

The National College of Art and Design

Hard Materials, Applied materials

“What was the socio-political impact of art created by intersectional artists concerning wider public discourse during the first decade of the AIDS pandemic in the United States?”

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Submitted to the school of Visual Culture in Candidacy for the Degree of BA in Hard
Materials, 2023



National College of Art and Design

School of Visual Culture

I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

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Date: 28/1/2023

Acknowledgements

I would like to offer my most sincerest thanks to my thesis supervisor Dr Emma O' Mahony for her continued support throughout the writing of this thesis. Her continued help and passion for teaching has been much appreciated. I would also like to thank all of the staff at The Edward Murphy Library as their services have also been an invaluable support.

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Introduction

“What was the socio-political impact of art created by intersectional artists concerning wider public discourse during the first decade of the AIDS pandemic in the United States?” In reading and researching various materials surrounding this question, the suppression of other voices in AIDS discourse during the earliest years of the AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) pandemic is striking. Tinged with ideas of racism, misogyny and white heteronormativity, prevailing narratives about people with AIDS (PWAs) compounded the already stigmatised lives of marginalised communities such as the LGBTQ+ community, sex workers and those who used intravenous drugs. To understand the contribution other voices had to the national discourse surrounding the AIDS pandemic, we first must look at the socio-political climate of the time. This will include looking at the American political response to the crisis across the governments of both Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, as well as the response of the government at the Congressional level, as a means of understanding why artists felt it necessary to confront and disrupt the narratives the government produced. This will be aligned with an examination of society's response to the AIDS pandemic as well as the interconnected response of the previously mentioned marginalised communities. Dominant controlling hegemonies such as the Catholic Church played a huge role in the widespread misinformation regarding the pandemic and sought to shift blame onto the ‘lifestyles’ of PWAs. By examining the socio-political discourse around the pandemic we can understand the void that AIDS activists and artists had to fill by having to contribute to the AIDS in the public sphere debate. Secondly, the facilitations and limitations of AIDS discourse in American media at the time will be examined as an origin of the “moral panic”. In exploring Habermas's public sphere theory we can examine the role of the media and art activist collectives both held in acting as facilitators for widespread open public discourse on AIDS and how often the media failed in this regard due to its exclusionary nature. Finally, to understand the contributions intersectional artists made to the public discourse of the time three case studies of artists of different ethnicities, cultures, races and sexuality will be examined through the art they made in response to the AIDS crisis. This will allow an understanding of the institutional response to the crisis and how prevailing socio-political factors contributed to the response and creation of these artworks.

In the most formative years of the AIDS crisis in the United States, the social and political response to the crisis can be seen as ambiguous and inconsistent. Tom Stoddard offers an exploration of the institutional power's abdication of responsibility to the crisis in

his essay *Paradox and Paralysis: An Overview of the American Response to AIDS* featured in *Taking Liberties*, 1997. Stoddard offers examples of paradoxes that could be seen as examples of inadequate responses to the unfolding epidemic. One paradox is how although AIDS had been featured heavily in the news throughout the United States, “many Americans are still ignorant of such elementary facts about AIDS as the ways in which the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) ... is transmitted...” (Stoddard, 1989, P.96) This suggests an ineffective media response that is lacking in scientific analysis instead being focused on AIDS as a social issue. Another paradox is that although many political figures such as Ronald Reagan publicly committed themselves to ending AIDS, “there still is no national plan” (Stoddard, 1989, p.96) This contradictory message from political offices unveils an abject disengagement from prominent political figures to combat a most pressing issue due to their own political and social beliefs. A final paradox seen is how although people living with AIDS at the time had protections in regards to how they couldn't be fired for having AIDS, on the federal level applicants for Military Service, Peace Corps and Jobs Corps would be refused if they tested positive for AIDS (Stoddard, 1989, p.97). These paradoxes highlight the nature of social and political silence to the crisis and give a grounding for understanding the void and otherness felt by PWAs.

The Socio-Political Climate of the AIDS Crisis

The political culture of the AIDS pandemic in the United States can be examined as a time of enhanced stigma for already marginalised communities. The LGBTQ+ community, sex workers and intravenous drug users were seen to have fallen victim to their own ‘perverse lifestyle.’ The nascence of the wider AIDS pandemic within the United States can be traced to 1981, upon cross-country research into the commonality of severely immunosuppressed homosexual men in Los Angeles and New York. On the 5th of June 1981, the U.S Center for Disease Control (CDC) published an article in the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR): *Pneumocystis Pneumonia Los Angeles*. The article chronicled five, previously healthy, homosexual men, who had been treated between October 1980 and May 1981 for biopsy-confirmed *pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia at three different hospitals in the Los Angeles region (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1981). *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia is an opportunistic disease that had almost previously been limited to those who were immunosuppressed (Walzer et al., 1974, cited in Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1981). All five of the patients suffering from the disease also tested positive for cytomegalovirus (CMV) infection which would lead to the article examining whether CMV could be easily transmitted in urine or semen samples and lead to the conclusion that semen was “an important vehicle for CMV transmission” (Lang and Kummer 1975, cited in Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1981). Of the five patients mentioned in the article, two of them would eventually die in the hospital with CMV and *pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia, both being present in both of the respective patients' post-mortems (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1981). From observations made through analysis of the five Los Angeles patients, the CDC suggested: “the possibility of a cellular-immune dysfunction related to a common exposure that predisposes individuals to opportunistic infections ...” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1981). In 1981, on the same day that the CDC’s article was published, dermatologist Dr Alvin Friedman-Kien called the CDC to report the startlingly prominent clusters of the aggressive cancer Kaposi's Sarcoma (KS) that was being observed amongst homosexual men in New York and California (Tanne, 2008). Kaposi’s Sarcoma is a rare type of cancer that is characterised by the abnormal growth of cells that line lymph and blood vessels. The cancer causes red or purple lesions to grow under the skin and in the lining of the mouth, nose and throat areas. Kaposi’s Sarcoma had previously been an indicator of an immunosuppressed individual and would later be recognised as an AIDS-defining condition for people living with HIV (HIV.gov, 2022-b). The CDC’s article

about Pneumocystis Pneumonia in the MMWR report marked the first official reporting of what became known globally as the AIDS epidemic and Dr Friedman-Kien's work helped to further inform research into how and why previously healthy homosexual men across the country were reporting with rare cancers, despite no interconnection between patients (Tanne 2008). The CDC's findings were met with widespread ignorance and homophobia, with the association of these cancers being observed in gay men leading to the as yet unknown AIDS pandemic being labelled as a 'gay plague'. Previously homophobic beliefs allowed for homosexuality to be used as a causal factor in the AIDS crisis as homosexuality is "always available as a coercive and menacing category to entrench the institutions of family life ..."(Watney, 1994, P.52). By the end of the year, there had been 337 reported cases across the United States of individuals with severe immune deficiency of which 130 individuals had succumbed to their illness by December 31st (HIV.gov 2022-a). This first acknowledged year of the AIDS epidemic can be seen as a vacuum from which larger issues developed.

Before the onset of the AIDS epidemic, sexual minorities were largely unrecognised in American Society outside of major cosmopolitan cities. America functioned as a Christian, White, Nationalist country seeking to maintain the traditional values of a white conservative hegemony (Kester, 1998, P.170). In 1980, the Republican Ronald Reagan defeated the incumbent Democrat Jimmy Carter, to win a landslide victory for the Republican party. Reagan's election victory was seen as a defining shift in American politics, ushering in a new political realignment towards conservatism. During the Reagan Presidency, new political policies and economic initiatives were introduced. Neo-liberal ideals of tax reduction, economic deregulation and reduction in government spending were placed into effect. In 1981, Reagan proposed a slashing of the federal education, welfare, housing, and health budgets (Ashford, Ault and Group Material, 2012, p. 8). Reagan's ideologies were steeped in a "calculated strategy to change the shape of government through the introduction of 'private sector initiatives' and 'public/private partnerships'" (Kester, 1998, P.169). This included that the federal agency responsible for testing drugs and treatments – the National Institute of Health – would have its budget cut by \$127 million (Ashford, Ault and Group Material 2012, p. 8). By cutting federal investment for a national pandemic, Reagan alienated PWAs, reducing them to some kind of excess whose health and well-being could be seen as of less value than capital value. A notable example of the barrier between the Reagan administration and the wider AIDS community was the exchange between Reagan's press secretary, Larry Speakes, and the journalist Lester Kinsolving. The year was 1982 and by this time nearly 1000 people had died as a direct result of the AIDS epidemic. Kinsolving asks Speakes

whether the White House has any response to the CDC's announcement that AIDS is now an epidemic. Speakes responds by saying "I haven't anything on it". Kinsolving then tries to explain the magnitude of the situation by saying that one-third of people have died from it and mentions that it's become informally known as a 'gay plague'. This is met with press pool laughter and despite Kinsolving's attempts to again explain the gravity of the situation, Speakes can only respond that he doesn't have it and jokingly questions whether Kinsolving has it (Lopez, 2015). This exchange underscored the complete lack of compassion and empathy regarding the suffering of other humans. Speakes's flippant response imposes the idea that AIDS doesn't exist within the boundaries of national jurisdiction, and highlights that the gravity of the situation was not being recognised by the Reagan administration. Speakes's response was typical of the Reagan administration's dialogue concerning the pandemic during their tenure in office. Even by 1984 when over 4,200 people had died, upon being questioned again by Kinsolving about the AIDS pandemic, Speakes revealed "I have not heard him (Regan) express anything on it" (Lopez, 2015). This characterises the lack of duty Reagan personally felt to serve the needs of those he saw as minority Americans. It wasn't until 1985 that Reagan mentioned AIDS for the first time when he called it a "top priority," even though the US congress had to increase the budget allocation for AIDS research to \$190 million which was almost \$70 million more than the Reagan administration had previously allocated (Boffey, 1985). Reagan's failure to humanise and understand the colossal destruction of non-conforming identities remains apparent.

In David Wojnarowicz's *Close to the Knives*, (1992) he presents seven prominent Americans who held positions of power who he believed failed in their response to the AIDS pandemic. Wojnarowicz lists Edward Koch, Cardinal John O'Connor, Rep. William Dabbsmeyer (R-Ca), Stephen Joseph, Jesse Helms, Alfonso D'Amato and Frank Young as all being complacent in the failed response to the epidemic (1992, p.124-131). Wojnarowicz takes particular umbrage against Cardinal John O'Connor and the Catholic Church calling O'Connor "the world's most active liar about condoms and safer sex" (1992, p.125). O'Connor often voiced opposition to HIV/AIDS education, the distribution of condoms in public schools and abortion rights for women. He believed that homosexual acts were never permissible and acted as one of the most prominent Catholic figures within American society. O'Connor's beliefs stemmed from the Vatican's teaching about Pastoral Care of homosexual persons (Ratzinger 1986). The Catholic Church deeply opposed homosexual activity, going so far as saying that the passing of a Gay rights bill in 1986 which condoned "behaviour to which no one has any conceivable right ..." would lead to irrational and violent reactions

(Ratzinger, 1986). When the U.S conference for Catholic Bishops in 1987 suggested that people be educated on the use of condoms as a means for combating the epidemic, Joseph Ratzinger, then prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, declared it a “facilitation of evil” (Dart, 1988). In the 1980s, Catholic hospitals in New York were allowed an exemption from the requirement to offer condoms and other sexual health-based services that conflicted with their beliefs (National Research Council, 1993, p. 293). At the same time, the Archdiocese of New York refused to rent classroom space to the New York Board of Education to teach classes on AIDS education unless it followed a doctrine that was in line with the Church's teaching (National Research Council, 1993, p. 293). The Catholic Church’s widespread ignorance of AIDS education was steeped in widely held views of homosexuality as a sin. They only viewed homosexuals and drug users as being susceptible to AIDS, not the married, heterosexual couple or those who received a contaminated blood transfusion. Susan Sontag noted in her book *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, (1989) that while a cancer diagnosis was seen as the fault of someone who lived an excessive lifestyle, AIDS was being seen as “indulgence, delinquency-addictions to chemicals that are illegal and to sex regarded as deviant” (Sontag, 1989, p.25). The diagnosis of AIDS for the individual was being interpreted by a wider population as a justification for the life that individual lived. The diagnosis also brought forth a harsh, social reality, as AIDS continued to have connotations of debauchery and greed in the Western world.

AIDS and the media

In light of the political and cultural unconsciousness regarding the destruction the AIDS crisis was causing domestically in the U.S., artists and activists alike joined forces to shed light on the treatment of PWAs. Jurgen Habermas, in his 1989 book *On Politics and Society* writes on the idea of the “public sphere”. Habermas defines the public sphere as “... made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the State ...” (Habermas, 1989, cited by Calhoun, 2010, p. 306). Habermas’ concept of the public sphere required that individuals were allowed to “confer in an unrestricted fashion--that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions about matters of general interest” (Habermas, 1964, p.49). Habermas relays the historical groundings of the public sphere from the High Middle ages and “representative publicness” to the bourgeois public sphere which stemmed from privileged “public opinion” (Habermas, 1989, p.232, 234). For Habermas, the public sphere was intrinsically linked to mass media as it was a means for the public to circulate opinion, which would in turn form the public sphere. As a result, “conflicts which in the past were pushed off into the private sphere now enter the public sphere” (Habermas, 1989, p.235) This allowance for alternative discussions within the public sphere offered opportunities for counterpublics to challenge dominant hegemonies. This can be seen through the large-scale artists and activists' response to the inaction of society and government to the AIDS crisis. In 1987 Larry Kramer, the noted playwright and AIDS activist, called for the creation of a “political direct-action group that will force governments, elected officials, public health agencies, the pharmaceutical and insurance industries, and religious institutions to act to protect those at risk of HIV, and those who are sick with AIDS” (HIV.gov, 2022-a). Two days later, over 300 people met for the creation of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power) - “a non-partisan group united in anger and committed to nonviolent direct action to end the AIDS crisis” (Contact ACTUP New York | ACT UP NY, 2023). Two weeks later, ACT UP held its first public action on Wall Street, protesting the profiteering of pharmaceutical companies linked to the AIDS crisis such as the AZT (azidothymidine) manufacturer Burroughs Wellcome (ACT UP Accomplishments and Chronology in Brief | ACT UP NY, 2023). One of their most prolific large-scale public demonstrations was their 1989 Stop the Church protests (The ACT UP Historical Archive: Stop the Church Action 10 Year Anniversary Action, 2023). This protest was organised by ACT UP and WHAM! (Women’s Health Action and Mobilization), and involved activists storming a church service at St. Patrick’s Cathedral, New York by Cardinal John O’Connor

(111 Held in St. Patrick's AIDS Protest, 1989). The protest stemmed from the Cardinal's and Catholic Church's opposition to AIDS education. Although over 100 activists were arrested and strong political condemnation met their actions, the Stop The Church protests offered a successful entry into the mainstream discussion for both activist organisations and a focus on the Catholic Church's conservative viewpoints (111 Held in St. Patrick's AIDS Protest, 1989). Robert Asen argued that neoliberalism, which was the prevailing hegemony of the AIDS crisis, could be seen as a direct threat to the construction of a public sphere due to its prejudiced nature (Asen, 2017, p.331). Asen further argues that the coordinated action of networked locals can offer resistance to the neoliberal public (Asen, 2017, p.343). ACT UP was created to be a decentralised group that offered all of its members an equal opportunity to contribute to public discourse. ACT UP's success as a counter-public derives from its ability to "seek more and more places to circulate where people will recognize themselves in its address" (Warner, 2002, p.424). It offered an organised and structured discourse that focused on combating dominant hegemonies and cultivating its members' identities.

Before the onset of the AIDS crisis in the early 80s, the representations of sexual and racial minorities within the United States were inherently problematic. As a dominant conservative leadership developed, the ideas of the existence of others were admonished. In his book *Policing Desire*, (1986) Simon Watney criticises the "tendency for lesbians and gay men to find their lives contained within the format of 'current affairs' programmes, which are closely subject to direct regulation, and have to maintain strict criteria of 'balance'" (1986, p.98). Watney allows us to examine the nature of what can be accepted and what can be questioned. James W. Dearing and Everett M. Rogers argued that the influence of the New York Times often set the agenda for other media reporting (Dearing and Rogers, 1992, p.183). During the earliest years of the AIDS crisis, little attention was given to it by the New York Times, whose first page 1 article on AIDS was published on May 25 1983, almost a year behind other major newspaper publishers (Dearing and Rogers, 1992, p.184). Considering the idea that other major newspaper decisions hinged on other publications' media reporting, it allows for personal and organisational variables to dictate and counteract a comprehensive account of what's happening. The New York Times' status as a credible news source allowed it to seemingly, unknowingly influence AIDS-related media at the time, and in turn, caused a homogenous conforming media pattern that refused to treat AIDS as a paramount issue. The Kaiser Family Foundation, in conjunction with Princeton Survey Research Associates, undertook an examination entitled Media Coverage of the HIV Epidemic 1981-2002 in which they examined the scope and focus of HIV/AIDS-related

stories within the media (Brodie et al., 2004, p. 1). The extensive research in the report relays general fatigue found in media coverage of AIDS-related stories. News reporting of the epidemic peaked in 1987 with over 5000 stories being reported in various forms of media (Brodie et al., 2004, p. 2). As new AIDS diagnoses generally fell around the mid-1990s so did media coverage, but the decline in Media coverage starting post-1988 was six years ahead of the decline in AIDS diagnoses in 1994 (Brodie et al., 2004, p. 2). Record high numbers of AIDS diagnoses were reported in both 1992 and 1993, with 80,000 diagnoses being seen in both years, yet media reporting on HIV/AIDS news stories had fallen dramatically from its 1987 peak (Brodie et al., 2004, p. 2). These findings showcase the sense of “other” felt by those affected by AIDS within society. Even as the AIDS epidemic reached a critical point in the 90s, media coverage had seemingly moved on from responding to the crisis.

In examining the media dialogue regarding the AIDS crisis, the social issue of AIDS is often neglected in favour of focusing on AIDS as solely a medical problem. Since the earliest years of the AIDS crisis, healthcare workers and white, gay men have been the most predominant representation of the virus. This has excluded other sexual minorities and people of colour, as well as women from a wider media portrayal as a part of the AIDS crisis. Marlon Riggs in his article *Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a Snap! Queen*, comments on the social exclusion of the black gay male from society stating that to be black is to be heterosexual and that his existence as a gay black man could only be seen as being an other (Riggs, 1991, p.390). This sense of otherness felt by racial and sexual minorities is compounded by the exclusions of their lives from public discourse. Erving Goffman explores the ideas of stigma and social identity in his 1963 book *Stigma*. For Erving, stigma can be seen through firstly physical abnormalities (Goffman, 1963, p.13). Secondly, it's present in those with “blemishes of individual character” including those with “domineering or unnatural passions” and those with a history of homosexuality amongst other socially focused stigmas (Goffman, 1963, p.13). Finally, Goffman mentions tribal stigma, those being stigmas of race, nation and religion all of which he believes are possible means of infiltrating lineages of people (Goffman, 1963, p.13). The social stigma that gay black men faced stemmed from ostracization from a wider black community, due to their homosexuality, as well as their limited standing in Western society, due to their race. Women, especially women of colour, also faced an underrepresentation in the wider discussions on the AIDS crisis. Due to pretences of heterosexual immunity, women were often averted from AIDS-based media discussions or were negatively impacted by these pretences. In 1988, Cosmopolitan magazine published an article called “Reassuring News About AIDS: A Doctor Tells Why You May

Not Be At Risk.” In the article written by Dr Robert E. Gould, the magazine outlines how “there is almost no danger of contracting AIDS through ordinary sexual intercourse” as well as how general scientific findings that intravenous drug users could transmit AIDS through vaginal intercourse were a myth (Cohen and Solomon, 1993). The article was met with immediate public backlash with Dr Anthony Fauci of the National Institute of Health calling the article “really potentially dangerous” (Cohen and Solomon, 1993). Cosmopolitan magazine’s audience was predominantly young women, so their assertion that these women didn’t need to engage in safe sex practices was inherently misinformed. The magazine’s editor, Helen Gurley Brown, appeared on ABC’s Nightline to defend the article. Gurley Brown argued that “since there isn’t too much proof that AIDS is spread through heterosexual intercourse, I think our side should be presented, too” (Cohen and Solomon, 1993). In response the then surgeon general, C. Everett Koop, responded that the magazine was doing a great disservice to women by undermining public health care officials and that heterosexual contact was a means of AIDS transmission (Koop Says Article Gave Women Bad Advice on AIDS 1988). The article is an example of the myths of heterosexual AIDS immunity and how the media contributed to the erasure of women in AIDS discourse.

Art as a means of depicting the AIDS crisis

The AIDS crisis in America often revealed other social issues pervasive in the country at the time. Although homophobia was widespread at the time, racism within the gay community was also rampant. Marlon Riggs's 1989 movie *Tongues Untied* explores the political and cultural situation black gay men found themselves in during the times of the AIDS crisis. Riggs was one of the foremost black gay filmmakers of the time, having previously won an Emmy award for his 1987 documentary film *Ethnic Notions*, which investigated the media's role in perpetuating anti-black stereotypes and the effects felt by the wider African-American community (California Newsreel, 2023). *Tongues Untied* is a 55-minute long documentary film which features Riggs amongst other prominent Black gay activists depicting the realities of life as a black gay male in America. Throughout the film, documentary footage is blended with storytelling and poetry, often spoken by Riggs, Essex Hemphill or Joseph Beam, to explore the cruxes of life as they know it. One of the most prominent elements of the movie is Riggs' account of his time in San Francisco. In the previous sections of the movie Riggs' focused on the insular nature of heterosexual black culture whereas this section focuses on white gay culture's racism. Riggs describes the time as having "learned the touch and taste of snow" (*Tongues Untied*, 1989). Riggs recounts how he tried to ignore the lack of black gay men seen in San Francisco at the time but he notes the stereotypical racist caricatures he saw instead. Riggs concludes that in being "immersed in vanilla" he was losing his own identity and that by coexisting in two subcultures he was rendered invisible (*Tongues Untied*, 1989). This prompted Riggs to leave San Francisco. Throughout the movie, there are juxtapositions between wider notions of homophobia and the responses of gay black men. On the issues of homophobia within the black community, the "talented tenth" of Eddie Murphy and Spike Lee's *School Daze* are critiqued for their contributions to the normalisation of homophobia as justification for violence against gay men (*Tongues Untied*, 1989). The depiction of this fervent homophobia is followed with images of Essex Hemphill and accompanied by poetry questioning the need for silence to escape violence. Towards the end of the film, AIDS becomes a prevalent feature. As we see two men undressing, caressing and kissing we are reminded of the prominence of fear in the minds of gay men. Hemphill warns the audience about the dangers of sexual romance at the time, elaborating that "this nut might kill us" (*Tongues Untied*, 1989). This anxiety forces a personal withdrawal from one's emotions and needs. The movie continues with obituaries and headlines of gay black men who died of AIDS, including Joseph Bream who featured in the filming. Riggs speaks of the "time bomb

ticking in my blood”, a rationalised cry for others to join him in affecting change for the betterment of their lives (Tongues Untied, 1989). Images of Harriet Tuberman and Frederick Douglas appear before a video of Martin Luther King JR. walking in a civil rights march is crosscut with black gay pride marchers. The movie ends with an impassioned call, a shedding of the veil of silence and invisibility, while intertitles proclaim “Black men loving black men is the revolutionary act” (Tongues Untied, 1989). Riggs’ movie demonstrates allusions and analysis of the lives of each man featured. It explores the commonality of discrimination felt from their communities. Riggs would die of AIDS-related complications in 1994, having offered a poignant critique of the exclusion of black gay men from society.

AIDS activists, artists and collectives such as ACT UP, could be seen as examples of the contributions made by private individuals to the public sphere-related discussions surrounding the HIV/AIDS crisis. Daniel Sotomayor was an American artist from Humboldt Park, Chicago who was noted as the first openly gay and nationally syndicated cartoonist in the United States, as well as the co-founder of the Chicago chapter of ACT UP (Audain, 2018, p.97). Sotomayor was of Mexican and Puerto Rican descent and had graduated from the American Academy of Art. In 1987 Sotomayor was diagnosed with AIDS, leading him to create his distinct activist-focused art which highlighted the inadequacies of public response to the AIDS crisis. After his AIDS diagnosis, Sotomayor became an active member of C-FAR (Chicagoans for AIDS Rights) which would eventually become ACT UP Chicago in 1989 (Audain, 2018, p.97). ACT UP allowed Sotomayor, as well as other activists, a platform from which they could contribute to the public sphere and a means to leave a lasting legacy. At the behest of his mentor Paul Adams, Sotomayor began creating political cartoons for the Gay Chicago Magazine (Audain, 2018, p.98). In 1988, soon after Sotomayor began creating his political cartoons, his work became nationally syndicated. Sotomayor's work was described by the Chicago Reader as "acerbic, sometimes bitter, and usually national in scope, with subjects ranging from Andy Rooney to Mike Royko to the Catholic church" (Crump, 1990). In the following years, Sotomayor would work for the Windy City Times and Outlines but his cartoons and activism were often met with resistance due to political influence within Chicago's gay media. Sotomayor quit ACT UP Chicago in 1990 due to his frustration surrounding the lack of progress with AIDS activism, stating “I quit because I can no longer do the kind of AIDS work I want to do with the hostility that I feel within the group” (Crump, 1990). By 1991, Sotomayor had created 147 political cartoons that offered an insight into the mind of someone anguished by their finite reality. In the fall of 1991, with his failing health becoming more of an issue, Sotomayor stopped drawing. One of Sotomayor's most prominent

acts of activism was his 1991 confrontation with the then Mayor of Chicago, Richard M. Daley. In February 1991, Mayor Richard M. Daley attended the Impact Gala at the Chicago Hilton (Impact being the most influential LGBT political action committee in Chicago at the time) (Audain, 2018, p.103). For Sotomayor, Impact represented an appeasement of political failings with the AIDS crisis still raging, yet the Impact Gala served as a self-congratulating event for LGBT leaders who had failed the masses. As Daley and other prominent figures moved between a side gallery to the main ballroom, Sotomayor stepped out beside them and unfurled his hand-painted banner that said: “Daley Tell The Truth About AIDS” (Audain, 2018, p.103). The moment was photographed as seen in Fig. x and showed the political, clout-chasing leaders of the movement who had left others behind. Sotomayor was promptly thrown out of the building, but the breaching of an event similar to Habermas’ idea of the bourgeois public sphere, highlighted the insatiable desire Sotomayor felt to bring truth to the masses. Sotomayor would eventually succumb to AIDS on the fifth of February 1992, at the Illinois Masonic Hospital. Sotomayor left a lasting legacy of AIDS activism in Chicago with his often combative nature and power of genuine urgency documented throughout his artwork and activism.



Fig.x, Photographer unknown. (1991) *Daniel Sotomayor Confronts Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley at Political Gala.*



The creation of art in response to the AIDS crisis offered artists and activists an opportunity to challenge prevailing narratives and depictions of the AIDS virus. Photography emerged as one of the most prominent mediums for artistic expression during the crisis, due to its intimate nature and availability. The artistic photography relating to the AIDS crisis can be compared and contrasted to the media-focused photography of the AIDS crisis. Most of the media depictions of PWAs centred around a white, emaciated, homosexual male photographed within a hospice setting, a very graphic and troubling depiction of the end of life (see Fig. x). Often this media imagery was lacking in a social context. It sought to promote ideas that PWAs were dissipated individuals, whose AIDS diagnosis stemmed from their lifestyle. These depictions neglected a critique of governmental failure in response to the AIDS crisis and only furthered damaging assumptions. This typical imagery of a dying, emaciated, white man also found its way into artistic responses to the AIDS crisis. In 1988, the Museum of Modern Art exhibited Nicholas Nixon's *Portraits of People*. The exhibition consisted of 100 8 x 10 inch black and white photograph contact prints. The 100 photographs were broken down into five subcategories, one of which formed a then ongoing series of "extended portrait sequences of people with AIDS". The press release for the exhibition expounded that Nixon's focus is on "embracing the idea that sympathetic photographs of ordinary people can address the deepest human value" (NICHOLAS NIXON: PICTURES OF PEOPLE, 1988). Nixon's exhibition was met with acrimony from some gay activists.

They claimed that Nixon's photography was lacking a broader social context and that he had created an alienated imagery of PWAs that wasn't in balance with their beings beyond their AIDS diagnosis (Ogdon, 2001, p. 76). Notably, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) leafleted the exhibition, calling for images of PWAs "who are loving, vibrant, sexy and acting up" (1988, cited by Atkins, 1991, P.20). Nixon's exhibition did generate some positive feedback, with some PWAs finding it an authentic depiction of themselves, but largely the exhibition was critiqued for not challenging a dominant media driven depiction of PWAs. Nixon himself had long been married to his wife, Bebe Nixon, who had been a staple of her husband's work as part of his series *The Brown Sisters*, therefore his work with PWAs could be questioned as inquisitorial. Homosexuality and AIDS had both maintained a controversial social status within the United States, hence Nixon's work could be seen as opportunistic, appealing to the media-driven frenzy for images of PWAs at the time. Nixon's fifteen subjects included both gay and straight individuals, as well as white and non-white individuals, but there seemed to be a hyperfocus for Nixon to explain why each individual had been diagnosed with AIDS. Eight of his male subjects were listed as being gay, one male was listed as a heterosexual haemophiliac, whereas two of the other males were not labelled by their sexuality. One was labelled as a recovering alcoholic and the other a one-time oil rig worker who had spent an extended period of time in tropical countries such as Fiji, Thailand and Singapore (Ogdon, 2001, p. 101). There were four female subjects in the series, three of them being non-white, but all four of them were labelled as having a "sexually promiscuous /and or sexually violent history as well as substance abuse" (Ogdon, 2001, p. 101). All of the photographs were accompanied by an essay written by Bebe Nixon. By the time of the project's completion, fourteen out of the fifteen subjects of the series had passed away. Nixon seemingly maintained no personal relationship with the subjects of this series, unlike other works he created such as *The Brown Sisters*. During a lecture Nixon gave at MOMA he commented on his frustration with Tony Mastrorilli (seen in Fig. x), one of his subjects who had said he was uncomfortable with Nixon's closeness to him with the camera. Nixon remarked that although Mastrorilli complained he still "went through the motions". Nixon commented that he was "not interested in somebody just going through the motions. Life's too short" (Crimp, 1992, cited by Ogden, 2001, p.78) Nixon was referring to his own life which is a telling reflection of the lack of empathy and closeness Nixon felt towards his subject. Although permission had been granted for Nixon to photograph the PWAs, there seemed to be a lack of boundaries. Nixon's work could be challenged as voyeuristic and lacking subjectivity, with his images offering little beyond the depiction of an illness.



Fig. x, Nixon, N. (1988). *Tony Mastrorilli, Mansfield, Mass., from the series People With AIDS*. [Photograph]. Houston, The Museum of Fine Arts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, intersectional artists of varying races, ethnicities and sexuality all contributed widely to AIDS discourse through their artwork. These artists achieved varying degrees of success in achieving a meaningful depiction of life with AIDS and the social conditions that existed with it. Media, particularly print and television, contributed significantly to wider public discourse at the time in ways that were both proactive and counteractive to an educated AIDS discourse. By engaging with the mass media depictions of AIDS, artists and activists contributed to and altered the public sphere as it related to the crisis. Marlon Riggs' work served as a thoughtful rebuttal of racially derived stereotypes that ignored the existence of black men and women who lived with AIDS. Riggs' work critiqued the exclusionary nature of white homosexual society and highlighted the non-existence of black gay men in public media when the issue of AIDS within the United States was discussed. Daniel Sotomayor's work as an artist and activist allowed him to engage with acts of social parrhesia. Sotomayor truthfully relayed the anguish and sorrow of a person with insufficient time. His cartoons contributed to the LGBTQ+ community's responsive nature to the crisis, as his depictions of ignorance and political hostility resonated across the nation. Nicholas Nixon's work failed in comparison to the other mentioned artists' work as it lacked a substantive nature. Nixon's identity as a white, heterosexual artist may have relayed the fact that Nixon existed in a sphere removed from the AIDS crisis, one in which Nixon was unable to make a meaningful contribution. Nixon's work failed to create a critique of the social conditions of those with AIDS; instead, it was rooted in the typical media depictions of PWAs. Whereas Riggs and Sotomayor were active AIDS artists and activists, whose activism spanned their professional careers, Nixon's work was a small inclusion of work as part of a larger series. Yet Nixon's work was granted the largest platform by institutional powers in the art world, suggesting that those living with AIDS, especially people of colour, were neglected from a prominent standing in the art world in favour of white voices. If work created by black artists did make the mainstream discussion it had to contend with homophobic and racist political pressure which sought to suppress their artwork. For example, the previously mentioned *Tongues Untied* was used in Republican, presidential candidate Patrick J. Buchanan's political ads in his native Georgia as a means of critiquing fellow Republican, George H. W. Bush's administration's funding of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). The ad, which featured images of partially clothed gay men from Riggs' film, lambasted how "this so-called art has glorified homosexuality, exploited children and

perverted the image of Jesus” (1992) Riggs's art was reduced to homophobic fodder, used to tear down an administration that had inadvertently funded art which critiqued the national discourse it had created. This attack on art came only a week after John Frohnmayer had to resign as chairman of the NEA, due to conservative political pressure for his funding of educational art, which dismayed the evangelical religious right (Honan, 1992). These political actions show the value and necessity artwork has, to engage a public audience and contribute to the public sphere even from a marginalised position. The right-wing political crackdown on artwork that was deemed “obscene” or overtly contentious only substantiated claims by artists and activists that they were not being represented in the neo-liberal, Christian, American society of the time. Therefore, the art created by intersectional artists both positively and negatively contributed to public discussions on the AIDS crisis. However, the substantial progress in education regarding AIDS stems from the facilitation of wider public discussions and the insatiable desire these artists had to act as a counterpublic to an intolerant socio-political climate.

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