean needles. These are lies . . . good morality is good medicine." Running along both sides of the Pope's image was Gran Fury's counterposition. "The Church," the statement reads, "makes clear its preference for living saints and dead sinners [...] AIDS is caused by a virus, and a virus knows no morals."<sup>24</sup>

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24 ——— The full statement reads as follows: "The Catholic Church has long taught men and women to loathe their bodies and to fear their sexual natures. This particular vision of good and evil continues to bring suffering and even death. By holding medicine hostage to Catholic morality and withholding information which allows people to protect themselves and each other from acquiring Human Immunodeficiency Virus, the Church seeks to punish all who do not share in its peculiar vision of human experience and makes clear its preference of living saints and dead sinners. It is immoral to practice bad medicine. It is bad medicine to deny people information that can help end the AIDS crisis. Condoms and clean needles save lives as surely as the earth revolves around the sun. AIDS is caused by a virus and a virus has no morals."

The original installation at the Venice Biennale also included a wall panel giving information in both English and Italian about AIDS prevention campaigns organised in different countries.



Installation view of the exhibition *Tema: AIDS*, Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 1993.

Photo: Jacky Penot. Courtesy of Henie Onstad Kunstsenter.

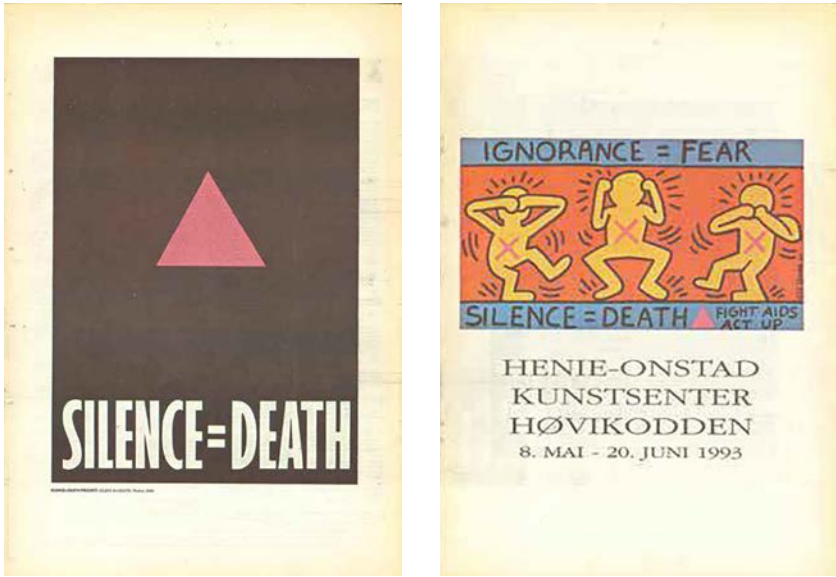
On the wall: Gran Fury, *The Pope and the Penis*, 1990.

The activist section of the exhibition also included a collection of videos, screened in the museum's studio space.<sup>25</sup> Most were produced by the Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York as part of their weekly TV show *Living with AIDS*. Safe sex videos were also included, alongside Robert Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman's memorial documentary *Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt* (USA, 1989) and a video chronicling the Hunter Reynolds performance *Patina du Prey's Memorial Dress* (1993), featuring the artist in the guise of his alter ego, Patina du Prey, standing on a rotating pedestal and wearing a black silk ballgown printed with the names of people and friends lost to AIDS. In addition, two independent films, produced by Creative Time as part of its *Fear of Disclosure* project, addressed issues of coming out as HIV-positive or as having AIDS.<sup>26</sup> *(In)Visible Women* (USA, 1991), co-directed by Marina Alvarez and Ellen Spiro for public-access channel Deep Dish TV,<sup>27</sup> depicts the experiences of three African American women fighting AIDS. Marlon Riggs's *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien (No Regret)* (USA, 1992), meanwhile, explores issues connected to the representation and perception of the gay male identity in the Black community, presenting the everyday lives of five homosexual Black men who try to overcome the fear and shame of being HIV-positive, facing their feelings of self-hatred and exclusion when dealing with family, friends, their workplaces, and the church. Both films dislocate the focus of the most common representation of the AIDS epidemic by affirming the need to look at its often invisible communities, namely women and people of colour, who were seldom given a voice to express themselves in public forums.

25 ——— According to the various correspondence stored in the exhibition archive, Hatlebrekke wanted this selection of videos to be even more extensive in order to include film works whose neglected history has recently been revisited following the exhibition *Fever in the Archive: AIDS Activist Video* (2000), curated by Jim Hubbard and held at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. The videos shown in *Tema: AIDS* also included informational short films as well as advertisements made by health ministries and activist groups from around the world, mainly Western European countries, directed both at the general public and targeted groups, such as homosexuals and intravenous drug users.

26 ——— The *Fear of Disclosure* project was initiated in 1989 with a five-minute experimental video titled *Fear of Disclosure: The Psychosocial Implication of HIV Revelation*, by filmmaker Phil Zwickler in collaboration with artist David Wojnarowicz.

27 ——— Deep Dish TV (DDTV) is a grassroots national public-access satellite TV network, established by Paper Tiger Television (PTTV) in New York in 1985. Since then, it has acted as a hub linking independent filmmakers, video artists, and activists as well as supporting them in the production and distribution of socially grounded and empowering video works. Both DDTV and PTTV played a crucial role in the development of video art in relation to the AIDS activist movement in America.



Front and back cover of the catalogue for the exhibition *Tema: AIDS*, Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 1993. Courtesy of Henie Onstad Kunstsenter.

The third and biggest part of *Tema: AIDS*—installed across the two Prisma rooms, primarily the larger—comprised a vast selection of approximately fifty artists, mostly but not exclusively North American, who had “adapted the AIDS crisis in their work,” as Hatlebrekke described it in his archival correspondence with museums, lenders, and other organisations. In Kim Levin’s essay for the catalogue, which was produced as a forty-page newspaper-like booklet designed in collaboration with the gay magazine *Blick* and distributed for free, she elucidates what *Tema: AIDS* was really about: “As the issues surrounding the AIDS crisis undergo ongoing conceptualization, analysis, and critique,” she argues, “the discourse on AIDS in the US art community and the works of art being made have evolved from an early personal and elegiac mode into a highly theoretical and deconstructive critique of issues of signification, control, and empowerment.”<sup>28</sup>

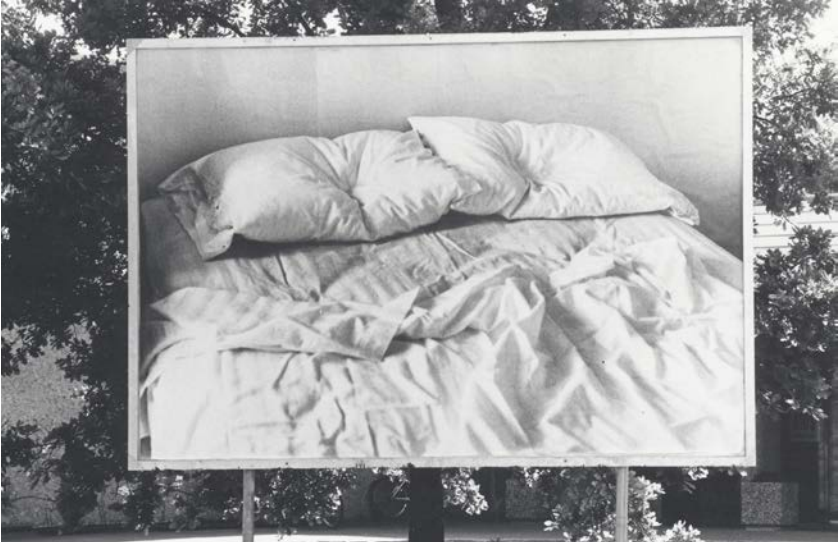
28 ——— Kim Levin, “Crisis of the Body: Art in the Age of AIDS,” in *Tema: AIDS*, ed. Per Hovdenakk and Herlof Hatlebrekke, trans. Karen Monica Reini (Oslo: Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 1993), 13.

In addition to Levin’s essay (the only one in English), the exhibition catalogue includes a preface by Per Hovdenakk, a long essay about art and activism in New York by Herlof Hatlebrekke, and texts by *Blick* journalist Tom Ovlien and medical doctor Svein-Erik Ekeid, both addressing issues of safe sex and educational prevention campaigns in Norway.

Levin briefly cites activists and critics Douglas Crimp, Paula Treichler, and Simon Watney, who from the mid-1980s were among those to give theoretical support—often grounded in media studies, semiotics, linguistics, and most importantly poststructuralist literary criticism—to artists whose work was affected by the AIDS epidemic in one way or another. Although only briefly, perhaps in an attempt to make her essay accessible to a larger audience, Levin gives a general sense of how artists were making use of theory to sustain their work without forgetting the climate of social and critical awareness that had already characterised the Conceptual Art movement of the previous decade. This theoretical engagement very often led to the use of techniques of appropriation and the manipulation of images, as well as representations of desire, lingering on thematic contrasts between the body and identity politics, the self and the other, the powerful and the powerless. Not all works produced in response to the AIDS crisis had to share the same complexity and intricacy of critical analysis; the indexical image was still very much present, often serving the purpose of favouring coalition-building among different groups and communities directly affected by the epidemic, or of articulating their demands in a tangible and direct manner. In both cases, artists often dealt with issues of censorship and encountered difficulties in exhibiting their works, evidencing their shared objective to disturb, provoke, and contest in order to effectively intervene in the public discourse on AIDS. Sometimes censorship indeed played into conservative political agendas, but in other instances—as with Gran Fury’s billboards for the Venice Biennale—it unexpectedly achieved the opposite effect, making the artists’ statements even stronger. For example, when *Untitled* (1991), Félix González-Torres’s now widely-known billboard of an empty double bed with messy sheets, was installed next to the main road leading to Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, neighbours from a nearby retirement home called the city council and had the image removed.<sup>29</sup> “They got it right straight away,” recalled Levin. “They understood it was about love, loss, and death.”<sup>30</sup>

29 ——— The billboard was reinstalled next to the Centre’s main entrance, in front of a big oak tree, which, according to Per Hovdenakk, was a personal gift from Joseph Beuys to the museum, made in the early 1980s. In 2008, the oak tree was removed and replaced by a sculpture by Norwegian artist Per Inge Bjørlo.

30 ——— Kim Levin, interview by the author, November 2018.



Installation view of the exhibition *Tema: AIDS*, Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 1993. Félix González-Torres, *Untitled*, 1991 Photo: Jacky Penot. Courtesy of Henie Onstad Kunstsenter.

Commemorating the one-year anniversary of the death of González-Torres's partner, Ross Laycock, due to AIDS-related complications, the image was initially displayed in the summer of 1992 at twenty-four outdoor locations throughout New York City, recalling the intimacy and intangibility of the artist's private space and personal life. The work is not only about AIDS, sexual intimacy, and personal narrative; it is, most importantly, about what happens when all of the above are placed in a contemporary urban landscape and exposed to public debate. The absence of the two lovers who shared intimate moments in their bed is so overwhelmingly present that it is almost impossible not to interpret the work's message through the lens of one's own life experiences and human fragilities.

Despite the fact that there is no visual evidence left of it, nor any mention of it in the exhibition checklist, based on the archival records, a second work by González-Torres was included in *Tema: AIDS*: the 1991 installation *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*. Because of legislation limiting the importation of sugar into Norway, it appears the work—made up of a 175-pound pile of individually wrapped multicolored candies—was locally produced and later installed in one corner of the main exhibition space. It encourages visitors to take candies from the pile, staging an analogue to the diminishing weight of a per-

son living with AIDS.<sup>31</sup> In its quiet poignancy, the piece is an expression of desire, loss, and vulnerability as well as of grief and love inflected with the artist's personal outrage at society turning its back on the devastating effects of the AIDS crisis. By re-articulating and reaffirming the non-representational aesthetic strategies of Minimalism and Conceptual Art in a very personal, delicate, and intimate way, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* needs to be understood in light of its deep political intent. It destabilises the recurring narrative conventions used to describe the epidemic and, by asking visitors to interact with the construction and deconstruction of the piece, forces them to rethink and try to comprehend the hidden and complex realities of the AIDS crisis that, in the 1990s, still had not been thoroughly discussed by the general public.

Indeed, most of the works selected for *Tema: AIDS* had this "revelatory" effect: some were labelled informative or thought-provoking by local newspapers, while others were described as brutal, irreverent, and offensive. The latter category claimed Andres Serrano's series of photographs depicting bodily fluids—blood, urine, and semen—in various abstract compositions: *Bloodstream* (1987), *Ejaculate in Trajectory* (1989), and *Frozen Semen with Blood* (1990). Though minimally representational, they clearly allude implicitly to sexual activities. Their meaning, especially in the context of the AIDS discourse, is open-ended, involving multiple layers of analysis and interpretation. Not only do these socially indelicate and perverse body fluids become materials to be managed with caution, but they also positively reaffirm the power of personal erotic gratification, as well as safe sex practices, by literally flying the outcomes of sexual satisfaction in the face of those who would condemn sex in service of pleasure and recreation rather than procreation. Likewise constituting a positive affirmation of sexual pleasure, eroticism, and intimacy, David Wojnarowicz's *Sex Series* (1988–89) comprises eight black-and-white photomontages featuring vintage porn scenes framed in circles and superimposed over cityscapes and landscapes (an aerial view of the Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges, a train passing through the desert, tree trunks in a flooded forest, a tornado). Besides functioning as peepholes disclosing the diversity of human sexuality, these prohibited pornographic scenes are juxtaposed with other visual elements, such as an enlarged view of human blood, a tower broadcasting radio waves, a squad of cops involved in a

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31 ——— Unfortunately, neither Levin nor Hatlebrekke could confirm that the work was included in the show, but letters between the curators and Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York confirm that it was actually produced in Norway and displayed a few weeks after the official opening of *Tema: AIDS*.



riot, and an overlay of text. These correlations are meant to describe, for example, the narrator's sexual encounter with a stranger or the inadequacies of the US government's AIDS care programs, and to reverberate against a social context awash with a sense of fear, peril, and threat of control over private lives and imaginations. This Dadaist play of free association results in an array of confusing and contradictory emotional effects, placing the viewer in a field of tension, tangible conflict, and ideological warfare. Not even in our personal fantasies, the artist seems to claim, can we find refuge from the consequences of society's ferocious sexism, racism, and homophobia.<sup>32</sup>

Other works by Wojnarowicz in the show included his well-known image of a buffalo falling off a cliff, *Untitled (Buffalo)* (1988–89), symbolising the death of the American dream and the artist's indictment of his nation's sickness, and *Untitled (One Day This Kid...)* (1990–91), a portrait of the artist as a child surrounded by text celebrating same-sex desire in the face of the conservatism, censorship, and violence of the "diseased society" in which that queer kid will have to grow up. Equally powerful and rife with social and political critique, though differing in tone, is a big untitled acrylic-on-canvas by Keith Haring from 1988. Installed next to Wojnarowicz's works, the painting—over three-by-five metres—portrays an enormous horned "demon sperm" emerging from a cracked egg, outlined in white against a black background.

It is in the act of gripping a scared male figure who struggles to escape by climbing a flight of stairs, only to end up face-to-face with yet another deadly sperm. This demonic motif recurs in many of Haring's works made after his HIV-positive diagnosis at the end of 1987. Typically interpreted as a representation of AIDS and an embodiment of death, the horned figure is more likely a frightening metaphor for the climate of fear, ferocity, and sexual and political repression that characterised the age of silence and fear-mongering around the AIDS crisis, epitomised by the Ronald Reagan administration. Alongside the work of Wojnarowicz and Haring, the curators displayed four Masami Teraoka watercolours made between 1988 and 1990, one large-scale

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32 ——— The *Sex Series* was at the centre of a legal controversy in the United States when, in 1990, the University Galleries at Illinois State University presented, with the financial support of the NEA, a comprehensive exhibition of Wojnarowicz's work entitled *Tongues of Flame*. The right-wing American Family Association (AFA) accused the artist of using public funds to create sexually explicit images and distributed over two hundred thousand flyers reproducing Wojnarowicz's works inappropriately and without permission. Wojnarowicz sued the AFA for copyright infringement and defamation, among other things; the United States District Court ruled in favour of the artist.



Installation view of the exhibition *Tema: AIDS*, Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 1993. Photo: Jacky Penot. Courtesy of Henie Onstad Kunstsenter.

On the wall, from top left to right: David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled (Buffalo)*, 1988-89; *Untitled (One Day This Kid...)*, 1990-91; *Untitled (Sex Series)*, 1988-89. Keith Haring, *Untitled*, 1988.

and three midsize, as well as three oil-on-canvas paintings by Frank Moore from the early 1990s. Painting in the traditional Japanese style of *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, Teraoka employs ancient visual imagery and tropes from Kabuki theatre as symbols of and warnings against the dark and deceptive forces nurturing the AIDS epidemic.

Moore's canvases use all of the most familiar iconographic elements of the AIDS epidemic, framing them in visionary and gloomy scenes reminiscent of Salvador Dalí's surrealist dreamscapes. In *The Great American Traveling Medicine Show* (1990-91), a group of sick human figures, amid a desolate, dry American landscape of severed redwoods, encircle the white van of a salesman claiming to sell the cure to AIDS. The word "PLACEBO" is written in the sky above, and at the centre of the scene, a giant syringe filled with supposedly infected blood drips onto the soil below. Moore again renders the fragility of human life in the face of the AIDS tragedy through angst-inducing figures and noxious characters in *Hospital* (1992) and *Arena* (1992), in which a patient, often interpreted as Moore's partner of eight years, Robert Fulps, who had recently died because of AIDS, lies on a dissection table crowded by skeletons. The surrounding theatre is based on a wood engraving of the Anatomy Theatre at Leiden University, one of the very first dissection theatres in Europe, dating back to 1610; while a fig-



Installation view of the exhibition *Tema: AIDS*, Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 1993.

Photo: Jacky Penot. Courtesy of Henie Onstad Kunstsenter.

On the floor: Adam Rolston, *Trojan Boxes*, 1990.

On the wall from left to right, works by: Frank Moore, Masami Teraoka, David Wojnarowicz, and Keith Haring.

ure on horseback vividly references the macabre iconographic leitmotif of the Black Plague that terrorised Europe in the Late Middle Ages.

In front of the main entrance to the large Prisma room sat Adam Rolston's 1990 installation made of a pile of twenty shipping boxes for Trojan latex condoms, clearly citing Andy Warhol's near-mythic *Brillo Boxes* (1964). The sides of the boxes read: "For your protection during anal and vaginal intercourse." Nearby was Jack Pierson's *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road, Part II* (1990). Composed of 120 bars of soap placed on the floor, arranged in twelve rows of ten, this poetic work is animated by a delicate and muted, but also powerful, narrative: despite evincing a sense of apparent aridness upon first impression, the work mysteriously, almost contradictorily, enchants the viewer. Referencing *The Wizard of Oz*, the title suggests that the work is about the end of the universal journey to innocence, lightheartedness, and happiness: that road no longer leads anywhere. When the viewer kneels down, they can see that each bar of soap has been imprinted with a man's name or nickname—probably friends, boyfriends, and amorous liaisons, people the artist loved even if only for a single night, collectively forming a list of nostalgic, impenetrable, and immaterial memories. *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road, Part II* is "a love sonnet 120 verses long," writes art critic Jerry Saltz. "These names are markers, the brief respites from our regular,



Installation view of the exhibition *Tema: AIDS*, Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 1993.

Photo: Jacky Penot. Courtesy of Henie Onstad Kunstsenter.

On the floor: Jack Pierson, *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road, Part II*, 1990.

On the wall, from left to right side: General Idea, *One Month of AZT*, 1991;

Frank Moore, *Hospital*, 1992; *Arena*, 1992

At the centre: Sissel Tolaas, *The West*, 1993.

normal lives, the times when hunger and pleasure prevail, when heat wins out over reason and fear –when urge is more important than duty. A time when you get away from yourself –to yourself– in a shelter from the storm.”<sup>33</sup>

On the wall facing the gallery’s entryway stood General Idea’s *One Month of AZT* (1991). Comprising 150 oversized azidothymidine (AZT) pills arranged on the wall, the installation recalls a sort of hyper-technologised and aestheticised daily mantra in the life of a person with AIDS. The number of pills corresponds to the monthly dosage of five capsules per day that Felix Partz, one of the three co-founding members of the General Idea, was taking at the time. Next to it were twelve portraits, each one metre high, of HIV-positive people, taken by Norwegian artist Fin Serck-Hanssen and commissioned by Hovdenakk for

33 ——— Jerry Saltz, “Shelter from the Storm,” *Arts*, September 1991, 22.



Fin Serck-Hanssen, *Tema: AIDS*, 1993. Installation view of the exhibition *Tema: AIDS*, Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 1993. Photo: Jacky Penot. Courtesy of Henie Onstad Kunstsenter.

*Tema: AIDS*. Serck-Hanssen, who was involved in HIV-prevention and educational programs for local NGOs, was among the first Oslo-based artists to lend his images to government campaigns designed to inform the public about HIV and AIDS in Norway.

Despite the overtly homoerotic aesthetics and narratives of same-sex desire underlying his visual interests from the 1980s onwards, his work very much contained AIDS as a hidden presence. “When I presented *Birds* at Galleri Wang [in Oslo in 1991],” Serck-Hanssen recalled, “I didn’t tell anyone, including Per [Hovdenakk], but HIV/AIDS was one of its main sources of inspiration.”<sup>34</sup> The *Birds* exhibition took place at the same time as an Andres Serrano solo show at the nearby Galleri Riis, offering a sort of early preview of the dialogue the two artists’ works would engage in two years later at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, where they were literally placed one in front of the other. This dialogical interaction was further expanded by the proximity to Nan Goldin’s

34 ——— Fin Serck-Hanssen, conversation with the author at the artist’s studio in Oslo, November 2018.

photographs of her best friend, Cookie Mueller, who died at age thirty of AIDS-related complications; a series of Robert Mapplethorpe's self-portraits from between 1975 and 1988; and Mark Leslie's photo series *Dying with AIDS/Living with AIDS* (1991–92), documenting his transformative voyage through the devastating effects of AIDS as well as his tragic and tangible awareness of his own imminent death. New commissions went to other Norwegian artists, including a large-scale painting by Kjell Erik Killi Olsen titled *Søvnen*, depicting human bodies—friends of the artist who had died because of AIDS—lying with big empty spaces between them, symbolising the loneliness human beings inevitably face when dealing with loss and death; *Rwanda*, a photographic installation by writer Wera Sæther; and a sculpture entitled *The West* by Sissel Tolaas, consisting of a glass cube displaying small family photo frames, each showing the name of a friend who had died because of AIDS, as well as tee shirts bearing their smell.

The exhibition organisers also commissioned two special projects, one by Chinese-born, Oslo-based artist, architect, and city planner Mi Qiu Ling and the other by Norwegian sculptor Per Barclay. In the tradition of ACT UP's fax actions, Mi invited visitors to send faxes to Henie Onstad Kunstsenter reflecting on the tragedy of the AIDS epidemic and how it had affected their daily lives or those of their partners and friends. On May 15, a week after the opening of the exhibition and two days before the Norwegian Constitution Day parade, Mi mounted a large site-specific installation on Karl Johans gate, Oslo's main commercial road: a huge AIDS graveyard, 124 metres long and five metres wide, made up of big posters placed on the street, each with the name and date of death of a person who had died because of AIDS, acting as temporary gravestones.<sup>35</sup>

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35 ——— When travelling to other venues, the *Tema: AIDS* exhibition took different formats. Loans for works were not always extended, and in certain cases new artists were included. One interesting example is *AIDS* (1993), a site-specific work by Norwegian artist Anders Tomren, which was one of the exhibition's key projects when it was mounted at the Nordic Arts Centre in Helsinki. Originally commissioned for *AIRPORT*, an exhibition Tomren co-organised with Frans Jacobi for Galerie Anhava in Helsinki in the fall of 1993, *AIDS* comprised twenty-five thousand plastic bags printed with the word "AIDS," intended for distribution in Helsinki Airport's tax-free shops. After it was banned by the Finnair Tax-Free shop and the Finnish Civil Aviation Administration because of its subject matter, the work was acquired by the Nordic Arts Centre and the bags were distributed for free throughout the duration of the exhibition.



Sissel Tolaas, *The West*, 1993. Installation view of the exhibition *Tema: AIDS*, Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 1993. Photo: Jacky Penot. Courtesy of Henie Onstad Kunstsenter.

Exploring themes of vulnerability, affection, and fragility, Barclay, a long-time friend of Hovdenakk, created a series of Polaroids for his commission: close-ups of artists, contract workers, and museum staff shot during the installation of the show. The prints were used as wall labels, each superimposed with the name of the artist, the title, and the medium of the work on display, and destroyed after the exhibition had closed down.<sup>36</sup>

**36** ——— For his commission Barclay originally wanted to instal a flashing light, like those commonly used in lighthouses, on the roof of Henie Onstad Kunstsenter and use it to send out an SOS message each day at midnight for the entire duration of the exhibition. Due to local restrictions about the use of such technologies—as well as the fact that in summertime it would have been nearly impossible to see the light projected into the sky—the project was not realised.

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## Love, AIDS, Riot, and Other Demons

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*Tema: AIDS* also presented, arguably for the very first time in a European museum, canvases by the American artists and life partners Geoffrey Hendricks and Brian Buczak; a site-specific video work by Japanese artist and filmmaker Noritoshi Hirakawa;<sup>37</sup> the potentially lethal assemblages of American artist Barton Beneš, *Poison Darts* (1991), *Crown of Thorns* (1991), and *Molotov Cocktail* (1992), which contain his own infected blood; a Sol LeWitt-esque conceptual piece by John Lindell, pencilled on the museum wall; Gran Fury's well-known painting *Love, AIDS, Riot* (1990); photomontages by Brazilian artist Márcio Neves; the provocative images of Nicholas Nixon;<sup>38</sup> works on paper by Bernard Faucon; a light installation by the Japanese duo H et H (Bujin Hirai and Tadaaki Hyodo); a light box piece accompanied by confrontational political messages from American painter Donald Moffett; and a 1,200-slide projection that was part of the US-based artist project *Electric Blanket*. In one corner of the big Prisma room, hanging from the ceiling on a transparent string, was a large female figure: an untitled paper-based sculpture by Kiki Smith (1990). As a reflection on human connections to sexuality, gender, and society, the work confronts themes such as emotional and physical violence, human fragility, and death in the context of the AIDS crisis, with the almost shapeless body of the figure representing

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37 ——— Invited by Levin to participate in the exhibition, Hirakawa prepared a questionnaire for people living in and around Oslo who visited the museum. They were supposed to be videotaped while giving their answers. Because of some very explicit and allegedly sometimes irrelevant questions, neither Hovdenakk nor Hatlebrette supported the project and it did not go ahead.

38 ——— AIDS activists in the United States often criticised Nixon's work for failing to present positive and reaffirming images of people living with AIDS. In the fall of 1988, when Nixon's exhibition *Pictures of People* opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, featuring images of people with AIDS portrayed over a duration of weeks to show the different stages of the disease, members of ACT UP organised a peaceful demonstration in front of the museum. To ACT UP, such images contributed to spreading prejudice and the notion that AIDS was an untreatable disease, making any protest to inform the public about the possibilities of successfully living with AIDS pointless and slowing research for a cure.

For further reading see: Douglas Crimp, "Portraits of People with AIDS," in *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 84–107.





Installation view of the exhibition *Tema: AIDS*, Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 1993.

Photo: Jacky Penot. Courtesy of Henie Onstad Kunstsenter.

On the wall, left side: Dui Seid, *AIDS/Service*, 1988.

Hanging from the ceiling: Kiki Smith, *Untitled*, 1990.

the battleground upon which the war against society's racialised sexual discrimination was being waged. This piece animated the entire exhibition space with a certain rhythm of fear and emotional turmoil, sending an imperceptible rustling sound reverberating through the surrounding works. Two visually striking and powerful works stood out on a nearby wall, one of which, from Chinese American artist, activist, and health worker Dui Seid's ongoing series *AIDS/Service*, was being exhibited in Europe for the first time. Each work in the series, which was initiated in 1988, is a grouping of four words affixed to the wall, where the first letter of every word is composed of plastic bags filled with body fluids, hypodermic needles, surgical tape, and other medical equipment, exuding an organic, bodily feeling. When read vertically as an acrostic, these initial letters form the word "AIDS." The twelve *AIDS/Service* pieces each use the four letters of "AIDS" to evoke a different set of associations related to the epidemic, accompanied by a framed statement written by someone affected by the disease. The one exhibited in *Tema: AIDS* read: "Almighty, Intercede, Deliverance, Samaritan." In its direct, literal, openly political, and even didactic intent, Seid's series proves highly disturbing. The body the artist depicts has been brutally reduced to garbage bags full of biological waste and blood.



Edilson Viriato, *Untitled*, 1993. Installation view of the exhibition *Tema: AIDS*, Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 1993. Photo: Jacky Penot. Courtesy of Henie Onstad Kunstsenter.

Next to Seid's work was a multimedia installation by Brazil-based artist Edilson Viriato. Two funeral wreaths made of artificial flowers and decorated with long, shiny tinsel—one adorned with syringes and needles, the other with small, toy-like, silver-winged plastic penises—emerged side-by-side from the wall as an apparently playful but equally sarcastic and severe warning to the viewer. "Here lie the dreamers of illusion" and "Here lie the ones who drowned in delights" read the two paper ribbons pinned to the wreaths. Between them, placed on a shelf near the floor, sat a teddy bear, a Snoopy puppet, and a doll. Spray-painted white, with their eyes covered by black cloth, the toys were interconnected by a transparent tube reminiscent of the kind used for blood transfusion. The piece formed the backdrop for a special performance by Viriato, a sort of sorrowful ceremony the artist held the day of the opening. Covered in yellow-and-red paint recalling body fluids, Viriato danced naked around the exhibition space, carrying a big balloon in his hands that looked like a toy globe and shouting, "Help me! Help me!" to the audience. The blindfolded eyes and medical-tube bonds of the dolls—pointing to a common sadomasochistic trope in the imagery of same-sex desire and homoerotic sexuality—somehow conjure up an erotic atmosphere while simultaneously evoking the tragedy of AIDS. At times playful and at others dramatic, Viriato's paintings, graphic works, performances, and collages are always highly critical and contestatory: in them, AIDS becomes a powerful signifier of both life and death, pleasure and pain, sexual vitality and religious disillusion.

It's precisely within such assertive and contentious effects that *Tema: AIDS* needs to be framed, studied, and ultimately understood. In his introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Hovdenakk underscores how "art is an important tool for the recognition, exploration, and discussion of matters that concern us; for placing the spotlight on problems we sometimes shun and do not see the scope and consequences of." He continues, "That is what the artists in this exhibition do; and it is clear that the images therefore have to be brutal, unsettling, and maybe even offensive in their openness and concrete depiction of the catastrophic scope of AIDS."<sup>39</sup> In other words, as an attendee of the opening of *Tema: AIDS* described it to me: "The most important contribution of this exhibition is precisely this one: I felt I was finally ready for a revolution."<sup>40</sup>

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**39** ——— Per Hovdenakk, "Introduction," 4.

**40** ——— This idea was expressed to me by Hilde Maisey, managing director of Transcultural Arts Production, Oslo, who was one of the many people I spoke with during my research period in Oslo.

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# Every Moment Counts—AIDS and Its Feelings<sup>1</sup>

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**1** ————— A previous version of this essay was drafted together with Ana María Bresciani, with whom I co-curated *Every Moment Counts—AIDS and Its Feelings*. Original ideas for this essay were conceived during a one-month residency in Venice in March 2022, during which we discussed on a daily basis key topics that we agreed needed to be addressed or touched upon in the text. This previous version is included in the exhibition catalogue published by Henie Onstad Kunstsenter in November 2022 under the title “The Making of an AIDS Exhibition—Notes on Methodology.” I have not only expanded on the original draft, but also fully reorganised its structure. Furthermore, I have rewritten parts of it in order to mirror the theoretical underpinnings of my research as well as of my curatorial practice. Bresciani has not read the version published here. Nevertheless, for stylistic reasons I have decided to maintain the “we” rather than the “I.”

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## Preface

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The following text reflects an ongoing conversation around the legacy of *Tema: AIDS* (1993) with Ana María Bresciani, senior curator at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Oslo, initiated at the beginning of 2021. Among the largest, though not the most noticeable, European exhibitions from the 1990s to address the tragedy of HIV/AIDS, *Tema: AIDS* was the starting ground from which the curatorial ideas for *Every Moment Counts—AIDS and Its Feelings* were outlined. Asked to re-think the 1993 exhibition on the occasion of a yearlong celebration of events honouring “queer culture” in Norway, I accepted the invitation, knowing I would have to face the challenge of not being seduced by the prospect of the “re-.”<sup>2</sup> To the contrary, I viewed it as an opportunity to practise with new ideas about the representation of HIV/AIDS—ideas that were

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2 ——— Events such as this are double-faced: if on the one hand they acknowledge the contribution of that impossible-to-define entity which is called “queer,” something that I believe does rather than is, on the other they contribute to the process of assimilation that I briefly touched upon in “A [After Andre Burke]”—therefore to the risk of its containment and control. However, it has to be said that the relationship between mainstream cultural politics and queer culture, though often occupying an antithetical position, suggests that there is a historical connection between the two, and perhaps a mutual implication in this process of assimilation/institutionalisation. *Every Moment Counts* opened to the public some months before the official inauguration of the “queer culture year” in April 2022. Two weeks before the official opening of the exhibition on February 17, a project addressing the international pharmaceutical industry’s longstanding profiteering off of HIV/AIDS, produced by artists Elmgreen & Dragset, was displayed in more than 700 public locations throughout the entire country, at a moment when the medical establishment was being praised for having saved us from the Covid-19 pandemic. This decision was made not in order to take distance from the general cultural framework of the programme, which had motivated the institution to support and organise an exhibition on HIV/AIDS, but to stand as a symbolic reminder that there is no such thing as a “queer year.” Rather, I believe, there is a potential behind old and new forms of commonality, should we be willing to explore other ways of writing the historical conditions of our being in common that queerness may offer us. In preceding the national celebrations, our project, I aimed, would suggest a different framework from which to look at the reasoning of a “queer culture year.”

then taking shape in my recent research and writing—and to experiment with curating AIDS as a site of multiple heteronomy, rather than of dialectical integration and resolution to the question “what does AIDS look like?” The exhibition had to be historically-based, an institutional mandate to which I had to remain faithful. Nevertheless, it could still disavow the confessional mode of the history of HIV/AIDS and take distance from the fascination with using it as the repository of a universal truth. At the time of the making of *Every Moment Counts*, the exhibition *Tema: AIDS* existed only as an archive. I was familiar with it, having visited it multiple times. How to avoid making the mistake of articulating a salvational historical consciousness about HIV/AIDS was a key issue in the conception of *Every Moment Counts*. The archive does preserve history from oblivion. Nevertheless, the past that eventually emerges from it is not meant, I argue, to produce any revelatory understanding of our present or to eventually be used as a toolbox for imagining a better future. History has disproven this statement. Thus, the question becomes how can we indulge in new reading protocols of the archive? The critical force of this exhibition project had to rely on the possibility of resisting the historical representational imperatives of the archive and on a confrontation with the curatorial stake of offering not one single definitive idea to represent AIDS and its history. Not because the aporia that is AIDS had already been solved, but precisely because, I claim, it is unsolvable. Furthermore, the exhibition had to be open to geographies other than the US, on which *Tema: AIDS* was primarily built—but, again, not with the intention in mind of re-writing the topographical trajectories of AIDS, nor of defining a history before the history of AIDS was written. Rather, I was willing to complicate further the historical (artistic) canon of AIDS, to assert the impossibility of grasping the vastitude of the accident that has come to be named AIDS. I purposely decided to include only a few examples of widely known works of artistic activism—all artists whose practices are oriented towards the visual representation of AIDS are, intentionally or not, entering the domain of political activism. The historical dialogical distinction upon which *Tema: AIDS* also relied, and with it the ideological battle over differentiating positive or negative forms of representing AIDS, needed to be eluded and hence surpassed. The risk of collapsing the subjectivity, the sexual and identity politics, and the biography of an artist with the content of their work also had to be avoided. The exhibition had to move beyond an interpretative model that situates AIDS as merely the result of a biographical experience, eventually transformed into political action, and that establishes an AIDS iconography as a theme marking the work of all artists addressing AIDS in their practice. The question to be posed was about rep-

resentation itself, and its metaphorical logics, rather than the representational content per se—i.e. to investigate the persistence of the visual in the midst of the impossibility of making sense of AIDS, thereby to point to the political dimension of visibility itself and examine the extent to which AIDS did not, and still does not, stop allowing for aesthetic production.

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## Cruising the Archive

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Taking its title from a series of colour photographs by artist Rotimi Fani-Kayode (1955–1989), *Every Moment Counts—AIDS and Its Feelings* presents works from 1982 to the present, including several newly commissioned productions, from a heterogeneous group of sixty artists. In addition to arguing for the potential of queer alliances, and their performative force to see otherwise, the exhibition also assesses the contribution of the arts to periods of intense social and political crisis. Opening on February 17, 2022, it preceded the festivities for the Queer Culture Year in Norway. 2022 marked fifty years since the decriminalisation of sex between men in Norway, when section 213 of the Norwegian Penal Code was repealed on April 21, 1972. Interestingly, by limiting its scope to sexual conduct between men, the law contributed to legitimising gender difference, with cultural repercussions beyond the legislation itself.<sup>3</sup>

In the making of *Every Moment Counts* we faced several curatorial challenges in tackling the specificities of the visual representations of HIV/AIDS, especially in the context of the celebrations of queer cul-

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3 ——— The Penal Code only considered sexual relationships between persons of the male sex, or between persons of any gender and animals, as indecent. The exclusion of women asserts the disempowerment and peripheral cultural position assigned to women in Norwegian society. At the same time, it speaks to how homosexuality was perceived, historically, in the cultural milieu of not only Norway, and highlights the slippage between identities and acts, assigning the role of the criminal to the male homosexual subject alone. The issue at stake is not to question the definition of homosexuality, a medical “invention” of the nineteenth century. Rather, it is about unveiling the logics of control upon which society is built. By claiming that the male homosexual fantasy is more obscene than any other, the Penal Code indirectly invests the male subject with the power to sustain society and contribute to its development, assigning to women the role of biological reproduction, a function that is never failed, not even in the case of a same-sex experience. More than a threat to the legitimacy of heterosexuality, male homosexuality is a threat to the social norms of heteronormative capitalism inscribed in a reproductive unit—coupling, marriage, family, and children. Therefore, the crime is not about desiring another man, but about claiming the right to own an oppositional identity, one in which the civil society recognises a symbolic power, and a productive agency, that might breach the boundaries of the social order and create new visions of social and political possibilities outside the recognised polity.



ture to which the institution had decided to contribute as well as in relation to *Tema: AIDS*. When programming *Tema: AIDS*, former director Per Hovdenakk emphasised his interest in addressing issues of social justice in his exhibitions. In an entanglement of art, politics, and education, the exhibition in 1993 attempted to impact the local society at large, both within and beyond the art world. Hovdenakk's bold presentation of artworks—often very explicit and provocative, dealing with themes of death, sex, sexuality, longing, and despair—was significant in the history of exhibitions at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter. To unfold this history, we questioned how such an attempt might still affect public discourse thirty years later. Moreover, we strongly believe that Hovdenakk's approach embraced an act of caring for the communities affected by HIV/AIDS, and we had the responsibility to take it into account. At the same time, by acting within the boundaries of the art establishment, though committed to problematising rather than glorifying it, our role as curators had to emphasise our care for the institution as a site or a marker of change, as gatekeepers of a history made with and for the arts and the artists.

From a curatorial perspective, presenting a large exhibition project unpacking the multi-layered positions of the AIDS epidemic seemed the right choice to take for the Queer Culture Year. While HIV/AIDS does not exclusively affect queer people, it has been and still is a preoccupation of our daily lives, as well as of those of millions of people, queer or otherwise, worldwide. Furthermore, the discipline of queer studies has historically offered powerful analytical tools to investigate the multiple issues at stake when discussing HIV/AIDS. As a critical methodology, and a theoretical mode of contemplation, queer studies offers us the possibility of reaching for other forms of association, argumentation, traction, and affection to challenge the social order.

Whenever we deal with research materials related to the history of HIV/AIDS, we operate within the theoretical fields of identity formation and subjectivity, however loosely these categories might be constructed. We don't cast doubt upon the factual circumstance of the AIDS epidemic having affected queer communities in the first place, nor do we deny that queer activism emerged as a response to the AIDS crisis of the 1980s to voice a collective call for visibility, inclusion, alliance, and acceptance of sexual diversity, and not only. Nevertheless, addressing HIV/AIDS within the field of queer theories means for us also something else. In following a curatorial vision that challenges the "archival enquiry" as a methodology—one that resists bequeathing the lesson of history—we embraced the term queer, a yet to be codified category whose genealogies have changed over time, in order to

problematised notions of identity and belonging, beyond gender and sexuality, to include race, class, nationality, and most importantly the constitution of alternative affiliations.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, queer becomes the act of imagining transformation, freed from any accountability to articulate historical consciousness, hence in a constant state of un-becoming rather than becoming. The structure of the exhibition was greatly influenced by the politics of affect—not only as a denouncement of normative forms of longing in favour of other forms of rela-

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4 ——— Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, among others, highlighted the non-dualistic potential inherent in the broader research field of queer scholarship, advocating for a more fluid and challenging perspective beyond its origins in LGBT studies—an acronym which, it bears mentioning, made its appearance in the middle of the AIDS crisis. As early as 1993, Sedgwick explored the intersectional use of the term “queer” in an essay titled “Queer and Now,” through which she offers some definitions of the term, inclusive of race, nationality, and postcolonialism too: “A lot of the most recent work around ‘queer’ spins the term outward along dimensions that can’t be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality crisscross with these and other identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses, for example. Intellectuals and artists of color whose sexual self-definition includes ‘queer’—I think of an Isaac Julien, a Gloria Anzaldua, a Richard Fung—are using the leverage of ‘queer’ to do a new kind of justice to the fractal intricacies of language, skin, migration, state. Thereby, the gravity (I mean the *gravitas*, the meaning, but also the center of gravity) of the term ‘queer’ itself deepens and shifts.” Sedgwick’s “Queer and Now” is a first attempt to counteract the historical logic of attributing a precise identity to the term “queer,” and thereby of denying the mesh of “possibilities, overlaps, gaps, dissonances and resonances of meaning” and the potentially transformative indeterminacy that the term *per se* entails. Furthermore, by detaching it from the implications of gender and sexuality, she points to the performative aspect of queer, i.e. rather than simply referring to a form of being, queer is a mode of doing—a performative act and a temporal arrangement that I claim insists on its potentiality to open to interrogation, contestation, and resistance. In the making of *Every Moment Counts*, we invoked Sedgwick’s idea in an effort to resist the historical consciousness inherited by the epistemological discourse of HIV/AIDS and the salvational project of the archive. “A word so fraught as ‘queer’ is—fraught with so many social and personal histories of exclusion, violence, defiance, excitement—never can only denote; nor even can it only connote; a part of its experimental force as a speech act is the way in which it dramatizes locutionary position itself. [...] ‘Queer’ seems to hinge much more radically and explicitly on a person’s undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation.” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Queer and Now,” in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 8–9.

tionality, but also and most importantly as pulsing, sensual forces that interact with the process of creating knowledge and, as such, have “historical significance in the domains of subjectivity.”<sup>5</sup> We chose to situate it within the field of queer critique in an attempt to look for sites of theoretical tension other than the historical account of HIV/AIDS and its artistic activism, beyond remembrance, memory, and nostalgia. We insisted on experimenting with a politicised modality of cruising, one that can offer different paths to cruise for the potentialities that may be possible within acting queer. In the months during which we had weekly Zoom sessions to discuss the trajectories to take for this exhibition, we very often claimed the right and the pleasure to be “promiscuous.” Originally used as a term to describe the sexual lifestyles of the gay community before and after the gay liberation movement, promiscuity in the context of queer theory becomes a metaphorical means of incessantly interrupting disciplinary boundaries. The etymological origin of the term gestures at this potentiality: to indiscriminate, to mix, to admit without distinctions, hence to open up. This form of relationality is one without relation that, as with the experience of cruising, traces a limitless and unbounded space through the uncertain trajectories it takes, such that the point of arrival is always a new point of departure. “What if we were to substitute something like a cruising ground for an epistemological ground?” John Paul Ricco writes.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, *Every Moment Counts* comprises a wide range of artworks that enhance the plurality as much as the heterogeneity of the epistemological discourse of AIDS. Nevertheless, the selected works and artists are to be understood irrespective of, rather than in reaction or opposition to, other artistic practices that gained more attention over the past twenty years, especially in institutional contexts such as that of *Tema: AIDS*. These practices still implicitly haunt the exhibition, and somehow revive a sense of social histories within the broader discourse on AIDS. The force of *Every Moment Counts* and its subtending argument is the dismissal of a systematic mapping and modelling for the representation of AIDS as well as the idiosyncratic opportunity to stop looking for the perfect object with which to theorise AIDS. For me acknowledging this undisciplined space of uncertainty is a queer erotic experience, similar to the one that, Ricco claims, forces the art historian to remain within the space of writing and to insist on staying there, “where it is nearly impossible

5 ——— Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 53

6 ——— John P. Ricco, *The Logic of the Lure* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), xix.

to exist in art history.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, the political strength of this group of works, when put in relation to a queer methodology and the nonconformity of subject positions inherent in this terminology, precisely lies in their state of permanent unrecognisability, i.e. the impossibility of writing AIDS.

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7 ——— Ricco, *The Logic of the Lure*, xxi.

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## Historical Coincidence

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Given the circumstances during which ideas for this exhibition took shape, we could not avoid reflecting on the significance of presenting an exhibition about an epidemic while facing another epidemic. As the crisis generated by the advent of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s was not only medical but also political, so too is the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>8</sup> Despite this historical coincidence, the politics and polic-

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8 ——— The term “political” is not used solely to designate politics or affairs managed by state representatives and legal codes, which we briefly mention later in the text in relation to COVID-19. Rather, we use it as it has been discussed within the realm of political theories. It concerns the being-in-common of the world—a sense of domestic community which, as William Haver, among others, has pointed out, should be constituted in and by “different singularities” rather than “same multiplicities,” and which is in a constant state of becoming rather than a preexisting state of being. In this sense, it calls upon the domain of the “ethical.” It is worth noting that in the refusal of the concept of cultural community or society “constituted as the intersubjective recognition of an essential similitude,” Haver sees qualities that designate the term “queer.”

William Haver, *The Body of This Death: Historicity and Sociality in the Time of AIDS* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 120.

Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has handled the question of community in similar terms. What happens when individuals decide to “co-belong without any representable condition of belonging?” Reformulated as a question, this statement is useful to understanding how political logic operated in the context of HIV/AIDS. The state apparatus has given people living with HIV/AIDS an identity that they didn’t feel or refused to belong to. In this rejection they are considered “illegitimate,” for they affirm their right to be-in-common beyond shared identity. “Whatever singularities cannot form a *societas* because they do not possess any identity to vindicate nor any bond of belonging for which to seek recognition,” Agamben writes. “In the final instance the State can recognize any claim for identity. [...] What the State cannot tolerate in anyway, however, is that the singularities form a community without affirming an identity. [...] The State, as Alain Badiou has shown, is not founded on a social bond, of which it would be the expression, but rather on the dissolution, the unbinding it prohibits. For the State, therefore, what is important is never the singularity as such, but only its inclusion in some identity, whatever identity (but the possibility of *whatever* itself being taken up without an identity is a threat the State cannot come to terms with).”

Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 86.

ing of the two epidemics are very different in kind, with the former identified as the epidemic of the “queers,” the “perverts,” and the “illegitimates,” all those living at the margins of social normativity and the expectations it has historically imposed.<sup>9</sup>

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This position somehow clarifies the importance, especially for the early AIDS activists, of embracing identity politics and building an identity around which to bond and effectively assert their political presence. Interestingly, after a series of well-directed and successful actions, most prominent members of ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, founded in New York in 1987 to fight back against the government’s inaction) pressured for a higher institutionalisation of the group. In light of Agamben’s argument, this urgency is easily comprehensible. In only a few years, by 1992 the Coalition had established itself not only as a structure of competence in distributing knowledge and practical skills, but also as a source of authority, meaning it could intervene in the American electoral agenda. This process of institutionalisation and the increased complexity of ACT UP’s organizational structure was not without consequences: the needs of the singular individual, the non-political activist included, seemed not to align anymore with those of the group. The original possibility to “co-belong without [embracing any identitarian] condition of belonging” had been torn apart.

- 9 ————— In the essay that Leo Bersani wrote following his lecture in Venice in 2011, the philosopher explores the possibilities for resisting networks of repressive power should we be able to fully embody the term “illegitimate” in the refusal to belong, to be named, to be legitimised, and hence to be conferred an identity by society. Interestingly, just as alternative forms of alliances and intimate relationships were being given a space to express, although transgressively, their need for institutional legitimation—ironically by the same agents which disqualified them, as Bersani notes—the advent of HIV/AIDS was used to sustain the politics of marginalisation in terms which were not only political and/or cultural, but also and once again medical and scientific. “The perennial danger [of homosexuality],” Bersani points out, “had now become biologically detectable in our bodies.” An attempt made successful, as he suggests, by means of a “historically contingent syndrome (it could appear anywhere at any time)” used to exploit the scientific discourse and reinforce the estrangement of certain categories of individuals (the “surplus” of society) from social, political, and cultural life. Nevertheless, Bersani argues, re-inventing the terms that have excluded and condemned us to illegitimacy can be a demiurgic act of deserting the appeal for institutional legitimation as well as challenging the oppressive intelligibility required by society in order to control us—something that he refers to as a delegitimised social existence. The legitimising institution is an entity not open to negotiation, unless within its own terms and conditions. By refusing the possibility of belonging to a predetermined social order, individuals can question, attack, and eventually resist, hence nullify, the authoritative power of those same institutional endeavors which have disqualified them. Leo Bersani, “Illegitimacy,” in *The State of Things*, ed. Marta Kuzma, Pablo Lafuente, and Peter Osborne (London: Koenig Books, 2012), 39-70.

While discussing the exhibition with some of the artists we invited, inevitably the connection with the COVID-19 pandemic entered into our conversations. Beyond the overall shared feeling of impotency, more interesting questions surfaced. “I cannot help but wonder,” one artist told us, “if the world would have responded to AIDS like they do with Corona, how many lives would have been saved?”<sup>10</sup>

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10 ——— The artist in question is Bjarne Melgaard, whom in 2011 I assisted in shaping and managing an MA program at the IUAV University as part of the Norwegian Pavilion at that year’s Venice Biennale. Titled *Beyond Death: Viral Discontents and Contemporary Notions about AIDS*, the course considered different codifications in response to HIV/AIDS. In Melgaard’s perspective, these codifications had mostly to do with acts of violence—an approach that has never been embraced by the AIDS activist movement as a possible solution to the climate of AIDS terror—and the killing machine, perpetuated by both local politics and the civil society at large, more generally. Although Melgaard didn’t address it when we discussed his participation in *Every Moment Counts*, the upsurge of violence in response to Covid-19 measures in the months preceding the making of the exhibition was implicit—to take one example, among others, the riots that broke out in several cities across the Netherlands in November 2021. In the months during which the course in Venice unfolded, we never came to a concrete solution as to why acts of violence were never fully developed as a response to the policing of AIDS, unless as forms of imaginative resistance—that of artist David Wojnarowicz and poet James Robert Baker, for instance—which I briefly outlined in the chapter “A [After Andre Burke].” I am more interested in this aesthetic potentiality, and I reject any actual possibility of approaching violence as a solution to a cultural issue.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that Melgaard never disguised his critique of the “sentimentality” surrounding the discourse on HIV/AIDS of “white, male, privileged, middle-class, and well-educated” activists of the early AIDS era. This sentimentality, according to the artist, contributed to a process of addomestication (and “entertainment”) that prevented violence from becoming a thinkable and viable act of resistance against those who wished all queers were dead. The “reduction” of AIDS to an “intellectual” issue, Melgaard claims, was never perceived by the mainstream “as anything else than civil disobedience” and, as a consequence, the homosexual outlaws “as any real dangerous threat to heterosexual society.” To sustain his argument, Melgaard brings in the figure of gay serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer, who according to the artist exemplifies the ways in which homosexuality, as well as race, have been historically constructed as something to be “either ignored or ridiculed or simply not trusted at all.” On May 27, 1991, Glenda Cleveland, an African-American neighbour of Dahmer in Milwaukee, along with her daughter Sandra Smith and her cousin Nicole Childress, called the police to report a young Asian boy sitting naked at the corner of the street, injured and unconscious. Dahmer claimed that he was his boyfriend, intoxicated from drinking too much alcohol following an argument they’d had. Dahmer had drugged the

Regardless, the number of COVID-19 deaths is unbearable. However, it is common knowledge that after a “killer virus affecting gay men in America” was identified in 1981, it took more than five years before the President of the United States addressed AIDS in a public speech. In response to COVID-19, local governments rapidly addressed the current epidemic by disrupting mobility and productivity, with some societies shutting down entirely. The investment in research and the economic aid made available have no precedents. On the contrary, the policing of the AIDS epidemic was grounded on different terms: by associating it with minorities, and in particular with the image of deviance, the State legitimised—and to a certain extent it continues to do so—indifference, hence the total abandonment of its responsibilities towards certain categories of citizens. While in search of a culpable cause, the HIV virus proliferated. Furthermore, the way in which civil society responded to the AIDS crisis is astonishingly misaligned with what we have experienced in the current epidemic. No one can deny it. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that for too many AIDS didn’t matter, since it was not a white bourgeoisie heterosexual problem. As the disease of the diseased, HIV/AIDS has become the symbolic locus from which to articulate the menace, and with it the disaster, of those promoting unacceptable standards of public order, decency, and morality—hence ultimately undermining the stability of the familiar capitalist structure’s hegemony. Looking back in time, searching for the various historical traces of HIV/AIDS, the attempt to deny queer energies and lives is so evident as to remain indelible. To a certain extent, it remains clearly visible. Last summer, an image posted by The AIDS Memorial Instagram account page went viral, at least within queer communities. The July 1983 front-page of the *Moral Majority Report* shows the picture of a husband and wife with their two young sons, all wearing face masks, accompanied by the title “Homosexual Diseases

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fourteen-year-old son of Laotian immigrants, before perforating his skull with a drill and injecting hydrochloric acid into his lobe. When the police arrived, they simply ignored the protagonists of this macabre story, clearly based on their identity positions—the Asian immigrant, the Black women, and the homosexual—and they left the scene of the crime. According to Melgaard, “this is just one of many stories about how non-threatening and helpless homosexual men come across faced with heterosexual authority,” in this case to two policemen who “could not even experience a homosexual as anything even remotely aggressive or dangerous.”

Quotes used in this footnote have been taken from the personal preparatory annotations that Melgaard wrote before the start of the MA program in Venice.



Threaten American Families.”<sup>11</sup> Luckily, most of us have made peace with that despoiling history, even though it left a mark on what we are and do. However, there is one detail in this image that in the context of COVID-19 did not go unnoticed. People worldwide, mostly from the right wing, including its most conservative religious fringes, have seized the streets to protest against the use of PPE (personal protection equipment) to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Parents, in particular, fought for the freedom of their children not to wear masks in schools. But, there was a time when ironically to prevent from a non-airborne virus wearing a mask seemed not to be such a big problem. As queer makeup artist and social media influencer Matt Bernstein sarcastically commented when he reposted that image, “maybe we need to tell them Covid makes you gay.”

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11 ——— The Moral Majority was founded in 1979 by Baptist minister Jerry Falwell, Sr. as the formation of a new Christian Right in the US. The political association promoted traditional family values and opposed state recognition or acceptance of homosexual acts, as well as of abortion and pornography. The Moral Majority remained politically active until the beginning of the 1980s before dissolving in 1987. The organisation’s magazine, *The Moral Majority Report*, advanced their conservative values through political and religious agendas and was mailed monthly to 600,000 families across the US.

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## Actuality

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HIV/AIDS is not over and is not going to end any time soon. Millions of people worldwide live with the threat of the epidemic on a daily basis, with the situation on the African continent remaining the most serious one. Research in the medical and scientific fields has advanced enormously in the last two decades, often thanks to the collective effort of the communities most affected by the disease. Of the many segments constituting the future history of AIDS, this is an important one.<sup>12</sup> But, needless to say, we must also come to terms with its past.

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- 12 ——— New long-acting HIV treatments, administrable as an injection once every two months, were approved by drug regulators in the spring of 2022, intended to replace the PrEP tablets already in use. Medical studies have proven that patients who received the injections reduced the risk of infection by 80 percent in comparison to users of the daily HIV-prevention pill. However, at what cost and under which conditions of accessibility this new treatment will be made available is still to be determined. Mathematical modelling presented at the 24<sup>th</sup> International AIDS Conference shows that a rapid rollout of the injectable treatment in Sub-Saharan Africa would reduce new infections by 27 percent in the next fifty years. But it remains an open question how many manufacturers will invest in the new treatment, based on the promises offered by the market. I am not denying the medical advancements in the field of HIV/AIDS prevention, but I must admit that what seemed to be a contradiction of the old days of AIDS medical research has not yet been resolved forty years later. The “AIDS is Good, Business for Some” slogan by artists Elmgreen & Dragset, which appeared in public spaces all over Norway as a prelude to *Every Moment Counts*, has proven to be more actual than expected. A few days before the opening of the exhibition, an article in *The New York Times* reported on a “mixed-race woman” in the US being cured of HIV. According to the reporter, this is the third case of an HIV-positive person “ever to be cured [...] using a new transplant method involving umbilical cord blood” with a mutation that blocks the entry of HIV into healthy cells. The first two patients were cured with adult stem cells derived from the bone marrow of donors of Caucasian origin, a technique that according to the journalist would exclude people from treatment based on their race and ethnicity, given the necessity of a perfect match between the stem cells of the donor and the recipient respectively. Furthermore, by essentially replacing the patient’s immune system, the bone marrow transplant is a highly risk technique. The *Times* article does not give any scientific explanation for the reason why the umbilical stem cells seem to “work so well.” Perhaps, one doctor says, “there’s [just] something magical about [them].”

Even if we acknowledge the need to preserve history from oblivion, when diving into the study of *Tema: AIDS* we intentionally decided not to look for any revelatory truths about the past history of AIDS and the arts. On the contrary, we aimed to push the archive beyond its depository boundaries and open it up to other possible outcomes of the representation of AIDS and its feelings—hopefully, even outside the artistic edges of the epistemological discourse of AIDS. Thus, the conscious curatorial decision not to re-make or re-visit *Tema: AIDS* as such and instead to face with honesty the challenge of presenting the “actuality,” and not only the “ongoingness,” of the epidemic.<sup>13</sup>

But what does it mean to trace the actuality of HIV/AIDS in the practice of curating today, from a theoretical as well as an art historical perspective? we asked ourselves. To organise an exhibition on HIV/AIDS is to claim that HIV/AIDS is not over. Doing it in the middle of

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Apoorva Mandavilli, “Woman Cured of H.I.V. Using Novel Treatment: Umbilical Cord Blood,” *The New York Times*, February 16, 2022, 19. Overall, the article cites minimal scientific evidence. Details are not given about the kind of mutation the umbilical stem cells are required to have. Furthermore, one single case study is perhaps not enough to announce that medical research has found the cure to HIV. Surprisingly, the reassuring news followed the recent scientific research conducted into the rapid development of the COVID-19 vaccine, with no mention of the fact that more than forty years into the HIV/AIDS epidemic a vaccine still does not exist. In 1997, Bill Clinton publicly announced his government’s goal—one that the President defined as “clearly feasible”—to develop a vaccine to prevent HIV/AIDS within a decade. Only in the summer of 2022 did Moderna launch phase one of a clinical trial for an mRNA HIV vaccine, presumably building on the research into urgently stopping COVID-19. Nevertheless, it has to be said that the trial was conducted only on HIV-negative patients to test the response of their immune systems.

13 — Although they share traits of a dimension concerning time and space, the two terms differ. “Ongoingness” indicates a sense of movement, something that is in a state of progression, thus in a relationship of continuity and connection with the past. There is no doubt that HIV/AIDS is not over; therefore it is as much ongoing as it is urgent to discuss. However, in this continuation resides a latent tension between remembering and forgetting. Indeed, it is important not to forget. To the contrary, “actuality” is not rooted in the past. From the Latin *actus*, it indicates a dynamism, which is not so evidently expressed in the action of being in a state of ongoingness. In “actuality” a renewed energy is present, a sort of “creative force” that can produce new content. The movement inherent in “actuality” is of a different kind: it expresses the activity of realising a possibility, one that does not necessarily have a connection with the past. Experimenting with the opportunity to produce new *gravitas* seemed to us more aligned with our curatorial model.

another epidemic situates the contribution of the art world in this discussion. But practising a curatorial model based solely on historical facts or the disclosure of a history that has remained forgotten or untold would mean—in this specific context—to fall back into the “archival enquiry” or the educational mission. It is undoubtedly true that AIDS has precise historical qualities and a vast literature on the subject exists.<sup>14</sup> We came of age at a time when the ferocity of the epidemic was not at its peak anymore, when it was almost “normalised” in the West. We ventured into this exhibition fully aware that it would not be within the limited space of a museum that we could fill in the gap that separates us from the history that we inherited.<sup>15</sup> As curators,

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14 ——— As I discussed in the chapter “A [After Andre Burke],” only by inscribing AIDS within history can we try to make sense of it. “Never felt to be a natural catastrophe,” to cite Avital Ronell again, “AIDS has from the start carried the traits of an historical event.”

Avital Ronell, “A Note on the Failure of Man’s Custodianship: AIDS Update,” *Public: The Ethics of Enactment* 8 (Fall 1993): 57–66.

15 ——— Issue 42 of the *OnCurating* journal, edited by scholar Theodore (Ted) Kerr, is not by chance titled “What you don’t know about AIDS could fill a museum.” The title clearly positions the research conducted for this issue, and the selected contributions, within a history of AIDS not yet known and not yet told. Kerr’s research and ethos are very much rooted in the historical silence around AIDS, its exclusionary logics in particular, and the necessity to keep the conversation ongoing. The work and research conducted by Kerr is of inestimable importance, informing the practices of many of us working in the field of HIV/AIDS representation. Nevertheless, despite fully agreeing with Kerr, we decided to take a different path in the making of *Every Moment Counts* and, for a moment, to abandon the educational mission—as well as a veiled form of resentment—that is palpable in Kerr’s curatorial vision. For us the cultural experience of AIDS has been a dramatic one to handle. Not only did it reveal the impossibility of us filling in the historical gaps with which Kerr is grappling, but also the impossibility, if not the non-sense, of making peace with the history of AIDS. There is an experience of failure that we think characterises the daily lives of all those who are creating work and making culture about AIDS—a failure that is related to both the inability to solve the issue of AIDS, including the historical traces that it carries, and the mission to give definitive answers to the manifold questions which arise each time we address HIV/AIDS as the object of our research. We decided not to abandon a position of high risk and to accept the porosity and the ambiguity of AIDS as such. At the same time, we decided to keep the discourse on AIDS anchored to the power of images to generate unclassifiable and often ungraspable knowledge(s)—which in the case of AIDS is always attached to the political-material contexts out of which it emerges. The process of selection inevitably shows the presence of our voices and bodies, outside a purely historical and theoretical determination, but still enmeshed in a political terrain that we tried to negotiate in a

we have embraced AIDS as a representational challenge, rather than a historical issue to either solve or repair, and decided to advance an aesthetic argument consciously rooted in the power of the images that artists create about and around AIDS. The diverse visual traces the exhibition touches upon include love and death; hope and resignation; intimacy and the body; care and healing; spirituality and protection; mourning and memory; vulnerability and power; sex, politics, and activism. The exhibited artworks function, indistinctly, as barometers of the individual pressure and the emotional sphere that artists experience in dealing with AIDS and its drama, including the difficult task of giving a sense to this tragedy and the equally impossible mission of condensing the meaning of AIDS within an image or a shape. However, we deliberately selected images in which the presence of the AIDS epidemic is difficult to grasp. In certain cases, its traces almost fully disappear; in others, a concrete message concerning HIV/AIDS is disavowed, in favor of a subjective mode of engagement and self-definition. Nevertheless, the context in which they are presented prevents the danger of dissolving the focus of the exhibition. Precisely because of their ambiguous relationship of form to content, these works actualise curatorially the discourse on AIDS on levels different than the historical need to remember or to educate, offering opportunities that go beyond the research and artistic fields more neatly connected to HIV/AIDS. When displayed next to more “agitative” images, these works encourage us to reconsider the tension between introspection and social commitment, hence to reflect on a commonality of intents. In making this exhibition, we experienced AIDS as a topic that is not only incomprehensible but also unbearably difficult and painful to talk about. Not always aimed at triggering an immediate sense of identification, but emphasising traits of a more self-centred experience, many works in this exhibition still function as generating forces. They confront the viewer on grounds that seemingly defy a political commitment; though less evident, they still call upon and lead them into a crisis mode, built upon an expanded vision of the worlds of AIDS, where intimacy, intuition, ambiguity, discomfort, risk, transitoriness,

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very personal and sensual way. The idea of telling visitors as well as ourselves how to experience this exhibition—which questions to start their journey with; challenging their entitlement in looking at, discussing, commenting on, or criticising an exhibition about HIV/AIDS; defining their subject positions in relation to ours and those of the artists exhibited; what space they reclaim for themselves within the discourse of AIDS—seemed to be a discomforting notion, one that would not pay tribute to the multiplicity and the long-running reverberations of AIDS, an aspect that is also at the core of its unavoidable non-intelligibility.

vulnerability, and politics interact, imagining an historicism of discontinuous circumstances in which there are no sovereign ways of seeing AIDS or being in it. In these affectively-embroidered histories and the echoes they generate, which cross-cut and interact with one another to produce new undertakings, hopefully our dualistic (either right or wrong) perception of the world will change, or at least we will make some space for this possibility.<sup>16</sup>

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16 ——— In his introductory text to the exhibition catalogue *Les Mondes du Sida* (1998), Frank Wagner precisely addresses the need for this critical impulse in relation to HIV/AIDS, while fully acknowledging the unquestionable necessity of work involving political activism. The question of AIDS, he argues, is to be posed also by “means of imaginative actions, which stimulate and influence the thought process.” Even if it is only a matter of “understanding of the conditions for common responsibility or of the otherness of the other,” he writes, still it is the fulfilment of a much-needed possibility. The title of his text, “Education Sentimentale. Putting thought and action to test in an art exhibition about AIDS,” clearly exemplifies his position. The kind of education that Wagner is haunted by is informed by sensing and feeling the world rather than solely being educated about it. It is an experience in which “AIDS becomes visible as a life-structuring factor of existence.” This approach leaves a wider margin for processing individual thought and self-defined position in regard to, but not exclusively, HIV/AIDS. In this space of permeability the hope is realised, Wagner writes, “that art might perhaps once again acquire prophetic character—a wish.” Frank Wagner, “Education Sentimentale: Putting thought and action to test in an art exhibition about AIDS,” in *Les Mondes du Sida—Entre résignation et espoir*, ed. Frank Wagner (Berne: Sida Info Doc Suisse, 1998), 3–7.

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## Decentering

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AIDS has historically been conceptualised as a North American disease. The contributions of many intellectuals in the US—who from the beginning of the epidemic created critical work at the intersections of art, politics, theory, philosophy, and activism—are still a must-read today, both inside and outside of academia. The numerous historical AIDS exhibitions organised lately in the US further underpin this thought, as does the conspicuous number of recent films produced in the last decade to historicise American AIDS activism.<sup>17</sup> When director Per Hovdenakk organised *Tema: AIDS* in 1993, the epidemic in Norway was not at the level of a health emergency. The urgency of immediate action, either individual or collective, which motivated artists and activists on the other side of the Atlantic, was presumably not his primary preoccupation. *Tema: AIDS* was part of a larger project that Hovdenakk had in mind to test the institution's agency in reflecting the world's state of things and tackling the intellectual, social, and political priorities of the time. The research in Henie Onstad Kunstsenter's exhibition archive testifies to Hovdenakk's involvement with the American art scene. Not by chance, *Tema: AIDS* was co-curated by Kim Levine. Based in New York, she also acted as a "messenger" of what was happening in her home country. Besides attempting to historicise an artistic "movement" that had started to interest the European art world, it is reasonable to believe that Hovdenakk's exhibition was meant to serve an additional purpose—namely, to urge the Norwegian art scene to incorporate in their practices less "quietly" issues of social justice, HIV/AIDS included, and to openly question the political status quo. To experiment with this possibility, alongside artwork from the US, Hovdenakk exhibited new works commissioned from a group of artists either based in Norway or of Norwegian descent. This dialogical curatorial model not only attested to the connection of art and politics

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17 ——— The list of both films and exhibitions celebrating the 1980s and 1990s American-centred AIDS activism is a long one. It includes, among others, the documentaries *How to survive a plague* (USA, 2012 by David France) and *United in Anger* (USA, 2012 by Jim Hubbard); the films *Dallas Buyers Club* (USA, 2013 by Jean-Marc Vallée) and *We Were Here* (USA, 2013 by David Weissman); as well as the HBO feature film *The Normal Heart* (USA, 2014 by Ryan Murphy). Exhibitions include: *ACT UP New York: Activism, Art, and the AIDS Crisis, 1987–1993* (The Carpenter Center for Visual Arts, 2009); *Art AIDS America* (Tacoma Art Museum, 2015); and the most recent *AIDS at Home: Art and Everyday Activism* (Museum of the City of New York, 2017).

but also reminded the local cultural milieu of the concrete necessity of addressing HIV/AIDS in their work. In discussing this position, and insistent on rejecting a methodology of the “re-,” we realised that *Tema: AIDS* had to be decentred from its original US–Norway organisational axis. For this reason, we looked at exhibitions with a broader focus than *Tema: AIDS* and expanded the geographical horizons of our research to include several artists from the Global South. We introduced other forms of visualising HIV/AIDS, each embodying a specific sense of place and time and tracing alternative visual narratives. We acknowledge that not all geographical latitudes and identity positions can be included, and in fact constructing an exhaustive artistic genealogy of the AIDS epidemic was not our claim. The effort to diversify the visual leadership of the representation of HIV/AIDS mirrors a trans-historical task, one offering a zone of experimentation, in which a fragmented plurality of possible aesthetic forms to grapple with the social regimes of both the past and the present of AIDS coexists. Thirty years later, the polarity upon which *Tema: AIDS* was built does not satisfy the art institution’s demand for being a site to interrogate, include, and diversify rather than to preserve and educate.

Berlin-based Frank Wagner (1958–2016) was one of the earliest curators in Europe to stage exhibitions about AIDS, the first of which was *Vollbild AIDS* in 1988, at a historical moment of highly political pressure and generalised stigmatisation of people living with HIV/AIDS. As a member of the RealismusStudio, Wagner has dedicated his entire career to developing exhibition projects that address the politics of the body, gender, sexuality, and in particular HIV/AIDS. In 2002, the exhibition *africa apart* presented—departing from previous curatorial projects—a group of artists whose work was rooted outside the American AIDS urban culture.<sup>18</sup> The multiplicity of territories that informed this show, and other Wagner exhibitions which evidently

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18 ——— The exhibition *Vollbild AIDS* was curated by a group of researchers working under the name of RealismusStudio (which Wagner was part of, together with Leonie Baumann, Kurt Jotter, Barbara Straka, and Christiane Zieseke), formed in 1988 within the Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende de Kunst (nGbK) in Berlin, with the precise scope of addressing HIV/AIDS in their curatorial work. In 1997, Wagner and another group of curators developed a second curatorial team that organised exhibitions as part of a larger series named *Unterbrochene Karrieren* [Interrupted Careers]. Even though Wagner came up with the idea for the series, he was no longer part of the *africa apart* curatorial team (which included Thomas Michalak, Torsten Neuendorff, Beate M. Sauer-Dolezal, Sabine Schlenker, and Ingo Taubhorn). This group exhibition was also the last in the series.

Ingo Taubhorn, email correspondence with author, April 25, 2022.



influenced its curation, reflects the quest of the time for connectivity in a globalised world. In the context of the politics of HIV/AIDS, *africa apart* acknowledges a clear economic demarcation between the Global North and the Global South that is, above all, manifested in the disparity of investment in therapies and accessibility to prevention programs. Such an act of decentring, more than anything else, calls for the need to consider the catastrophic extent of the epidemic, beyond national and geographical limitations, and shows an irreconcilable tension existing between different AIDS worlds, built upon premises that bring in ethnicity and postcolonialism, and not solely sexual and gender differences. As early as 1990, the travelling exhibition and its accompanying publication *Ecstatic Antibodies: Resisting the AIDS Mythology* already confronted, on different terms, the topic of “defocussing.” Conceived in London by artists Sunil Gupta and Tessa Boffin—both members of the AIDS and Photography Group, formed at the Lesbian and Gay Centre in London in the summer of 1987—the exhibition aimed to bring attention to critical issues concerning race and nationality within the British agenda on HIV/AIDS. While criticising the inadequacies of both the government and the mass media coverage of the epidemic, the curators demystified icons of the nation and the nuclear family and claimed the existence of a commonality in the eruption of creative life that the epidemic had triggered, beyond national and cultural identities. When six years later, in 1996, the French magazine *Revue Noir* released a single issue entirely devoted to HIV/AIDS in Africa and its “creative spirits,” it not only situated AIDS as a still unexplored global phenomenon, but also recorded the explosion of AIDS-related artistic work outside the Western world. Interestingly, the journal’s primary focus is on poetry and literature, a decision that, consciously or not, renders the representation of the outcry for hope and visibility often associated with AIDS artistic activism complex, but at the same time discloses a will to reassert the imaginative power of the creative act for potential change. To us, it seemed to echo the sort of transcendental neutralising antibodies that Gupta and Boffin alluded to in the title of their exhibition.

Retrospectively, we relied on these curatorial terrains, using them as “disobedient” instruments of research to generate porosity inside exhibition models on HIV/AIDS with a strong historical mandate, such as *Tema: AIDS*. Artistic production is a permeable as well as a generative force. Asserting the coexistence of trans-cultural, multiple, parallel, and mutable aesthetic positions in relation to HIV/AIDS introduces elements of divergence that inevitably put into question the idea of the Western artistic canon. This does not resolve the unresolvable issue of how to better represent the manifold worlds of AIDS, also

if formulated in light of theories of postcolonialism, race, and the cultural diaspora. By focussing on concerns, that are per se conditions of art production, in whatever place and time—aesthetic experiences that manifest the phenomenon of HIV/AIDS and its “identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses” differently—*Every Moment Counts* experimented with one out of many ways to occupy a sphere of instability that might contribute to converting the space of an exhibition into an interrogative experience rather than a celebratory one.

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## Holistic Reverberations

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*Tema: AIDS* was divided into three main sections: political activism, visual arts, and HIV/AIDS education. A fourth section, separated from the rest of the exhibition, was devoted to the screening of artists' films and videos as well as documentaries on HIV/AIDS, the majority of which focussed on the political demonstrations of ACTUP and affiliated activist groups. Reassessing this sort of division today seemed problematic to us. On the one hand, developing the exhibition *Every Moment Counts* around a past and a present to show the chronological developments of the arts in the age of AIDS would run the risk of using the archive as a depository of truth and memory, something we need to learn from rather than something we should critically discuss. Deciding not to show watershed moments responded to the ethical mandate to connect rather than to periodise. It would be equally problematic to identify geographical areas, and to assert the historical defeat in representing the global aspect of AIDS, including the exclusionary logics of Western culture, as well as the different representational modes triggered by diversified cultural milieus. On the other, separating art from activism would support the tension and debate over representation that historically constructed the figures of the "hero" or the "foe," the former aiming to reach the marginalised with urgent life-saving political messages, the latter following the self-conscious desire to experiment aesthetically and conceptually inside the artist's studio. This would mean playing into a long-running unspoken conflict and outright debate over the representation of AIDS, one based on the power, corrective and virtuous, of the indexical image and its confessional mode, to produce revelatory truth.<sup>19</sup> We need to

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19 ——— On the occasion of a private conversation with Richard Hawkins to discuss the inclusion of his work *Still III: An Illuminated Manuscript* (1984), the artist agreed upon one condition: that he not be made to play the role of the "badass." Hawkins's concern slots directly into the historical conflict between the goal of accessibility, political outcry, and the social function of art in the time of AIDS and the desire for aesthetic and self-reflective expression. Furthermore, his concern suggests that forty years later this animosity has not been fully resolved, perhaps passing the testimony on to a new generation of scholars who still keep in place a neat separation between one form and the other of expressing AIDS, on the basis of a demand for art to be socially effective at all costs when it deals with political issues such as AIDS. In 1988, at the peak of the AIDS epidemic in the US,

acknowledge that artists, indeed, were moving between these spaces, wrestling with the pressure of if and how to take a sharp position in the public debate about HIV/AIDS.<sup>20</sup> Surely, they contaminated each other's practices and to varying degrees shared elements of aesthetic qualities. In this respect, we opted for a more open choreography,

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Hawkins and writer Dennis Cooper organised the exhibition *Against Nature: A Group Show of Work by Homosexual Men* at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE). The project was not intended to present a refusal of AIDS activism, but to offer equally valid and highly diversified, though different, positions of embedding AIDS in an artist's work—an approach that was very personal to the curators and the group of invited artists, in whose works the presence of AIDS was often oblique or sometimes blatant, but always the result of their personal experiences of the epidemic, the fear and grief associated with it, as well as of the ways in which their sexual desires informed or empowered their artistic practices in a period of intense crisis. The show caused innumerable controversies, for failing to promote AIDS activism. AIDS activists protested at the opening, and one of the most notable advocates of political activism, Douglas Crimp, ferociously discredited the work and the intellectual credibility of both Cooper and Hawkins. "How many times have we heard that political art is always bad art, that it is merely propaganda?" Crimp wrote. "This is the most sacred art world dogma of all, and it is one to which Dennis Cooper and Richard Hawkins, in their stance against political correctness, cling. Their greatest fear seems to be that what they do might be dismissed as propaganda." I am not certain that the issue at stake is political correctness, but rather an investment, by Crimp and a series of other AIDS intellectuals, in controlling or clarifying the narrative that surrounds the discourse as well as the artistic production on AIDS—a narrative despite which, rather than in opposition to, Cooper and Hawkins presented a group of works informed by different priorities. Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 116.

20 ————— David Wojnarowicz exemplifies this hybrid relationship between artistic and political fields. Activist, multimedia artist, writer, and poet, Wojnarowicz has extensively addressed the power of imagination as a political act in his writings, and discussed the repercussions of making the private into something public in the "preinvented world, the one-tribe-nation." Every aspect of his art is indeed deeply personal. "There is a tendency," he writes, "for people affected by this epidemic to police each other and prescribe what the most important gesture would be for dealing with this experience of loss. [...] Bottom line, emotionally, even a tiny charcoal scratching done as a gesture to mark a person's response to this epidemic means whole worlds to me if it is hung in public; bottom line, each and every gesture carries a reverberation that is meaningful in its diversity; bottom line, we have to find our own forms of gesture and communication."

David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2017), 131–32.

where the exhibited works followed a trajectory impacted by different “emotional temperatures” of AIDS, rather than one dictated purely by historical events, epochs, chapters, themes, or geographical areas, and following Ricco’s seductive proclamation we transformed the exhibition space into a cruising ground. Certain works may connect on the basis of visual citations or content; some more than others render evident the issues artists are bringing to the surface or problematising. Nevertheless, the exhibition was not divided into topics or motifs. Such a thematic division was tempting but represented a risk at the same time of reducing the complexity and fragmentarity of the HIV/AIDS discourse to a list of relevant issues, at the expense of enhancing the powerful combination of art, craft, politics, theory, and activism in the making of artistic work concerning HIV/AIDS.

In *Tema: AIDS* the partition into three main areas of research was reflected in the spatiality of the exhibition: three separate rooms, as well as a fourth area dedicated to HIV/AIDS videos. Aimed at conveying the range of historical positions in response to the AIDS epidemic, at that time this proved to be a successful mediation strategy. Nevertheless, we decided not to inherit this partitioning methodology. The curatorial framework we experimented with—advocating “promiscuity” as a way to tackle the actuality of HIV/AIDS—has been translated into a more fluid choreographic display. *Every Moment Counts* included more than 200 works by sixty artists. Some were present in *Tema: AIDS*, but even then our exhibition rarely featured the same works. When inserted into the intentionally atomised format of the exhibition, the horizons of these artists’ practices inevitably expand. Their meanings shift and change, contaminating one another, enhancing a sense of desire, sensuality, and openness as well as urgency that responds to the context, whether that be the temporal gap between 1993 and 2022 or the indistinct subjectivities of the viewers. By following an associative mode of analysis, such a choreographic display aimed at standing against the reasoning behind the historical case study, bringing to the foreground another possible way to queer the exhibiting space and convert it into a site of cruising and promiscuity. Concurrently, by refusing to identify specific aesthetic properties to be detected in the representation of HIV/AIDS, we wanted to test how this representational indeterminacy can propel a critical process resonant with the potentiality of AIDS, its condition of not-yet, untethered from any historical dictate to give AIDS a face. Artworks reverberate in the space, in so far as they contaminate one another. We imagined new intimate relationships between works in the show and hoped for the viewers to become seismographers of innumerable states of mind. We mixed different media to look at how artists express emotions, critical analysis,

and activism, all evoked by a disease that is still characterised by fear, grief, loss, discrimination, isolation, economic exploitation, misinformation, and political sabotage but also care, spirituality, love, sex, desire, intimacy, and the body. The choreography of *Every Moment Counts* also served metaphorical purposes. Visitors were invited to enter a space left in suspension, where resolution was not achieved, as an entry point to perform an experience of “cruising.” The exhibition had no beginning or end. It was meant, symbolically, to extend beyond the walls of the museum. The amount of work—as different and complex as the levels of aesthetic, theoretical, and political research—carried out by artists on HIV/AIDS in the last forty years is overwhelming. It would not fit in any single museum, but an infinite number of museums. Recognising this overproduction and translating it into a space of endless contamination, associations, and flux also mirrors the shared will to keep the discourse on HIV/AIDS ongoing.

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## Exhibition as Leverage

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This open circuit of contagion, stimulation, opacity, and visual promiscuity also guided the selection process, pointing to the symptoms and the rhythm of a feeling more than an illness. Likewise, we acknowledge our own subject position, not exclusively as curators, in relation to the included works, which make sense to us on a very personal basis.<sup>21</sup> Not all subjectivities and identity positions could be included. So the tension between the two opposite poles of inclusion and exclusion somehow remained in place. However, indulging in a binary logic of in/out, visible/invisible, or now/then would be to linger in a “categorical” agenda, asserting that AIDS is, more than anything else, a historical project. Absurdly, it would feed the expectations of a strange logic of normativity. The idea to not give AIDS a face and let the viewer, a nomadic one, freely experience the exhibition on a personal rather than historical level, seemed to us one of the many possibilities for a process of self-reflection that can hopefully generate new understandings of HIV/AIDS.

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21 ——— Besides the intellectual permeability that has forged our research project, there are also elements of “affective expressiveness”—a privilege that as Sedgwick pointed out is often reserved to those like us who work with creativity and thought—that have nourished, from beginning to end, the making of this exhibition. The sort of intellectual work that this affective expressiveness exercises responds to the interest and the urgency of positioning ourselves, as well as our consciences, within a pursuit of pleasure, one that leads to a new experience and eventually a new understanding of the subject matter. “Many people doing all kinds of work are able to take pleasure in aspects of their work; but something different happens when the pleasure is not only taken but openly displayed. I like to make that different thing happen. Some readers identify strongly with the possibility of a pleasure so displayed; others disidentify from it with violent repudiations; still others find themselves occupying less stable positions in the circuit of contagion, fun, voyeurism, envy, participation, and stimulation. When the pleasure is attached to meditative or artistic productions that deal, not always in an effortlessly accessible way, with difficult and painful realities among others, then readers’ responses become even more complex and dramatic, more productive for the author and for themselves. Little wonder then that sexuality, the locus of so many showy pleasures and untidy identities and of so much bedrock confrontation, opacity, and loss, should bear so much representational weight in arguments about the structure of intellectual work and life. Sexuality in this sense, perhaps, can only mean queer sexuality: so many of us have the need for spaces of thought and work where everything doesn’t mean the same thing!”

Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 19–20

We have confronted the indexicality of the image and experimented with works where the presence, or sign, of AIDS almost disappears from representation; it remains a spectre. The logic of pure representation needed to be transcended. Not only does the contextual meaning need to be acknowledged, but also the viewer's participation in the process of meaning making plays a crucial part in this language game. Each work in the exhibition engaged with the idea of a potential to be—i.e. a yet-to-become. AIDS indeed is an entity that troubles systems of representation. We have embraced this challenge, not with the aim of resolving the issue of the visibility, representability, and historical heritage of HIV/AIDS, but rather with the ambition to insert it into a circle of continuous questioning, which expands beyond the territories of the exhibition space and the institutional host. In this sense we interpreted the queerness around which the exhibition has been institutionally organised—a queerness that is a different mode of both structuring and desiring the world and the many other possible ways of being in it; but also, a possibility, or a portal, to see and to feel beyond the marshland of the past and its present reverberations. We invoked the work of many who inspired us in the making of this exhibition, and this hybrid mode of half-spiritual, half-philosophical contemplation has become both a source of critical affect and a methodology. And in the end we saw our project resonating alongside their words.





fig.1



fig. 2



fig. 3



fig. 4



fig. 5



fig. 6



fig.7



fig. 8



fig. 9



fig. 10



fig. 11





fig.12



fig.13



fig. 14



fig. 15



fig.16



fig. 17

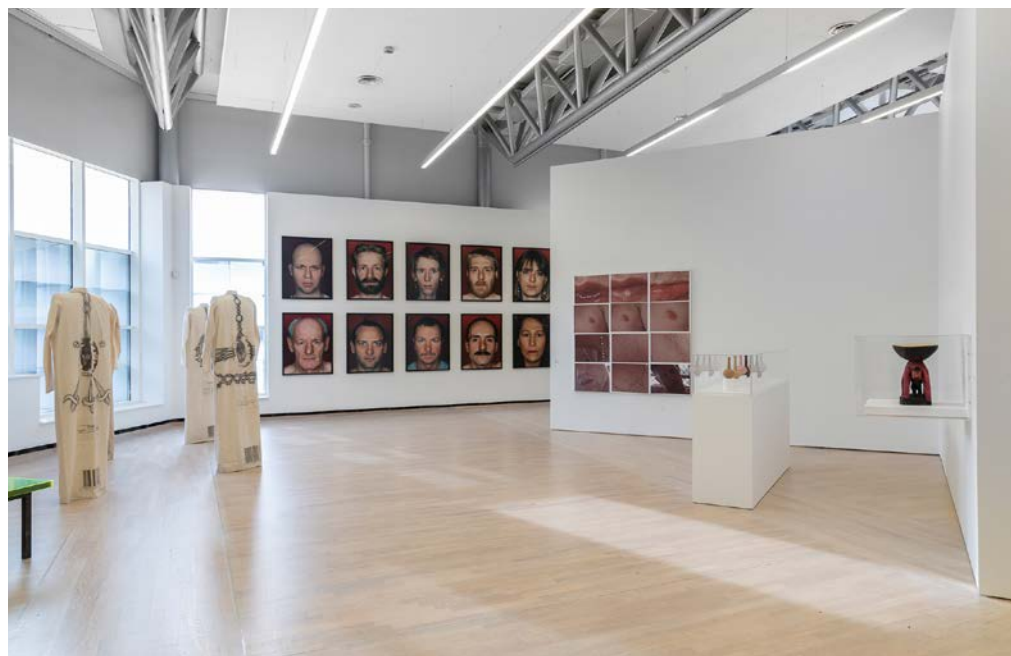


fig. 18



fig.19

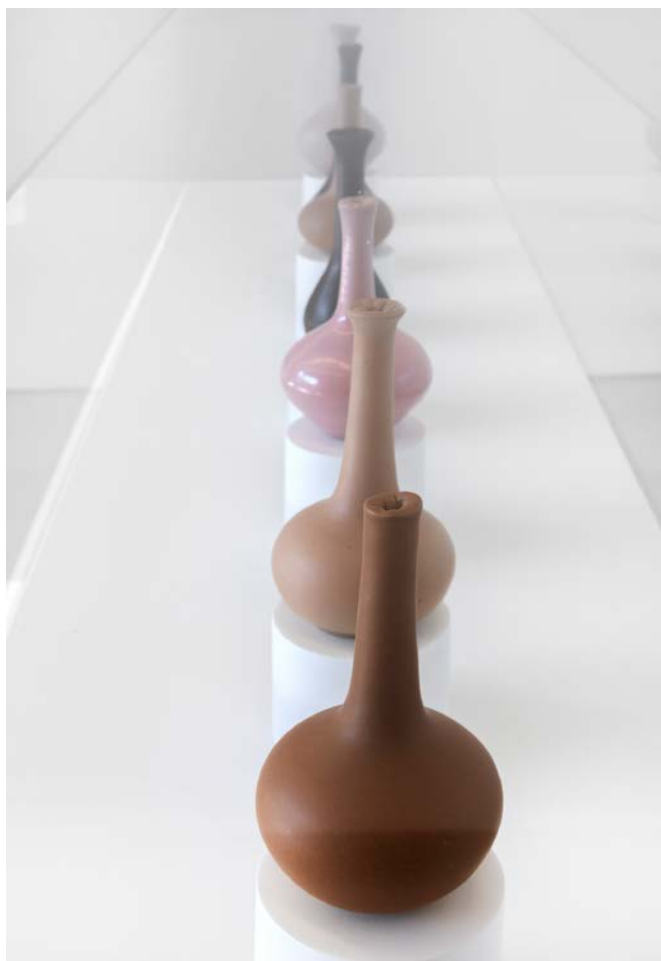


fig. 20



fig. 21



fig. 22



fig. 23



fig. 24





fig.25



fig.26

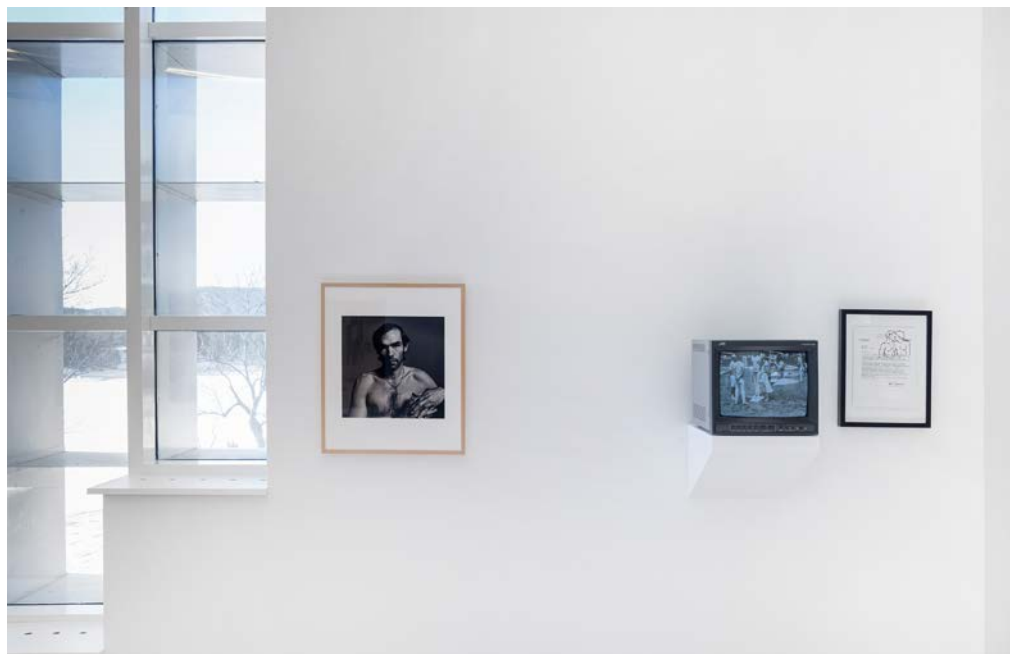


fig.27

figs. 1–26

Installation views of the exhibition *Every Moment Counts–AIDS and Its Feelings*.  
Photo: Øysten Thorvaldsen. Courtesy of Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 2022.

fig. 1

Donald Moffett, *Call the White House*, 1990. Ciba transparency on lightbox.

On the background:

Karol Radziszewski, *AIDS*, 2012. Wallpaper.

fig. 2

On the wall:

Hugh Steers, *Maron Shed*, 1991. Oil on canvas.

In the vitrine:

Bjarne Melgaard, *Beyond Death*, 2011. Thirty drawings, ink and colored crayons on paper.

fig. 3

On the wall, from left to right:

Patrick Angus, *All The Love in The World*, 1988. Acrylic on Canvas.

David Wojnarowicz, *When I Put My Hands on Your Body*, 1989; *Last Night I Took A Man*, 1989. Videos.

Bench by:

Piotr Nathan, *Interpretation of Dreams*, 2004. Pen on wood and iron frame.

fig. 4

From left to right:

Liliana Maresca, *Sin título. Imagen pública-Altas esferas*, 1993, Costanerasur, Buenos Aires, 1993. Six and forty inkjet prints.

fig. 5–6

Bart Julius Peters, *When Will I Hear Your Sweet Voice? II*, 2022. Dye transfer print on polyester.

Bench by:

Piotr Nathan, *Interpretation of Dreams*, 2004. Pen on wood and iron frame.

Bart Julius Peters, *When Will I Hear Your Sweet Voice? II*, 2022. Dye transfer print on polyester.

## fig. 7

From left to right:

Sunil Gupta, *No Solutions*, 1989. Four archival inkjet prints.

Romuald Hazoumè, *Auai-Tolegba*, 1992. Ski, Plastic brushes, and tennis racket handle.

Hudiniilson Jr., *Untitled*, 1992. Twenty collages with photocopy on paper.

Rafael França, *Prelude to an Announced Death*, 1991. Video.

## fig. 8

At the centre:

Piotr Nathan and David Armstrong, *New Romantic—Writings on the Passions of the 20th Century: The Boys*, 1993. Lacquered and organic material on wood, three panels.

From left to right:

Gretchen Bender, *People with AIDS*, 1986/2022. Live television feed and vinyl.

Mark Morrisroe, *Untitled*, 1988. Colorized gelatin silver print, photogram of X-ray;

*Untitled*, 1988. Toned gelatin silver print, photogram of X-ray.

Barton Lidice Beneš, *Lethal Weapon: Essence*, 1994. Mix media with blood.

Hugh Steers, *Boxes*, 1990. Oil on canvas.

## fig. 9

All images are gelatin silver prints by Rotimi Fani-Kayode.

From left to right:

*Grapes*, 1989; *Untitled*, 1987–88; *Maternal Milk*, 1986; *Dan Mask*, 1989; *Every Moment Counts II*, 1989; *Half Opened Eyes Twins*, 1989; *Sonponmoi*, 1987; *Bronze Head*, 1987; *Golden Phallos*, 1989.

## fig. 10

From left to right:

Robert Mapplethorpe, *Vincent*, 1981; *Flower*, 1986; *White Gauze*, 1984.

Gelatin silver prints.

Tessa Boffin, *Angelic Rebels—Lesbians and Safer Sex*, 1989. Five gelatin silver prints.

On the floor:

Jack Pierson, *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road, Part II*, 1990. One hundred and twenty soap bars.

## fig. 11

On the wall, from left to right:

Feliciano Centurión, *Untitled*, 1993; *Estrella de mar*, 1992; *Gansons*, 1991;

*El amor es el perfume de una flor*, 1991; *Vestiditos*, 1994; *Ave del Paraiso florecido*, 1994;

*Cielito Argentino*, 1993. All works: acrylic on blanket with crochet inclusion.

Patrick Angus, *J.B. in Drag (Standing)*, 1988. Acrylic on canvas.

On the floor:

Andrea Bowers, *Something to Keep you Warm* and *The Size of a Grave*, 2007.

Pencil on paper.

fig.12

Lars Laumann, *Folder. Skrikende mann. Luftangrep and Vega-Horn Ferge 9, januar 2017 kl 12.30*, 2017. Hand-stitched fabric.

fig.13

Chrysanthe Stathacos, *xxx*, 2019; *Condom Mandala I*, 1991; *Condom IUD*, 2020; *Potted Passions Gold*, 1990; *Condom Aura II*, 1992. Oil on canvas.

fig.14

On the left:

Manuel Solano, *Miracle Gallery; Shit Paintings; Brian Molko; Antonin Le Beau*. Acrylic on paper. From the series *Transgender with AIDS*, 2014.

Video:

Zoe Leonard and Nancy Brody, *East River Park*, 1991. Super 8 black and white silent film (digitized).

fig.15

On the left:

General Idea, *One Month of AZT*, 1991. 150 pills vacuum-formed styrene with vinyl.

Video:

Zoe Leonard and Catherine Gund, *Keep Your Laws Off My Body*, 1989. Super 8 black and white silent film (digitized).

fig.16

Keith Haring, *Untitled*, 1995. Acrylic on canvas.

fig.17

From left to right:

Kerstin Schroedinger and Oliver Husain, *DNCB*, 2021. Two-channel video.

Edilson de Carvalho Viriato, from the series *Os brutos tambrn amam*, 1997.

Garoto Lucas, Angelo, Tiago, Gaucho. Four silkscreen prints on fabric.

fig.18

From left to right:

Fin Serck-Hanssen, *Tema: AIDS*, 1993. Fourteen chromogenic color prints.

Jack Pierson, *E.O.T.*, 1997. Acrylic lacquer on canvas.

Matts Leiderstam, *Ahmed; Claude; Chuck*, 1994. *Dietrich; Doug; Pierre; Dick*, 1995. Glazed ceramic.

Zephania Tshuma, *Checking AIDS Stool*, 1992. Painted wood.

fig. 19

From left to right:

Nan Goldin, *Gotscho kissing Gilles, Paris*, 1993. Cibachrome print.

Cookie Muller & Vittorio Scarpatti, *Putti's Pudding*, 1990. Eight felt-tip pen drawings.

fig. 20

Matts Leiderstam, *Ahmed; Claude; Chuck*, 1994. *Dietrich; Doug; Pierre; Dick*, 1995.

Glazed ceramic. Zephania Tshuma, *Checking AIDS Stool*, 1992. Painted wood.

fig. 21

GANG, *All People with AIDS Are Innocent* and *AIDS Countdown*, 1991. Video.

fig. 22

Peter Hujar, *Cookie Mueller*, 1981. Gelatin silver print.

On the floor:

Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *"Untitled" (Blue Placebo)*, 1991. Candies wrapped in blue cellophane.

fig. 23

Mark Morrisroe, all images *Untitled*, 1987–88. Colorized gelatin silver prints.

fig. 24

At the centre:

Lars Laumann, *40 Million Years*, 2022. Assembled quilt.

On the right wall:

Ross Bleckner, *Throbbing Hearts*, 1995; *Trophy*, 1993. Oil on canvas.

fig. 25

Patrick Angus, *The Apollo Room 2*, ca. 1980s; *Boys Do Fall in Love*, 1984.

Acrylic on canvas.

fig. 26

Richard Hawkins, *Still III: An Illuminating Manuscript*, 1984. Plate 1–4 and pages 5, 7, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16. Acrylic, ink and pencil, polaroid and collage on paper.

fig. 27

From left to right:

Peter Hujar, *Self-Portrait*, 1980. Gelatin silver print.

David Wojnarowicz, *Death of Peter Hujar*, 1987. Video. *Dear Mr. Hujar*, 1987.

Drawing on paper.







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## **PART 4**

# **Conclusion: Notes for a Promiscuous Methodology**

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## Preface

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I began this new PhD journey, of which this dissertation is the final outcome, by trying to welcome, rather than to silence, the immateriality of my emotions and desires. On the one hand, it ended up being an exploration of the unrepresentability of HIV/AIDS, an experience filled with the joy of accepting and embracing failure as a system of knowledge creation; on the other, it has been the conscious result of an attempt to queer the academic discourse, a process that has run in parallel to a new perception of the sort of “work” that my queer subject position can realise. Research for this project began some years ago, when I was enrolled in a different PhD program in the UK. Unsure of how to define the feeling I had, I somehow perceived the limits of what appeared to me to be a certain kind of narrow academic path. I did not enter the academic environment with naiveté. To the contrary, I seriously took into consideration the challenge as well as the possibility offered by academic research to pursue a path of both intellectual and personal transformation. Nevertheless, I did not believe that being forced to conform to certain expected standards would necessarily contribute to my growth. The kind of encounters—both symbolic and not—I had during the last four years, on the occasion of almost weekly reading sessions and several conferences organised around Europe, were of a different kind. The PhD program in curating not only supported me in taking the risk of performing a more open form of writing, free of standard academic constraints, but also offered me the chance to share ideas in a safe space with a group of peers whose diverse research projects opened up to both intellectual and emotional scenarios I had not come in contact with before. The final outcome of my PhD writing process is undoubtedly the reverberation of the discursive formations that we, as a group, have built together. Without such a research environment, I would not have instinctively conceptualised the idea of a promiscuous methodology, which is the subject of this concluding chapter.

There is another important factor that I need to acknowledge. It has to do with an experience of joy. When I first presented an essay I wrote for my previous PhD program to my new group of peers, my supervisor’s response both struck and guided me. “It fulfills everything that is needed,” she told me, “but it is not written with joy, if I may say so.” Had I ever considered that a community is better off built by sharing experiences of joy rather than of trauma? I have often thought of

trauma as a long-time companion to my process of subject formation. The ghosts of my past and with them the fragility of youth, family, and love were some of the main characters I obsessed over. As my supervisor pointed out, I had forgotten to embrace joy. I was too busy to struggle to redeem my own history. Trauma, shame, and fear are indeed characteristics common to many experiences of queerness, as well as of queer literature, cinema, artistic production, and theory. The trauma of history is part of the way in which many of us have either rehearsed or fully performed our queer subjectivities, not only in childhood and adolescence. It has very often revolved around the hurtful realisation of not fitting in. Recalling the words my supervisor shared with me, I have been asking myself how I can reverse the trauma plot into something joyful (the act of writing itself, for instance), something that can eventually allow me to imagine a space in which to perform a different version of myself. Perhaps it is just the historical structures of the world that have produced the trauma? And what if I think of this queer trauma as a gift rather than a burden—one meant not to traumatise but to be used as a tool of critique?

On many occasions I discussed these ideas with my new therapist. A friend introduced her to me. At the end of our very first session, I was not totally convinced of her approach. I had the impression that she was insisting on pointing to issues that were superfluous to why I was there. Before leaving the room—a simple and dusty attic filled with a disparate collection of furniture from various parts of the world, books amassed everywhere, some amateurish paintings on the walls, and the pervading though not authoritarian presence of a smiling and reassuring woman in her mid-fifties—she asked me how I felt about the session. I had never been asked such a question by a therapist before. “Apologize for being so direct,” I replied, “but I think you’re not the right therapist for me.” “Good to hear that,” she answered back. “You neglected to consider that you might not be the right patient for me.” I realised she could immediately see traits of my narcissistic wound. Over the course of the last four years, she has introduced me to psychosynthesis, a school of thought with which I was unfamiliar. Developed in the early twentieth century by Roberto Assagioli, a colleague and collaborator of both Jung and Freud, psychosynthesis unveiled the possibilities of the not yet there, the yet to come, of that which remains unknown about the self. Interested in various holistic practices, including meditation and yoga, Assagioli believed in a harmonious balance of the several subpersonalities that constitute human beings, rather than a unity among them. The synthesis invoked by his approach advocates for an awareness, and therefore an acceptance, of the different aspects of the self. According to Assagioli, this

can be fully achieved through a process of *disidentification*, a super-conscious state of the mind—something that is not directly accessible but can be deduced through our experiences—that brings the individual to empathise with their feelings, emotions, and behaviours and, finally, to abandon a univocal way of being. Psychosynthesis does not only include matters of the spirit and the soul—which, in accordance with my therapist and perhaps influenced by my fascination with theories of quantum consciousness, I prefer to think of as the intuitive energies of the self—but also puts an accent on the unconscious potentialities of the imagination to open up to the prospects of a joyful experience of ourselves in relation to others. As obvious as it sounds, I had never so clearly realised that the ideas and images that constitute my inner perception of the outside world exist in a state of latent actions. Although not yet actions, they carry within themselves elements of a driving force. In other words, the way I imagine the world is reflected in the way I can eventually act upon it. “Images or mental pictures and ideas tend to produce the physical conditions and the external acts that correspond to them,” Assagioli states in the first of ten principles he outlines in *The Act of Will*. “Every image has in itself a motor element. [...] This law is at the base of all psychosomatic influence; both pathological and therapeutic, and it is one of the facts which account for mass suggestion, so cleverly and successfully exploited by advertisers and other ‘persuaders,’ including political leaders.” Arguing that the image is indeed characterised by a motor impulse grants the individual multiple capacities to control or guarantee the necessary conditions for movement and action. As Assagioli concludes, “the centrally located will can mobilize the energies of imagination and of thought, and utilize these energies within the individual to carry out its plan. So the will can be used purposefully and consciously by the individual to choose, evoke, and concentrate on the images and ideas that will help to produce the actions he desires.”<sup>1</sup>

I reckoned with both the “pathological” and “therapeutic” dimensions of Assagioli’s first law. I can metaphorically delineate a before and after of my experience of academia: in the former, my will to act was overcome by the power of the images and ideas, thus expectations, that academia was producing for me; in the latter, I was encouraged to imagine and therefore take the risk of positioning the manifold aspects of my self within my academic research and writing. Rather than disciplining myself solely to the subject of AIDS experimental filmmaking, I expanded the borders of my research into domains other than media theory, artistic activism, and art history. The way my body

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1 ——— Roberto Assagioli, *The Act of Will* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1974), 51.

processed certain experiences, both physical and nonphysical, was not at all disconnected from my project and the practice of reading, researching, and writing. I found myself unable to mark a distance between the writing subject and the written object. Often, I lost track of the subject I was trying to theorise. Consciously or not, I proved resistant to exercising full control, and this resistance of the disciplined object(s) then became the subject matter.

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## Act 1: The Conflict

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In watching and writing about more than one hundred videos and/or films (most of them rarely shown before) about HIV/AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s, I undertook an experience that departed from that of the historian attempting to systematically map AIDS and its artistic historiography in order to produce knowledge that is supposedly stable, permanent, and enduring. I entered a space in which the subject matter is anything but immutable—instead, I realised, it is indeterminate, constantly moving, changing, and very often escaping any possibility of being fully defined. I embodied a transversal position to the object of inquiry, viewing my AIDS video archive as a historic, and thus contingent, occasion rather than as a history per se, and thereby opening up to the affective and erotic “virtualities” (a concept I am borrowing from Michel Foucault) that my subjective experience of watching these films would eventually bring to light,<sup>2</sup> with an eye towards contributing different articulations of the critical work (one already legitimised) around the history of HIV/AIDS.<sup>3</sup> What other kind of curiosity

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2 ——— In “Friendship as a Way of Life,” an interview Foucault gave in 1981 to the French magazine *Le Gai Pied*, he states: “Homosexuality is a historic occasion to reopen affective and relational virtualities, not so much through the intrinsic qualities of the homosexual but because the ‘slantwise’ position of the latter, as it were, the diagonal lines he can lay out in the social fabric allow these virtualities to come to light.” Reclaiming this diagonality—I align myself with Foucault—is exactly what might nurture the possibility of experiencing forms of relationality other than those that are institutionalised and/or enforced by society, and in so doing to envision, as Foucault claims, a new way of life, or, in the specific context of my PhD project, a new way of conducting research.

Michel Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity And Truth (The Essential Works Of Michel Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 1)*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 138.

3 ——— The obliquity at the centre of Foucault’s argument resonates in Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, under the concept of smooth space, which characterises a rhizomatic structure. In smooth spaces, trajectories are transversal. These trajectories do not link a beginning to an end; rather they trace a plurality of directions. The line of a smooth space is curved, and as such it allows for an errant, nomadic force to emerge. In this sense, smooth spaces are sites of resistance. *A Thousand Plateaus* is an exercise in exploring the potentialities of thought to become a smooth space.

should motivate the work of a researcher, Foucault has alleged, if not one that is obstinate and that, rather than seeking to conform to what is “proper for one to know, enables one to get free of oneself?”<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, my personal AIDS video archive served as a functional device to question the position from which I, the knowing subject, stood in relation to the material of my investigation, as well as to acknowledge such material as the object of my desire, and, furthermore, to problematise the conditions as well as the conducts by which I have historically defined who I am and what I do. In my attempt to investigate what led artists to the practice of AIDS filmmaking and what they achieved with it, I realised the “perversity” of the how and the why that led me to the study of AIDS—an aesthetic entity that, I later concluded, cannot be defined. In this experience of an impossibility—i.e. the resistance of AIDS to being objectified—I recognised that I was (un)forming my self in relation to the selves of others, self-actualising via the process of researching the forms and modalities by which I constitute myself as a desiring subject (and eventually a desired object) in relation to the objects of my desire. This unbecoming—this ungrounded and uncertain movement whose trajectory, in my body and mind, resembles that of cruising—is my attempt to outline the “poiesis of a queer research.”<sup>5</sup> Only this, I sensed, could be my historical experience

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Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 474–500.

- 4 ——— Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 8–9.
- 5 ——— “[...] queer poiesis,” William Haver writes, “will in fact be an ‘unworking’ that reveals the putatively adequate self-identity and auto-reproduction of the cultural *domus* to be a nostalgic fantasy. This unworking, which I am attempting to think as the poiesis of a queer research, is an infinite subtraction, a movement towards a radical existential destitution, towards entropic indifference of empirical singularities bereft of the consolations of culture.” In this sense, for Haver queer research is a form of interruption rather than of reproduction. He begins his essay with a series of provocative questions that had an influence in my research process, some of which I want to list in support of the argument I have developed in this thesis: “[...] what if queer research were thus to think the social field as essentially uncontrollable proliferation, as multiplicity, rather than merely conceptualizing the social field as a plurality to be known and thereby managed and controlled? What if, concomitantly, queer research thus were to constitute itself in *and* as a refusal to participate in a struggle for intellectual hegemony, to provide a better explanation of the world? [...] What if queer research were not merely undertaken in the interest of action (by providing a new and improved theory or interpretation of the world according to which we would act) but were itself an active

of AIDS and of the force of its enunciation. I run the conscious risk of failing and, most importantly, of jeopardising an academic dictate constituted by forms of knowledge production that operate on the assumption of an objectivity to be achieved and afterwards to be put into circulation for the purpose of either confirming or institutionalising a disciplinary field. Framing my experience vis-à-vis the material in this way, I made my original academic struggle of providing an answer to the question “what does AIDS look like?” almost impossible; rather, I was experimenting with a differently articulated methodological approach to the study of the history of HIV/AIDS. Could the experience of my queer subjectivity’s potential (once again, a Foucauldian inheritance) to constitute relationships, friendships, and forms of affiliation other than those advocated by the heteronormative society I grew up in be a methodological tool to embark on a research process of thinking as becoming, and from there to produce knowledge? How could the experiences of which my body and its affective infrastructure are capable—the joyful or dangerous, often unexpected and unpredictable, encounters I am having; my desires for, and relations with, others as well as the new pleasures I can learn from them—become material through which to exceed the framework of possibilities offered by the academic, history-driven research on AIDS and its representations? This intellectual gesture constitutes a tentative–intuitive exercise, whose relational logic to the academic research and the subject implied in it is one of both becoming and unbecoming, doing and undoing, of insinuating a future that is neither given nor recognisable but that remains in a state of the unknown. Philosophy, Foucault argues in the introduction to *The Use of Pleasure*, is first and foremost an ascesis, “an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought.”<sup>6</sup> So too is writing—he claims elsewhere—an act through which one becomes

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intervention, a provocation: an interruption rather than a reproduction? [...] And what if thereby what might be called thinking were acknowledged to be always also something other than conceptualization, always also something more than the manipulation of concepts; what if, indeed, thinking were always also the surplus or supplement of conceptuality—an erotics, for example? What if queer research did not evacuate that surplus, that erotics, as so much waste? What if thereby queer research actively refused to forget that perversity, that chaos of pleasures and affects, that anonymic existential exigency which has been the occasion of its emergence?”

William Haver, “Queer Research: How to Practise Invention to the Brink of Intelligibility,” in *The Eight Technologies of Otherness*, ed. Sue Golding (London: Routledge, 1997), 278–79.

6 ——— Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 9.



someone other than the one they are.<sup>7</sup> The work he is doing, Foucault continues, is not that of an “historian.” The object of his work, he writes, is “to learn to what extent the effort to think one’s own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently”—an exercise that the subject performs upon themselves more than on the object of their inquiry. “Was I right to take these risks?” he ultimately asks.<sup>8</sup>

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7 ——— In a 1983 interview conducted by Charles Ruas about Foucault’s *Death and the Labyrinth. The World Of Raymond Rousset*, Foucault states: “one writes to become someone other than one is. Finally there is an attempt at modifying one’s way of being through the act of writing. It is this transformation of his [Raymond Rousset] way of being that he observed, he believed in, he sought after, and for which he suffered horribly.”

Michel Foucault, *Death and the Labyrinth: The World Of Raymond Rousset* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), 184.

8 ——— Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 9.

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## Act 2: Franny, Part 1

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Franny, the eponymous character of J.D. Salinger's short story, has been seduced by similar risks. In Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, the spiritual crisis she undergoes in Salinger's original text is surpassed by means of a "very good schizo dream"—a vision that entails elements of the solitude experienced by Salinger's character when she dreams of a swimming pool at the bottom of which she is forced to search for something of presumably high value but that is simply a coffee can. Asked if she would like to be a wolf as she listens to a program about wolves, Franny recounts a new dream. The setting is a crowded desert, populated by bees, soccer players, and a group of Tuareg. Neither within the crowd nor beyond it, Franny is attached to it by one of her extremities, either a foot or a hand. Despite the peripherality of her position, she is both separate and inseparable from the group. What is happening to Franny's oneiric "I"? In parallel to this desert crowd, Franny is in a state of perpetual motion, never in the same place in variable relation to either the others or herself. Though her position requires a steep investment of energy and a high level of tension, she says, "I know the periphery is the only place I can be." And this, she ultimately realises, "gives me a feeling of violent, almost vertiginous, happiness." Reflecting on Franny's itinerancy, the virtual trajectory that brings her beyond her self, as well as the unbounded space and placeless place from which she both is and is not part of the crowd, I have a fantasy of my own: Franny appears and disappears, dissolving into the singular multiplicities of her self and the multiple singularities of the others. In this anonymity, she is no longer one or many; rather she remains in a state open to all forms of becoming. Taking a walk like Virginia Woolf, Deleuze and Guattari conclude the dream, Franny resolves "never again [to] say 'I am this, I am that.'"<sup>9</sup> Following Franny,

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9 ——— The full sequence reads as follows: "Franny is listening to a program on wolves. I say to her, Would you like to be a wolf? She answers haughtily, How stupid, you can't be one wolf, you're always eight or nine, six or seven. Not six or seven wolves all by yourself all at once, but one wolf among others, with five or six others. In becoming-wolf, the important thing is the position of the mass, and above all the position of the subject itself in relation to the pack or wolf-multiplicity: how the subject joins or does not join the pack, how far away it stays, how it does or does not hold to the multiplicity. To soften the harshness of her response, Franny recounts a dream: 'There is a desert. Again, it wouldn't make any sense to say that I am in the desert. It's a panoramic vision

I too have taken a walk into the anonymous. I have attempted to understand how to apply the lessons I learn from how I desire and how I love to how I think of my journey into academic research. I have explored multiple sites of desire, both physical and virtual, coupling my experience of writing AIDS to that of fulfilling my sexual drive and my amorous obsessions, in order to see where it would eventually take me.

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of the desert, and it's not a tragic or uninhabited desert. It's only a desert because of its ocher color and its blazing, shadowless sun. There is a teeming crowd in it, a swarm of bees, a rumble of soccer players, or a group of Tuareg. I am on the edge of the crowd, at the periphery; but I belong to it, I am attached to it by one of my extremities, a hand or foot. I know that the periphery is the only place I can be, that I would die if I let myself be drawn into the center of the fray, but just as certainly if I let go of the crowd. This is not an easy position to stay in, it is even very difficult to hold, for these beings are in constant motion and their movements are unpredictable and follow no rhythm. They swirl, go north, then suddenly east; none of the individuals in the crowd remains in the same place in relation to the others. So I too am in perpetual motion; all this demands a high level of tension, but it gives me a feeling of violent, almost vertiginous, happiness.' A very good schizo dream. To be fully a part of the crowd and at the same time completely outside it, removed from it: to be on the edge, to take a walk like Virginia Woolf (never again will I say, 'I am this, I am that')."

Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 29.

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## Interval

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I wake up one day, not hungover like Bruce LaBruce. The night before, I read a text he had been commissioned to write about the homocore (a portmanteau of homosexual and hardcore) fanzine *J.D.s*, co-founded by LaBruce and G.B. Jones in 1985.<sup>10</sup> Refusing to write about the “wild, wild world” of punk fanzines, LaBruce gets into the autobiographical to discuss his dissatisfaction with the idea of a gay community (a political movement, too), to which he feels he has never belonged. That morning, as LaBruce did, I sit at my desk. Arms akimbo, I stare at my cup of tea and light up the first of many cigarettes. A notification from my phone warns me that I have a private message. It’s from one of my Instagram virtual lovers. There is a long list of boys I sext with online on a regular basis, but this message is from a special one—someone with whom I also have an intellectual connection. Already distracted by the reluctance to be faithful to my daily writing duties, I take my phone and read. He sends me a link to a post that art critic David Rimanelli had just published on his profile. It’s a quote from author Sheila Heti, taken from her book *How Should a Person Be?*. The passage is short, just two lines: “Why are you all reading? I don’t understand this reading business when there is so much fucking to be done.” Rimanelli, in a side comment, distances himself from Heti’s stance. “I am a reader, not a fucker,” he writes. I am unsure if there is any regret in the tone of his public announcement. What I am sure of is that I am actually both. But how can the two experiences, reading and fucking, work reciprocally together? My mind drifts back to Franny, and I think that mine, too, can be a very good “schizo dream.” I revisit her dream one more time—what else can a good “schizo dream” be if not a pulsation (perhaps even an intuition) with a great potential for its liberating effects?<sup>11</sup>

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10 ——— Bruce LaBruce, “The Wild, Wild World Of Fanzines: Notes from a Reluctant Pornographer,” in *A Queer Romance: Lesbians, Gay Men and Popular Culture*, ed. Paul Burston and Colin Richardson (London: Routledge, 1995), 197–207.

11 ——— As Leo Bersani beautifully argues in “I Can Dream, Can’t I?” such a reverie is more than just the manifestation of a repressed desire that takes place in an unconscious state of thinking or the intrusion of the unconscious into the temporality of the conscious. In recounting a successful friend and colleague’s recurring anxious dream about failure, Bersani sees in his terrifying oneiric fantasies a means to potentialise rather than undermine his real-world accomplishments and

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## Act 3: Franny, Part II

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Franny's nomadic, solitary experience resonates with a quote from John Paul Ricco that has been occupying a lot of space in my mind while researching and writing this dissertation. In light of his provocative statement, I asked myself: How can I transform the epistemological ground of my research into a cruising ground?<sup>12</sup> How can I relate my newly discovered promiscuous sex life to my academic inquiry? How can I become other(s) than the one I have been in order, as Foucault advised, to get free of myself? Which positions can I take in an academic journey where I feel attracted to the idea of interruption rather than reproduction? How can I acknowledge and fully experience that chaos of pleasures and affects with which Haver defines queer research? How can the training in impersonal intimacy by which

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with them the fullest satisfaction of real life. "Those accomplishments would, on the contrary, benefit from their temporal juxtaposition with accomplishment failures," Bersani writes. "In this juxtaposition, the unconscious reveals itself not as a reservoir of repressed representations and impulses that aim to block the realization of our conscious projects but, precisely because the repressive ego prevents them from being realized, as the original reservoir of psychic virtualities." The most interesting part of Bersani's argument I can fully relate to both Franny's imaginary dream and my own: "Rather, dreams of failures, alternating with successful accomplishments in waking life, bring a degree of uncertainty to those accomplishments, making them less definitive—in a sense, even less necessary—after the fact. Fantastic failures at least partially free us from the limitations of actual success; they beneficently inject doubt into those successes, successes that the dreams move into an enlarged field of potentiality."

Leo Bersani, "I Can Dream, Can't I?" in *Thoughts and Things* (London and Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 58–76.

12 ——— "In the end, what if we were to substitute something like a cruising ground for an epistemological ground?" Ricco writes in the preface to *The Logic of the Lure*. The process of knowledge production that Ricco alludes to relies upon different modes of experiencing the object of his inquiry, hence the notion of thinking epistemologically about the experience that subtends cruising—one that for Ricco does not presuppose, a priori, any pre-established "zone of identity." I have reversed the terms of his substitution and tried to grapple with how thinking of knowledge in terms of cruising (in my case it is knowledge that performs the function of cruising) might affect my process of understanding the object of my investigation.

John P. Ricco, *The Logic of the Lure* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), xix.

Bersani characterises cruising become a model for academic research? “In cruising—at least in ideal cruising—we leave our selves behind,” Bersani writes.<sup>13</sup>

I came up with the idea of a promiscuous methodology while I was putting elements together for the exhibition *Every Moment Counts—AIDS and Its Feelings*. Committed to abandoning the historical imperative to show the face(s) of AIDS, I visualised solutions to reflect in the exhibition space the limits of my thinking and writing AIDS, its unintelligibility as an aesthetic and a socio-cultural entity, the need to break free of the historical responsibility to give an explanation of the world(s) of AIDS, as well as the personal experiment, reflected in my affective experiences, of suspending (rather than contributing to) that process of subjectivity and identity formation which takes shape in the production of knowledge and in the construction of the subject who knows—a process that for me was very similar to the urgency of saying, “I am this, I am that,” which characterised my past love affairs as well as my previous approach to academic research, and that Franny bravely decides not to be faithful to anymore. By betraying herself, she becomes others. Discussing the “relation of non-relation” in queer research, William Haver points to a similar dynamic of subject formation, citing Maurice Blanchot.<sup>14</sup> “What Blanchot calls ‘research’ is an interruption,” Haver argues, “not merely of normative and normalizing explanations of the world (explanations that familiarize the ‘world’ for knowing subjects), but of the very possibility for thinking, the very possibility for the production of concepts.” He continues, “An unworking without destination, thinking as departure, ‘research’ is essentially nomadic, something that happens—an interruption, a hiatus in the very possibility for cultural (re)production—rather than something that ‘is’. Queer.”<sup>15</sup> According to Haver, in queer research something happens other than being, and as such it *does* rather than it *is*.<sup>16</sup>

13 ——— Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 61.

14 ——— Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 3–82.

15 ——— Haver, “Queer Research,” 284.

16 ——— In the introduction to *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz follows a similar argument, though he acknowledges an essential mode of being of queer research, namely a utopia, a “not-yet-here.” Setting aside the problem of defining what queer research is, Haver, to the contrary, focusses only on its potentially transformative pragmatics to reach other modes of theoretical argumentation. “Queerness is also a performative,” Muñoz writes, “because it is not simply being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness,” and here Muñoz gets closer to Haver, “is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”

The idea of a departure without destination has been a salvational project for both my academic journey and affective ecosystem. I could see many points of convergence between my fascination with Haver's queer pedagogy (whose arguments have largely influenced my research) and the (often just "virtualised") promiscuity of my sex life. The possibility he offered to abandon the project of "conceptualising" the object of my inquiry as well as the dilemma to answer the question of who I am in my intimate encounters with other human beings has undoubtedly been liberating. My investment in promiscuity—both in the field of academic research as well as in the intimacy of my private sphere and imagination—is my response to a disappointment with and a tension between several modalities of being, namely the persistence of multiple individualities that are tied together inside my self as fragments of both a living and a knowing subject (a self divided between consciousness and unconsciousness, past and present, one that refuses to think of being as a unified subject always identical to itself). Furthermore, this investment is the result of an experience of failure, both academically and personally, that I later realised was worth unpacking and re-working in order to shed light on a different understanding of the world and its politics than the good-versus-bad dichotomy that structures Western thought. In the specific context of the exhibition *Every Moment Counts*, I attempted to look at the potential outcomes of a promiscuous research methodology—intended as an interruption of disciplinary boundaries—not only as a system of knowledge production but also as a catalyst of energies (whether cultural, political, theoretical, artistic, or even "just" emotional) that shape the curatorial, not in the direction of a complex unity but, to the contrary, towards a site of difference, of all forms of becoming. This is exactly the experience of Franny's whimsical "I" in the dream Deleuze and Guattari revisit. To be promiscuous is the practice of willfully engaging in sexual activities with multiple and indiscriminate partners. In the same vein, the act of sex cruising is that of an ungrounded movement through an unbounded, placeless place, analogous to Franny's trajectory of perpetual motion at the periphery of the desert crowd in her dream. Both carry the traces of an experience that is anonymous, nomadic, indistinct, and itinerant, though pleasurable and, most importantly, non-dualistic. When applied, metaphorically, to the field of artistic and academic research, such a position might contribute to the creation of a space of appearance that embraces rather than resists uncertainty, impossibility, and obliqueness, and that ceases to respond to the imperative of achieving historical closure in regard to the object of inquiry. The persistence of

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José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

the past and its history as a recoverable object, as a knowable text to write about, is not fully realised. Responding to Jean-Luc Godard's film *Passion*, Bersani states that its apparent incongruity is not the type that is ever resolved into a congruity the viewer might have failed to initially recognise. "Incongruity institutes virtualities that have no intrinsic reason to be actualized," he writes. "This retreat from the actual creates a freedom that might be defined as a kind of being to which no predicate can be attached."<sup>17</sup> My task has been of a similar kind: to see whether the incongruous relation between promiscuity and academic research—one apparently so removed from the other—could be viable ground for other forms of connectedness (or virtualities, to quote Foucault) to come to light. With this in mind, I have included in my research the personal, the intimate, and the emotional as effective affective forces, thereby transforming the academic project (and its machination) into a venue for permeable and perpetually transformable encounters. Emphasising elements of process and the celebration of perpetual movement, a methodology that is promiscuous seeks to create the conditions for multiple subjectivities to emerge and co-exist—in other words, as Franny did, for being in common without needing to strictly embrace any condition of belonging. Or even more simply put, for a being in common that is defined by difference, not by sameness, or eventually by neither of them, a concept that, interestingly enough, William Haver has described as "the promiscuity of the nonrelating relation of infinite singularities."<sup>18</sup> I cannot testify to successfully realising this work of methodological promiscuity, for one very specific reason: it is never complete.

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17 ——— Leo Bersani, "I Can Dream, Can't I?" 66.

18 ——— In Haver's argument, this promiscuity is essentially what he calls "the social": "the infinite proliferation of promiscuous, anonymous singularities."

William Haver, *The Body of This Death: Historicity and Sociality in the Time of AIDS* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 120 and 149.



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## Act 4: The Climax, Part I

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In 2019 Natalie Loveless published *How to Make Art at the End of the World: a Manifesto for Research-Creation*. According to Loveless, one of the most powerful elements that characterises research-creation is its strong demand for an inter- or transdisciplinary perspective on academic and scholarly research. In this inter/transdisciplinarity Loveless locates the resistance of research-creation (“its experimental and dissonant forms of practice, research, and pedagogy”) as well as its legacy of intellectual activism, including “feminist studies, cultural studies, critical race studies, Indigenous studies, and gender and sexuality studies—interventions into not only which knowledges might be deemed valuable, but who might produce such knowledges and how.” In order to fully realise its potential for disruption, Loveless draws on the “affective literacies of theoretical polyamory” and uses a methodology that, by means of a beautiful neologism, she terms “polydisciplinamory.”<sup>19</sup> The linguistic roots of this coinage make it clear what is at stake here. The terminology is built on the ground of an opposition between polyamory and monogamy as well as a feeling, which we identify as love or the state of being in love, that supposedly encourages a researcher’s choice to embark on a long-term scholarly project—in Loveless’s case, the unconditional passion for a multitude of disciplines with which she establishes an intimate and consensual amorous relationship. “The theoretically polyamorous,” she writes, “[...] invite[s] us to develop and nurture attachment across multiple (sexual/social/disciplinary) sites.”<sup>20</sup> She uses the Lacanian idea of the *petit object a* as the driving force that both motivates and sustains her polyamorous theory of research-creation. Related to the objects that define our drives rather than to a singular, universal object, the *petit object a* is that which sets desire in motion, not that towards which desire tends. It serves the purpose of taking the academic commitment to one primary disciplinary field—a relationship of the researcher to knowledge that could be defined monogamous—beyond its monodisciplinary framework, granting the researcher the possibility of being faithful to more than one discipline. For this reason, Loveless advocates for an inter- or transdisciplinary model of research creation

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19 ——— Natalie Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World: a Manifesto for Research-Creation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019), 8 and 14.

20 ——— Loveless, *How to Make Art*, 62.

rather than a multidisciplinary one. Echoing Donna Haraway, under whose supervision Loveless completed her PhD, her invocation of the *petit objet a* centres “situatedness” as an essential element of polydisciplinamory. The loving drive and the desire that characterise the researcher’s position in relation to their research is thus what is at stake in research-creation and as such it sustains the polyamorous direction of Loveless’s theory as a means to reconfigure the “monom-arital” logics of academic research. She invokes the theoretical domain of queer theory, especially its potential for undoing social, sexual, cultural, and, in this specific context, academic norms. In particular, she draws on the theoretical-political contribution of Deric Shannon and Abbey Willis, who declared, in their text entitled “Theoretical polyamory: Some thoughts on loving, thinking, and queering anarchism” that “theoretical polyamory [...] is the belief that we can have multiple partners when it comes to political theory.”<sup>21</sup> Aside from being extremely seductive, Loveless’s polydisciplinamorous orientation opens up to possibilities that, I agree, seem to have been precluded by the conventions of academic research. Her paradigm offers a chance to break the rules of the academic game. On the one hand, she shows how we are constantly asked to follow a path that someone has previously traced for us; on the other, she makes tangible the opportunity to experiment with, if not to invent, new ways of looking at our personal experiences as a mode of knowledge production, thus of bravely blurring the boundaries separating what we do from who we are. Nevertheless, I must confess that I harbour a certain skepticism, not for her overall theoretical approach, but rather for some specific elements that to my mind verge on contradiction—despite being a big supporter of contradictions myself. Furthermore, the way Loveless attempts to unpack the divide between the way we love and fuck and the way we think and produce knowledge is not always attuned to my promiscuous methodological approach to academic research as well as to the artistic and curatorial fields. Perhaps, the way I am learning to love and experience pleasure is simply not aligned with the central foundation of her polydisciplinamorous perspective. Alongside Shannon and Willis, Loveless cites passages from authors David Halperin and Lee Edelman that invoke some definition of queerness. “[Queer] is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant,” Halperin argues. “There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without essence. ‘Queer’ then, demarcates not a

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21 ——— Deric Shannon and Abbey Willis, “Theoretical polyamory: Some thoughts on loving, thinking, and queering anarchism,” *Sexualities* 13, no. 4 (August 2010): 438.

positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative.”<sup>22</sup> Edelman’s notion of queer is similar: “fluid, contextual, resistant to every attempted substantialization, queerness is situational but never positivized as an attribute, never fixed, that is, as a stable term that results in a coherent perspective.” In this sense, queer as a negativising force resists any external exercise of power, and in so doing disavows the social norm as well as the social expectations that dictate what is acceptable, hence readable and/or intelligible, and what is not. “As permanent eruption of a non relation, of an unintelligibility, as the signifier of social non-closure, the empty signifier of that founding exclusion through which the social posits itself,” Edelman continues, “queerness denotes the set of those things that stymie categorization, that impossible set of elements always external to any set, the paradox of particularity in the absence of specification.”<sup>23</sup>

In both cases, queerness denotes a negativising force, one that resists the external exercise of power and social expectations. I am not denying the force of resistance that Loveless’s theory of polydisciplinamory undoubtedly performs. But I am not really confident about its queer potential. The social contract implicit in a polyamorous relationship simply does not feel right to me. Isn’t this, perhaps, a way of naturalising rather than denaturalising (sexual, cultural, academic) hierarchies? In this perspective I find myself missing the exceptional quality of queerness of being constantly on the move and of remaining in a state that is always unfinished. “A community [...] is queer to the extent that it is unbecoming,” as John Paul Ricco writes.<sup>24</sup> The unforeseen destabilising power of queerness is also a result of it being perpetually in play. Franny keeps coming back in my dreams. Her dream has seduced me so thoroughly that it has now become my only fantasy. Ultimately, I liked to run the risk of a broken self and of the traumatising though fascinating experience of recognising in myself the impenetrable, non-negotiable, unlocatable otherness of the other. I am not sure if I am ready to let that go. I am keen to experiment with a different sexual and theoretical model, one in which, as Bersani states, “a deliberate avoidance of relationships might be crucial in initiating, or

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22 ——— David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 62. Quoted in Loveless, *How to Make Art*, 61.

23 ——— Lee Edelman, “Unbecoming: Pornography and the Queer Event,” in *Post/Porn/ Politics: Queer-Feminist Perspective on the Politics of Porn Performance and Sex Work as Cultural Production*, ed. Tim Stüttgen (Berlin: b\_books, 2009), 31. Quoted in Loveless, *How to Make Art*, 61.

24 ——— Ricco, *The Logic of the Lure*, xxii.

at least clearing the ground for, a new relationality.”<sup>25</sup> Seeking the essence of such a model, Bersani poses the question, which kind of new ethical vocabularies does the practice of cruising and promiscuity—one that forces us to transcend all relations—require us to elaborate?

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<sup>25</sup> ——— Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?*, 59.

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## Act 5: The Climax, Part II

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“As anyone who has inhabited polyamorous and ethically nonmonogamous circles knows, honesty is one of its central axes of power. Polyamory and ethical nonmonogamy are distinguished from other forms of nonmonogamy on the basis of an ‘ethical responsibility’ grounded in honesty and consensus—in ‘truth,’” Loveless writes. “In popular as well as some critical literature on the subject, ‘uncommitted’ or ‘unethical’ nonmonogamy, which in the language of interdisciplinarity would be something like ‘disciplinary dabbling,’ is understood as focusing on sex and a lack of commitment to doing the work of honest and ongoing communication,” she continues, arguing that commitment and faithfulness are reciprocal and implying that sex unbound by either cannot allow an experience of knowledge to emerge, thus discarding any possibility for an academic experiment to break the rules of an ethical contract dictating the kind of “structure” that interdisciplinarity should have. In so doing, she prevents new and unpredictable modes of knowledge production from coming to the surface—even though, as Loveless openly acknowledges, interdisciplinarity is about creating new objects. “Committed’ or ‘ethical’ nonmonogamy or polyamory is characterized by situationally negotiated, multiple kinship nodes involving sexual and emotional intimacy, grounded in the premise of and promise of radical (emergent) honesty,” she concludes, taking for granted that the sort of intimacy we need to commit to our academic pursuits is always the result of a promise of faithfulness, one in which truth supposedly resides.<sup>26</sup>

But which kind of truth is Loveless advocating for, I ask myself? Isn’t it perhaps one of the main objectives of a queer resistance to oppose any attempt to achieve historical closure, hence to establish a definitive “truth”? How does Loveless know that my uncommitted relationships—so those of many others—are not grounded in a consensus, ideally one that is not defined by a heteronormative concept of honesty? What kind of categories is Loveless using to define honesty and ethical responsibility? Is it faithfulness and loyalty, perhaps? What is the purpose and the meaning of brushing off the serious and dedicated work done by many, including authors that she quotes, as “disciplinary dabbling”? The sort of honesty that I establish with my lovers and sex partners is not defined merely by open communication, as she

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26 ——— Loveless, *How to Make Art*, 64.

suggests; rather, it is the result of all parties committing to enter a space of erotic and, I argue, political potential in which all of us, in one way or another and with different individual purposes, are faithful to the irresistible need and drive for an experience of self-discovery, united in our refusal to accept, hence embrace, social protocols and imperatives. Furthermore, my mode of being with others still involves emotional and sexual intimacy through the reciprocal exchange of elements (even if they are simply imaginary or situationally invented) of one another's subjecthood.<sup>27</sup> Which other sort of honesty should I

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27 ——— In *Intimacies*, the book that Leo Bersani co-authored with Adam Phillips, he challenges the notion that “original” intimacy comes through knowledge, i.e. that the deeper one knows the other, the deeper the intimacy established with them. This notion relies on the assumption that the other—the one that we are in the process of knowing—is a knowable and therefore fixed entity. The impersonal intimacy Bersani advocates for is an experiment in relational transformations. The unpredictability of the knowing experience that such relationality entails—one that prioritises being over knowing—is crucial to defining the promiscuity of an encounter in which I am both with and without the other. It is not about responding to the will of “personally” knowing the other as much as it is about knowing what “each is becoming in the presence of the other.” In this respect, my promiscuous approach, far from being “disciplinary dabbling,” differs from Loveless’s polydisciplinamory.

In the last chapter of *Intimacies*, Phillips addresses the practice of barebacking, and its relationship with shame and guilt, as an emblem of impersonal intimacy. Recounting the “dismantling of what has been assumed to be the most profoundly personal form of selfhood” that the subject experiences in the feeling of shame, Phillips, citing Bernard Williams, writes: “Where once there was the power of personal narcissism—the ego invested by and invested with personal commitments—there is now, as a preliminary to a more impersonal narcissism, the loss of power, a disinvestment. [...] The question is what has to happen to the consciousness of loss of power to make it a shameful experience rather than, say, a blissful one? [...] Loss of power, after all, might be the precondition for the longed for and feared experience of exchange of intimacy, of desire indifferent to personal identity.” Discussing the original narcissistic relation, that which exists between the mother and her child, he continues: “The mother and the child [...] are more attuned by their impersonal narcissistic investment in each other, to what each other is becoming in the presence of the other. [...] The parents’ wish to know the child, and the child’s wish to know the parents (which is introjected from the parents)—the personalizing of their narcissistic investment in each other—is, at its most extreme, a defense against what is unknowably evolving, as potential, between them. This is a version, perhaps the originary one, of the desire for virtual being [...] The first intimacy,” Phillips concludes, “is an intimacy with a process of becoming, not with a person. The question

promise if not that of giving what I have to offer (should this something also be just a nothing) and receiving what the other has decided to give? The pure pleasure of my encounters with the multiple singularities of the others with whom I share this sexual and emotional intimacy is mirrored in the virtuality and indeterminacy of the relationship I establish with the *petit object a* of my academic research. It is the possibility of being both with and without that constitutes the “diagonality” of my relation with theory and as such establishes a connection between the way I love and fuck and the way I think and write. In other words, it is my becoming, rather than my knowing, that defines my promiscuous (understood also as “poly”) relationship with and to theory. Rephrasing Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star’s concept of “boundary objects,” Loveless states, “a polyamorous approach [...] allows one to ‘inhabit several communities of practice and satisfy the [affective/sexual] requirements of each of them. [Poly(discipline)amorous practice is] thus both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them [relationship partners], yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites.” Hence, an intersubjective recognition—one that rejects the contingency of the encounter and is based on the need to grant the emergence, and with it the readability, of an identity—is a necessary condition of Loveless’s polydisciplinamory. The commonality of identities she advocates for is a key principle to understanding where her idea of honesty comes from. “This robustness [is] seen as the direct result of the honesty invoked above,” Loveless continues, “given that having multiple intimate relationships, be they sexual or not, without the knowledge of all partners involved does not allow for a ‘common identity across sites.’”<sup>28</sup>

The point is clear: the schizo-dream I am dreaming of is one in which my fantasised Franny is attempting to belong without any strictly imposed condition of belonging—a “pure” belonging without the need for recognition of such belonging.<sup>29</sup> It is not an intellectual

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raised by Bersani’s account is why is this relation so difficult to sustain, so easily sabotaged by the drive to take things personally?” Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 112–14.

28 ——— Loveless, *How to Make Art*, 65.

29 ——— If, on one hand, the term queer has been used to investigate notions of identity, on the other it needs to be called upon to question the notion of belonging. From a queer perspective, at least according to the authors that Loveless cites, to belong means to struggle to be accepted by those same agents that have historically disqualified “us”—queerness is invoked as a negativising rather than positivising force. The question I am posing is the following: how can we decide

objectification (or conceptualisation) of a final destination of her nomadic journey that Franny is committed to achieve and eventually to write about.<sup>30</sup> She is not seeking any revelatory truth. Her primary

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to co-belong while refusing to embrace any possibility of social acceptability? What if—to paraphrase Loveless—we decide not to “inhabit several communities of practice and satisfy the [affective/sexual] requirements of each of them” and therefore not to inhabit any pre-constituted, or even not yet existent, community? This idea echoes Bersani’s notion of illegitimacy, which I discuss in greater depth in the chapter “A [after Andre Burke].” Illegitimates are those who affirm their right to be in common, without accepting or embracing any condition of belonging (they miss this urgency to belong that seems so crucial to Loveless’s definition of faithfulness instead). They refuse to affirm an identity to which a name can be given and therefore remain nameless. They stand outside representation, and in so doing they resist control and any external exercise of power. Illegitimacy is, in Bersani’s perspective, one of the viable yet risky modalities we can experiment with in order to attempt to actualise Foucault’s “new relational modes.” Loveless’s approach, it seems to me, is anchored to an already existing relational mode, one which she has given the name of honesty and faithfulness.

Leo Bersani, “Illegitimacy,” in *The State of Things*, ed. Marta Kuzma, Pablo Lafuente, and Peter Osborne (London: Koenig Books, 2012), 39-70. Similarly to Bersani, Ricco associates this drive towards anonymity with an ethics that he defines as promiscuous, whose insurgent politics, he states, can be performed only by those who decide to “remain anonymous, itinerant, imperceptible, and illicit.” Citing Blanchot, Ricco draws a parallel between the tension of remaining unnamed and the experience of queer cruising. “Blanchot’s *others*,” Ricco writes, “in their incessant itinerancy, ceaselessly approach the point of uncertainty, as thereby remain as indeterminately anonymous and unbecoming as the placeless places through which they pass. They too are without qualities or content: infamous (*infame*) any-bodies-whomever of formless (*informe*) any-places-whatever.” The risk that Loveless is not taking is exactly this movement beyond the singular self (something that she provocatively labels “disciplinary dabbling”) that would eventually lead (and this is the biggest risk) into “the realm of the indistinct.” By using honesty as the *sine qua non* of polydisciplinarity, Loveless produces a theoretical approach that, in my opinion, is “restorative.”

Ricco, *The Logic of the Lure*, xxii and 9.

- 30 ——— Picturing Franny in my mind, I can’t resist drawing a parallel to what Haver has written about the work of artist David Wojnarowicz. Wojnarowicz’s (much like Franny’s) expedition without destination, Haver writes, is “always a departure, a detour, a *detournement*, and thereby a queer perversity. [...] This celebration of perpetual movement [...] is inflected, perhaps deflected, by the fact that it is always a departure, a separation, a secession *from* the preinvented Other World, in respect of which this flight is always a turning, always necessarily perverse, the *ekstasis* that is the very cutting edge of metamorphosis



relation to the world is not determined by defining an “ethics” of the object of her knowledge; in this sense, she is not a knowing subject. Rather, Franny’s searching ‘I’ is characterised by a different experience of the relationship between the world and knowledge. She is experimenting with a new, unpredictable, and thus vertiginous form of exchange and correspondence between herself, as both the object and the subject of her knowledge, and the world as the source of such knowledge. I have the impression that she loves this mode of getting lost. I am not trying to delineate an opposition between two different perspectives on how the signifier “poly” might initiate a new way of relating and connecting to academic research.<sup>31</sup> To the contrary, I am expressing a personal dissatisfaction towards a methodological approach whose potential to disrupt is somehow disavowed by an aspiration for intellectual legitimation. I find the commonality of identity that Loveless fights to maintain across different sites very problematic. Isn’t it true, as Haver has pointed out, that the formation of a community of “we” can be fully realised only by excluding that which “we” are not? Isn’t the inclusivity of such a community inclusive only insofar as it excludes?<sup>32</sup> Doesn’t it seem like Loveless’s theoretical approach ultimately seeks to be constituted via the recognition of a similitude rather than by a radical difference or a refusal of both? Through the lens of Haver’s queer pedagogy, I have the terrible feeling that Loveless’s academic paradigm is a form of reproduction rather than of interruption. Is she perhaps trying to provide a better explanation and interpretation of the world? By underscoring a sine qua non of polydisciplinamory,

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–or of revolution. This movement describes a curve [...], obliterated in and as its very inscription, an itinerary that leaves no trace. What seduces Wojnarowicz here, as it were, is the perverse edge or bite of liminality, the queer turn.”

Haver, *The Body of This Death*, 134.

- 31 ——— I am more interested in a dimension of “poly” that is not simply the negation or the opposition of “mono,” but instead has its own qualities, more similar to the “incongruous” (i.e. the unnameable) of Edelman’s queerness than to Loveless’s safe though ethically constrained multiplicity of communities of practice. I am not disqualifying her theoretical approach, but I have sometimes the feeling that we are granted the possibility of being “poly” only insofar as we do not fully abandon the overall framework of the “mono.” It is exactly this “mono” that guarantees the possibility to belong, i.e. of institutional legitimation disguised as the kind of ethical responsibility that Loveless ultimately advocates for. It misses the chance to question if and how a dimension of “poly” can enable us to think differently, to establish other forms of “virtualities,” to become someone other than the one we are, and ultimately to destabilise the “game” of academic research.

- 32 ——— Haver, *The Body of This Death*, 146.

Loveless is running the risk of reintroducing the inter/transdisciplinarity of her methodological “poly” promise into the monodisciplinarity of an entity, or an academic framework, that she defines as “honesty.” In so doing she reinforces, rather than undermines, inside/outside binary logic. The sort of “amour” embedded in Loveless’s notion of polyamory is then, to a certain extent, also the result of this dialogical tension, as if there is a right versus a wrong way to love. Polydisciplinarity is “a kind of eros-driven-curiosity,” she writes. “Research-creation is a practice of love. It is an erotic, driven, invested practice.”<sup>33</sup> It is my understanding that Loveless’s call to love, and to the erotic, is intended as a form of spirited curiosity. For her, love is also a promise of honesty and faithfulness, hence of fidelity—even though supposedly deprived of its original heteronormative emphasis. Nevertheless, it seems to me that in Loveless’s perspective, one that disregards theoretical promiscuity as a perfunctory casual engagement, accountability is a crucial point: “In truly poly form what matters [...] is one that entangles us in relations of debt in ways for which we can never fully account, despite always being willing to be (emergently) accountable.”<sup>34</sup> According to the silent social contract that we establish with our multiple partners, we need to take responsibility for doing that which we are not supposed to do, i.e. to decommit from the original agreement and thereby be unfaithful to the partners to whom we have promised our truthful love. The promise is about the “where,” the “how,” and the “with whom” we have sex. Unpredictability is an element that Loveless takes into account. Even in the most honest of polyamorous relationships, we can be caught by desire unexpectedly. This unpredictability is always an eventuality, an accident ruled out by the premises of an accountability to which we have promised our commitment.<sup>35</sup> In this sense, the unpredictability of the desire by which

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33 ——— Loveless, *How to Make Art*, 70.

34 ——— Loveless, *How to Make Art*, 71.

35 ——— Loveless defines honesty as follows: “The honesty at stake must be understood as split, based both on a capacity to be honest and clear about the *manifest* content of given relationships while also being willing to be accountable to the *latent* content of relationships that emerge unexpectedly in unpredicted (affective/erotic) encounters. [...] [We] nurture not only a willingness to be accountable for our positionalities, affective attachments, and concrete choices in any and all love (and research) stories—that is, accountable for *where* and *how* and *with whom* we do our (disciplinary) coupling and uncoupling—but also a willingness to take seriously the eruptions and drives that can seem to take all volition off the table and render us followers, in much the same way that sexual desire can ignite one’s attention forcefully and unpredictably in directions one never thought one would go.” Loveless, *How to Make Art*, 66.

one might be ignited could eventually lead to the inclusion in the polyamorous contract of an additional love partner (“[it] render[s] us followers,” Loveless writes), one with whom to perform the same rules of the game. This romantic idea of love suggests that my self ends in the encounter with the self of the other, where the other starts, disavowing the ceaseless motion, the eruption of non-relation that, according to Edelman, defines queerness. Furthermore, the resolute will to be accountable is a form of “substantialization” and social closure that, as Edelman points out, queerness attempts to resist in the first place. By contrast, the inconvenient “latent content” of an unpredictable encounter—an indefinable existential exigency, or the will to take the risk of bearing all kinds of differences beyond any intersubjective recognition—is what defines the *petit object a* of a promiscuous research methodology.

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## Act 6: The Climax, Part 3

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When we decide to initiate a journey into academic research, all of us are presumably, though not necessarily, motivated by something (a thing that turns us on) that will in time become what might be called love (curiosity)—whether love for the subject matter or love for the sake of knowledge. For many, the object of this love is truth, an experience that will eventually climax in a joyful moment of discovery. The nature of this form of love is very personal; it is inherently predicated upon the personalities of both the maker of the experience and that which is being experienced. But is love possible without this investment into the personal, this preoccupation with wanting to know the other and wanting the other to know you? Can it be just a process, an endless search without a resolution, an experience of ‘lack,’ in which what I have to offer, in Lacanian terms, is a nothing, and it is exactly this nothing that makes the search for love possible? And what if the erotic—the force that fuels the loving subject, that turns me on—will finally lead us to something other than the joy of truth? What if it is not an experience but rather a condition for a possibility—perhaps the blissful possibility to perform impersonal intimacy, not as a relation with one or multiple partners but instead with a potential process of becoming, as Phillips and Bersani write about? “If rampant disciplinary promiscuity demands no commitment (welcoming one-night stands), polydisciplinamory, while in some senses promiscuous, does something different,” Loveless argues. “It asks that multiple and simultaneous committed loves, at multiple levels—manifest and latent, conscious and unconscious—be taken seriously.”<sup>36</sup> I wish Loveless could know how committed I am to my one-night stands, and how seriously I think that the erotic force with which I am making experience is one that has something to do with love. The erotic is a limit, Haver argues. As such, it has no relation to truth. The erotic is a radical gesture, a movement towards the unknown. “The erotic,” Ricco suggests, “is a force that makes subjecthood, identity, citizenship, and sociability, unbecoming.”<sup>37</sup> The erotic is that which remains excluded by the logic of knowing, for it tends towards an excess of knowledge. “Because the erotic is a limit,” Haver writes, “it cannot be known in itself. [It] is also the place (a kind of ontological lamella) where the distinction between self and the other is rendered essentially and originally unstable (an

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36 ——— Loveless, *How to Make Art*, 71.

37 ——— Ricco, *The Logic of the Lure*, 15.

instability that is not the degeneration of a prior stability).” In this sense, echoing Edelman, my self does not end where the self of the other begins. Here Loveless’s intersubjective recognition is replaced with Edelman’s ceaseless motion of the queer subject. “It is a ‘moment’ of absolute communion and communication,” Haver continues, “but also of the absolute failure of communion and communication, a ‘moment’ simultaneously of ultimate integration with and of ultimate separation from the other.” This simultaneous integration with and separation from the other will not be possible if the sine qua non of my poly-curiosity is truth. “The truth of the erotic,” Haver concludes, “is its being outside and beyond truth.”<sup>38</sup> In this sense, the erotic is never a form of assimilation. Its radical contingency and ambiguity render intelligibility impossible. “I am never more present to myself than in erotic relation, nor more other to myself than in the nonrelationality of the erotic,” Haver argues.<sup>39</sup> From the point of view that queer represents a surplus, Haver’s idea of the erotic casts doubt upon any possibility of historical understanding, to which, on the other hand, Loveless’s appeal to honesty clearly inclines. Furthermore, it appears to me that Loveless’s denunciation of rampant promiscuity, which she alleges to be a conscious repudiation of love, is advocating for a certain stability rather than for the inner transitivity of the erotic, a movement of the being whose temporality—once again it’s Haver showing me the way—corresponds to the “nothing-but-nowness of the Now.”<sup>40</sup> The temporality of the social contract of a polyamorous relationship as Loveless designs it—the knowing experience that subtends the personal intimacy that parents establish with their children once they have broken with the original impersonal intimacy and its ever-evolving, unknowable potential—implies the necessity of making the impermanent permanent, the intolerable tolerable, and in so doing limits the potential of thought to become a site of resistance. This is done in the name of a successful, self-assuring realisation of “truth.” In contrast, a temporality of the now is exactly what designates a methodology that aspires to be promiscuous. For the promiscuous nomads and the promiscuous thinkers—by welcoming the anonymous singularity that is the provisional otherness of the other, by accepting its unintelligibility—each encounter is a point of departure and never a point of arrival. Each promiscuous relationship is both fragile and transient. The only form of faithfulness that promiscuous lovers can eventually commit to in their sex/love agreement, though never established a priori, is the fullest acceptance of the impermanence and insecurity of their encounter, one

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38 ——— Haver, *The Body of This Death*, 16.

39 ——— Haver, *The Body of This Death*, 14.

40 ——— Haver, *The Body of This Death*, 14.

that is guaranteed only by the “nothing-but-nowness” of that encounter, and is therefore without any guarantee. The turn-on of their experience is the possibility of threatening the social bond, and ultimately the possibility of reinventing it.<sup>41</sup> In this temporary loss of the self that occurs in an encounter with a stranger, we can finally make experience of what we are becoming—and not of what we are getting to know—in the presence of the other.<sup>42</sup> This is, ultimately, the main project of a

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41 ——— In the context of a research project that attempts to accept and thus embrace the unrepresentability of AIDS, such a methodological approach represents an experiment in bringing AIDS outside of its historical recognition. AIDS, as I have pointed out in the chapter “A [after Andre Burke],” designates the impossibility of the knowing subject to know. Its opportunism is the result of its original multiplicity, of a surplus of thought (there is always something more to be said) that renders knowing impossible. The thought of AIDS thereby ultimately fails in its ontological mission of thinking and writing AIDS. In this sense, for academia AIDS might represent a risk, an attempt to mine the boundaries of traditional academic disciplines and in so doing favouring academic promiscuity. As Avital Ronell pointed out, “AIDS *infected* academia, dissolving boundaries that traditionally set the disciplines off from one another, if only to secure their sense of self-knowledge.”

Avital Ronell, “A Note on the Failure of Man’s Custodianship: AIDS Update,” *Public: The Ethics of Enactment* 8 (Fall 1993): 58.

42 ——— The erotic is a force that constantly returns in Haver’s writings. Even though he acknowledges the impossibility of defining it, he attempts, several times, to outline what the erotic is ultimately constituted by and of. Haver’s ideas have strongly influenced my understanding of a promiscuous methodology, in which the presence of the erotic is also predominant as a motor element. Haver explains the erotic as a loss of the self as follows: “In the erotic, *signifiance* constitutes a movement that at once accomplishes signification and withdraws or secedes signification and from the signification that is the syntagma, into an originary fragmentation that cannot be construed as the degeneration or dissolution of an always already established signified. [...] The erotic movement of *signifiance* is at once the accomplishment of sense and its excess, the fragmentation and proliferation of sensuous non-sense, the operation of work (*travail*) that simultaneously accomplishes a work (*oeuvre*) and its unworking (*désoeuvre*). [...] The erotic, therefore, cannot be a ‘state of being’, but is only disclosed as the ekstasis that is the cutting edge, the bite, of metamorphosis, the very transitivity of be-ing. Thus far,” Haver continues, “for the purpose of this logical fable that I am attempting to retrace, I have isolated (an isolation that is entirely fictive) four aspects or ‘moments’ of the essentially ungraspable, unpossessable, erotic. 1. The erotic erupts in and as that which precipitates the movement of a departure, a withdrawal, a secession without destination—as death. 2. The erotic is always a turning, a *détournement*, a perversity, a queering of an itinerary. [...] The erotic itinerary is always the edge of a curve; [...]

promiscuous methodology, in which knowledge is not the objective, but rather the result of a metamorphic process, of a loss of power that forces us to be in a transitory state of both becoming and unbecoming, of the force of a desire that, as Phillips and Bersani have pointed out, is “indifferent to personal identity.” In this sense, against what Loveless presumes, the promiscuous subject demands a high degree of commitment. Furthermore, I would argue that this principle of non-discrimination and non-identity—that is not the same as indistinct inclusion or generalising but instead implies that the process of becoming is invariably open to any “whatever–everything–singular”—might well be an act of love, one that exists outside the logics of recognition and in a space of interruption, ambivalence, and disturbance. There is no room for accountability, a constituent of the romantic love relationship that seems to satisfy rather than suspend the need to “recover an equilibrium,” to respond to an “always-already-there,” and to adjust to an “already established signified,” in which the risk of forging yet another normative form of affect is camouflaged as its refusal.

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a lamella. 3. The erotic is the punctuality of a temporal-corporeal ekstasis, the precipitating of orgasm. In the erotic, one always comes on time, which is neither the arrival at the destination of a satisfaction nor the recovery of an equilibrium. Rather, the erotic resides in the radical disequilibrium of the strange. 4. The erotic is the very movement of *signifiance*, the disjunct simultaneity of the achievement of sense and the fragmentation and proliferation of sensuous non-sense.” Haver concludes “The erotic ‘as such’ is a radical loss of self. But it is only from the perspective of the always-already-there of the preinvented Other World that the erotic can be conceived as loss or disintegration. [...] The erotic must be thought as a nonintegration rigorously equiprimordial with the putative integrity that is taken to be the self. [...] This non integration necessarily constitutes a ‘loss of self’ from the perspective of the constituted subjects we always already are.”

Haver, *The Body of This Death*, 138–39.

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## Act 7: Epilogue

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Sam, one of my recent lovers, was asking me about love last night. We meet in a natural wine bar nearby the train station. Ben is twenty-five. He shows up in a white shirt and a black leather jacket. He wears black jeans and a sharp pair of boots. His hair is dyed blonde. He sent me pictures on the app, and his body is covered in tattoos. I was skeptical to meet up, but the conversation we had online, though very short, was straightforward and smart, unusual for a guy of his age. He is clever, I thought. We order a glass of wine, and we sit outside. There is a small wharf on the canal, where people park their boats to access the bar. Sam was born in Los Angeles, where his grandparents still live, but grew up in New York. He has spent most of his young life in Germany, where his parents moved when he was six, or perhaps seven, I don't precisely recall. He lives in northern Munich, where he has just opened a project space with a group of friends, who are also his flatmates. He shows me pictures of the building, a big quasi-industrial site that was bombarded during the Second World War. It has since been abandoned. Thanks to the financial help of some private investors, it is now undergoing restoration. It will be turned into an art hub. Sam and his friends have planned one exhibition per month. A very ambitious program, I think. He has organised a trip to Turin, he tells me, where there is a museum of fruit that I have never heard of before. The third show in the project space will be about fruit. The gallery has been given to them for a year. After that, he says, he has plans to apply to Bard College. He is in town for three more weeks. He spent a few months working on a research project hosted by a private contemporary art museum run by a big American institution. Though he did not used to be, he is now a big fan of Duchamp. "Summer is great here," I tell him, "You should stay longer." At the end of April he is taking a two-week trip to the Balkans with the artist whom he is assisting at the academy of fine arts, somewhere in Germany. It's the same artist I worked with briefly back in the mid-2000s. It was my first job in the art world. The artist has a permanent installation in Milan, commissioned by a private foundation, that Sam is going to visit the following weekend. I spent months building up that installation, I tell him, with a bunch of other art students, who later became friends. It was almost twenty years ago. "Such a funny coincidence," he says. We order a second glass of wine. We both smoke. Sam is sort of charming in his own way, a quality that comes from his willingness to listen, a slightly disguised interest in what I have to say. Preceding what we both know is to come,



the moment is performative.<sup>43</sup> He asks me questions about my academic research. “Have you read *Testo Junkie*?” he asks. “Your approach reminds me of that.” For the first time, I rehearse my ideas with someone outside my circle of peers. We talk about Lacan, whose writings I struggle to fully understand. I tell him about how I have become Franny. I search my iCloud for the full quote and read it to him. I tell him about my love for Haver, while I reveal my dissatisfaction with the ethical non-monogamy of Loveless’s approach. We move into Phillips and Bersani. Though skeptical of the notion of impersonal intimacy I am attempting to explain, in the end he says, “it makes sense.” The promiscuity I advocate for is not, as Loveless seems to see it, an undesirable quality to which queer subjects are condemned but should make an effort to reject, I clarify to him. “I am meaninglessly engaging with theory,” I tell him, “Loveless says.” It’s the dissolution of the self, not its preservation, repair, restoration, or redemption, that the impersonal intimacy of Phillips and Bersani is all about. It’s a relational experiment worth celebrating rather than condemning. Despite our difficult coming-of-age, especially in relation to AIDS, isn’t it perhaps time for our queerness to be fashioned from joy rather than shame? Focussing on the potential of what our desire can do and how we can think rather than on what we don’t have—the ethical honesty, for instance, with which Loveless is so preoccupied—can be a transformative project, a non-redemptive one, that we should pursue. “I feel that Loveless’s project, instead, is about the prescription of a new form of normativity,” I timidly smile at him. We order a third glass of wine. He has a boiled egg with an anchovy on top of it. I leave food for later. “I am not trying to redeem the history of AIDS. Nor can the love for the subject matter eventually redeem me. I am just getting lost in it. That’s all I can do. And see what I will become. Nor, I confess, am I willing to conform to the historical consciousness of AIDS that I have inherited. When I did,

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43 ——— What I mean is exactly the following—in the preface to Renaud Camus’s *Tricks*, Roland Barthes writes: “But what I like best of all in *Tricks* are the preparations: the cruising, the alert, the signals, the approach, the conversation, the departure for the bedroom, the household order (or disorder) of the place. Realism finds a new site; it is not the *love scene* which is realistic (or at least its realism is not pertinent), it is the *social scene*. Two young men who do not know each other but know that they are about to become partners in a specific act, risk between them that fragment of language to which they are compelled by the trajectory which they must cover together in order to reach their goal.” A few weeks after his departure, I send Ben a text message with the aforementioned quote. Roland Barthes, preface to *Tricks*, by Renaud Camus (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1981), viii.

it simply didn't feel that great. What I can take from Bersani's impersonal intimacy is the idea that there is a different power of love, one in which this desire we've been discussing is celebrated rather than trivialised. I am not looking—not anymore—for the truth of AIDS as the monumental achievement of my research. The satisfaction now comes from the dissolution, and not the fortification, of that which I thought I wanted and desired. The impermanence and the insecurity of a promiscuous love encounter, and, moreover, the disturbance it creates in the experience of my pre-constituted self, something that has been constantly refashioned from the outside—and this disturbance is a chaos of pleasures, danger, and affects; and all of this, I have realised, is involved in my capacity to love, thus to become—thinking about promiscuity in these terms, I was trying to say, has been helpful in translating this sense of instability, of a non-reparative goal, into my research. I have abandoned any form of omnipotent control over the object of my love.” We pay and leave. We walk to a nearby cocktail bar, where we have a couple more drinks. It's packed with young kids, drunk and happy on their graduation day. We look at them and both realise how beautiful some are. When we reach the third and final bar, they are almost closing. They serve us drinks in plastic cups. I complain, unsuccessfully. “The bar is already closed,” they tell us. We sit on a bench in the nearby empty square. The light of the street lamps breaks on the gothic façade of the Church, one of my favorites in town. It's already almost 1 a.m. Sam tells me about his discarded career as an opera singer. He recorded an album as a child. “One of the songs was a hit,” he says. “Every single child in Germany knew it.” He seems both proud and ashamed of his success, even though, he confesses, he does not dislike the idea of being successful. “Popular, you mean?” I ask. “Both,” he replies. “Is there anything you are ashamed of?” he asks me. “There are plenty of things I did feel ashamed about for a long time,” I reply. “Perhaps, we should learn to embrace shame rather than to find a way around it. It shows us a conflict exists between the image of what we are supposed to be and of what we feel we are or want to be. It is an experience of failure, for it shows us we are unable to deal with the idea of knowing who we might eventually become. But, at the end of the day, we are never one thing or another. Isn't it just an illusion to think we know what we are? Lately, I have changed my perspective on things I thought I was sure about. Even in the context of my own research. But I don't dishonour anything I've written or said in the past, even though I might take distance from it. I look at it today. It's just there to remind me—Phillips and Bersani come to mind—that we

live in a provisional state, in a process of becoming.<sup>44</sup> The beauty of it is that we are unable to predict how this process will evolve. This obscure evolution is also the force of the potential of our self. The form of love we can experience, then, cannot be about anything other than a shared alertness, a momentary exchange and accordance.” I tell him about Franny. “I will never again say ‘I am this, I am that.’ Do you remember? That’s what she says at the end of her dream.” Drinks are over. The time to go home has come. Despite his youth, Sam is so astonishingly self-confident. He is as aware of his ideas as he is of his sexiness. He is not afraid of showing it. That excites me. The weight of our reciprocal drive for the pleasure of sex and love is now so very palpable in the air.

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44 ——— In the concluding chapter of *Intimacies*, Bersani recaps what impersonal intimacy is about. It does not entail “some truth about the self,” he writes, but rather, paraphrasing in other terms Phillips’ “process of becoming”, it has to do with “evolving affinities of being.” In this sense, impersonal intimacy is an experiment in “relational transformations” formulated as a “prioritizing of being over knowledge.” Such a radical gesture, moving from knowing to being, when transposed or performed within the epistemological ground of academic research, will definitely create a dissonance, which might open up to possibilities, or virtualities, other than those we have inherited so far. This might be one of the many possible ways to actualize a queer pedagogy such as Haver has defined it, one that is committed to be a form of interruption rather than of reproduction; one that refuses to participate in the struggle for intellectual hegemony; one where the surplus (intended in Haver’s terms as the erotics) and its perversity are celebrated rather than rejected as that which makes thinking to emerge. Bersani and Phillips, *Intimacies*, 123–24.

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## Act 8: Finale

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I've seen Sam a few other times. We had drinks. We attended a gallery opening. One evening, his last in town, I introduce him to a couple of my friends at a bar. Even though it is quite close to his apartment, we decide to go to my place. He likes the kitchen that my ex-boyfriend has designed. He finds my apartment cosier than his. Ben has an early train the following morning. It's late already, but he seems not to care. From the kitchen we move to the bedroom, and we make love. Sex with him is always so intensively beautiful and somehow new. We lay naked on my bed, my right arm under his neck, his face resting on my chest. I caress his head with my left hand. The base is soft, where new hair is growing in underneath those dyed blonde. "I've been looking all day for a hairdresser," he tells me. "I wanted to cut my hair before the Balkans. But they were all fully booked." "You're sexy anyway," I say, "despite your frizzy hair." The rest of the night unfolds in moments of silence between conversations about Sam's gallery project and the tattoos his body, almost entirely, is covered with. There is a big black-and-white snake on his lower abdomen. It twists in on itself to resemble a looped rope, the head reaching his left hip. "It's my favourite of them all," I tell him. "It's my least favourite," he confesses. "I got it made a long time ago, I was a teenager, it was an experiment to make my tattoo friend happy. I think it does not fit with the other tattoos I have." "I disagree," I reply, "or perhaps it's just because I like snakes." Sex with Sam is always followed by long talks about ideas that revolve around my research. I am not sure whether he genuinely wants to know more or is trying to understand something I am unable, or perhaps refuse, to understand. The last night feels like the conclusion of a book we have been reading together sometimes. I feel a strange energy in the room. I touch his body in an act of reassurance, even though there is nothing to reassure him about. Will we see each other again? I am sure we will. "I hope you'll be back in town soon. We can go to the beach this summer," I tell him. He nods in agreement. We stay in silence for a little while. Who knows what we are each individually thinking. "There is a beautiful passage in one of Wojnarowicz's writings," I randomly tell him. "He meets up with a tattooed man. The moment before sex is handsomely described. It's a scene that returns in one of David's experimental films. The tattooed man unhooks the buttons of David's trousers with his teeth. The reader is left in limbo to imagine what happens next. The scene ends with a different kind of climax. David writes something

along these lines—‘in loving him, I have been freed from the silence of my interior life.’ His experience of anonymous sex is framed as one about love—‘in loving him’ is repeated several times.” For Wojnarowicz, recognition is not necessary to make an experience of love; it is about the effect of the impermanence and the finitude of life. Love, in this sense, can always be reinvented, every time, in repetition. It is the discovery of the original communicative function of our bodies—obliterated by the rules that govern us—before the necessity of establishing an identity prevails. It is an experience in which we consciously take the risk of opening up to our most intimate being in the presence of the otherness of the other. It is the polymorphous potential for love, with which Mario Mieli calls for a gay communism. “Are you familiar with Mario Mieli?” I ask. “I am not,” he replies. “Mieli was an Italian queer theorist,” I explain, “before queer theory existed. His most well-known book, *Towards a Gay Communism*—beautiful title, isn’t it?—was published at the end of the 1970s, only a few months after Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, the success of which, needless to say, put Mieli’s contribution in the shade.”<sup>45</sup> *Towards a Gay Communism* is a complex book along the lines of Guy Hocquenghem’s *Homosexual Desire*. Read from the vantage point of the present, it might sound somewhat ‘outdated’. Nevertheless, before anyone else, Mieli pointed to the subversive potential of queerness and queer politics—namely, the possibility of constituting new forms of alliances by celebrating the porousness and the boundlessness of any categorical definition of (social, cultural, sexual) identity. His idea of promiscuity, in the same vein as my reading of Wojnarowicz’s experience, is also freed from the necessity of an intersubjective recognition, in favour of the shock of the contingent singularity of the other, of any other. This, of course, requires emotional investment, contrary to the ideas of those who think that promiscuity is the exact negation of the commitment we expect in love. “Mieli came up with a beautiful expression: the perverse polymorphous potential for love,” I continue. “I like it very much. What

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45 ——— In 1977 the Italian publisher Einaudi sent to print Mario Mieli’s *Elementi di Critica Omosessuale* [Elements of a homosexual critique], a revised version of the author’s MA dissertation. The book has become a manifesto of the Italian gay liberation movement, of which Mieli was a key figure before deciding to take distance from it. The first English translation was published independently by Gay Men’s Press in London three years after the Italian edition, under the title of *Homosexuality and Liberation: Elements of a Gay Critique*. *Towards a Gay Communism* is the title of a recently edited version published by Pluto Press in 2018. The title derives from the last chapter of the book. In the Italian edition the chapter’s title reads “Verso il gaio comunismo,” where the term “gaio” ambiguously refers to both ‘gay’ and ‘joyful’.

I find interesting about it is that his polymorphous potential for love—which he says originally characterises childhood rather than adulthood—is a different (and perhaps a bit spicier) way of describing Bersani’s impersonal intimacy.<sup>46</sup> The joyful possibility of embracing rather than resisting it is a political project for Mieli. By mining the heteronormative values of capitalism, it can lay the symbolic foundations for a different model of society. I am keen to understand what happens when we apply this polymorphic drive of pleasure and desire to academic research.” I think for a moment of Franny, and I realise that such a project requires a full and conscious embodiment of a marginalised position—uncomfortable though vertiginous, as Franny says. But it is

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46 ——— Mario Mieli’s argument is a political one. His theory and call for a “gay communism” recognises the power of capitalism in shaping society and sociality. The new modalities for building social alliances offered by queer politics and a queer revolt (Mieli uses the term *gay* as a synonym of our current use of *queer*) are a powerful way to disrupt the social order and undermine the power of capitalism, namely to contest and reconfigure all of those social values (not only related to social decency but also to the reproduction of capital) that have been embedded into a universalised model of heteronormativity. Mieli advocates for the idea of remaining outside the logics of the laws that govern us, including resisting any temptation to be assimilated into, and therefore legitimised by, neoliberal capitalism in order to comply with normative models—ideas that resurface in the works of many queer theorists, including Michel Foucault and, in particular, Lee Edelman and Leo Bersani. Everything that exceeds the logics of heteronormative capitalism is metabolised and recast into the market, according to Mieli. Thereby, the erotic multitude that characterises sex promiscuity, a terminology that echoes the perverse polymorphism of love, can be a political tool for mining and undoing the heteronormative logics of Western capitalism. “And the values of gay promiscuity are many,” Mieli writes, “most of all because it opens the individual up to a multiplicity and variety of relations, and hence positively gratifies the tendency that everyone has to polymorphism and ‘perversion’. [...] Each of us is a prism, a sphere, is mobile, and beneath and beyond the contradictions that presently oppose and negate us, each of us fits potentially together with anyone else, in a ‘geometry’, both real and imaginary, of free intersubjectivity.” Thus, the desire for pleasure (or Eros), the experiential practices of a queer erotics, a cross-fertilising knowledge of society and its politics, as well as the ambition for a kaleidoscopic (trans-subjective) community against the idealised heteronormative (economic and social) individualism—the same that has established faithfulness and honesty as values to be pursued—are altogether a revolutionary force to contribute to the achievement of his political project.  
 Mario Mieli, *Towards a Gay Communism. Elements of Homosexual Critique* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 122.

precisely the potential of that marginality at which the queer subject stares. "I want to read this book," Sam says. "I'll buy a copy and send it to you in Munich," I respond. We stay in silence for a little while. I give him a kiss on his closed eyes. I stand up, and I walk to the door. "I'll shower," I tell Sam, "before saying goodbye."





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**PART 5**  
**APPENDIX**

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## **Filmography from the AIDS Video Archive**

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- Adair, Peter. 1991. *Absolutely Positive*. USA: 90 mins.
- AIDS Films, producer. 1987. *AIDS: Changing the Rules*. USA: 26 mins.
- Atlas, Charles. 1991. *We Interrupt this Program*. USA: 60 mins.
- Barens, Edgar A. 1988. *Automonosexual*. USA: 3 mins.
- Barnette, M. Neema. 1989. *Are You With Me?* USA: 17 mins.
- Beck, Robert. 1990. *The Feeling of Power*. USA: 9 mins.
- Benoit, Patricia. 1988. *Set Met Ko*. USA: 28 mins.
- Biella, Peter and Frances Negron. 1989. *AIDS in the Barrio: Eso no me pasa a mi* [This can never happen to me]. USA: 30 mins.
- Bordowitz, Gregg. 1986. *Some Aspects of a Shared Lifestyle*. USA: 22 mins.
- and Jean Carlomusto. 1988. *Seize Control of the FDA*. USA: 25 mins.
- and Jean Carlomusto. 1988. *Work Your Body*. USA: 28 mins.
- , Jean Carlomusto, John Greyson and Catherine Gund. 1990. *Ray Navarro's Memorial Video*. USA: 10 mins.
- Bressan Jr., Arthur J. 1985. *Buddies*. USA: 81 mins.
- Brook, Tom. 1986. *Hero of My Own Life*. USA: 24 mins.
- Brose, Lawrence. 1986. *An Individual Desires Solution*. USA: 16 mins.
- Burke, Andre, 1986. *A*. USA: 8 mins.
- C-Hundred Film Corp. *Direct Effect*. USA: 4 thirty-second AIDS spots.
- Carlomusto, Jean. 1987. *The Helms Amendment*. USA: 8 mins.
- and Alexandra Juhasz. 1987. *Women and AIDS*. USA: 28 mins.
- and Maria Maggenti. 1988. *Doctors, Liars and Women: AIDS Activists Say No To Cosmo*. USA: 23 mins.
- Alexandra Juhasz. 1988. *Prostitutes, Risk and AIDS: It's Not What You Do, But How You Do What You Do*. USA: 28 mins.
- Gregg Bordowitz. 1992. *Portraits of People Living with HIV* [n. 1 and 9]. USA: Two ten-minute video.

- Castellaneta, Paul Joseph. 1990. *Together Alone*. USA: 85 mins.
- Cucher, Sammy. 1990. *Corpus*. USA: 18 mins.
- Cypriano, Tania. 1989. *Viva Eu!* [Long Live Me!]. USA and Brazil: 18 mins.
- DiFeliciantonio, Tina. 1986. *Living with AIDS*. USA: 28 mins.
- Dickoff, Micki. 1987. *Too Little. Too Late*. USA: 48 mins.
- . 1989. *Mother, Mother*. USA: 30 mins.
- DIVA TV. 1989. *Target City Hall*. USA: 28 mins.
- . 1989. *Pride 69–89*. USA: 26 mins.
- . 1990. *Like A Prayer*. USA: 28 mins.
- Durand, Yannick. 1988. *Mildred Pearson: When You Love a Person*. USA: 9 mins.
- Durrin, Ginny. 1986. *The AIDS Movie*. USA: 26 mins.
- . 1988. *Til Death Do Us Part*. USA: 20 mins.
- Epstein, Rob and Peter Adair. 1986. *The A.I.D.S. Show: Artists Involved With Death and Survival*. USA: 57 mins.
- Fenn, John and Kathleen Laughlin. 1987. *All of Us and AIDS*. USA: 30 mins.
- França, Rafael. 1991. *Prelude to an Announced Death*. USA and Brazil. 5 mins.
- Friedman, Peter and Jean-Francois Brunet. 1991. *Fighting In Southwest Louisiana*. USA: 27 mins.
- Gale, Adam. 1992. *Rubber Queen: An AIDS Docu-diary*. USA: Six thirty-minute episodes.
- GANG. 1990. *Video Interruptions*. USA: Eight ten-second AIDS spots.
- Gay Men's Health Crisis. 1989. *The Safer Sex Shorts*. USA: 25 mins.
- Giannaris, Constantine. 1988. *Jean Genet is Dead*. UK: 33 mins.
- George, Carl Michael. 1989. *DHPG Mon Amour*. USA: 12 mins.
- Getchell, Franklin. 1986. *Sex, Drugs and AIDS*. USA: 18 mins.

- Gran Fury. 1990. *Kissing Doesn't Kill*. USA: Four thirty-second AIDS spots.
- Grenier, Vincent. 1991. *Out in the Garden*. USA and Canada: 15 mins.
- Greyson, John. 1986. *Moscow Does Not Believe In Queers*.  
Canada: 27 mins.
- . 1987. *The AIDS Epidemic*. Canada: 5 mins.
- . 1989. *The Pink Pimpernel*. Canada: 32 mins.
- Gund, Catherine. 1988. *Simon Watney Speaks About Clause 28 and Homophobia in the United Kingdom*. USA: 27 mins.
- and Ray Navarro, 1989. *Bleach, Teach, and Outreach*. USA: 25 mins.
- Gutierrez-Gomez, Jose. 1987. *Ojos Que No Ven* [Eyes That Fail to See]. USA: 51 mins.
- Jacoby, Roger. 1980 *How to Be a Homosexual Part I*. USA: 35 mins.
- . 1982 *How to Be a Homosexual Part II*. USA: 15 mins.
- Jarman, Derek. 1987. *The Last Of England*. UK: 90 mins.
- . 1990. *The Garden*. UK: 95 mins.
- . 1993. *Blue*. UK: 76 mins.
- Jawitz, Merle, Sherry Busbee, Joanne Basinger and Sheila Ward. 1989. *He Left Me His Strength*. USA: 14 mins.
- Joseph, Jamal. 1992. *Reunion*. USA: 30 mins.
- Julien, Isaac. 1987. *This is not an AIDS Advertisement*. UK: 9 mins.
- Kalin, Tom. 1986. *Like Little Soldiers*. USA: 3:30 mins.
- . 1987. *News From Home*. USA: 7:00 mins.
- . 1988. *They Are Lost to Vision Altogether*. USA: 10 mins.
- . 1991. *Finally Destroy Us*. USA: 4:00 mins.
- Kleiman, Vivian. 1992. *My Body's My Business*. USA: 16 mins.
- Kuchar, George. 1987. *Video Album 5: The Thursday People*. USA: 60 mins.
- Kybartas, Stashu. 1987. *Danny*. USA: 20 mins.

Hammer, Barbara. 1986. *Snow Job: The Media Hysteria of AIDS*. USA: 7:30 mins.

———. 1990. *Sanctus*. USA: 18 mins.

———. 1991. *Vital Signs*. USA: 9 mins.

Hassuk, Adam and Robert Huff. 1989. *We are NOT Republicans*. USA: 13 mins.

Hilferty, Robert. 1990. *Stop the Church*. USA: 23 mins.

——— and Robert Huff. 1991. *TAG Helms*. USA: 5 mins.

Hollibaugh, Amber. 1988. *The Second Epidemic*. USA: 27 mins.

——— and Gini Reticker. 1990. *Women and Children Last*. USA: 12 mins.

Hubbard, Jim. 1989. *Elegy in the Streets*. USA: 30 mins.

———. 1991. *Two Marches*. USA: 9 mins.

———. 1992. *The Dance*. USA: 8 mins.

Huestis, Mark. 1986. *Chuck Solomon: Coming of Age*. USA: 59 mins.

Huff, Robert. 1985. *The Asshole Is A Tense Hole*. USA: 1:58 mins.

———. 1988. *We're Desperate, Get Used to It*. USA: 3 mins.

———. 1988. *AIDS News: A Demonstration*. USA: 7 mins.

———. 1989. *Rockville is Burning*. USA: 25 mins.

Leigh, Carol. 1988. *Safe Sex Slut*. USA: 2:30 mins.

Leonard, Zoe and Catherine Gund. 1989. *Keep Your Laws Off Our Bodies*. USA: 12 mins.

———. 1991. *East River Park*. USA: 5 mins.

Lester, Cas. 1985. *A Plague On You*. UK: 22 mins.

Life, Reggie. 1989. *Seriously Fresh*. USA: 28 mins.

Marshall, Stuart. 1984. *A Journal of the Plague Year*. UK: 5 monitors installation, 10 mins each screen.

———. 1984. *Bright Eyes*. UK: 80 mins.

———. 1991. *Over Our Dead Bodies*. UK: 50 mins.

———. 1991. *Robert Marshall*. UK and Canada: 10 mins.

- Moriyasu, Ann Akiko. 1987. *Gab*. USA: 10:22 mins.
- Morrison, Richard. 1991. *Bust*. USA: 14 mins.
- Newby, Christopher. 1991. *Relax*. UK: 22 mins.
- Paper Tiger Television. 1988. *Transformer/AIDS*. USA: 28 mins.
- Parmar, Pratibha. 1987. *Reframing AIDS*. UK: 35 mins.
- Portillo, Lourdes. 1989. *Vida*. USA: 18 mins.
- Riggs, Marlon T. 1989. *Tongues Untied*. USA: 55 mins.
- . 1992. *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien (No Regret)*. USA: 38 mins.
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The book unfolds against the presence of an absence, a certain ghost or spectre that has permeated the research: a decade of experimental and independent AIDS moving images that the author have metaphorically cruised as an experiment in building alternative knowledge about HIV/AIDS. Within this context, Tommaso Speretta argues for the unrepresentability of HIV/AIDS and for the failure of the logics of representation arising from the advent of AIDS to “speak” the unspeakable.

In its incessant entanglement of the personal with the theoretical, the research has been conducted by means of a methodology that the author defines promiscuous. “How can we transform the epistemological ground into a cruising ground?” Speretta asks. The book invites the reader to consider the potential outcomes of a promiscuous research methodology that shape the experience of knowledge production not in the direction of a unitary, stable, and ultimate, therefore hegemonic, intellectual achievement but, to the contrary, towards a site of difference, of all forms of becoming.

Applied to the curatorial field, Speretta advances the following questions: Can cruising and the queer experience of sexual promiscuity be used as a research method? Can the curatorial be a place to perform promiscuity as a way to escape the normalising discourse perpetuated by society and problematise the trajectories imposed by art history? Framed in this light, the curatorial becomes a space of appearance that embraces the uncertainty, the risk, the atemporality, and the obliqueness of an experience of cruising. In so doing, it seeks to create the conditions for multiple subjectivities to emerge and co-exist; in other words, for being in common with no need to strictly embrace any condition of belonging.

**Tommaso Speretta** is an independent curator and writer. He is the author of *Rebels Rebel. AIDS, Art and Activism in New York, 1979–1989* (Ghent: MER, Paper Kunsthalle, 2014).



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