



LGBTQ

## How AIDS Changed Art Forever

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Aug 21 2017, 6:45pm



David Wojnarowicz (1954-1992), "Democracy," 1990, Black-and-white silkscreen print, 23 x 20 inches, © The Estate of David Wojnarowicz, Courtesy of ClampArt, New York City.

**Three recent exhibitions show that though HIV is no longer a death sentence, the art world is still grappling with its psychological toll.**

After the first show to examine the artistic response to the HIV/AIDS crisis opened at a major, mainstream US institution, the *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter let out a giantsigh of relief. "What took museums so long?" he wrote in his review of *Art AIDS America*, which debuted at Washington's Tacoma Art Museum in 2015, before traveling to the Bronx Museum and closing in Chicago earlier this year.

The use of art as a coping mechanism and a call to action in the face of adversity is, of course, nothing new. The first artwork related to AIDS was likely completed in 1981, the same year the CDC released their first official report of the disease. Since then, institutions like Visual AIDS, a nonprofit that uses art to increase AIDS awareness, and the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art have risen to support artists fighting the disease through beauty, drama and sarcasm.

But Cotter had a point. It seems mind-boggling that it'd taken three decades for the art world to truly take stock of the epidemic. Today, just two years later, three recent and current exhibitions in New York have been dedicated to work about AIDS activism and art.

"People who lived through that epidemic experienced in a lot of ways the same kind of trauma that people experience during war times, and it takes decades for people to be able to address that," Greg Ellis told me. Ellis is the curator of *Screaming in the Streets: AIDS, Art, Activism*, currently on view at ClampArt gallery in Chelsea. After the epidemic began claiming the lives of those around him in the 80s, he began receiving and collecting archival material from his friends, many of them artists and activists. The show is intended to "shape the discussion for the history of what AIDS activism is," and illustrate interconnected relationships among major artists at the time—specifically in the East Village—and the collaborative spirit that existed among them.

*Screaming in the Streets* features pieces by household names like Keith Haring and Nan Goldin, as well as ephemera from queer "radical spaces" popular at the time like the Gaiety, The Club Baths and Danceteria. Those venues, like the artists Ellis featured, further developed the social network of queer artists in New York at the time. Because HIV/AIDS had never lost its "gay cancer" stigma, it quickly became fuel for anti-queer rhetoric, which would segregate the community even deeper. And without much help from the government, activists and artists would often hold fundraisers in those spaces—where many of those relationships were formed.

The exhibition also features many of the most famous works of activist art produced during the era, from groups like Gran Fury and the Silence = Death project. But while "a lot of public representation of HIV/AIDS activism has centered on street protest and the really important work of organizations like ACT UP," said curator Stephen Vider, "some of the activism that happened in private has gone less noticeable."

That's part of what drove Vider to curate *AIDS at Home: Art and Everyday Activism*, on view at the Museum of the City of New York until October 22. In it, Vider takes a deeper look at how the crisis affected the home space specifically, and how artists and activists managed to cope.

*AIDS at Home* is designed to feel like a real four-bedroom apartment; each room tells part of the exhibition's story. As visitors navigate the space, they move seamlessly from a lesson in activism history—exploring the impact of the crisis on caretaking, housing, and family for those affected, both at its height and today—into a survey of protest art. Highlights include *Bath Curtain*, a heart-wrenching 1992 painting by Hugh Steers depicting a man tending to his lover, and *Peter Hujar's Diagnostic Letter*, a 1987 letter from Hujar's doctor detailing his AIDS diagnostics, with a drawing by David Wojnarowicz of two men kissing over the writing. "I didn't want anybody to be able to leave the exhibition with a sense that HIV/AIDS is not urgent," Vider said.



Hugh Steers, *Bath Curtain*, 1992. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2016 Estate of Hugh Steers/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Urgency was one of the main features of *VOICE = SURVIVAL*, presented by Visual AIDS and the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation, where curators Claudia Maria Carrera and Adrian Geraldo Saldaña examined voice as a medium used in AIDS activism. The multimedia exhibition, presented earlier this summer at The 8th Floor gallery, focused on the role of voice—both metaphorical and literal—in the fight against the crisis.

Archival audio works by David Wojnarowicz (including recordings from his answering machine of messages from Peter Hujar) and clips from activist and author Vito Russo's *Why We Fight* speech showed the dire urgency of the fight: "When future generations ask what we did in this crisis, we're going to have to tell them that we were out here today," Russo said then. And Gran Fury's *Read My Lips* series renders the metaphorical voice of activists into illustrated works, and proves that provocative messaging can be used as an effective tool in the fight against homophobia, according to Saldaña. (An additional selection of works are featured online at VOICE = SURVIVAL Expanded.)

Exhibitions like these that reckon with the weight of AIDS are giving audiences a chance to unpack the sheer psychological impact of the crisis. And other queer artists whose work deals with the epidemic, like Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Alvin Baltrop, Aziz + Cucher, Ron Athey, John Hanning and more, have snaked their way through the most prominent American galleries and museums this year. Their rise proves that though living with HIV is now far from the burden it once was, we're still figuring out, day by day, how to process its toll on the world.

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