

T.L. Litt: ACT UP demonstration at Kings County
Hospital, Brooklyn, New York, June 1989



In regards to government response [to AIDS], "I know it, you know it, we all know it. Nothing has happened."¹

-C. Everett Koop,
Former Surgeon
General of the
United States

On May 31, 1987, former President Ronald Reagan delivered his first public speech on the AIDS epidemic. By this time, 36,058 American citizens had been diagnosed with the syndrome and 20,849 had died as a result of it. Almost six years had elapsed since the first AIDS-related deaths in this nation.

The AIDS Timeline, a mixed-media installation by the artists' collective Group Material, reconstructs the history of AIDS as embedded within a web of cultural and political relations, primary among them the federal government's response to the syndrome. According to Group Material, the timeline, "indicts the government's inaction [on AIDS] and society's complicity in that inaction."²

The exhibition calls upon a variety of art objects as well as cultural artifacts, including images and texts from the popular media, the government, and grassroots political activists, to create a

chronology of the syndrome. Using this breadth of representational materials, the timeline suggests that AIDS has been constructed through both a biomedical discourse of infection, incubation, and transmission as well as a cultural vocabulary of innocence and guilt, dominance and deviance, threat and threatened, self and other. The second set of definitions helps to determine the first in that conceptions of AIDS—the media's, the public's, the federal government's—directly impact upon funding for research, outreach, education, and health-care. Thus, the long-standing ghettoization of the syndrome as a "gay plague" and the media construction of gay men and i.v. drug users as the "guilty" victims or even the "perpetrators" of the syndrome, has allowed and increased delays in federal funding to AIDS research.

Running throughout the timeline will be three graphs—the numbers of Americans diagnosed with AIDS, the numbers of Americans dead from the syndrome, and the amount of government spending on AIDS research. One need only to note the progress of the funding graph between 1985 and 1986 to appreciate the effects of popular representation on the reality of AIDS death

and dysfunction. Following the summer of 1985, when it was disclosed that Rock Hudson, a beloved figure of (dominant) culture, was ill as a result of AIDS, the Reagan administration doubled the budget of the CDC (Centers for Disease Control). Prior to the news of Hudson's illness, Reagan had planned to cut that organization's funding for the following fiscal year. In effect, the recognition of one celebrity's death, one person who could not be dismissed as "foreign" by the popular medias, had saved many thousands of lives.³

Several of the artworks on the timeline decry the federal response to AIDS. Tim Rollins + K.O.S.'s portrait of Senator Jesse Helms as a pit-bull set against collaged pages of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* challenges the legislative mission of Senator Helms, which included a call for quarantine of people with AIDS in 1987; restrictions in funding to organizations producing AIDS education-information because they "promote or condone gay sex and i.v. drug use" in 1988; and the reduction of funding to the National Endowment for the Arts because it supported exhibitions of works of art that Helms deemed obscene in 1989.

Infringements of bodily freedoms are also contested in works such as Nancy Spero's semi-abstract image of a female body with overlaid text reading, "This womb does not belong to doctors, legislators, judges, priests, the state, etc." Although Spero directly responds to legislative rollbacks on reproductive rights, her affirmation of bodily autonomy can also, in the context of *The AIDS Timeline*, be read as a response to Jesse Helms and to William F. Buckley, the latter of whom called for tattooing the buttocks of so-called "AIDS carriers" in 1984.

The timeline also includes documents from the popular culture of the past decade which, while not always explicitly related to AIDS, recall the historical context of the syndrome. Thus, Steven Evans' *Selections from the Disco, Various BPM, 1979-1989* places the titles to popular disco songs at yearly intervals throughout the timeline. The songs, which range from "Got to Be Real" (1979) by Cheryl Lynn to "Sex" (1985) by Sylvester (who has since died as a result of AIDS), recall an ecstatic disco tradition once central to gay subcultural identity that has now given way to a more somber, even memorializing musical style.

The titles of each song also flag the historical context of their popularity, grounding the AIDS representations from that particular year in a specific and remembered cultural moment. Similarly, an ominous image of Darth Vader, the mechanically mediated villain of the 1980 blockbuster film "The Empire Strikes Back" peers out from the beginning of the timeline, drawing parallels between Vader and the then newly elected Reagan/Bush team, whose election button is on view nearby.

A program of recent videos on AIDS forms a discrete part of *The AIDS Timeline*. The videos, which are screened daily, approach the epidemic from several different perspectives and methodologies. These include representations of grassroots protests by AIDS activists, instructional tapes for safer sex, community-based documentaries, and more abstract, or non-narrative, representations by video artists.

In addition to the timeline housed in the MATRIX Gallery, Group Material has selected several other sites throughout the Berkeley community in which to confront AIDS and its representation, thereby expanding the address of the exhibition beyond the bounds of an art-world or

museum audience. On the facade of the museum, Group Material has installed a "dazibao" or "democracy wall", that lists responses to questions about AIDS posed by Group Material to the larger Berkeley community. The texts reflect the diversity of AIDS awareness in this community. These range from the confidence of a Berkeley undergraduate who remarks, "AIDS doesn't affect me at all. I don't really sleep around," to the concerns of a Berkeley alumnus with AIDS who relates, "All my goals and dreams for the future have been put on hold or just plainly shattered. I'm a 33 year old man whose life and stamina resembles that of an octogenarian who is witnessing his contemporaries and friends die and whose life is coming to an end."⁴

In addition, a series of videos on AIDS is being presented inside the Recreational Sports Facility for the duration of the exhibition. Within a space devoted to physical training, the video program asks gym patrons to consider the larger responsibilities of health consciousness, both physical and social, in light of the AIDS crisis. An animated public service message created by children, a documentation of an AIDS

protest, and a lyrical montage proposing homoeroticism as a strategy of resistance to AIDS phobia are among the tapes continuously broadcast on a video loop.

In an effort to address the entire campus community, a large graphic on AIDS representation is included in the November 10, 1989 issue of *The Daily Californian*. This work, designed by the New York-based AIDS artist/activist collective, Gran Fury, comprises a half-page of the paper and calls for activism and anger from Berkeley students in response to AIDS.

In a radical critique of the art-making and exhibiting process, the artists of Group Material do not create the works they exhibit. Rather, the "work" of their art is the selection and installation of multiple images and texts which often, as in *The AIDS Timeline*, include art objects, (other) consumer products, posters, informational flyers, videos, and agit-prop. By taking the exhibition as their medium, and by including in that medium several modes of representation—both high and popular culture, for example, or both governmental and grassroots propaganda—Group Material stages a layered and multivocal address to the political

issue(s) under consideration rather than an individual or "authorial" one.

During the ten years of their installation work, Group Material has exhibited in a wide variety of venues, including urban storefronts and the Whitney Biennial. The membership of the collective, which has evolved since its founding in 1979, now consists of Doug Ashford, Julie Ault, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and Karen Ramspacher.

Richard Meyer
Graduate Student
Department of Art
History
University of California
at Berkeley

Notes

¹ C. Everett Koop, address to the National Commission on AIDS, Washington, D.C. September, 1989, as quoted in *Outweek*, October 8, 1989, p. 26.

² Interview with the author, September 2, 1989.

³ "At age 59, [Rock] Hudson died. Till then it had still been possible to think of AIDS as something foreign, a scourge of the gay baths and the drug underworld," *Newsweek*, January 6, 1986, p. 42.

⁴ Anonymous respondents, Group Material "dazibao," *The AIDS Timeline*, University Art Museum, Berkeley.

Works in MATRIX:

1. Robert Beck, *Safer Sex Preview Booth*, 1989, mixed media, 3' x 4' x 7-1/2'. Courtesy Simon Watson Gallery, New York.

2. Nayland Blake, *Untitled (Future Shock)*, 1989, mixed media, 7" x 6" x 4-1/2". Private collection, New York.

3. Theresa Bramlette, *No Trace: Wishbone*, 1989, photo emulsion on painted wood, 5 parts, 9" x 12-3/4" ea. Lent by Mr. Dan Lufkin; Courtesy Althea Viafora Gallery, New York.

4. Steven Evans, *Selections from the Disco, Various BPM, 1979-1989*, 1989, mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

5. Tom of Finland, *Use a Rubber*, 1987, poster, 11" x 14". Courtesy Feature, New York.

6. Barry Frederick, *D Is for Dignity*, 1989, mixed media, 25" x 11" x 9-1/2". Lent by the artist.

7. Mike Glier, *Key CIA Official*, from *White Male Power series*, 1981, print, 11" x 16-1/2". Private collection, New York.

8. Keith Haring, *Ignorance = Fear, Silence = Death*, 1989, poster, 43" x 24". Courtesy ACT UP, New York.

9. Michael Jenkins, *June 30, 1986*, 1988, acrylic on paper, 9' x 6'. Lent by the artist.

10. Tom Kalin, *1968-1988*, 1988, photo and text on adhesive paper, 5" x 21-1/2". Private collection, New York.

11. Louise Lawler, *Beautiful*, 1989, black-and-white photograph with letter press mat, 14" x 11", edition of 10. Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.

12. Dorothea Lange, *Untitled*, from the *Internment Camp*

series, 1942, black-and-white photograph, 8" x 10". Courtesy National Archives 210-GC-160.

13. Rudy Lemcke, *Paintings from the Wizard of Oz series*, 1989, acrylic, dimensions variable. Courtesy Modernism, San Francisco.

14. Brad Melamed, *Black/White*, 1988, oil crayon on vellum paper, 17" x 20". Lent by the artist.

15. Duane Michals, *The Nature of Desire*, 1986, book, 9-1/4" x 12-1/4", Twelve Trees Press. Private collection, New York.

16. Ann Meredith, *Delta and Rachel at Baker Beach*, 1987, black-and-white photograph, 16" x 20". Lent by the artist.

17. Donald Moffett, *Check Out Your Violence of Opinion*, 1988, light box, 25-1/2" x 26" x 4". Courtesy Wessel O'Connor Gallery, New York.

18. Diane Neumaier, *Find a Cure*, 1989, black-and-white photographs, 16" x 20" ea. Lent by the artist.

19. *Members of the Rest Stop and The Center (Eddie Booker, Steve Brown, Richard C., Steve Curd, Tom Devine, Paul Gronberg, Paul Freitas, Ken Huff, J.J., Eric Lewald, Richard McMullen, Ben Medina, Gary Ostrander, Max Proudfoot, Steve Rene, Paul Steindal, David Taylor, Lou Troga, Andy Woodward, Teresa Yee, Jeff, Jim, Kat, Oscar, Terry)*, masks, 1989, mixed media, dimensions variable. Lent by the artists.

20. Tim Rollins + K.O.S., *From the Animal Farm (Jesse Helms)*, 1987, pencil and acrylic on book pages on linen, 56" x 80". Lent by Ernie and Lynn Mieger.

21. Kay Rosen, *Sinking Feeling*, 1984, enamel paint on museum board, 2 panels, 17-1/2" x 11-1/4" ea. Courtesy Feature, New York.

22. Erika Rothenberg, *Make the World Perfect Miracle Spray*, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 60-3/

4" x 79". Courtesy P.P.O.W Gallery, New York.

23. Lorna Simpson, *Untitled*, 1989, black-and-white photograph, 20" x 16". Courtesy Art Against AIDS, New York.

24. Nancy Spero, *This Womb Does Not Belong to Lawyers...*, 1988, handprinting and typewriter collage on paper, 24" x 19". Lent by the artist.

25. Mitchell Syrop, *Insider Trading*, 1986, black-and-white photo-mural on gator board, 40" x 26-1/2". Courtesy Lieberman and Saul Gallery, New York.

26. Michael Tidmus, *AIDS Stack*, 1989, computer program. Lent by the artist.

27. Michael Tidmus, *Health and Morality: A Desultory Discourse*, 1989, computer program. Lent by the artist.

28. Michael Tidmus, *Next*, 1989, computer program. Lent by the artist.

29. David Wojnarowicz, *Sex Series (one of eight)*, 1988-89, black-and-white photograph, 18-1/4" x 21-3/4". Courtesy P.P.O.W Gallery, New York.

Videos in MATRIX:

1. April Productions, *He Left Me His Strength*, 1989, color, 13 min.

2. Patricia Benoit, *Se Met Ko*, produced by Haitian Women's Health Group, 1989, color, 28 min.

3. Jean Carlomusto, *The Helms Amendment*, from the *Living with AIDS series*, produced by GMHC, 1987, color, 8 min.

4. Jean Carlomusto and Maria Maggenti, *Doctors, Liars, and Women: AIDS Activists Say No to Cosmo*, from the *Living with AIDS series*, produced by GMHC, 1988, color, 28 min.

5. DIVA-TV (ACT UP), *Target City Hall*, 1989, color, 28 min.

6. John Greyson, *The World Is Sick (Sic)*, 1989, color, 38 min.

7. Barbara Hammer, *Snow Job*, 1986, color, 8 min.

8. Bob Huff, *We Are Not Republicans*, 1988, color, 14 min.

9. Bob Kinney, *Transformer AIDS*, produced by Paper Tiger Southwest, 1988, color, 28 min.

10. Latino AIDS Project, *Oj Os Que No Ven*, 1986, color, 50 min.

11. Arl Spencer Nadel, *Golden Gate Bridge Blockade*, 1989, color, 6 min.

12. Ray Navaro and Catherine Saalfeld, *Bleach, Teach, Outreach*, from the *Living with AIDS series*, produced by GHMC, 1988, color, 28 min.

13. Catherine Saalfeld and Zoe Leonard, *Keep Your Laws Off Our Bodies*, 1989, black and white, 14 min.

14. Ellen Spiro, *DiAne's Hair Ego: AIDS Info Up Front*, 1989, color 26 min.

15. David Weissman, *Song from an Angel*, 1988, color, 5 min.

Videos in the Recreational Sports Facility:

1. Brooklyn AIDS Task Force, *Life/Information/Protection*, 1988-89, color, 2 min.

2. John C. Goss, *"Out" Takes*, 1989, color, 13 min.

3. Bob Huff, *We're Desperate, Get Used to It*, 1988, color, 3 min.

4. Tom Kalin, *They Are Lost to Vision Altogether*, 1989, color, 13 min.

5. Testing the Limits

Collective, *Testing the Limits*
NYC (Part 2), 1988-89, color,
58 min.

Work in *The Daily Californian*:

Gran Fury, Untitled, November
10, 1989, graphic design.

Selected solo exhibitions:

Group Material, NYC, *The*
People's Choice '81; Public
installation on Union Square,
NYC, *DA ZI BAOS* '82; IRT subway
trains of New York City,
Subculture '83; P.S.1, NYC,
Timeline: A Chronicle of U.S.
Intervention in Central and
Latin America '84; Temple
University Gallery,
Philadelphia, *Constitution* '87
(catalogue); Advertising
supplement to *The New York*
Times, NYC, *Inserts* '88; The
Dia Art Foundation, NYC,
Democracy '88-89.

Selected group exhibitions:

The Whitney Museum of American
Art, NYC, *Americana*, organized
for the Whitney Biennial '85;
Museum Fridericianum, Kassel,
West Germany, *The Castle*,
organized for *Documenta 8* '87.

Selected bibliography about the
artists (see also catalogues
under exhibitions):

Lippard, Lucy. "One
Foot Out the Door," *In These*
Times, July 9-22 '86.

Smith, Roberta.
"Working the Gap Between Art
and Politics," *The New York*
Times, Sept. 25 '88.

Hess, Elizabeth. "Safe
Combat in the Erogenous Zone,"
The Village Voice, Jan. 10 '89.

Olander, William.
"Material World," *Art in*
America, Jan. '89.

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