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AIDS AND THE ARTIST'S CALL TO ACTION

Artists have lent their voices to many activist initiatives, and the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s was no exception. Largely, the art created during this era was propaganda, though some works were a reflection on living under the iron grip of AIDS. Artists and their work pushed for information and education to be dispersed throughout the community to combat the climate of fear and misinformation surrounding the AIDS crisis. These artists explored what HIV/AIDS is, who lives with AIDS, and who is ready to act up (a common sentiment throughout the musical, *Rent*). Through their work, these activists advocate/ed for a group of people whose voices were largely unheard and chronicle society for the future (Bottinelli).

In 1981, the first reported case of *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia (PCP) had been reported in Los Angeles, California. Those affected by PCP were homosexual males, and the etiology of the disease had been associated with sexual contact (“HIV and AIDS United States” 431). PCP is no longer the diagnosis for this disease, which is now called HIV/AIDS. Unfortunately, due to lack of education and funding, much about the disease was left to be discovered. In 1982, “GRID,” or Gay Related Immune Deficiency, ran rampant. By June 1983, “health departments in the United States and Puerto Rico had reported a total of 1,641 cases of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome” (Current Trends, 309). It was not until 1987 that the President at the time, Ronald Reagan, even spoke of AIDS. After thousands of lives had been lost, Reagan publicly addressed the crisis, finally speeding along efforts in education and research. At that point, the change from “GRID” to AIDS was too late and

a stigma had been put into place, thus marginalizing groups of people while decreasing opportunities for support and funding. Aside from the marginalization of those belonging to the gay community, misconceptions surrounding the transmission of HIV/AIDS also ran rampant. This misinformation left the entire community at risk though many believed that HIV/AIDS was confined to the gay community (Nancy Reagan AIDS Crisis). It is because of this lack of education and the silenced voices of those who have lost their battle with AIDS that art has played an integral role in calling for support and memorializing lives lost.

After years of underrepresentation within the media and underfunding by the government, many looked for an outlet for their frustration. After losing numerous friends to AIDS, American lyric baritone William Parker came up with the idea for *The AIDS Quilt Songbook*. The song cycle was a co-organized initiative with *The NAMES AIDS Quilt* which had its start in 1987 (The Names Project). Like the quilt's ongoing additions, the assembly of the song cycle is similar. On July 4th, 1992, *The AIDS Quilt Songbook* premiered at Lincoln Center. This concert was different than any previous AIDS benefit concert, asserts Parker when discussing the songbook with Brian Kellow, columnist for *Opera News*:

The AIDS Quilt Songbook invites people to take risks. Some of the texts are very graphic. They're about taking medication, being sick, throwing up, having to take it over again, the night sweats—the horror of the number of diseases that exist. We're not sugar-coating it and saying, 'Well, we're just having a little difficulty.' We must show some of the rough sides. After all, most songs are about crucial times in our lives—someone has died, someone has left you, you've inherited a lot of money, the boy's gotten the girl. So, why can't we sing about AIDS? (Kellow 42)

The pieces performed (at the concert) were raw and conveyed obstacles faced by those affected by AIDS. Also, many of the composers whose pieces debuted within this cycle were queer. Parker himself was infected with HIV and died less than a year after the premier due to complications from AIDS (Kozinn).

The songbook is a collective response to the disparities faced by many during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Parker's songbook is continually growing with its most recent addition in 2014 (Malafronte). Though the AIDS crisis three decades ago may have ended, there is still work to be done, which is why these additions are crucial. With every addition to the cycle, the issue of AIDS is brought to the forefront through current artists. This allows for the work of the cycle to be continual. While in its infancy, the songbook spoke to local issues while the current edition thinks globally. Today's songbook focuses on HIV/AIDS prevention here in the States as well as places such as Africa where education and resources are scarce. The work being done still sits at the core of what the original songbook intended; now at a larger scale.

Through Parker's work, many were exposed to the hardships that people faced when diagnosed with AIDS. Unfortunately, the original song cycle was not well received by all. Bernard Holland of the *New York Times* attacks the work when he states, "[l]et us say that the quilt and its fashioners created a composite of considerable effect even when individual segments of it were not so successful. Listeners who had hoped to hear important music generated by momentous events were generally disappointed" (Holland). Later in his review, Holland contends that if the listener was looking at the music as a narrative surrounding AIDS, then they were left satisfied. Holland did not see the potential for the cycle or the lasting effect it would have on awareness or the financial support it has provided and continues to provide for HIV/AIDS research (Holland). *The AIDS Quilt Songbook* also provided a medium for discourse surrounding HIV/AIDS. In doing so, conversations that otherwise would not have occurred were started and the impetus for change created (Seesholtz). While at times the audience may have been uncomfortable, it is this discomfort that has allowed for redressive action (Rosen). In times of discomfort, it is important that redressive action occurs. It is the discomfort towards the work that has allowed for such conversations to surround the work and works like it. Comfort or the lack of it allows for the audience to look at the work of others and analyze it through their own lens

to then think about the change they are willing to make. The value of one's work is not determined by the comfort of an audience; however, the impact and reach of one's work can be quantified in these terms.

The cycle as a whole is a memorial to lives lost and lives that will be saved in the future. From a technical perspective, the premier of the cycle was less than perfect, but the imprint that it left on society is lasting. These performers and composers were not asking for acceptance, rather, they demanded acknowledgment by the government as well as the general public. The music by these composers was unapologetic and worked to combat the stigma that surrounds AIDS by presenting a truthful and at times frightening depiction of AIDS through their compositions and performances.

Performance art has been a forum for social change as far back as the tragedies and comedies of Ancient Greece. According to theatrical theorist, Victor Turner, works in the dramatic arts do have the potential to create change. This can be done through a very specific formula that requires the audience to go through "crisis and reintegration" in order to reach redressive and motivated action (Rosen). Turner's formula has provided a framework for later librettists and playwrights, such as Jonathan Larson, to expand upon politicized theater to be an actuator for social change. According to Bertolt Brecht (a German dramatist and director), theatre allows for social change as it forces the audience to relate to a reality that they may not see in their day-to-day lives (Rosen). For example, Brecht may historicize an issue within a play to make it more relatable to an audience.

Jonathan Larson's Pulitzer Prize winning musical *Rent* is one of the most prominent works of theatre focused around the AIDS crisis, second only to Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. As *Rent* is an easily accessible work, the impact that it had over its record twelve-year run on Broadway is lasting and impactful. *Rent's* popularity has allowed it to promote conversation surrounding HIV/AIDS. Through reproductions and international tours, the musical has developed a large audience. *Rent* connects to a younger generation which has also attributed to its success. Using popular

compositional styles, the score imitates pop music. Based loosely on Puccini's *La Boheme*, *Rent* tells the story of eight struggling individuals living in New York City's Lower East Side. Through captivating and shocking lyrics, Larson lets the audience in on the financial and physical struggle that surrounds AIDS (*Rent*). In a review in the New York Times, *Rent* is praised for its emotional sincerity and raw critique of death and AIDS (Brantley). The genuine quality that is conveyed to the audience is done through Larson's brilliantly set lyrics, dialogue, and the motivation of the actors. Through theatre, Larson and the cast of *Rent* contextualize and give life to the AIDS crisis, an event that many refused to acknowledge. As the characters in *Rent* plead for others to realize, "... actual reality, Act up! [and] Fight AIDS" in the song, "La Vie Boheme," the cast of *Rent* asks the audience to do the same (*Rent*). These tableaux allow for past and present audiences to ponder the AIDS crisis. During its premier, the recency of the AIDS crisis was impetus enough for the audience to spark change.

Now, using Brecht and Turner's theories, *Rent* is seen as a historicized period piece. The distance between the past and present allows for current audiences to criticize current discrepancies and inequalities surrounding HIV/AIDS. This distance is also why *Rent* remains relevant to this day. While preserving a past for the future, Larson created a work that transcends time and maintains an insightful portrayal of the AIDS crisis. Larson's work has allowed for a globalized understanding of HIV/AIDS. Whether it is *The AIDS Quilt Songbook* or the performance of *Rent*, conveying the text to its fullest has allowed for these two contrasting works to have similar impacts and goals surrounding the AIDS crisis. This has also allowed these works to deconstruct the stigma surrounding AIDS. Both works involve music and the portrayal of people living with AIDS. By using music as a medium, both Parker and Larson present a grisly narrative in a nonthreatening manner as music is extremely accessible; however, it is not universal as there is no common or unifying feature of all musical styles. While music is not the universal language, it is universally appreciated throughout time and cultures (Davis et al).

Images can evoke a similar response from the viewer as music does from the listener. At times people are more responsive to images than music due to how pervasive they have become within society (Zugazagoitia). Artists such as the collective of creatives known as Gran Fury used images to call for change and speak up in silence. Of Gran Fury's work, their installation piece *Silence = Death* is one of the most controversial pieces of the era. A pink triangle is centered against a black background with lettering directly below that reads, "SILENCE=DEATH" (Gran Fury). The group reclaimed the pink triangle from the Nazi regime. Then a symbol of isolation and stigmatization, it is now used as a symbol of empowerment and action. This piece has had several different forms. It was once an installation at White Columns Gallery in New York. It was also seen on posters that canvassed New York streets and other major metropolitan areas (Manuscripts). By turning the symbolic nature of the pink triangle in on itself, Gran Fury harnessed the power of images for their own purpose and he fought stigmas that were rooted in the AIDS crisis.

Many ask if art that is the progeny of crisis and activism is, in fact, real art. Columnist for *The New York Times* and author of *The 7 Days of Art Columns, 1988–1990*, Peter Schjeldahl addresses this question and resoundingly states that propaganda is in fact art. Schjeldahl comically points out that debates on "... 'real art' are as sensible as fretting about the paint job on a lifeboat when your ship is sinking" (Schjeldahl 38). Work by artists like Gran Fury are often seen as nothing more than propaganda. This is an unfortunate truth that should not discredit an artist's work. Gran Fury's message is clear and, in any case, got their points across, no matter how brazen their methodologies may have been.

Like *The NAMES AIDS Quilt and Songbook*, Gran Fury's work is partially the work of activism. More specifically, Gran Fury's body of work focuses on the lack of education given to the public about AIDS as well as a harsh commentary of the government's response to the AIDS crisis. The manner in which *NAMES* and Gran Fury work is vastly different; however, their dedication to their cause, the fight against AIDS, is unrelenting. Both groups' pieces are now

used as a catalog of the past that has recorded the hardships faced by previous generations. Their work also serves as a reminder that there is still work to be done nationally and globally when it comes to AIDS, its treatment, and cure. As *Gran Fury* is of the visual arts, it can be aligned with Larson's work *Rent*. Both works use brash images, whether they be a pink triangle or the emaciated body of an AIDS patient (Angel, a character in *Rent*) to embolden the viewer to make some sort of change. Recency in time or how culturally salient a work is affects the impact of a work, as does being able to experience the work firsthand. Since there are actors playing the parts of the characters in *Rent*, it is hard to argue when the points being made are overtly placed in front of the audience. It is hard to avoid the conversation once the subject is presented. *Gran Fury*'s work goes even further in this by asserting that one's silence will lead to death. This image is one that is bound to have an impact as humanity has a propensity to fear death.

Death is common with AIDS but definitely not as common as it was three decades ago. Daniel Goldstein's *Icarian* series serves as a reminder of the destruction that was prevalent during the AIDS crisis (Goldstein). These works, which present ghastly silhouettes of men cast on leather, commemorate the lives of the many people who died during the AIDS crisis. Goldstein notes that there is a theme of "presence of absence" within much of his work (Goldstein). In *Medicine Men*, another series by Goldstein, the artist again plays with this sense of absence by using various prescription bottles associated with AIDS and negative space; Goldstein gives the impression of someone who is no longer there. When asked about his work, Goldstein explained that "any art about AIDS, hopefully, if it works, [is] taking an abstraction and turning it into something. For so many people AIDS is an abstraction" (GoldsteinStudio). Goldstein uses his work as a facilitator for conversation surrounding AIDS in hopes that the conversation will not cease or be hushed as it was decades ago.

In order to keep this proverbial conversation moving forward, entities such as Make Art/Stop AIDS, a product of UCLA's Fowler Museum, have been created. As a part of its initiative, this

organization has created a traveling exhibition under the same name that allows for critical examination of the past, present, and future of AIDS (Fowler Museum et al). Works by Gran Fury and Goldstein can be found in this exhibition. Make Art/Stop AIDS is a unique exhibition as it is a rather comprehensive collection featuring contemporary and period pieces. This gallery features works that are situated around questions such as, "What is AIDS? Who lives, who dies? Why are condoms controversial? Are you afraid to touch? When was the last time you cried? Why a red ribbon? Are you ready to act?" (Fowler Museum et al). By focusing the gallery around these questions, the viewer is able to answer some of their questions while grappling with the complications surrounding their answers (Fowler Museum et al). The exhibition is an extension of the activism among artists that was seen during the AIDS crisis. Along the gallery, Make Art/Stop AIDS serves as a coalition that spreads awareness, creates educational tools, and lobbies for research. These were the goals of many during the AIDS crisis; through art and the arts community, Make Art/Stop AIDS has been able to reach those goals.

As the problem of HIV/AIDS is largely a global issue, the focus of the group is slightly broader than those who were fighting for this community in the 1980s and 1990s. That being said, Make Art/Stop AIDS, takes an active role in storytelling and must look towards the past in order to claim a space in a future that is free of HIV/AIDS. Just as Parker and Larson told stories through song, Make Art/Stop AIDS tells stories through visual art. By including works by Gran Fury and Goldstein, Make Art/Stop AIDS maintains an authenticity to their work that could easily be overlooked. By featuring these artists, Make Art/Stop AIDS has also situated two artists among others and allows the work to serve as a history. The work of Gran Fury was considered to be highly controversial, some would have even considered it inflammatory propaganda. Now Gran Fury's work is seen as less provocative and a reminder of the past. This is highlighted even further when seen among Goldstein's newer works. As Goldstein's work highlights current discrepancies surrounding HIV/AIDS, his art is seen as controversial and thought

provoking. The contrast of the two drives the continued work of activists, past and present, into the future. Furthermore, by including works by Gran Fury, the Fowler museum substantiates Schjeldahl's claim that creative works, no matter their origins, are art. This exhibition is a form of activism that many during the AIDS crisis would not have imagined. Through the exhibition's outreach programs, information and education is being disseminated, furthering the goals of those who worked so hard in previous generations. The art of one generation is now a lasting message for the current generation to fight AIDS and take steps that further the initiatives that were started decades ago.

Art by those who had been affected by AIDS directly is abundant. What is missing is the stories of those who matured during the era of AIDS. D. A. Powell is someone who did that, and his work tells a story about growing up with this ailment, as he himself did, during the AIDS crisis. Powell uses poetry to do this. Poetry seems unpopular as aural and visual artists dominate; it is rare that one hears of poetry or literature in the same category as art. The reason for this is highly subjective, however, the cultural salinity of many poet's and author's creations can work against them. That being said, many artists do not receive recognition until after their death. It is my assertion that society engages with literary art differently than art curated in museums and therefore the differentiation between literature and art is drawn. However, they are one and the same if one broadens the scope of their definition. Poetry, similar to music, allows for the artist to imply meaning without directly stating intent. Poetry has allowed the artists of the AIDS crisis to memorialize their existences in their lines, like epitaphs to a generation that has been forgotten.

Powell, the author of three widely successful collections of poetry chronicling the AIDS crisis, is just one of many artists who have taken it upon themselves to set a record of happenings during this period. Powell's work is unapologetic and at times frightening. As a gay man growing up during this era, Powell provides a lens that is slightly different than many others who had not spent their adolescence under the oppression of the AIDS crisis. Powell's

three collections have been referred to as the “AIDS trilogy.” This is likely an annoyance to Powell as in his own forward he wrote, “This is not a book about AIDS... AIDS will inevitably be touted as one of the cries of the book’s occasion. I do not deny this disease its impact. But I deny its dominion” (Powell, xi).

Though the author himself has denounced his work as a symbol of the AIDS crisis, his verse is undoubtedly tinted by AIDS. In one of his most haunting pieces, “[When you touch down upon this earth. little reindeers],” Powell discusses AIDS and its side effects with little-to-no filter, “I left you tollhouse cookies. you gave me bloody briefs / lipodystrophy neurosthesia neutropenia mild psychosis” (Powell 17). After this jolting transition, Powell goes on to list various side effects of AIDS and the medications involved in rambling and tense lines. The only guessing Powell leaves for the reader is why something as innocent as Christmas memories are paired with something as vile as AIDS. It is the clarity that Powell provides here that allows his work to remain accessible to those with little knowledge of the life and times he is portraying.

In his works as a whole, Powell uses categorical organization that is influenced by the pop culture of the time. In doing so, Powell provides a point of reference for his readers. This allows for his works to be contextualized and situated in the AIDS crisis. While he likely wishes for his works’ clout not to be determined by AIDS, his poems do recount life during that time. Powell provides a voice for the many who have lost their lives to AIDS. As a carrier of the virus himself, Powell is also living on borrowed time, and with this acknowledgement comes a deeper understanding of his work. Since Powell is a member of various communities affected by AIDS, he writes with an experience that cannot be matched.

As a member of the AIDS-affected community, Powell uses his work to memorialize those who lost their lives to AIDS. Powell also uses his work to reflect on the societal norms that stigmatized those afflicted with AIDS as well as the gay community. Art, visual or otherwise, is seen as a history of the time in which it was created. Through clearly crafted verse, Powell speaks for his respective community and allows readers to take ownership of the change

that Powell calls for. His art being slightly different than the typical does not mean that the impact that it carries is any less but rather understanding its impact is slightly different.

Artists throughout history have been keeping record of the societies and communities in which they are members. It is through this record that many artists have called for change and been a voice for those who are marginalized and under-recognized. Art, be it visual, performance, or literary, has the ability to reach across demographics in order to elicit change and educate those who would not otherwise understand certain communities and ideologies. In the case of the AIDS crisis, artists advocated for education and destigmatization of those living with AIDS. Today, their works serve as biographies for those who have died. These works also inform the current generation and are still used in educational programs. It is the longevity of art that has allowed for these pieces, artists, composers, and poets to traverse generations and push for changes in policy and social perceptions. Each artist throughout their own discipline has created a piece that takes part in the collective conversation surrounding HIV/AIDS and has been an actuator for provoking conversation and thought that has sparked changes in ideology and policy.

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