



Image courtesy of 80 Washington Square East Gallery

AIDS Activist Legacies and the Gran Fury of the Past/Present

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How do you archive an activist movement? The archives of the AIDS epidemic embody a set of contradictions: the work they contain was meant to be immediate, in the moment, on the street, and carried a particular kind of temporal meaning. The idea of an AIDS activist poster having historical value was not a part of its initial intention, which was to find a way to get a message out, to intervene with urgency, to “stop the killing.” With this context in mind, how does an in-the-moment message become an historical document? The archives of both ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, which was the most important AIDS activist group of the late 1980s and 1990s) and the activist art collective Gran Fury (its name implying both the Plymouth model used by the NYPD for unmarked cars and the anger of the movement) provoke these questions. In many ways, the poignancy of an archive like the ACT UP and Gran Fury archives

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at the New York Public Library comes from its strangeness as a historical collection—the uncanny distance that these images now tell of another time, of a moment of emergency in which the image was understood to be a crucial element in the battle over AIDS. The year 2012 marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the emergence of both ACT UP and the NAMES Project's AIDS Memorial Quilt, as both were founded in 1987, with Gran Fury emerging a year later. The 2012 exhibition of the work of Gran Fury at the 80 Washington Square East Gallery at New York University evokes both the powerful anger of that moment, its fury, as well as the poignancy of its historical status.

It is incumbent on us to remember that the AIDS epidemic emerged as a crisis of signification (in Paula Treichler's terms, an "epidemic of signification") at the same time that it emerged as a medical and political crisis.¹ AIDS activism was powerful in its focus on issues of representation, in its trenchant understanding that the epidemic would be fought through visual culture, and through the struggle over the defining terminology of disease—advocating the term, "Person With AIDS" rather than, "AIDS victim," for instance. AIDS activism understood that issues of representation were ones of life and death. That is, perhaps, one of the most extraordinary aspects of the epidemic's legacy: the sense that representation and identity can matter in determining who will live and who will die. As Stuart Hall once stated, the answer to the question, "against the urgency of people dying in the street, what in god's name is the point of cultural studies?" is that representation matters, that in the case of AIDS, the question of who lives and dies is also, "a question of who gets represented and who does not" (Hall 1996, 272).²



IMAGE COURTESY OF 80 WASHINGTON SQUARE EAST GALLERY

Therefore, one of the questions of the archive of activist work is whether its urgency remains embedded within its remains. Much of AIDS activism was created for the template of the street. Gran Fury was about bus posters, bloody hands on stickers, stencils on the sidewalk—a demarcation of spaces in the city (primarily New York, but in other cities as well) as sites of interaction. Not only was this about the context of postering in New York City—enabled by the constant presence of construction sites providing temporary spaces on which "post no bills" was practically an incitement to poster—but it was also about an understanding of the rhythms and movements of bodies in the cityscape. For example, the stencil of a bloody hand on the sidewalk curb was as much about the message of blame and death as it was about the

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understanding that people look down before stepping into the street. Or, the sticker reading: “a person with AIDS used this phone” on a pay phone anticipated that its user would look at the phone before talking into it. Guerrilla culture thus incorporates the semiotics of the street within its larger meanings, even as, today, that street has been extended to the web.

So the idea of an activist archive is an oxymoron, a paradox, a definition fraught with poignancy. Not only do we think of activist art as about the immediacy of the present and not about history but the activist archive also reminds us that issues of social injustice remain unresolved and under erasure. It reminds us both of the fervent sense of immediacy of the activist temporal “now” and of how far we have not come.

ACT UP/Gran Fury and the AIDS Memorial Quilt represent the two poles of AIDS activism: at one end angry, radical, demanding civil disobedience; at the other, deploying Americana, craft, and families to demand that People With AIDS be understood as belonging in America. These organizations can also be seen in relation to questions of institutionalization and activism, the very questions that now preoccupy the Occupy movement. ACT UP and Gran Fury functioned as collectives with varying degrees of anonymity. The Quilt has functioned on a non-profit model, one designed for outreach and community engagement—quilt panels are used for educational programs and to create connections with communities affected by AIDS. The Quilt, understood by AIDS activists to be too soft, too feminine, not angry enough, was conceived by its founder Cleve Jones as a project that would bring in grandmothers and families to accept their relatives with AIDS, and it did.



IMAGE COURTESY OF 80 WASHINGTON SQUARE EAST GALLERY

The status of ACT UP/Gran Fury and the Quilt as archival work is also revealing. The NAMES Project is still in operation and continues to run an extensive education campaign—it will bring the entire quilt back to Washington, D.C. in Summer 2012 for its 25th anniversary. The NAMES Project defines itself as a “custodian” of the quilt, which earned the status of an “American Treasure” from the federal government in 2006. The AIDS Quilt presents enormous challenges as an archive, as its very materiality (craft, cloth, glitter, objects) is easily subject to decay. All the Quilt panels have been digitized, but its meaning is primarily derived from its object status, the signification of repurposed cloth, heritage, comfort, and tactile materiality. It is, in a certain sense, an archival nightmare—cumbersome, expensive, and deliberately oversized. Yet, the

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Quilt as archive is not a contradiction—it has always appeared to fit into a museum (and indeed several quilt panels are in the collection of the Smithsonian).

By contrast, the archiving of ACT UP and Gran Fury is more paradoxical. The NYU exhibition of Gran Fury strategically rendered the work present through a gallery aesthetic—the street aesthetic of the work was transformed into the art context of the gallery. The exhibition was stunning, with images printed very large and bold, framing each room like an oversized tabloid. In a certain sense, this dramatic use of scale reenacted some of the urgency of the graphics' original message—the radical images and text appearing to shout out from the walls:

Kissing Doesn't Kill
Read My Lips
Art is Not Enough
You've Got Blood on Your Hands
AIDS: 1 in 61

This deployment of scale in the exhibit was enormously effective. Yet, in a certain sense, that aesthetic demonstrated the changed status of Gran Fury's work. Gran Fury was about the street—transformed into a gallery decades later, it could no longer carry its original shock and urgency (these works are all from 1988-1990, giving a sense of the compressed fury of those years). So, the images become poignant, moving emblems of a previous time, evocative of grief and sadness—especially for those gallery visitors who remember that time and those lost then. They thus become images of nostalgia in what they evoke of the clarity of mission of their time and of the sense that their message was a radical intervention in its time.

Yet, of course, Gran Fury's voice of rage is not gone. One of the key works in the Gran Fury exhibition was the display of thousands of copies of 100 and 50 dollar bills with a series of enraged responses on their reverse side:

Fuck Your Profiteering.
People are dying while you play business.

Why Are We Here?
Because your malignant neglect KILLS.

White Heterosexual Men Can't Get AIDS....
Don't Bank on It.

The powerful sense of outrage in the critique of the system in these works persists, even in an art gallery setting. While the willful erasure of the AIDS epidemic and its communities was the target of Gran Fury and ACT UP, their critique of the financial industry and the inequities of capital lives on, of course, in the Occupy Movement. Occupy has generated an enormous

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number of posters and images, enacting a broad range of debates and discourses through visual culture.³ As some of Occupy's slogans have taken hold across broad constituencies—the 99 Percent, the versatile signification of “occupy”—its indebtedness to AIDS activism is ever more present. The archive of AIDS activism lives on in the street.

Marita Sturken's work focuses on the relationship of cultural memory to national identity and issues of visual culture. She is the author of *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (California, 1997), *Thelma & Louise* (British Film Institute, 2000), *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (with Lisa Cartwright, Oxford, 2001, Second Edition, 2009), and co-editor, with Douglas Thomas and Sandra Ball-Rokeach, of *Technological Visions: The Hopes and Fears that Shape New Technology* (Temple, 2004). Her most recent book is *Tourists of History: Memory, Consumerism, and Kitsch in American Culture*, Duke University Press, 2007.

Notes

¹ Treichler, Paula. 1987. “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification.” *October* 43: 31-70.

² Hall, Stuart. 1996. “Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies.” In *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, edited by David Morley and Kwan-Hsing Chen. New York: Routledge.

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<http://civicpaths.uscannenberg.org/2011/10/the-visual-culture-of-the-occupation-month-one-and-counting/>