"Another Kind of Love: A Performance of Prosthetic Politics".
Debra Levine

There is a force within society that cannot be contained. Call it Queer Theory. Clearly no one could have predicted the visual representation of this theory.

---- Ray Navarro, 1990

What has happened is that there is no longer a supportive gay community with peer relations that support the necessity of keeping up safe-sex practices. Instead, many gay men meet other men for sex only on the Internet. When I speak with younger friends now, gay men who are having a lot of sex with people that they meet over the Internet or at clubs, I find that they almost never get tested, rarely talk about safe sex, rarely consciously think or talk about HIV at all. ...We have lost the strong sense of community around HIV discussion and activism that kept the issue front and center. For gay men, this is very dangerous.

----- Douglas Crimp, 2003

I presented the first version of this paper December 12, 2004 in Mexico City, at a conference sponsored by Enkidu Magazine entitled "AIDS and Culture."

The day I spoke, no more than twenty people attended any of the panels, including my fellow panelists. The topics included shamanic performance, homoerotic photography and safe sex lectures at orgies. As the day progressed, none of the panelists acknowledged the issue I found most shocking. Most presenters (gay, male and under thirty) identified themselves as HIV-positive. How could this happen now, in a cohort of intellectually engaged cultural scholars who have access to HIV prevention information and healthcare options? At the question-and-answer period after my panel, the "erotic" photographer, a man in his early forties, stood up, turned to the rest of the audience and exhorted them to attend to my narrative. He reminded the audience that there had been a
vibrant AIDS activist community in both the US and abroad, and declared that the knowledge produced by that community has already been forgotten.

What follows is a meditation on how affective relationships developed in the course of political praxis transmit and facilitate knowledge. I write about Ray Navarro, a dazzling, outspoken, proudly queer twenty-five year old Chicano-American AIDS activist: an artist, video-maker, and writer whose final work embodies the ethos of care for oneself and others produced by this political community. I interject this singular memory into the history of the AIDS crisis in order to disrupt the "smooth passage from past to future" (Nora 1994: 285) which has actively forgotten the unique practices of early AIDS activism. I write not to resurrect the past but to recuperate a future.

THE SHIFT

In the early- to mid-1980's, the political focus of the gay community in New York City abruptly shifted from issues of sexual liberation to the confluence of events now known as the AIDS crisis. This seismic event was marked by Larry Kramer's apocryphal 1987 rant at the gay and lesbian bookstore, A Different Light. Michael Petrelis recounts Kramer asking "half the audience to stand up and he said, 'You're all going to be dead in six months, now what are we going to do about it?" (Petrelis 2003: emphasis added). This moment has been memorialized as the birth of the AIDS activist group ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power.

The political shift cannot be imagined as a regression or a renunciation of the liberated sexual practices that flourished after the Stonewall riots. Erotic and
sexual relationships, a critical component of how individuals defined their relationship to the gay community, were integrated into AIDS political practice "without apology or compromise" (Halprin 1995: 108). Even as ACT UP members died from HIV-related opportunistic infections in increasing numbers, the commitment to the preservation of this element of gay culture intensified. Safer-sex methods were slowly incorporated as an ethics of AIDS activism both to prevent infection and to honor these bonds in the formation of a political community. Early in the AIDS epidemic, the negotiation of safer sex between members of ACT UP was truly an attempt at a care of the self, what Foucault views as an "ethos of freedom" (Foucault 1984: 9).

Responding to the impact of AIDS, activists re-contextualized gay sexuality to include the impact of HIV disease on members' bodies. This necessitated the creation of a "different economy of bodies and pleasures" (Foucault 1990: 159). Part of that economy was ordered through the concept of affinity and the practice of what I call a "prosthetic politics." Prosthetic politics enabled members disabled with physical complications from HIV and AIDS to retain their own creative, sexual and political identities. Rather than allowing PWAs (persons with AIDS) to relinquish an activist presence in the process of dying, affinity groups doubled as the site of both political action and active caregiving where the able bodied understood themselves as a prosthesis for the disabled body. After he was incapacitated, Ray Navarro engaged members of his affinity group as his agents to continue functioning politically and artistically. Through us he inserted his altered body back into the realm of the body politic.
AFFINITIES

I joined ACT UP in the spring of 1988. ACT UP became my community, my entire world. Vito Russo, a vocal, "out" PWA and author of The Celluloid Closet, accurately depicted this cosmos within a cosmos in his 1988 speech, Why We Fight:

Living with AIDS is like living through a war, which is happening only for those people who happen to be in the trenches ... And it's worse than a war, because during a war people are united in a shared experience. This war has not united us, it's divided us. It's separated those of us with AIDS and those of us who fight for people with AIDS from the rest of the population. (Russo 1988)

José Muñoz situates the binary articulated by Russo into spheres of affect. For Muñoz, working through Raymond William's term "structures of feeling," community is constituted and strengthened by the modes in which affect is performed. Reading Russo through Muñoz, there is a "national affect" which here could be described as straight or "heteronormative," displacing those affected by AIDS from a hegemonic "culture of consent." (Muñoz 2000: 68) It is essential that heteronormative affect not be read as a neutral operation against which AIDS-activist affect is portrayed as hysterical excess. Instead, the community Russo defines through the divide must be understood as a set of displaced or exiled subjects whose activism constitutes a point of solidarity in time. AIDS activism was not predicated on an essentialist gay identity, but on an ever-shifting set of concerns that often intersected with the social needs of many constituents within the gay community. Individuals acting through and with affinity groups developed fierce affective relationships because the construct of affinity accounted for Norma Alarcón's concept of "identities in difference"
(Muñoz 2000: 67). Action and affect were the two key components inherent in the concept of affinity when ACT UP adopted it as a theoretical organizing structure; what AIDS activists added to that equation, given the conditions of our political struggle, was the necessity of support.

Affinity groups, conceived by the Spanish anarchists in the 1930's, were small groups of individuals whose "kinship ties were replaced by deeply empathetic human relationships ... nourished by common revolutionary ideas and practice." (Bookchin 1986: 221). Originally designed to be a catalyst for revolution, affinity groups became micro-sites of resistance: politically inspired alternative-lifestyle formations existing within dominant culture. ACT UP, already embedded within the gay community, which by necessity had formed "intensely experimental and variegated lifestyles" (Bookchin 1986: 222), recovered the use of affinity as an organizing structure to support independent individual political praxis within the larger organization.

Imagine ACT UP through the laws of physics, as self-determined gendered and raced celestial bodies orbiting around a combustible source of affective energy, which ACT UP defined as anger. Bodies were activated by anger but magnetized by intellectual, political, erotic and aesthetic attraction. Some individuals formed affinity groups based on specific subjectivities or issues and remained in tight orbit; others were natural satellites revolving around sick bodies; and still other affinity groups were constituted as quick responders to a provocation: like meteors, they flared up and flamed out. Bodies were in
constant movement, reconfiguring and adapting to the evolving political climate as well as the pressing health needs of PWA members.

Gregg Bordowitz recalls: "ACT UP was a kind of anarchist-inspired ideal. Someone could stand up and say 'I'm doing this action, who is interested in this action? Meet me in the back corner.' It was about stepping up, it wasn't about delegation ... it was the part of the affinity groups to constitute the larger group" (Bordowitz 2004). In the summer of 1988 I stood up on the floor of ACT UP and asked for collaborators for an AIDS education project at El Museo del Barrio. That fall, Ray and I conducted an after-school safe-sex workshop for teenagers. At El Museo, we curated an exhibition of their artwork that focused on the impact of AIDS in their East Harlem neighborhood. Ray produced a videotape incorporating images from the workshops as part of the installation. Through that collaborative experience, and countless others which followed, Ray became an intimate member of my affective ACT UP affinity group.

SUBJECTS OF DESIRE

Ray developed many intimate relationships through his political and artistic praxis. And we all came together to care for Ray when he became symptomatic. Ray completed two artistic works in the month before he died. He wrote an essay for an exhibition, An Army of Lovers: AIDS and Censorship (1990), through Aldo Hernandez. He created Equipped (1990), a triptych of photographs, through Zoe Leonard. Ray needed Aldo and Zoe because he could no longer see, walk or touch. He could barely hear. Aldo and Zoe, along with Catherine, Gregg, Ellen, Kim, Julie, Lola, Tracy, Robert, Jean and me, were
one self-selected affinity group produced by ACT UP, trained to orbit around Ray. When affinity groups were organized to protect activists during demonstrations, a key component of the group was the support person whose "role" was to be:

the personal extension of the care and concern an affinity group shares among its members, an extension of the need all the participants have to see that individuals who participate in nonviolent direct action are not isolated, neglected, and overburdened because of their political statement. (Alach 2004)

Our activist bodies, produced by ACT UP, applied the same ethic towards care-giving responsibilities when PWAs in our affinity groups became ill.

The PWA was always portrayed in the dominant media as a "victim" destined for a certain death. Activist art practice, never wavering from privileging the PWA's subjectivity, creatively inverted the "typology of signs that promises to identify the dreaded object of desire (the infected body) in the final moments of its own self destruction" (Watney 1993: 207). Attacking cultural representation of the HIV-positive body in the media, ACT UP unveiled the hegemonic biases around the social construction of the AIDS crisis. Collectives of activist artists and video producers such as the Silence=Death Project, Testing the Limits Collective, Gran Fury, and Ray's very own DIVA TV (Damn Interfering Video Activists) took it upon themselves to create non-commodified alternative images which were distributed to maximize political impact, "usually on TV, out of doors, being mailed, miniaturized or just given away ... [work which] bursts forth from the edges of its frames and through the gallery doors seeking liberation" (Navarro 1990). The force of these collectives, manifested in the counter-images and counter-narratives that appeared in both dominant and alternative media,
were works of "art and invention – which communicates with an extremity of play, of sovereignty, even of ecstasy" (Nancy 1991: 7).

Ray's final two works are the artistic trace of an activist force. Jean Luc Nancy in *The Inoperative Community* calls this "the challenge of our times ... an art or thought adequate to politics and a politics adequate to art" (Nancy 1991: 8). His essay and photographic triptych added to the accumulation of counter-imagery working to eradicate the stigma surrounding the PWA body. The political performance of this artmaking, through Zoe and Aldo's participation as prosthetics, introduces a new dimension to what could be considered the "affected body." Their prosthetic praxis was just one kind of "force which could not be contained" (Navarro 1990). In conceptualizing this work, Ray engages his own question regarding the visual representation of queer theory.

**EVOLUTION OF PROSTHETIC PRAXIS**

1989. Ray and his lover Tony traveled to the Fifth International AIDS Conference in Montreal with DIVA TV, to document the ACT UP demonstrations calling for "parallel track" drug testing. During the demonstration, Tony contracted PCP (pneumocystis carinii pneumonia), and we in New York scrambled to send money to Canada to pay for his hospitalization. Neither Ray nor Tony had been aware of their HIV status before Tony got sick; now Ray's friends had to contend with the notion that he too was probably HIV-positive.

1990. Ray's friends and acquaintances from ACT UP had transformed themselves into his Army of Lovers, an affinity group held together by a love for Ray and for those who loved him. We had all been taking shifts with Ray in the
hospital, sleeping in bed with him, cleaning his body, wiping his lips with glycerin, reading, singing and gossiping with him, fighting and negotiating with doctors in the hospital, and sneaking in an acupuncturist. Ray left the hospital for a brief time before his last birthday, a month before he died. Zoe talks about the phone call she received from Ray during that time, asking her to help him create *Equipped*:

I was surprised when he asked me to come over and talk to him. I was taken aback but a little honored. He expressed that he had a piece he wanted to make and he was blind at the time. He couldn't make it. He was in bed, he couldn't move around and he was blind. He could hear but it was impaired. He wanted me to make this piece for him. I just agreed. (Leonard 2004)

*Equipped* consists of three black and white images: [image: wheelchair.jpg] a horizontal photograph, 12 3/8" by 18 5/8," of Ray's upside down wheelchair lying outdoors on asphalt entitled, "HOT BUTT;" a 12 ¼ by 18 ½ " horizontal photograph of his walker lying on its side in the dark narrow entryway of his building entitled "STUD WALK;" and a vertical photograph, 18 5/8" by 12 3/8" of his cane propped upside down against a door entitled, "THIRD LEG." The signs hung centered beneath their respective images. The images were framed in wood sprayed to a high gloss finish with Crayola "flesh" colored paint to simulate plastic prosthetic material. The images hung on the gallery walls eight to ten inches apart.

Zoe describes her meeting with Ray and her perception of her role:

He described the piece. And we made some kind of a plan...But I'd been doing some collaborative work at that point and I kind of turned it over in my head and I realized that this isn't collaboration in the traditional sense. This is not about my ideas meeting somebody else's ideas. This is about becoming a conduit for someone else's ideas. Becoming an extension of
their body. Because I could see, I could operate the camera. I could choose the color. It was not going to be a collaborative thing or a collective project. It was about becoming his hands. (Leonard 2004)

A prosthesis is a device of some sort, which enhances one's limited abilities. It also authenticates a site of rupture: it exposes the failed part of the anatomy. Healthy activist bodies were configured as prosthetics, fleshly machines to fill the holes indelibly left by infection. But even if a prosthesis is intimately connected with a body so as to assist its function, it can never attain a full union: it will always be alien. This process of prosthetic politics can function only if each body accepts its singularity and then works in a state of what Nancy calls "beings-in-common." (Fynsk 2001: xxiv) For Nancy, acceptance of this state of commonality articulates the "between" that joins the two beings and defines them (even as they define it). The otherness of this voice is always the different voice of community (Fynsk 2001: xxiv). Zoe and Ray created this voice in the making of *Equipped*.

I suspect Ray chose to make a photographic piece for two reasons. First, he had been collaborating with Catherine Gund on a critique of AIDS activist discourse, which privileged white gay men over people of color and women. As a lesbian and a gay Chicano male, they highlighted the price minority subjects pay by joining a predominantly white gay male movement. Ray and Catherine argued that alienated self-representations in photography by minority artists "record a counter-memory" which "explodes the stability of the official history," thus highlighting stratification of resources along the lines of race and gender not only in dominant culture but in ACT UP itself (Saalfield and Navarro 1991: 347).
Their article, "Shocking Pink Praxis," also deconstructed the value-laden practice of captioning demonstration photographs in the dominant media (e.g., photos of dynamic bodies being carried away by police during civil disobedience, with a caption reading, "AIDS Victims"). Quoting Barthes' discussion of photography, they cautioned that "a photograph is a message without a code, until it is captured or captioned" (Saalfied and Navarro 1991: 345). The captions of Equipped – "HOT BUTT," "STUD WALK" and "THIRD LEG" – link ordinary objects associated with disability to notions of fetishized queer desire.

Secondly, because Ray and Catherine reference Barthes in their article, I assume that Ray also looked to him in making the decision to use photography rather than video. Barthes refers to cinema as a "community of images" (Barthes 1981: 3). Forgive my slippage in media, but Ray, a collective member of DIVA TV, opted for singularity rather than community in Equipped. The common theme is of the machine, built to aid movement, which has been inverted and abandoned. Ray used photography to resist forward camera movement, to indicate a halt in production and to freeze time. In the photograph of the wheelchair, the fleshy leather seat is what connects to the asphalt. The smooth steel wheels, looking like cogs in a watch mechanism, are perfectly still. The curve of the wooden cane rests on the floor instead of gripped in a warm hand; the walker is not buffered by its rubber tipped ends but prone on the tile of the hall. All these prosthetic devices are now obstacles in the path of others.

Equipped is a fetish containing a metonymic object. There are so many transferences involved: photographs conceived in Ray's head, machines
employed by his body, translated to Zoe's brain, located by her eyes through the lens of a camera, imprinted as a negative, developed as a positive, wrapped in a pinkish prosthetic frame which then became an art object exhibited in a gallery and sold at an auction to raise funds for ACT UP. It is an object imbued with healing and commodity value. And its title, *Equipped*, tantalizingly engages issues of sexual fetishism and desirability in disability.

Ray evaded the political problems associated with the photographic portrayal of the body with AIDS by representing himself through three intermediary objects he depended on for circulation in the world. In doing so, he also cleverly invoked post-colonialist desire for the other, specifying that photograph frame be constructed from pinkish colored plastic – the "flesh-color" of prosthetic limbs. Ray's metonym for his brown body is both circumscribed and supported by this artificial white flesh.

Although I have attempted some description and offered some interpretation of *Equipped*, I feel compelled to say that the photographs do not move me. I am happy that in my interview with Zoe, she reminded me that *Equipped* is really a conceptual work. Staring over and over at the wheelchair photograph, I find beauty in the reflection of the asphalt on the outside metal edge of the seat. There also is a small object lying on the ground, covered by a leaf. My gaze often settles on the leaf as a potential entrée into the photo. But it doesn't take me far. The chair is smack dab in the middle of the photo and it blocks me from entering.
I suppose that is part of the point. Ray was fully aware of where he was going. The work points out the instabilities, the impermanence of affinities. We could only go so far with him. As he began to disappear, we disappeared too. In *Elective Affinities*, Goethe observes, "affinities really become interesting only when they bring about separations" (Goethe 1963: 40).

Making *Equipped*, Zoe was the invisible body in the process, the prosthetic device that is unacknowledged in all the links most spectators could now bring to the piece. However, what I see when I look at the photographs is that performance of affinity. I see Zoe lifting Ray out of his wheelchair in Tompkins Square Park, propping him against a fence so she and he would be facing the same angle, turning the chair over and asking, "Background? Do you want to be able to see a tree? Do you want to be able to see a bench?" I can imagine Ray’s response, but I no longer hear it in my mind. His body and voice are ever slipping away from this frame.

*Equipped* is a placeholder for the time between Ray's death and now. It has been shown only one other time, at a Day of the Dead exhibition in 1991, at the Los Angeles Photography Center. The original piece has languished in storage at an activist archive in Ohio. Barthes says "there is nothing surprising, then, if sometimes, despite its clarity, the punctum should be revealed only after the fact, when the photograph is no longer in front of me, and I think back on it" (Barthes 1981: 53). Fourteen years later I realize the punctum is the affinity we all shared for Ray and each other. I have performed a romantic archeology of my past to resurrect this work: pulling work prints of the photographs from Zoe;
hounding Patricia, Ray’s mother, for her replicas of the plaques; digging through boxes and boxes of Art Positive materials in Aldo’s tiny East Village apartment for a copy of the exhibition essay; and visiting with Aldo, Gregg, Zoe and Catherine to recover more than their "official" memories of Ray recounted elsewhere.

But I too am a subject in this archeology of affinity. I have used my current identity as a scholar to reconnect relationships that have dissipated over time. Douglas Crimp has warned that activism suppresses mourning. Lola and Julie, Catherine and Gregg, all cite Ray’s death as a catalyst to their decision to separate from ACT UP. I would argue that separation from ACT UP, the dissolution of affective bonds, induces melancholia for the affinities of activism. I have come to understand that I am writing because I have refused to fully grieve the loss of the activist cosmology. The political implications of this refusal echo in the present discourse regarding recidivism in safe-sex practices.

Activism, as represented by ACT UP, was far more than joining a demonstration to shout at some symbol of authority. Because the group was constituted as an assemblage of fragments, cantankerous and desiring bodies attempting to connect through affinities, we were held in a force field that offered the individual support from the collective. We all miss that feeling, even those younger, politicized people who have never experienced it. Several months ago, someone remarked to me that ACT UP was the last great possible movement – that it could not exist in this day and age. My first impulse was to disavow that statement, but my disavowal leads me back to my own melancholia.
Ann Cvetkovich, in her book, *An Archive of Feelings*, recounts oral testimonies of former activists to offer a public space for the resolution of melancholia. Several contemporary queer theorists have recuperated melancholia as a potential space where rage converts into activism through a psychoanalytic alchemical conversion. Crimp calls for public discussions of creative erotic connections to counter the shame induced by the “failures” of gay men to uphold an impossible heteronormative mimesis. But Paul Farmer implicates capitalist culture with a deceptively simple statement. He quotes a resident of a small village in Haiti speaking of his community’s attempt to support members with AIDS. “The poor have the patience to struggle with people’s illness,” says Saul (Farmer 1992, 120). So where does that leave us?

Goethe says "the unity is never lost unless broken by force or some other determining factor" (Goethe 1963: 38). The fissures in any kind of project like ACT UP were too great to be mended. Some of the group wanted to struggle on for national health care, others were satisfied narrowly focusing on better and better drugs. Some founded Queer Nation to struggle for expanded gay rights and visibility. Many of us moved on to specific projects initiated in ACT UP, which then became institutionalized and funded by the very people we had screamed at for so long. I linger on Paul Farmer's Marxist-inspired assessment of the Haitian response to illness. Maybe we are melancholic specifically because we are not forced to turn to each other. We have private spaces to which we can retreat when suffering from burnout. Some of us are afforded the privilege to turn away, to earn money as a buffer, to ignore.
Both Kramer and Crimp, at odds about the means to resolve this new crisis of HIV disavowal, have to take in the factors enabling this amnesia. For many with health insurance, the consequences of HIV infection have lessened. Finding new activists means re-forging a community contained in a collective space that supports embodied resistance. Some say that the push for gay marriage is a healing response to the melancholia produced by struggle and loss. I say that our practices and collective organization, the affinities which formed and reformed, belie that solution. But it is certainly possible that "united in anger" is no longer effective and that we must allow new activists to proceed from a different affective sphere, one that acknowledges the current state of melancholia and alienation.

The prosthetic performance in the making of Equipped is an invitation to practice a politics which bonds singular bodies and accommodates ruptures. Initiating Equipped, Ray was simultaneously caring for himself and for all of us. All the members of his affinity group, including me, affirm the privilege we experienced caring for Ray. And Zoe and Aldo, within the space of our community bound by affinity, were fortunate to maintain a political relationship with him until he died. As beings-in-common, they made his work. And so I confer upon Ray the honor formerly awarded to chemists: he proved himself to be an "artist in separating" (Goethe 1963: 40).

I am taking advantage of Equipped to recuperate the possibilities that affinities may offer for the present. I begin by resurrecting a healing image, one that separates Ray from me and gives him to you. In this, I bring back Ray's
body, replete with so many layers of meaning. This image was taken at the Stop the Church demonstration at Saint Patrick's Cathedral in 1989. Ray interviewed demonstrators as the on-camera commentator, "J.C.," from the "Fire and Brimstone Network" (DIVA 1990). In this image, I find Barthes' idea of that which represents "the impossible science of the unique being." (Barthes 1981: 71) His hair was wild and long, he was covered in a ridiculous blanket intended to be a toga, his cheekbones were even more prominent because of his weight loss, and he was wearing the requisite crown of thorns draped over his forehead with a few leaves stuck in the branches. His eyes were fierce and he wields a very big microphone. The image I am reading is a video still, shot by another member of DIVA TV. His face, so very Ray, frozen from a moment in the videotape, is only a pause in a community of images.

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Debra Levine, a former theatre director, AIDS activist and documentary producer, is a doctoral candidate in the Performance Studies department at New York University. Her work currently focuses on AIDS memorials, specifically those created for "World AIDS Day" and "A Day Without Art," as performative practices of resistance.