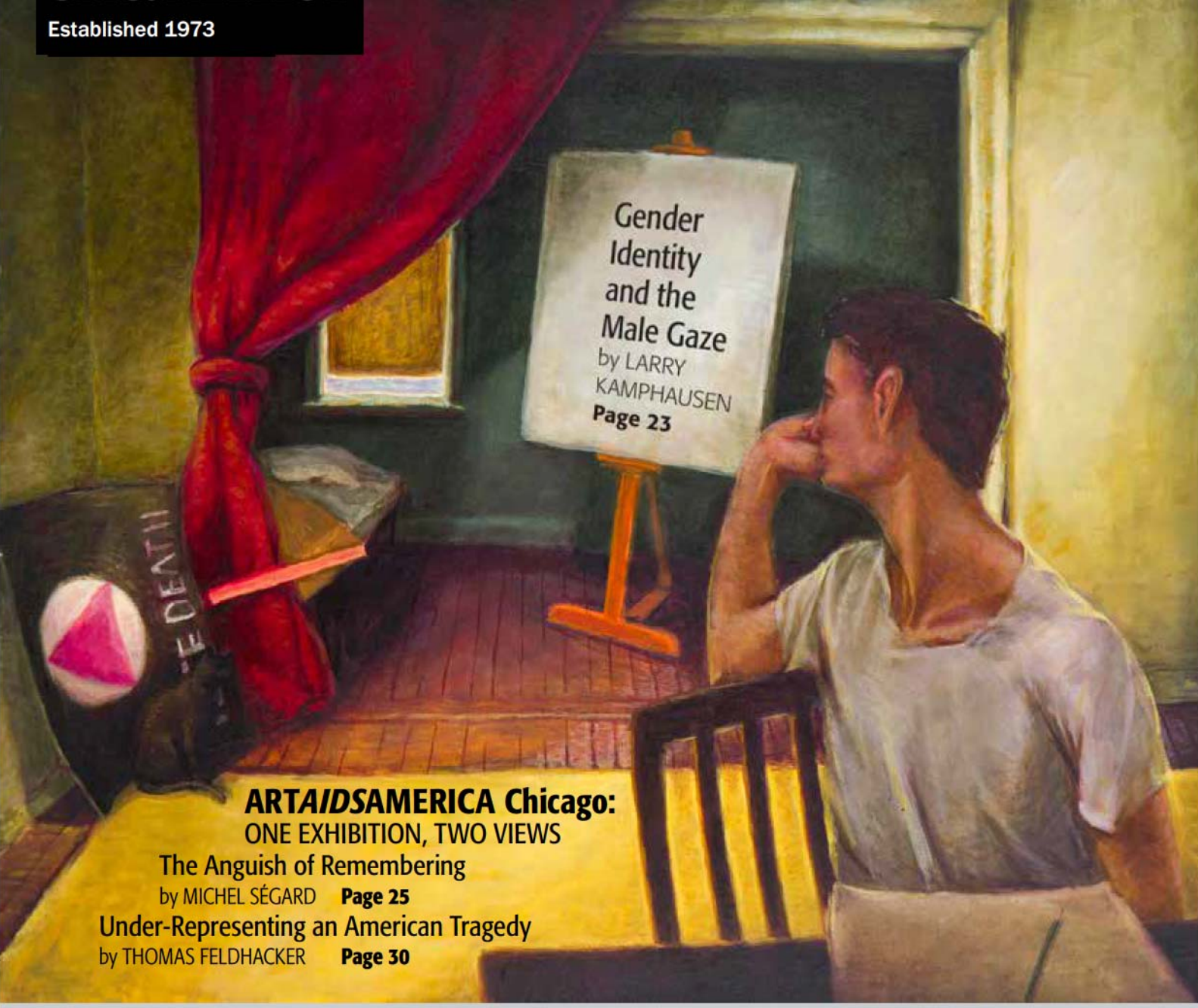


GENDER POLITICS IN ART



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ART/AIDSAMERICA Chicago: The Anguish of Remembering

by Michel Ségard

ART/AIDSAMERICA Chicago was a documentary about the early days of the AIDS epidemic in the United States as told through works of art. And for those of us of a certain age, it was also a memorial that reopened the never-quite-healed wounds of loss and rejection. We could not see the exhibition as merely a documentation; it was too much a family album.

The works in the exhibition were placed into four categories that represented the four dominant themes of the show: **Body**, **Spirit**, **Activism**, and **Camouflage**. The categories worked for understanding the exhibition as an analytical documentary. But for those of us who lived through those early days, **Body**, **Spirit**, and **Activism** merged into a nightmare of despair, hope, and anger. By blending the pieces from each category together in hanging the show, that anguish became an overarching category of its own.

Body concentrated on the physical ravages of AIDS on the human body and the role of sex and drugs in the spread of the disease. Eloquently summarizing the physical devastation, the solitary bony appendage in Nan Goldin's *Gilles' Arm* creates a deadly slash across white bed sheets.

Also noteworthy in this category is *AIDS, Time, Death* by Luis Cruz Azaceta. A wheel that is also a clock rolls down a hill covered in skulls, blood seeping into the ground below. It is a variation of the Doomsday Clock on the cover of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist, designed by Suzanne Schweig (Marty) in 1947, and conveys the same sense of impending annihilation.

For me, the most thoughtful piece in this category was Keith Haring's *No Title*, 1988. It depicts the connection between sexual arousal and the sensation of pleasure in the brain and how the need to satisfy that dynamic dominates one's



Nan Goldin, *Gilles' Arm*, Paris 1993. ©Nan Goldin, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

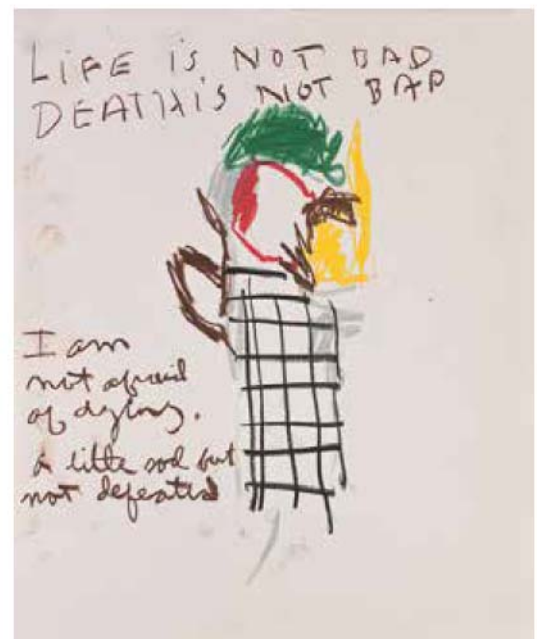
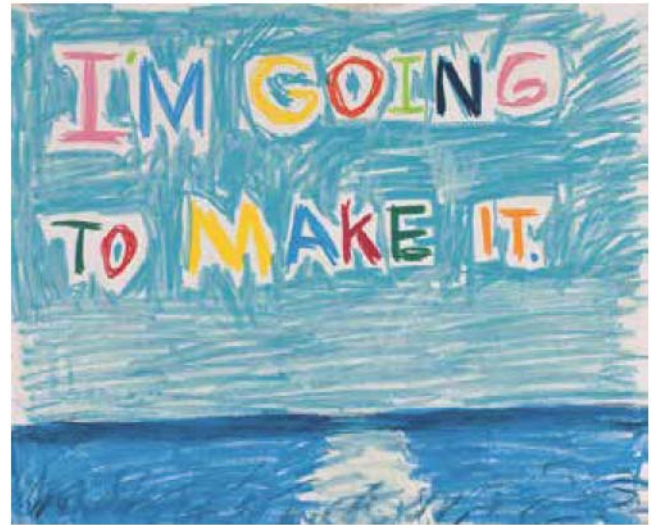
Luis Cruz Azaceta, *AIDS, Time, Death*, 1989. The New School Art Collection. Photo by James Prinz.



life—and how it becomes one of the causes of the spread of the epidemic. The work provokes the viewer into confronting the dilemma of satisfying biological needs versus the desire to stay alive—the primal internal conflict we still face today.

The **Spirit** category was mostly devoted to finding comfort in religious or other spiritual practices, or just each other. In *Ebony Ball Manhattan* by Gerard Gaskin, two young men embrace. It was one of the rare pieces in the exhibition that showed any kind of affection between two people. But was this a one-night stand? Were they finding solace in each other? Or was this a love that would see them through this holocaust?

More than a decade before Gaskin's image, Larry Stanton, a portrait artist, made two drawings the year he died. First while hospitalized for pneumonia, he declared "I'm going to make it." And later, just before he died and rendered in a very child-like style: "I am not afraid of dying. A little sad but not defeated." To declare victory in the face of death at such a young age (37) must have taken extraordinary faith.



(Clockwise from top)

Larry Stanton, *Untitled (Hospital Drawing)*, 1984. [I'm Going To Make It] Courtesy of Arthur Lambert and the Estate of Larry Stanton.

Larry Stanton, *Untitled (Hospital Drawing)*, 1984. [Life is not bad, Death is not bad] Courtesy of Arthur Lambert and the Estate of Larry Stanton.

Gerard Gaskin, *Ebony Ball, Manhattan*, 1997.

Keith Haring, *No Title*, 1988. Collection of the Rubell Family Foundation. © Keith Haring Foundation. Photo by James Prinz.



The most overtly religious piece in the exhibition was Keith Haring's very moving *Altar Piece*. In the center panel of this triptych according to Christian creed, Mary holds out her infant son for all to see and to contemplate the sacrifices that they made. It speaks directly to our inconsolable loss. This piece has so moved the Christian community that versions of it are to be found in churches in Manhattan, San Francisco, and Paris.

Eventually, the anger—no, rage—started to manifest itself. Jonathon Horowitz's *Archival Iris Print of an Image Downloaded from the Internet with Two Copies of the New York Post Rotting in Their Frames* exemplifies the fury depicted in the **Activism** category. In this triptych, two unpreserved copies of the New York Post report on the death of President Ronald Reagan, the President who failed to publicly mention AIDS until 1987 (cowardice? bigotry? both?), while below them is the print of the corpse of a victim of AIDS. Horowitz's piece depicts, in the most graphic way, ACT-UP's slogan "Silence=Death."

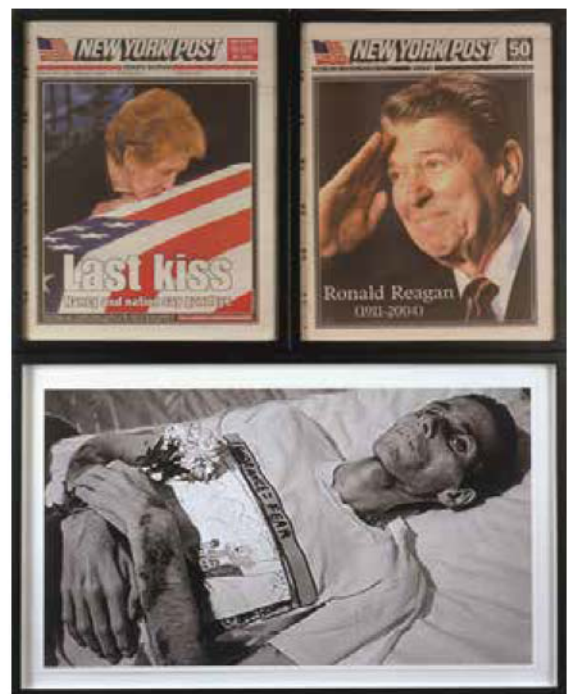
ACT UP NY/Gran Fury's poster *Kissing Doesn't Kill* was commissioned as a public service announcement to go into buses and subways. The intent was to educate the public about the realities and politics of HIV/AIDS. What it produced was a furious backlash. Local Chicago and Illinois state governments proposed legislations to ban the poster, and it was routinely censored and defaced by the very people whose inaction on HIV/AIDS led to the death of thousands. Today the poster seems innocuous, and it is hard to remember what outrage it caused.

Hugh Steers' painting *Poster*, of a young man looking across a barren room at an ACT UP poster and an empty bed, poignantly summarizes the feelings of many of us from that time. No matter how much you demonstrated, that bed would remain empty—your loved one could not be brought back to life. But it must be remembered that although political activism cannot change the past, it can shape the future and, therefore no matter how painful, it must be done.



Keith Haring, *Altar Piece*, 1990. Denver Art Museum, Gift of Yoko Ono. © Keith Haring Foundation. Photo by Michael Tropea.

Jonathan Horowitz, *Archival Iris Print of an Image Downloaded from the Internet with Two Copies of the New York Post Rotting in Their Frames*, 2004. Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York/Rome.



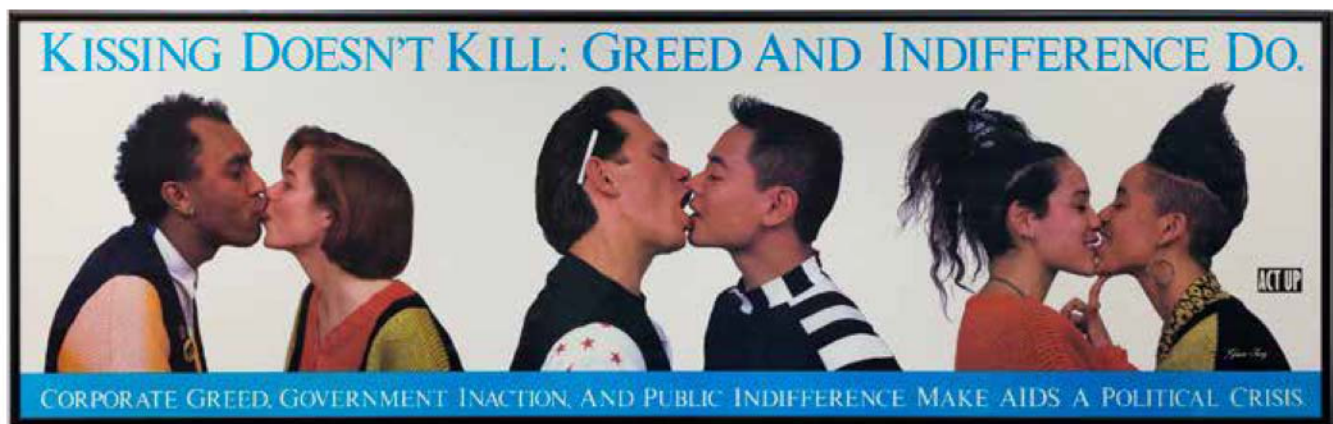
For me, the **Camouflage** category was the weakest category. Since overtly AIDS-referential art was being rejected, the intent was to hide the message by using coded symbols or language and get the work seen in mainstream art venues. But it amounted to preaching to the choir in code. Many of the hidden symbolisms were so obscure that most people would never know that they were there—never mind what they meant. The whole strategy could even be thought of as kind of cowardly activism. Nevertheless, there were a few noteworthy pieces.

Carrie Yamaoka, in *Steal This Book* #2, photographed a spread from Abbie Hoffman's *Steal This Book*, his manual for social revolution. She then obscured or erased all the words except "slaughter" and "history." Yamaoka's experience as an AIDS activist led her to understand that these two words were "the baseline of all forms

of human experience," according to the wall note accompanying the work.

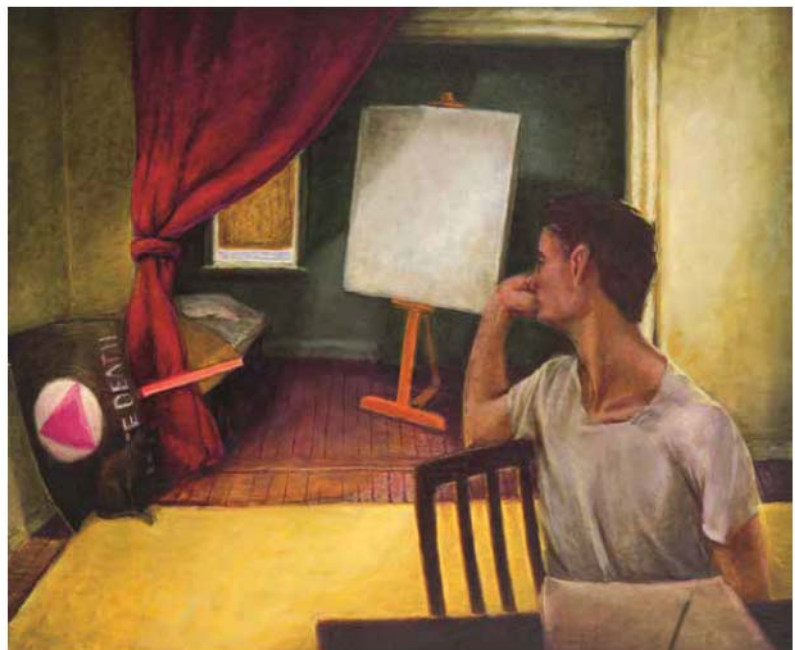
In 1983, Roger Brown painted *Peach Light*, an image of a skeleton with a leather hat backed by concentric peach colored rings that slowly change to black. The color is a reference to the Gold Coast Bar, a leather bar in Chicago that bathed the room in peach colored lights so that Kaposi's sarcoma lesions and the gaunt frames of their patrons would be less noticeable. As mentioned in the wall note, the cruising posture of the skeleton interweaves desire, eroticism, mortality, community and illness into one image.

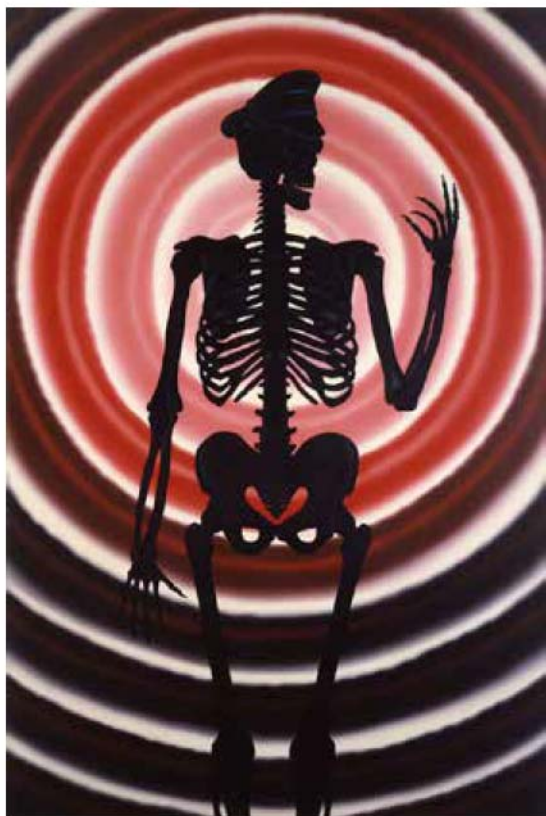
The most moving piece in this category, for me, was Rudy Lempke's *The Uninvited*. It is a video projection of Balinese style shadow puppetry that tells the story of a homeless gay Vietnam veteran with AIDS. It draws attention to the parallels between the two deadly catastrophes, the



(Above) ACT UP NY/Gran Fury, *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, 1989. Photo by James Prinz.

(Right) Hugh Steers, *Poster*, 1990. Courtesy of the artist's estate and Alexander Gray Associates, New York.



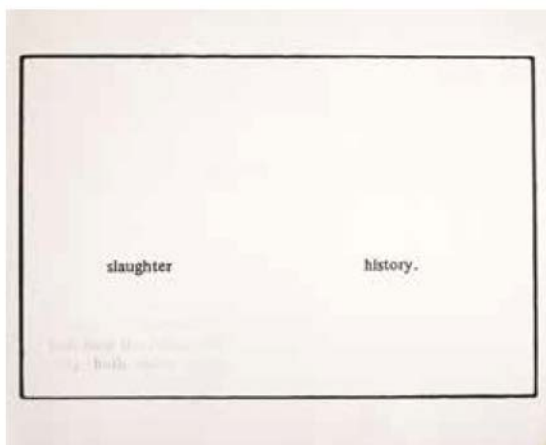


Vietnam War and AIDS, thereby refuting the tendency to consider people with AIDS as “other.” The message is augmented by the sheer formal beauty of the work, drawing you into its tropical false paradise permeated by death.

There were a number of pieces in the exhibition depicting African Americans, mostly in the form of videos. And there were a handful of pieces devoted to women with AIDS. But the exhibition concentrated mostly on the experiences of white gay males. They were the ones most affected early on in the epidemic, and it was their initial political activism that brought about the public awareness of the horrors of AIDS in the United States and the need to aggressively fight the disease. Later, the epidemic spread to the African American community and to women.

For those of us who lived through the early days of the epidemic, this exhibition was not just a documentary. It inevitably functioned as a requiem to those we lost. Marcus, Jerry, David... we will never forget you! ■

Michel Ségard is the Editor-in-Chief of the New Art Examiner.



(From top)

Roger Brown, *Peach Light*, 1983. Photo: James Connolly.
Kavi Gupta and the Roger Brown Estate, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Carrie Yamoaka, *Steal This Book #2*, 1991.

Rudy Lemcke, *The Uninvited*, 2003. Video still.



ART/AIDSAMERICA Chicago: Under-Representing an American Tragedy

By Thomas Feldhacker

America has approached an interesting point in time where it can look back on its recent history with enough distance to be reflective on the effects of the pain and hope it experienced. It can also see the potential for change in the future and the demons that continue to haunt it. The "ART/AIDSAMERICA Chicago" exhibition was an attempt to be that reflective agent about the HIV epidemic in America as well as an agent for continued progress socially, politically, and individually. However, it sorely missed the mark in any comprehensive way and has opened up the conversation to older, deeper cultural wounds surrounding identity politics. Instead, the poorly thought out original curatorial message was muddled with a public service message from private donors that used the art and the pain of the past it represents as a tool to sway the audience into a cautionary stance on the disease. In essence, this show was reworked from its original purpose of surveying the influence that the disease had on the visual arts to promoting safe sex practices within the gay community. The result was an overwhelming amount of great art out of context that underrepresented the comprehensive damage inflicted by this disease.

Curatorially, this show has only one thread that binds each piece of art together: the influence of HIV. The range of mediums, messages, contexts, and artists were very broad, and there was no defining aesthetic. It would be perfectly apt to call this show a thematic survey exhibit. To help navigate these sub-genres the curators devised a symbol system that categorized each piece into four general ways the art related to the epidemic: Body, Spirit, Activism, and Camouflage. This system was helpful to contextualize each piece since there was very little thematic layout to the space. The objects were placed where they were best displayed in a very unconventional space. One could spend hours just reading the labels and contextualizing each piece individually. The emotionally exhausting journey would take you

through the countless experiences of distress, hope, loss, love, anger, and so on of these artists. Any connoisseur of Post-Modern American art would fall in love.

The exhibition was a collaboration between two curators, Jonathan David Katz of the University of Buffalo and Rock Hushka of the Tacoma Art Museum. The project included a travelling exhibition and a book of the same name and content. The exhibition was not accepted by any elite institutions, only second tier museums and independent galleries. Chicago was not on the tour because no institution, not even lower tier institutions, would accept to host it until the Alphawood Foundation decided to buy a space and fund the exhibition. The foundation has a special interest in gay rights activism and it should be no surprise that it decided to fund this landmark exhibition.

For those who have been following the exhibit know that it was not well received upon first opening. Although it was seen as culturally imperative to create an important documentary of the disease and the art that resulted, it did not do so in a fully representative way that caused the exhibit to become a platform for conversations about other identity politics to take place, specifically around race and gender, America's timeless social problems. Tacoma, the opening of the tour, was protested when it became clear that of the 107 artist represented only four were black and only one of those four was a woman. This is absolutely outrageous considering that the black community is disproportionately infected and there were many artists that could have been chosen to represent them.

There are two explanations for why this could have been the case. The first one is that the intensity of the cultural war after AIDS became known as the gay disease focused around those artists that had money and influence to fight the institutions; i.e. wealthy white men. They had the resources and/or the connections to produce art that was shown in prominent institutions. The second explanation is that the curators, in

an attempt to court elite institutions, chose only those artists with prestige and gallery representation to give the show perceived legitimacy. The big names that were included in the show to bring credibility were those such as Judy Chicago, Félix González-Torres, Keith Haring, Annie Leibovitz, and Robert Mapplethorpe. Neither explanation is very satisfying. It is inexcusable to ignore these other dynamics of the epidemic when all you had to do was look and you would find all the examples you would need. As the exhibit travelled from Tacoma to West Hollywood, Atlanta, and finally at the Bronx Museum in NYC, the exhibit had earned the hashtag #stoperasingblackpeople. What was intended as an attempt to be a reflective agent about HIV in America and its effects socially and politically turned out to under-represent most non-gay experiences, especially those experiences of children and people of color. Only in the Chicago exhibition did the curation change to include more women, artists of color and local Chicago artists.

When the Alphawood Foundation took on the project of exhibiting this show, it did so by trying to correct some of these under-representations as well as making the current state of the epidemic very clear. The very first experience the audience has when they walk into the gallery space is a video that goes into the history of the activism in Chicago. To complicate an already messy cura-

tion, the foundation added this other layer to the exhibit that focused on what was happening now with the epidemic. This focused primarily on a new generation that is dealing with an entirely different situation than the older generation that lived through the crisis and view the exhibit with their own sadness and nostalgia. The overall message being that the experience was horrific and yet we still have not dealt with the problem. Advances in treatment have given HIV-positive people the same life expectancy as HIV-negative people but because of our collective amnesia to the pain of the past, transmission rates are about as high as they were during the peak of the crisis in the 80s.

The result of the exhibition was an overwhelming amount of great art pulled out of context that still did no justice to representing a holistic picture of the epidemic. Even as you walk through the exhibit, you notice that the most famous artists and artworks were on the first floor with prominent spots while the diverse additions added by the Alphawood Foundation were put on the second floor. They still felt like an afterthought. The change was a good start but it left much to be desired. ■

Thomas Feldhacker is the Social Media Editor of the New Art Examiner.

Kia Labeija *Eleven*, from the second installment of the ongoing series '24'. Photo courtesy of the artist.

