

Sculpting the Social Geography of Lower Manhattan: Artists and AIDS Activists in the 1980s and 1990s

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In this article, I argue that AIDS and abortion-rights activism, often perceived by commentators on both the Left and Right as paradigmatic single-issue identity politics, instead offered a broad challenge to the Reagan-era privatization of citizenship, with its concurrent imposition of a conservative sexual order. In New York City, political battles were waged within urban space, and activists used dramatic demonstrations and public art to claim rights to recognition and equal citizenship, turning the space of the city into a political and cultural forum. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, AIDS activists' stunning visual art and spectacular street theater reshaped the social geography of Lower Manhattan, leading to a dynamic coalition between gay men, lesbians and feminists supporting not only sexual freedom, but also health care for all. The public art and dramatic street theater of the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power (ACT UP) and their ally, Women's Health Action Mobilization! (WHAM!), brought once-isolated men and women together and gave them an immediate sense of connection. It also changed the way they experienced space in Lower Manhattan, producing a vocal and visible activist queer community. Drawing upon oral histories, memoirs, films, newspaper accounts, and archival records, this essay explores the relationship between activist artwork, the space of the city, and the formation of political coalitions.¹

Introduction

While the creation of independent spaces and the re-symbolization of space have been important for many social movements, including the civil rights, women's liberation, and gay liberation movements, this essay explores the particular meaning of AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power (ACT UP) and Women's Health Action Mobilization! (WHAM!)'s claiming of space in New York City during a time of rapid spatial privatization and commodification--especially of housing--and the demonizing of the gay community in conjunction with the rise of the AIDS epidemic (Evans and Boyte 1992). Chronicling the early poster art and street theater campaigns of ACT UP and WHAM! reveals the significance for gay, lesbian, AIDS and health activists in staging their protests in the streets of New York City, demanding the public's eye. Activists made visible an epidemic that the government preferred to ignore as it withdrew broadly from the provision of social services at federal, state and local levels. The spatiality of ACT UP and WHAM!'s political action established participants' right to the city by exposing and confronting larger, structural issues underlying the AIDS epidemic, including homophobia, racism, sexism, and class stratification.

ACT UP and WHAM!'s reclamation of urban space served not only to initiate critical public dialog on the AIDS epidemic and widespread expressions of rampant homophobia, but also to enable the formation of a supportive activist community. Participants in this activist community formed new self-identities, based on positive feelings of self-efficacy and friendship, which allowed for broad-based and lasting coalitions between gay men and feminists, groups that historians have traditionally viewed as at odds. Public art and street theater were essential means of communication, recruitment, and affirmation of positive self-identities.

This essay first places ACT UP and WHAM!'s actions in the context of the spatial transformation of New York City that accompanied neoliberal economic policies and the withering of a social safety net that confronted those ravaged by the AIDS epidemic. I focus in particular on the "Silence = Death" poster campaign and the controversial Stop the Church direct action.

Lauren Berlant argues that since the late 1970s, the New Right has succeeded in transforming American citizenship into a series of private moral choices related to the family, privileging heterosexual marriage and parenthood (Berlant 1997). Conservatives made bodily conduct and sexuality an ethical issue and deemed women who had abortions and gay people as un-American. In assessing the Stop the Church action, criticized by many for being divisive and therefore counterproductive, I highlight the ways that ACT UP and WHAM! challenged prevailing constructions of a private, narrow citizenship based on participation in the consumer economy and membership in a heterosexual nuclear family. When

ACT UP and WHAM! members used symbols of the body such as blood and ashes in their artwork and protests, they re-signified the body, asking what spectators were really afraid of, getting AIDS or becoming queer?

Background: the Ascendancy of Voluntarism under Neoliberal Policymaking

As conservative Republicans took power across the U.S. in the 1980s and 1990s, they helped usher in a broad cultural movement towards privatization, part of the global movement of neoliberalism (Schulman 2001; Avila 2004; Harvey 2005). This took place across many sectors of American life, including real estate, public space, social service provision, funding for the arts and humanities (cultural production), and concepts of family, community, and citizenship (Berlant 1997; Yudice 1999). President Ronald Reagan and his administration argued that the private sector would solve social problems more efficiently and creatively than government, and that smaller government would permit families and churches to restore (conservative Christian) morality to the nation (Schulman 2001). Hence, slashing welfare and social service budgets was not only economically efficient, but morally correct – an ideological stance furthered by the first President Bush, who highlighted voluntarism as the solution to social problems in his "thousand points of light" campaign, and by his son, George W. Bush, who has funneled public funds into faith-based charities.² In this way, following the end of the Cold War and the growth of globalization discourses, civil society, with its partnerships between government, business,

and non-profits, replaced government as the primary site for management of social problems (Yudice 1999: 292).³

In New York City, privatization enabled a spatial transformation. Donald Trump epitomized the replacement of government leadership by business when in 1986 he rebuilt Central Park's ice skating rink in five months, after the city's attempt had dragged on for more than six years (Freeman 2000: 292). The fruits of privatization included the growth of huge new developments like Trump Tower, which merged luxury apartments, office space, and high-end retail, the gentrification of working-class neighborhoods, the abandonment of poor, and an explosion in homelessness. Real estate developers replaced the inexpensive – and raunchier – theaters, bars and small stores of Times Square with “family friendly” entertainment complexes resembling suburban malls, while the City turned over construction of new, low-income housing to quasi-public, often religious-based, development corporations (Marcuse 1986; Plunz 1990; Delaney 1999). The Catholic Church, led by the outspoken Archbishop Cardinal John O'Connor, emerged as a major partner with the city in the transfer of the welfare apparatus. The Church's private organizations and non-profits, only loosely obligated to government oversight, won contracts with the city for the provision of health care and social services. This contracting out to the Catholic Church was especially detrimental to AIDS patients, as Cardinal O'Connor opposed homosexuality and forbade health providers from discussing with patients condom use, clean needles, or abortions. Overall, privatization combined the privileging of corporate, versus public, use of space with this conservative sexual agenda.

Contesting the Invisibility of the AIDS Epidemic

When the AIDS crisis hit New York City in the early 1980s, the impact of privatization combined with an increasingly strident conservative sexual order proved disastrous for social policy initiatives on behalf of those infected. New York City had roughly half of all reported AIDS cases, but under the conservative Democratic Mayor Ed Koch, the City's response to the epidemic was “marked by the utter absence of any policy at all.” The care and housing of AIDS patients was left to voluntary groups such as the Gay Men's Health Crisis (Andriote 1999; Bender 2003). A long-time bachelor, Koch had been gay-baited during his campaign for New York State Governor against Mario Cuomo, with signs that said “Vote For Cuomo Not The Homo.” Shilts (1987) suggests that Koch wanted to prevent any further association with homosexuality and therefore avoided meeting with gay leaders to discuss the emerging epidemic.⁴ New York hospitals, overwhelmed by the rapidly increasing number of AIDS patients and sensitive to the general public's fears of the spread of the disease, began refusing to admit AIDS patients to private rooms, forcing them to languish in emergency rooms. In the Bronx and New Jersey, at least 25 children with AIDS, abandoned or orphaned, lived in hospitals, some for years, with no other state facility available (Shilts 1987).

While unwilling to allocate funds for AIDS research, treatment, and comprehensive education campaigns, the Koch administration responded to fears of the rapidly spreading AIDS epidemic in 1985 by closing gay bathhouses and clubs. A marked decline in the vibrant and visible gay public culture that had flourished in New York in the 1970s ensued.

At the same time, developers, city officials, church leaders and conservative activists enacted a new spatial regime that prioritized the rights of capital and promoted a consumer-based citizenship modeled around the heterosexual nuclear family. High-end development transformed the West Village and spread into the East Village, disrupting neighborhoods once known for their prominent gay populations (Moore 2004). As gay culture seemed to disappear from the city streets, conservative Christians, led by Brooklyn Bishop Thomas Daily, among others, increasingly claimed public space, protesting in front of abortion clinics in “Daily’s Monthly Prayer Vigils” and forming a “Chain of Life” down Fifth Avenue (Kaplan 1990; Papenfuss 1990; Wilson and Garcilazo 1990 Solomon n.d). WHAM! member Mary Anne Staniszewski recalled New York in the 1980s:

It was profoundly conservative. The streets became flooded with homeless. The AIDS epidemic made prejudice more visible. My friends were dying.... There was a massive visibility of homophobia and of the backlash to women’s rights. We had this confluence of factors that were very focused on the body and human rights, sexuality, and gender, and, as a backdrop, it became more and more visible that the country was headed towards a health care crisis. (Alexander et al 2005)

Art as Catalyst: the Use of Urban Space

In response to this conservative Christian spatial regime, a group of graphic artists who had formed an AIDS support group decided to take action as an art collective, which they later named Gran Fury in 1986. Conservative columnist William Buckley issued

a call to tattoo people with AIDS on the buttocks and upper arms, to “protect” homosexuals and IV drug users. Revealing the fascist implications of Buckley’s suggestion, Gran Fury created the Silence = Death poster campaign (Crimp 2002).⁵ The poster featured a pink triangle on a black background, a reference to the pink triangle forced on homosexuals by Nazi Germany, but inverted up “to signify hope.” The pink triangle also recalled the legacy of the gay liberation movement of the 1960s, which had sought to reclaim derogatory images and words associated with homosexuality, such as queer, and to imbue them with new meanings of pride.⁶ The poster’s slick presentation on a glossy black background drew on advertising techniques and forced the reader to lean in close to read the political text in small font at the bottom. Founder Avram Finkelstein explained that Gran Fury hoped the image would catch people by surprise: “I wanted our work to have a real yuppie graphic, something that would fit where you didn’t expect politics” (Crimp 2003; qtd in Goldstein 1997: 43-44).⁷ Critic and AIDS activist Adam Rolston noted the success of this technique: “It looked like a corporate logo, like some institution was speaking to me. It’s the appropriation of the voice of authority. Like a trick” (qtd in Meyer 1995: 62).

At that time, despite 25,000 deaths from AIDS, President Reagan had refused to acknowledge the disease in public.⁸ While the Gran Fury poster singled out the Reagan administration for its silence, it also targeted the media’s erasure of the epidemic, from its reluctance to cover the “gay cancer” to newspapers’ policies of not citing AIDS as the cause of death in obituaries to avoid “embarrassing” family members. With an initial printing of 2,000 posters, Gran Fury set about wheatpasting “Silence = Death” all over the city.⁹

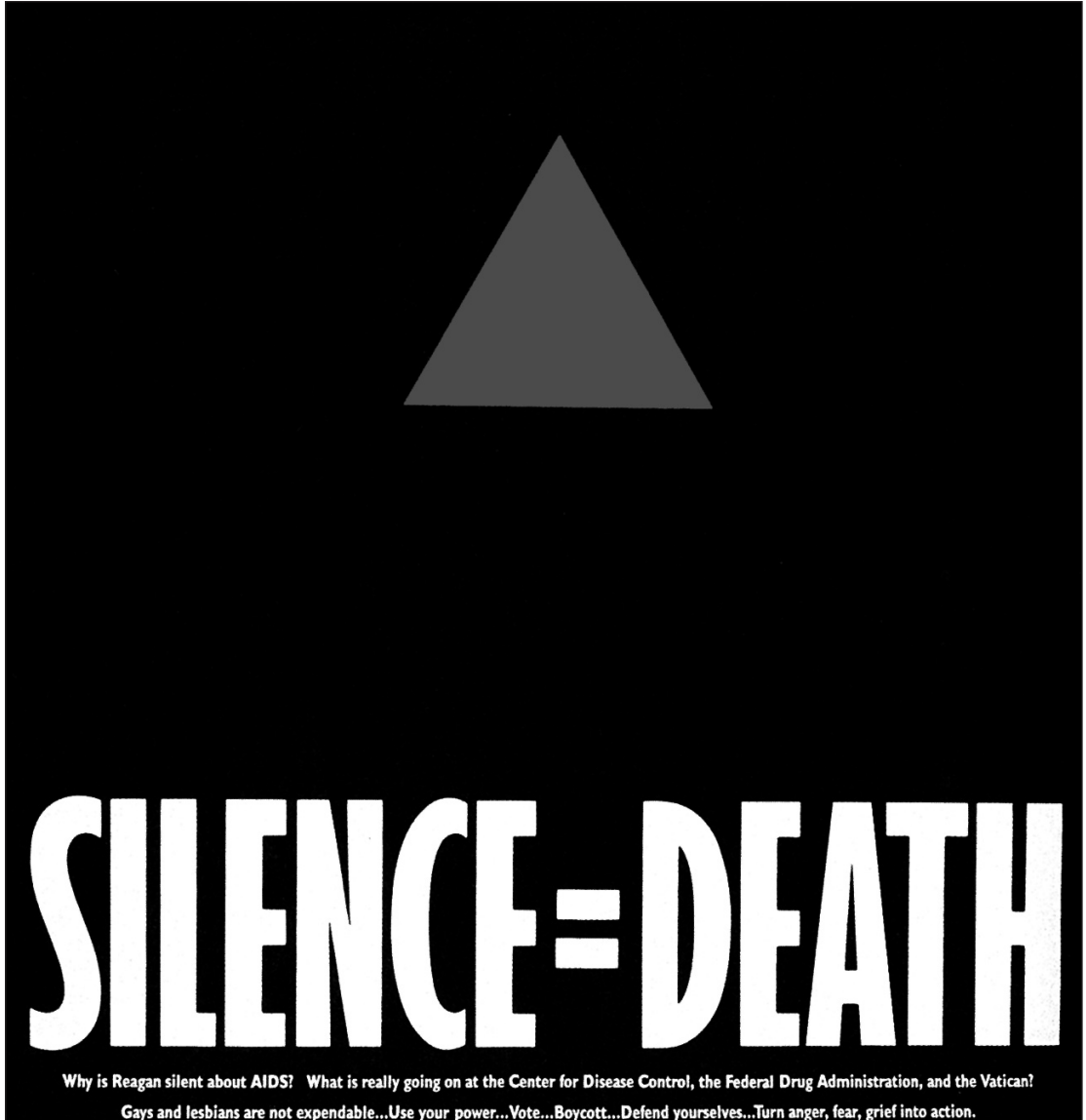


Figure 1: Silence = Death, 1986, Silence = Death Project, Poster, T-shirt, button and sticker.
Source: Courtesy of James Wentzy for ACT UP-NY and Douglas Crimp.

In March 1987, playwright and long-time AIDS activist Larry Kramer gave a speech at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center in Greenwich Village, warning the audience that two-thirds of them could be dead within five years. Kramer called his listeners, telling them, “If what you’re hearing doesn’t rouse you to anger, fury, rage and action, gay men will have no future here on earth.” Following Kramer’s speech, several hundred people reconvened and took the name AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. They also adopted Gran Fury’s “Silence = Death” as their logo (DeParle 1990). ACT UP dedicated itself to the use of mass demonstrations and dramatic civil disobedience to bring public attention to the AIDS crisis. They pressured both government and drug company officials to increase the availability of health care for people with AIDS.

ACT UP held its first protest in March 1987 on Wall Street, where gay men, lesbians and their straight allies criticized drug companies’ profiteering, citing the high cost of AIDS drugs. They also deplored the Federal Drug Administration’s lengthy process of approval of new treatment regimes. ACT UP charged that Burroughs-Wells’ marketing of AZT, the first drug approved to combat HIV, at \$10,000 for a year’s supply – the most expensive prescription drug to date – was immoral, and put profits before people. After the protest, the FDA announced it would shorten the drug approval process by two years, and Burroughs-Wells later reduced the price of AZT to \$6,000.00/year per patient. ACT UP decided to keep up the pressure on the corporation to further reduce the cost of AZT by affixing “AIDS PROFITEER” stickers to Burroughs-Wellcome products in pharmacies and grocery stores, including Sudafed, Actifed, and Neosporin (DeParle 1990; Schoofs 1997).¹⁰

While the Wall Street protest caught the attention of financial elites and passer-bys, ACT UP first caught the attention of many New Yorkers when they saw its trademark poster, Silence = Death. As one reporter noted, “On the streets of New York, it is virtually impossible to miss ACT UP’s militant message... The slogan – pasted over subway advertisements, slapped on the sides of mailboxes, affixed to the screens of automatic teller machines – intrudes, provokes, and disturbs” (Crossen 1989: 1). For some gay men and lesbians, the poster created an immediate sense of community. A recent migrant to New York from Iowa, artist Patrick Moore recalled the first time he saw the Silence = Death poster:

Arriving in New York, I sought connections to the gay world but could find none... It is all the more amazing to me that, out of this rigid and isolated experience, I could have been forever changed by something as simple as a poster. In 1987 I began seeing a remarkable poster on the streets of downtown New York. The poster seemed to resonate with a new kind of energy, with its glossy black field interrupted by a pink triangle, and, near the bottom, large letters reading “SILENCE = DEATH.” In small type at the bottom of the poster, readers were questioned:

“Why is Reagan silent about AIDS? What is really going on at the Centers for Disease Control, the Federal Drug Administration and the Vatican? Gays and Lesbians are not expendable... Use your power... Vote... Boycott... Defend Yourself... Turn anger, fear, grief into action”

Suddenly, though I knew nothing about it, I felt intuitively that there was in fact a gay world that I could not only identify with but aspire to join. (Moore 2004: 121-122)¹¹

In the late 1980s, while the face of the city was being transformed by privatized development projects, ACT UP plastered its images everywhere – especially on the blue walls designating construction sites that dotted Lower Manhattan, turning the space of the city into a political and cultural forum. As reporter Jesse Green remembered his first sight of the “Silence = Death” poster in his Greenwich Village neighborhood:

Everything was being demolished back then. In 1987, voids seemed to pop up daily in the New York streetscape, just as they had been popping up in gay men’s lives since the beginning of the decade. If the human loss constantly threatened to engulf us, the holes where buildings once stood could at least be covered over; temporary walls of plywood, often painted blue, were flimsily erected to prevent people from falling in. It took but a night for so-called snipers to plaster any such wall with a thousand ads and provocations. As a result, my neighborhood, Greenwich Village, was a giant bulletin board of notices no one noticed.

Still, this poster managed, by a purely aesthetic force, to breach the flimsy blue walls of my own defenses... this [poster] kept hacking away at me for days, the way a good play or book might. For days and for years. (Green 2003: 69)

In addition to its gripping aesthetic, part of the power of ACT UP’s posters lay in the element of unexpectedness. As critic Lucy Lippard notes: “sign language comes as a surprise from the alternative viewpoint, intervening and reinterpreting power plays from above” (Lippard 1999: 55). For ACT UP members, part of the meaning of the Silence = Death logo came when they affixed it, in button

form, to their jackets, or wore it on boldly printed t-shirts. Actor Ron Golberg explained that much of the significance of wearing the logo for him lay in being visibly out as a gay man on the streets of Manhattan, rejecting the shame of homophobia and fear of AIDS:

I remember wearing at that first demonstration my Silence = Death button and... even just putting that on your jacket was a statement... It was a statement that you were gay, because there was the pink triangle – whether it was true or not. And then, for people who even knew what that was about, people just assumed that you must have AIDS. And that was a big deal. (Goldberg 2003: 7)

The Silence = Death logo built not only a sense of community among gay men and lesbians, but also a sense of pride resulting in personal and group efficacy, which fostered the ability to do something to alleviate the AIDS crisis.

The remarkable success of the Silence = Death campaign also dramatically increased attendance at ACT UP’s weekly meetings at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center in Greenwich Village. In just two years, the group’s membership grew to more than 2,000, with a budget of more than \$500,000. ACT UP favored a non-hierarchical structure and consensus-based decision making, with no official leaders. Smaller caucuses and working groups formed to research and plan actions for specific issues, including drug treatment, women and AIDS, IV drug users, housing for people with AIDS, alternative and holistic treatment, health insurance, and sex education. Affinity groups planned secret civil disobedience actions and provided members with support during the actions. The entire floor voted on anything bearing ACT UP’s name.

ACT UP pursued an inside/outside strategy, with some members conducting research on AIDS treatment and negotiating with government and drug company officials to increase the availability of drugs, while others planned dramatic direct actions aimed at bringing public opinion to bear on the same officials.¹² ACT UP had a large contingent of graphic designers, artists, and public relations professionals, and their poster art campaigns remained central to the organization's goal of calling attention to the epidemic in public space and changing the way Americans understood AIDS. In 1987, Bill Olander, curator of the New Museum, approached ACT UP and offered them the use of the museum's window on Broadway for a "visual demonstration." The resulting installation, "Let the Record Show," produced by Gran Fury and other ACT UP members, continued the theme of "Silence = Death" by holding public officials accountable for their homophobia and lack of commitment to stemming the epidemic. According to Gran Fury member Tom Kalin, the installation was also inspired by ACT UP's demonstrations:

The main idea came from demos where we yelled 'shame' at public figures who were doing nothing about AIDS. So we decided we'd single out public figures who had made outrageous statements about AIDS, show a photograph of each of them, and cast their words in concrete. And then these AIDS criminals somehow got connected to the Nuremburg Trials. (qtd in Crimp 2003: 1-2)

As Douglas Crimp describes "Let the Record Show," it featured the Silence = Death logo in pink neon in the top center of the curved window, above a photomural of the Nuremburg Trials, bringing the history of questionable ethics of medical and scien-

tific research to the forefront of the presentation. In front of the photomural were "six life-size silhouetted photographs of 'AIDS Criminals' in separate, boxed in spaces, and below each one the words by which he or she may be judged by history, cast – literally – in concrete" (Crimp 2002: 35). Each image was lit up in sequence. The AIDS criminals included Jesse Helms, Republican Senator from North Carolina, (who suggested quarantining people infected with AIDS), Jerry Falwell (who contended that AIDS was sent by God to punish homosexuals for sinful sexual behavior), William Buckley, and Ronald Reagan (whose concrete slab was blank, to highlight his silence on AIDS), as well as an anonymous surgeon (who was quoted stating that AIDS was a legitimate reason to hate fags) and Cory Servaas, of the Presidential AIDS Commission (who suggested that "It is patriotic to have the AIDS test and be negative") (35). Through the "Let the Record Show" installation, ACT UP challenged gay people's exclusion from citizenship by suggesting that public officials, medical professionals, and right-wing commentators violated American ideals by acting like Nazis in their treatment of people with AIDS. Real patriots, ACT UP argued, would educate Americans about the epidemic and press for research and treatment.

ACT UP's artwork targeted individual public health officials and politicians, but also sought to raise larger, structural issues underlying the AIDS epidemic, including homophobia, racism, sexism, and class stratification. New York City Health Commissioner Stephen Joseph was a frequent target. He proposed mandatory AIDS testing of prostitutes and drug addicts, making public the names of those infected with HIV, and reducing funding for treatment and care of AIDS patients. ACT UP


charged that public money could be better spent on treatment than tracing. Members feared the loss of anonymous testing, the only method that would encourage people to get tested and seek help, since many hid their illness from health workers, fearing the loss of health insurance and employment. In 1989, ACT UP member Richard Deagle created the poster, “Deadlier than the Virus,” which featured the logo in red next to a photograph of Stephen Joseph’s head. ACT UP pressured Mayor Koch to fire Joseph (who resigned when Mayor Dinkins took office) and to allocate more funds for treatment and prevention. Also in 1989, ACT UP member Ken Woodard made “Invest in Marble and Granite,” a newspaper advertisement featuring Mayor Ed Koch surrounded by gravestones with the question: “What Does Koch plan to do about AIDS? Invest in Marble and Granite” (Crimp and Rolston 1990: 72-76, 87).

Along with public officials, ACT UP sought to hold the mainstream press accountable for its lack of coverage on AIDS and misinformation. In January 1988, *Cosmopolitan Magazine* ran an article that suggested that American women were not at risk for AIDS and did not need to use condoms, because they did not engage in the “brutal” sex practices of Africans. In response, Gran Fury created an English and Spanish language poster “AIDS: 1 in 61,” which featured a baby doll along with the information that: “One in every sixty-one babies in New York City is born with AIDS or born HIV positive. So why is the media telling us that heterosexuals aren’t at risk? Because these babies are black. These babies are Hispanic. Ignoring color ignores the facts of AIDS. STOP RACISM: FIGHT AIDS” (Crimp and Rolston 1990: 38-43).¹³

ACT UP also sprung into action in June 1989, when *The New York Times*, which was notable for its paltry coverage of AIDS, printed an editorial titled, “Why Make AIDS Worse Than It Is?,” suggesting that increased funds were not needed as the epidemic was leveling off. The disease was “still very largely confined to specific risk groups. Once all susceptible members are infected, the numbers of new victims will decline,” *The Times* concluded (The New York Times 1989: A22). With more than 65 million people infected with HIV worldwide and 25 million deaths

Figure 2: Invest in Marble and Granite, 1989, Ken Woodard. Newspaper advertisement.

WHAT DOES KOCH PLAN TO DO ABOUT AIDS? INVEST IN MARBLE AND GRANITE.



Welcome to New York, where AIDS is good for undertakers but bad for people. About 10,000 people. People the city left to die. And more will die, unless you do something. But what's something you can do? Simple. Be at City Hall on March 28th at 7:30 a.m. Be a part of the largest AIDS demonstration ever. And what, exactly, are we demonstrating against? A city that spends only one-half of one percent of its budget on AIDS. A city whose health department cuts costs by cutting estimates of people infected with HIV. A city where 1X drug users with AIDS will see months to get into a treatment program when, on average, they have six months to live. A city that sees thousands of empty apartments while 5,000 people with AIDS live on the streets. And if you think AIDS only affects the people that get it, think about trying to get a hospital bed when many hospitals in New York are at 95% capacity. Which is why we're targeting City Hall. And why we're protesting too ways. With a legal picket, and more forcefully, through civil disobedience. Civil disobedience training will be held on March 25th from 12-6 p.m. at The Center, 208 West 13th St. between 7th and 8th Ave. But whether you want to get arrested or not, join us on the east side of City Hall on March 28th. And if you want to know more about AIDS in NYC before the 28th, come to a teach-in at The Center on March 23rd (7-10 p.m.) or March 24th (3-6 p.m.). It's time we told City Hall to tackle the AIDS crisis, instead of burying it. AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, 490 Hudson St. Suite G4, New York, NY 10014 (212) 533-8888. **ACT UP**

Source: Courtesy of James Wentzly for ACT UP-NY and Douglas Crimp.

from AIDS, the *Times* editorial proved irresponsible (Zezima 2006: A18). Heterosexual transmission rates were already increasing in the U.S. by the mid-1980s. The editorial's implication that the deaths of gay men and drug users were of little significance to the nation as a whole was repressible, but representative of the early stage of public discourse on AIDS. ACT UP's Outreach committee responded with crack-and-peel stickers, "BUY YOUR LIES HERE," to be affixed to newsstands, and "OUT OF ORDER," to be placed over the coin slot of *Times* vending machines. On the sidewalks and streets outside of *Times* publisher Arthur Sulzberger's home, members painted outlines of bodies accompanied by a new slogan, "All the news that's fit to kill." They stood on street corners passing out flyers to Sulzberger's neighbors (Crimp and Rolston 1990: 108-114).

The painting or chalking of body outlines was a frequent motif in ACT UP demonstrations. It recalled the methodology of feminist artist Suzanne Lacy, who, in her 1977 *Three Weeks in May*, drew attention to the prevalence of rape in Los Angeles by painting the outlines of a body along with the notation "a woman was raped here," on sidewalks near locations where rapes were reported. According to Lacy, who also coordinated the picketing of city hall and the distribution of leaflets with daily rape statistics, the project "was used as both an organizing device to bring people from different anti-violence organizations and different political perspectives together on the same programs – and as a way to create public dialogue on rape and women's solutions to it" (Broude and Garrard 1994: 171-172). Drawing on the practices established by Lacy and other feminist artists in the 1970s, and, like them, wishing to add the voices of AIDS victims to the debate, ACT UP

similarly sought to combine poster or public art, performance art, and demonstrations that would initiate public discussions of AIDS. ACT UP's graphic aesthetic, typically using only one color in addition to black and white, along with boldface text, also borrowed from feminist poster artist Barbara Kruger, who sought to hold the art world accountable for its depiction of women as sexual objects and dismissal of work by female artists (Staniszewski 1995: 40).

Like chalk outlines, ACT UP used blood, especially bloody hands, as a recurrent theme. They painted red hand prints across the city and placed Gran Fury's 1988 design "The Government Has Blood On Its Hands," which featured a bloody hand along with the text "One AIDS Death Every Half Hour," on subway placards, t-shirts and stickers (Crimp and Rolston 1990: 80-81). The blood conjured up the public's fear of contaminated blood (especially since so many hemophiliacs had contracted AIDS from blood transfusions), as well as police use of rubber gloves when arresting AIDS demonstrators (Shilts 1987). In addition to blood, death and fear of death featured prominently in ACT UP's poster and performance. Most dramatically, perhaps, at a demonstration in Washington, D.C. on October 11, 1992, 8,000 ACT UP protestors charged through police lines, crossing onto the White House lawn and scattering the ashes of AIDS patients on the grass.¹⁴

With the success of the Silence = Death poster, Gran Fury and ACT UP continued to reframe notions of obscenity and morality, charging that it was the state's and the Roman Catholic Church's response to AIDS, and not extramarital or gay sex itself, that was immoral. Their dramatic installations sometimes took them beyond the streets of New

York. In 1990, Gran Fury was invited to participate in the Venice Biennale, and created “The Pope and the Penis,” which featured an erect penis with the slogan “SEXISM REARS ITS UNPROTECTED HEAD,” along with a photo of the Pope, accompanied by text charging that he preferred “living saints and dead sinners.” Italian Customs agents impounded the work, but Gran Fury members stole it from the building where it was being kept and placed it in the Biennale, where it was widely acclaimed by art critics (Goldstein 1997: 44). Returning stateside, in 1991, ACT UP members placed a giant condom on Republican Senator Jesse Helm’s Virginia house, protesting the Senator’s call for abstinence-only sex education (Green 2003). Locally in New York, Gran Fury wheatpasted its 1988 “Sexism Rears Its Unprotected Head” poster, featuring an erect penis with accompanying text, “Men: Use Condoms Or Beat It. AIDS Kills Women,” along with its 1988 “All People with AIDS are Innocent” poster, challenging the press’ construction of hemophiliacs as “innocent” AIDS victims and everyone else as implicitly deserving to die from the disease (Crimp and Rolston 1990: 62-63).¹⁵ At a time when gay sex was being demonized for creating AIDS and some insurance companies sought to deny coverage to AIDS patients who had contracted the disease “voluntarily,” these posters and installation projects highlighted the ways in which AIDS itself was socially constructed, and how AIDS patients were affected as much by homophobia as by the virus and the opportunistic infections it spawned.¹⁶ In its embrace of safer sex practices, ACT UP provided an alternative understanding of sexuality, one that was neither nihilistic nor negating of the power inherent in the expression of one’s sexuality, which the gay liberation movement had sought to explore.

While AIDS was ACT UP’s *raison d’être*, abortion rights was WHAM!’s. As ACT UP and WHAM! member Brian Griffin noted, however, “the same men and women who don’t want women to have abortions also don’t want men and women to be gay.” Common enemies – especially the religious right – facilitated a coalition between the groups, as did their queer sensibility and overlapping memberships. Both groups struggled with defining a broad yet targeted politics of social change that would address the many issues facing people with AIDS and women seeking control over their reproductive health.

The most famous – and controversial – of the coalition’s protests was “Stop the Church.” On Sunday morning, December 10, 1989, 4,500 protestors massed outside of St. Patrick’s Cathedral on Fifth Avenue in New York City. Carrying signs reading, “Stop the Church!, Public Health Menace, Curb Your Dogma, Keep Your Rosaries Off My Ovaries!, and Know Your Scumbags,” they rallied against Roman Catholic Cardinal John O’Connor’s stance against gay rights, reproductive rights, sex education, and condom use. The Cardinal’s policies were leading to an increase in AIDS deaths, they charged, and were violating the separation between church and state. While thousands rallied outside, several hundred protestors succeeded in entering the cathedral and disrupted the mass. Some same-sex couples embraced, some participated in a “die-in,” dropping to the ground and refusing to move, and others shouted back at the Cardinal during his homily, throwing condoms in the air and forcing him to end early. Most notoriously, one threw the consecrated Eucharistic wafer to the ground.

Meanwhile, dozens of protestors laid down in the street across from Rockefeller Center, blocking traffic on Fifth Avenue. Outside, the mood was riotous, with protestors passing along a 20-foot long, balloon-filled condom sloganed, "Cardinal O'Condom." Clowns threw confetti, blew horns, and distracted the police so that protestors could cross Fifth Avenue. As one participant noted, "Christmas carols chimed on one side of the street, while on the other side men and women yelled, 'Racist, sexist, anti-gay, Cardinal O'Connor go away.'" Costumes and drag were an important element of the political theater. One protestor, dressed as Jesus Christ, gave out interviews, alongside men dressed as nuns and others in mock clergy vestments (Walter 1989: 8; Griffin 2004).¹⁷

Through protests such as "Stop the Church," ACT UP and WHAM! drew attention to the city's privatization of social services, the Catholic Church, and the political influence of the Cardinal's sexual conservatism. For example, in 1984 O'Connor succeeded in getting an abstinence-first sex education curriculum adopted for all City public schools, and in 1986 he contributed to blocking a plan for condom distribution in the schools (Village Voice 1990). Moreover, the coalition articulated an alternative to the Cardinal's claims that "good morality is good medicine," arguing that all AIDS patients were "innocent" and deserved to live, and that all New Yorkers, and especially students, had the right to learn how to protect themselves from AIDS. The Cardinal's support for Operation Rescue and its blockade of abortion clinics promoted violence against women, they argued, not the preservation of life. Furthermore, the coalition countered conservatives' claims that extramarital sex was immoral, and that sexu-

ally transmitted diseases were God's punishment to homosexuals and promiscuous heterosexuals alike. Rather, they argued, sex was a positive good, and use of condoms and behavior modification could make sexual intimacy safe even in the age of AIDS. By interrupting shopping during the busy holiday season, the coalition reminded spectators that there was more to citizenship than consumption and challenged developers' stake on the city's streets as venues for privatized family entertainment.

Conclusion

As this essay has argued, ACT UP and WHAM! countered conservatives' emphasis on the heterosexual nuclear family as the primary site of citizenship by creating inclusive public spaces and "chosen" families united in their commitment to activism. As ACT UP and WHAM! member Heidi Dorow reflected, "It wasn't just politics. It wasn't just social change. It was about love and desire and family and community" (Dorow 2004). The coalition offered a counter-vision to the Right's promotion of privatization and conservative Christian morality, one of universal access to health care and sexual and reproductive freedom. Through its wheatpasting campaigns and direct action protests, the coalition created new meanings for the public space of Lower Manhattan, changing the way residents and visitors experienced the city streets, as well as how many Americans understood AIDS.

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Lead Photograph

"Parades are not Enough," from a 1991 ACT-UP demonstration in Chicago - Genyphyr Novak

Manuscript Collections

Women's Health Action Mobilization! Collection. Tamiment Archives. New York University.

Notes

¹ This essay is excerpted from chapter five of my dissertation. Tamar Carroll, *Grassroots Feminism: Direct Action Organizing and Social Change in New York City, 1955-1995* (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor: 2007).

² The Democratic Party has also embraced market-based solutions to social problems. For a chronicle of the Democratic Party's adoption of market populism in the 1990s, see Frank (2000).

³ As Yudice points out, these partnerships blur the line between public and private, thus further obscuring accountability.

⁴ However, Democratic Governors Cuomo and Michael Dukakis (MA) also blocked funding on AIDS. See Shilts (1987).

⁵ Buckley wrote, "Everyone detected with AIDS should be tattooed in the upper forearm, to protect common needle users, and on the buttocks to prevent the victimization of other homosexuals." See Crimp (2002), pg. 35.

⁶ Adopting a queer identity also involved challenging straight/gay dichotomies by revealing the constructedness of bounded sexualities, and the power involved in enforcing heterosexual masculinity, for example.

⁷ Gran Fury took the name of the Plymouth model used by the NYC Police Department in 1987, after the "Let the Record Show" display at the New Museum.

⁸ May 31, 1987 was the first time President Reagan gave a speech on AIDS, focusing mainly on testing, and avoiding using the words gay or homosexual. See Shilts (1987), pg. 559.

⁹ Wheatpasting refers to the paste used to plaster posters to temporary construction walls, subway stations, and other public places. Prior to Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's campaign to clean up New York in the mid-1990s, wheatpasting was tolerated by the police, with only a nominal fine imposed if one was caught in the act, and non-commercial images were much more common in the city. See the Reproductive Rights Coalition Meeting Minutes, June 20, 1991, WHAM! Collection.

¹⁰ See also “ACT UP Marks Tenth Anniversary Founding at Center,” *Center Voice: Newsletter of the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center*, April/May 1997, 1-4, WHAM! Collection. “ACT UP Background: A Capsule History of ACT UP/NY,” no date, WHAM! Collection.

¹¹ For additional first person accounts of ACT UP, see the ACT UP oral history project at <http://www.actuporalhistory.org/>.

¹² Peter Cohen links the “inside” approach to the “class style” of upper middle class white men in ACT UP who were used to being treated with respect and given access to power, and who preferred negotiating to staging demonstrations. See Cohen (1998), pg 49.

¹³ Gran Fury was the most recognized art collective within ACT UP, but not the only one, and is not solely responsible for crafting the creative style of the organization.

¹⁴ See “An ACT UP Chronology,” 1994, p. 7, WHAM! Collection.

¹⁵ When female members of ACT UP complained that the image of the large erect penis “glorified phallic power,” Gran Fury changed its design to a crack-and-peel sticker resembling a “Men at Work” sign, with the text, “MEN USE CONDOMS OR BEAT IT.” See Meyer (1995), pg 69.

¹⁶ In January 1990, ACT UP conducted a “phone zap,” in which members deluged the switchboard of the offending organization with calls against Galaxy Carpet Mills whose employees had to prove “involuntary” HIV infection in order to get coverage for HIV-related treatments under the company’s health insurance policy. See “An ACT UP Chronology,” 1994, p.3., WHAM! Collection.

¹⁷ The clowns were part of a direct action group “Operation Ridiculous,” a satire of the anti-abortion group Operation Rescue. They chanted, “Save the clown babies.” See *Like A Prayer: Stop the Church*, produced by Damned Interfering Video Activists (DIVA TV), 1990, DVD, in author’s possession.

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