THE AIDS EPIDEMIC IN THE UNITED STATES: THE ARTISTIC RESPONSE

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BY

Reina Protzel

APPROVED:

Michael Plante, Ph.D.
Director of Thesis

Fan Zhang, Ph.D.
Second Reader

Myrlène Bruno, Ph.D.
Third Reader
Beginning in the early 1980s, the AIDS epidemic in the United States rapidly became a public health crisis, as LGBTQ+ communities were abandoned by the government, by medical figures, and by the general society. This thesis documents a variety of artistic responses to the AIDS crisis, where art was utilized as a tool to de-stigmatize the illness, to initiate conversations with the medical and political communities, and to establish a level of basic human understanding of the disease and its impact. Three examples are explored: (1) Gran Fury, (2) the AIDS Memorial Quilt, and (3) Felix Gonzalez-Torres. In the first section, Gran Fury’s graphic designs and flyers are analyzed to show its abilities in shifting the blame away from AIDS-diagnosed individuals to leading figures and institutions of the country. In the second section, the AIDS Memorial Quilt is shown to be an effective, therapeutic tool for mourning and a platform to demonstrate the vastness of the disease. In the third and final section, Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s unique art installations create an interplay between private experiences and public settings to highlight the feelings of love and loss and to show the universality of the disease and its impact.
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Introduction

As AIDS activist Michael Callen once said to the New York congressional delegation, “I could not have imagined the possibility that I, too, would be up here begging my elected representatives to help me save my life. But there you are. Here I am. And that is exactly what I am doing.”\(^1\) By the time of his testimony for greater political support in 1983, there were approximately 3,000 diagnosed cases across the country with a fatality rate of nearly 45%.\(^2\) By mid-1993, there were nearly 300,000 reported cases with a fatality rate of 61.7%.\(^3\) With no available treatment options, an AIDS diagnosis meant a confrontation with the imminent face of death, leaving the harrowing question of “when will it happen to me?” in the minds of gay individuals throughout the nation. Yet, despite the mortality and prominence of this disease, there was a harmfully inadequate response from the country’s larger institutions, specifically within the federal, state, and local levels of government and the medical community. With fear and outrage as their ignition, artists – who often had the terminal virus themselves – created their own path and took charge to confront the silence surrounding the crisis. Thus, this thesis will document a variety of artistic responses to the AIDS epidemic which utilized art as a tool to destigmatize the illness, to initiate conversations with the medical and political communities, and to establish a level of basic human understanding of the disease and its impact. To illustrate this concept, I will focus on three key examples: (1) Gran Fury, (2)


the AIDS Memorial Quilt, and (3) Felix Gonzalez-Torres. In the first section, I discuss the transformation of art into an activist tool through the collective Gran Fury, as their artwork entered the public realm to expose the truth of the inefficient handling of the AIDS crisis and to de-victimize AIDS-infected individuals to the greater public. The second section centers on a specific art installation, the AIDS Memorial Quilt, which began in the mid-1980s, and its function as a therapeutic tool for mourning within the grieving community. Lastly, in the third section, I analyze the influential role of contemporary artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s artwork in society, as his installations created an interplay between private experiences and public settings to highlight the feelings of love and loss and to show the universality of this disease and its influence.

These three examples were chosen because of their ability to encompass three key perspectives of this epidemic: an art collective, an installation created by the community, and a formally trained, independent artist. Furthermore, each of these individuals were directly affected by the AIDS epidemic, whether through a personal diagnosis or the death of a loved one, consequently influencing them to highlight the devastating effects of the crisis on their community – especially on one of the highest impacted groups, the LGBTQ+ community. Therefore, Gran Fury, the AIDS Memorial Quilt, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres encapsulate the variety of artistic responses, the variety of outcomes, and the variety of human emotion during this period. By examining art as a tool for change, my thesis will simultaneously demonstrate the power of art, epitomized by its ability to provide a voice to ostracized communities and to initiate greater understanding of AIDS and its effect on society.
A Portrait of AIDS in the United States

The harmfully inadequate response from higher institutions, like the government, and the subsequent challenges were visible since the initial findings of AIDS-related diseases. In the summer of 1981, the New York Times published an article headlined with “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals,” reflecting the mystery and bias that surrounded this new medical anomaly. Individuals, particularly in New York, were experiencing symptoms of a rarely seen, typically inconsequential cancer called Kaposi's sarcoma; while most affected people initially only saw visual changes, such as bruise-like lesions on the skin, there were now unseen internal problems, as the cancer metastasized throughout the organ system of the body, often resulting in death. Consequently, scientists and researchers, like infectious disease specialist Dr. Joe Sonnabend and dermatologist Dr. Alvin Friedman-Kien in Manhattan, began to inquire into this public health outbreak that seemed to specifically affect gay men. However, even in its early stages, prejudices against the LGBTQ+ community further contributed to an already polarized society and to the construction of barriers for greater financial, medical, political, and public support. This was not an unfamiliar stance in the United States, because during the previous decade, Congress had embedded homophobic positions into legislation, under the guise of protecting the national identity and their children. Yet, homophobia did not end at the walls of Capitol Hill. This new legislation paralleled the

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5France, How to Survive a Plague, 16.

6France, How to Survive a Plague, 17.

7Ibid., 14.
attitudes of the American society. For example, there were restroom bans of gay individuals in Westchester County, evangelical Christian groups who engaged in fear-mongering to disseminate their values, a defiance by most funeral homes to handle the deceased (from AIDS-related diseases), and a refusal of the New York Police Department to monitor anti-gay crimes. Consequently, even in the relatively progressive city of New York, violent crimes were increasingly prevalent, such as the mass shooting of 1980 in Greenwich Village which killed two men and injured seven others, a stabbing in Tompkins Square, and a brutal police raid of a gay bar in Times Square.

Due to this nationwide mindset, medical professionals were facing several steep challenges to obtain the necessary means to find answers. First, federal health organizations, like the Center for Disease Control (CDC), sent very few representatives to respond to this outbreak – while allocating extensive amounts of resources on relatively smaller public health issues, such as the Legionnaires outbreak in Philadelphia in 1976. As Dr. Friedman-Kien said to his patient Larry Kramer, “we’re applying to the NIH for funds, but we won’t get money,” because of pure fear that the biological samples would “spread the disease.” Second, media outlets suppressed the coverage of this public health issue; while the New York Times published nearly ninety stories on Legionnaires’ disease, there were only six articles written about the outbreak of these AIDS-related diseases in the early 1980s. As a result, the silence from popular newspapers, television,

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8France, How to Survive a Plague, 15, 32, 34, 92.
9Ibid., 15, 69.
10Ibid., 35.
11Ibid.
12Ibid., 35.
and magazines contributed to ignorance, confusion, misinformation, and greater amounts of fear within the public. Lastly, particularly in New York, the local hospitals and medical research centers were similarly prejudiced against inquisitive scientists, like Dr. Mathilde Krim, and severely sick people of the LGBTQ+ community.\textsuperscript{13} For instance, Memorial Sloan Kettering enacted a ban against treating people with this mysterious illness – just as many other New York hospitals had done.\textsuperscript{14} While the NYU Medical Center opened their doors to these infected gay individuals, there was still internalized bias and fear that led healthcare professionals to wear excessive protective gear and to utter offensive slurs.\textsuperscript{15} Thus, as physicians around the country saw increasingly more patients who suffered from a range of illnesses, including all types of venereal diseases, viral infections, Kaposi’s sarcoma, pneumocystis carinii pneumonia, and cytomegalovirus, they were forced to turn towards their friends, their colleagues, and their personal communities to help these ostracized people and to continue their quest for answers.\textsuperscript{16} Yet, this personally-sought assistance was often not enough, leaving Dr. Sonnabend and other scientific experts underfunded, underprepared, and the LGBTQ+ community with little hope for the future.

However, by the mid-1980s, there was great success within the local communities themselves, especially in New York and San Francisco, as individual figures took initiative to find different approaches that could provide help and information to the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item\textsuperscript{13} France, \textit{How to Survive a Plague}, 56.
\item\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 56.
\item\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 56, 91.
\item\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 22.
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LGBTQ+ public. Playwright and activist Larry Kramer took on a role in disseminating information and fundraising for research efforts in New York.\textsuperscript{17} While he was sometimes regarded as a controversial figure by the LGBTQ+ community for some of his earlier writings as a gay man himself, he was still a forefront leader in AIDS activism.\textsuperscript{18} By 1982, Kramer was one of the prominent cofounders of the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC), which had several functions: fundraising, publishing a newsletter, providing social services to affected individuals, and later helping with patient care and advocacy.\textsuperscript{19} Through this program, volunteers at the Gay Men’s Health Crisis responded to any calls, which included men who needed help in hospitals and at home, assistance with grocery shopping, or simple companionship; as Kramer was quoted in David France’s book \textit{How to Survive a Plague}, these men with AIDS were “uniformly thrown out of jobs, uniformly couldn’t get benefits, uniformly without legal protection.”\textsuperscript{20} Thus, this organization acted as a support system for the LGBTQ+ community, when they were abandoned by their own government and country. Kramer eventually resigned from GMHC due to conflicting interests with the board of directors.\textsuperscript{21} Yet, his dedication did not cease, as he continued to write for \textit{New York Native}, to denounce the wrongdoings of politicians, like Mayor Ed Koch of New York, and to eventually form the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, or ACT-UP in 1987.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{17} France, \textit{How to Survive a Plague}, 23-24.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 21.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 50, 52.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 50, 52.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 52.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 122-123.
Kramer was one of many individuals who personally aspired to find solutions to the AIDS crisis. Akin to his preference of words and actions, art was simultaneously a powerful tool and advocate for the movement, utilized by artists and art-activists, like Gran Fury and Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Acting on art’s multidisciplinary function, they reframed this sociopolitical issue and broke down the barrier of prejudice against the LGBTQ+ community.
The Interweaving Between Art and Activism: ACT UP and Gran Fury

In 1987, gesturing towards the audience at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center in New York, Larry Kramer said, “At the rate we are going, you could be dead in less than five years. Two-thirds of this room could be dead in less than five years… How long does it take before you get angry and fight back?”23 By the end of this event, a strong sense of unity and determination was present in the room, as hundreds of individuals rallied for their next assembly.24 Within the next few meetings, nearly a hundred individuals – who were generally white, youthful, and privileged – formed the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP).25 This organization centered on a wide range of initiatives and demands.

First, there was a demand for a singular agency that specializes in the AIDS crisis; until this moment, multiple agencies – such as the Center for Disease Control (CDC), the National Institute of Health (NIH), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) – were working separately and inefficiently.26 Since the 1983 discovery of a retrovirus (lymphadenopathy-associated virus/human T lymphotropic virus type III, later known as human immunodeficiency virus) that was believed to be related to AIDS, many researchers were interested in finding treatments for this comprehensively debilitating


24France, How to Survive a Plague, 251-252.

25Ibid., 253.

26Ibid., 253.
disease. Consequently, a race to acquire an effective antiretroviral drug led to halting, inter-organizational conflicts with various checkpoints – illustrated with the NIH-based clinical trials for azidothymidine (AZT) and its reliance on FDA approval.

Second, ACT UP spoke for increased financial support for more extensive drug research. As interests in drug treatments were increasing internationally and nationally, the Reagan administration was slowly expanding (and later retracting) federal funding for AIDS-related research; it was still consistently at an insufficient level.

Third, they called for the removal of the placebo in AIDS-related clinical trials. By 1986, AZT was undergoing its phase II trial to determine its efficacy. To create an accurate study, the researchers wanted to halt any other medications of the participants, while also administering a placebo to half of them. Consequently, many of these patients were fatally affected; within the first few weeks of the phase II trial, nearly 26 participants had died, specifically 23 within the placebo group, raising ethical questions among the scientists.

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27 France, How to Survive a Plague, 169, 173.
28 Ibid., 239.
29 Ibid., 253.
30 Ibid., 190.
31 Ibid., 253.
32 Ibid., 213.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 239.
Lastly, the members of ACT UP advocated for anti-discrimination measures for individuals with AIDS within healthcare facilities and other environments.\(^{35}\) With this platform, these activists took direct action – utilizing marches, sit-ins, speeches, and, most profoundly, art – to spread their message and to change the current approach towards the AIDS crisis.\(^{36}\)

By 1988, the 11-member collective Gran Fury, a derivative of ACT UP that was named after the car model of the New York Police Department, was established to “publicize the crisis, to get drugs into bodies, and to end the AIDS crisis,” as member Michael Nesline stated in an Artforum interview.\(^{37}\) This incentive manifested itself typically in the form of posters and displays, utilized during protests, projects, and public exhibitions.\(^{38}\) As the members entered the public space, they demonstrated the power of visual art, bringing the conversation to the audience where they least expected it. Thus, Gran Fury re-contextualized art into a tool for change by disregarding artistic tradition and embracing its functional qualities – epitomized by five projects: *Let the Record Show*, *AIDS: 1 in 61*, *All People with AIDS Are Innocent*, *Kissing Doesn’t Kill*, and *The Four Questions*.


\(^{36}\) Ibid., 252.


Prior to their official formation, in 1987, several future Gran Fury members were approached by the New Museum curator Bill Olander to create a visual demonstration in their street-level window. Later named *Let the Record Show*, this display was crowned with an LED display that reads “Silence = Death” and topped with a pink triangle. Acquired from the Silence = Death Project that was founded by six activists in 1987, this triangular symbol represents its enforced use as an indicator of a gay man within Nazi concentration camps; however, its modern-day adaptation rotates the triangle into an upright position, reclaiming its history to signify a better future. Simultaneously, the illuminated, simplistic phrase “Silence = Death” alludes to the urgency of action, as inaction has, and will continue, to contribute to rapid deaths. Furthermore, underneath this symbol, the window continues to reference the Nazi regime – as it is lined with a photograph from the Nuremberg Trials, transforming this demonstration into a present-day trial (Fig. 1). To complete the visualization of the trial, there were six cutout figures under scrutiny: Reverend Jerry Falwell from the Moral Majority, columnist William F. Buckley, U.S. Senator Jesse Helms from North Carolina, the Saturday Evening Post editor/Presidential AIDS Commission member Cory SerVaas, an undisclosed surgeon, and U.S. President Ronald Reagan. Underneath each cutout, there is a stone surface that records publicly stated, inhumane quotations and actions from each corresponding

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39Crimp, “Gran Fury Talks to Douglas Crimp.”


42Sember and Gere, "Let the record show . . .".
For instance, represented with William F. Buckley’s figure, the stone reads, “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;” additionally, the members of ACT UP wrote underneath:

“Let the record show… William F. Buckley deflects criticism of the government’s slow response to the epidemic through calculations: ‘At most three years were lost. Those three years have killed approximately 15,000 people; if we are talking 50 million dead, then the cost of delay is not heavy.’”

By associating these six figures with ironically positioned text among the atmosphere of the Nuremberg Trials of the mid-20th century, the ACT UP collective reflected a mirror at society, shifting the blame towards these leaders. As individuals walked on Broadway in Manhattan, they were directly confronted with this street-level installation, visibly revealing the true reasons for this public health crisis – or the true public danger. Instead of showcasing the wounds of an AIDS-diagnosed person, they highlighted “public figures who had made outrageous statements about AIDS” and directly contributed to this socio-political disaster, as member Tom Kalin said in an interview with AIDS activist Douglas Crimp. Thus, these artists realigned the public perspective of the AIDS crisis. While media coverage often focused on the individual pain of AIDS, this artwork shifted the light towards the weapons – also known as the top

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43 Sember and Gere, “Let the record show . . .”


45 Sember and Gere, "Let the record show . . ."

46 Crimp, “Gran Fury Talks to Douglas Crimp.”
leaders of the country – that have deepened the wound. This ACT UP-based installation

*Let the Record Show* became a tool to illustrate the ineptitudes of the federal and public response, while uniquely excluding the individual struggle of the disease. After this window demonstration, Gran Fury was officially instituted to continue this type of graphic work to alter public opinion about the AIDS epidemic.

By the time of their formation in 1988, they had already begun their graphic designs for public distribution, commencing with *AIDS: 1 in 61* (Fig. 2). Situated on an empty white background, the poster is headlined with the dominating phrase “AIDS: 1 IN 61” in thick, black text. Underneath this large title, Gran Fury wrote in both Spanish and English:

“One in every sixty-one babies in New York City is born with AIDS or born HIV antibody 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 fact of AIDS. STOP RACISM: FIGHT AIDS.**”

In accompaniment to the bold text, there is a graphic image of a baby doll, whose legs and arms are sprawled in various directions, appearing lifeless. With this prominently juxtaposed arrangement between text and image, Gran Fury transformed this graphic display into a tool for public education and awareness on two key features of the AIDS epidemic. First, through the aforementioned statistic on the poster, they dismissed the public’s prejudiced belief that the disease only targeted the LGBTQ+ community. By 1988, a developing study of nearly 20,000 blood samples in New York noted a high frequency of either AIDS-infected or AIDS antibody-carrying babies, suggesting the sheer amount of infected mothers; consequently, many medical experts believed that
approximately 40 percent of the antibody-carrying children would eventually develop the disease. Thus, with the highly reproducible art form, Gran Fury further publicized the worrisome results of the study – in the hopes of dissociating AIDS from solely the LGBTQ+ community and destigmatizing the illness. The public health crisis was threatening the future generations of this country, not just a singular community. Second, with the strikingly bold font and the implementation of a Spanish translation, the art collective highlights the institutionalized racism from the medical community, the media, and society at large. With the artists’ decision to include short, concise phrases in small groups of lines, the artwork becomes easily accessible and comprehensible – highlighting more efficiently the treatment of minority communities during the AIDS crisis. Inspired by the lack of media attention, the nature of Gran Fury’s poster allowed for mass distribution and consequently for greater public awareness of racial and medical injustice. Therefore, the simplistic form of their first group-designed poster became a strategy to ensure the efficacy of their artistic tool and to ensure that society became aware of the harrowing reality of the epidemic.

Within the same year, Gran Fury made multiple posters and banners for the ACT UP-organized “Nine Days of Protests,” such as *All People with AIDS Are Innocent* (Fig. 3). With an overall, plain composition, this print contained a white background with a surrounding black border that thickens at the top and bottom. Placed within the white

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box, sharply contrasted words read “All People with AIDS Are Innocent,” while the symbol of medicine (the caduceus) – which contains a staff that is wrapped by two serpents – was positioned underneath the text.49 Towards the bottom of the design, smaller text highlighted the artwork’s connection to the ACT UP protests, stating “Spring into AIDS Action ’88: Nine days of nationwide AIDS related actions & protests.” Thus, Gran Fury implemented a minimalist aesthetic on their flyer, concentrating on the two extreme pigments, white and black, to accentuate their message. With this plethora of narrative throughout the graphic, this design functions as a tool to confront the stigma against the LGBTQ+ community and the bias against AIDS-diagnosed individuals through a few key characteristics: their word selection, their symbol placement, and their method of display. First, by associating the words “innocent” and “AIDS,” they commented on the guilt that was often predetermined by the public after a diagnosis. The boldness and simplicity of the header text, “All People with AIDS Are Innocent,” established a direct, authoritative tone to the audience, consequently exhibiting the gravity of the problem. Second, similar to the purpose of the installation Let the Record Show, Gran Fury criticized the public esteem of American leaders and the simultaneous condemnation of the AIDS-diagnosed community – specifically by medical professionals – through the juxtaposition between the caduceus and the text. With the inclusion of the symbol of medicine, the artwork brought into question the concept of medical ethics, especially as scientists and physicians proposed immoral clinical trials for drug research, failed to recognize treatment decisions, and refused to care for patients with AIDS-related

illnesses.\textsuperscript{50} Lastly, since the graphic was created for protests, its reproducible nature allowed for mass distribution, reaching beyond the confines of the art world and the LGBTQ+ community into the general public. As Douglas Crimp said in an article, these artists “suggest slogans,” “target opponents,” “define positions,” and “propose actions” in order to publicize the mistreatment of these vulnerable communities and to reach new solutions.\textsuperscript{51} Therefore, Gran Fury was metamorphosing the function and space of art, bringing these prints outdoors for all communities to observe, understand, and spread the conversation.

By 1989, Gran Fury was continually producing artwork to be seen throughout Chicago, New York, San Francisco, and Washington D.C. – epitomized by the posters on the sides of public buses and subway platforms.\textsuperscript{52} Named \textit{Kissing Doesn’t Kill}, this visual display depicted three interracial couples in colorful, patterned attire against a contrastingly simple, white background; between the three pairs of figures, two are same-sex couples (\textbf{Fig. 4}). Above these three couples, large blue text reads “Kissing Doesn’t Kill: Greed and Indifference Do;” below, relatively smaller white text states “Corporate Greed, Government Inaction, and Political Indifference Make AIDS A Political Crisis.” Similar to the purpose of the installations \textit{Let the Record Show} and \textit{All People with AIDS}, this poster served as a tool to expose the lies and stereotypes within society, transferring the accountability to American leaders – whether religious, social, or political – through its strategic balance between text and image. By associating the image of three kissing

\textsuperscript{50} Phillips, “Gran Fury and the Politics of AIDS,” 104.

\textsuperscript{51} Crimp, \textit{Aids Demographics}, 20-21.

\textsuperscript{52} Crimp, “Gran Fury Talks to Douglas Crimp.”
couples with a statement that declares the act as harmless, Gran Fury reassured the public of this safe display of love and devotion. They were challenging the initial belief that classified “kissing as a risk behavior and saliva as a likely fluid of HIV transmission,” as Richard Meyer stated in Outlaw Representation; therefore, this composition provided a “liberationist vision” that is “resituated within the context of the AIDS epidemic.”53 With the phrase “Kissing doesn’t kill,” Gran Fury attempted to normalize and instill respect for the freedom and behavior of the LGBTQ+ community – a concept that was often under attack from conservative leaders. Additionally, the group relocated the art exhibition space from the confines of a gallery to the openness of the street, similar to All People with AIDS. Discussing their decision to place the artwork in a typical advertisement space, Gran Fury member Loring McAlpin said, “We are trying to fight for attention as hard as Coca-Cola fights for attention.”54 As these buses passed through the city, it fed information to the public involuntarily, forcing them to process these posters as their eyes wandered; “It’s very different from being handed a leaflet where you automatically know someone’s trying to tell you something and you may not be receptive to hearing it,” however, if “you’re gazing at advertising … who knows what goes through [your] mind?” as member Avram Finkelstein explained.55 They were broadening the individuals’ experience within the city, exposing them to sights and sounds that could normally be blocked out of their minds. This poster entered the public space to force a conversation about social taboos – specifically kissing between races, between genders,

54Ibid., 236.
55Ibid., 236-37.
as well as its falsely interpreted relation to AIDS – and to destigmatize the illness within society.

Nearly a year later, as the AIDS crisis continued in its destructive presence, Gran Fury was still producing informative, thought-provoking forms of art, epitomized by The Four Questions (Fig. 5). Similar to their previous work of AIDS: 1 in 61 and All People with AIDS are Innocent, this artwork was simple and clear, containing only two opposing colors to publicize their message. On a white background, the poster reads four questions in black text: (1) “Do you resent people with AIDS?” (2) “Do you trust HIV-negatives?” (3) “Have you given up hope for cures?” and (4) “When was the last time you cried?” However, unlike the other graphics, the text is small, occupying only a small area of the overall composition and forcing the viewer to step into the space of the artwork. With this minimalistic design, the art collective – specifically Mark Simpson and Avram Finkelstein – aimed to represent their frustration and their inability to vocalize the complexity of the AIDS epidemic. As Finkelstein said, this artwork “intended to reflect the pain of the moment… [This poster] reunited me with my own sadness, and was closer to my own personal voice than any other work I’d done with Gran Fury.”

Inspired by their Jewish upbringing, Simpson and Finkelstein were specifically influenced by the Four Questions read from the Haggadah during the Passover Seder.

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57 Crimp, “Gran Fury Talks to Douglas Crimp.”


59 Ibid., 195.
As the youngest attendee asks the questions during Seder, this “ritual of remembering” aims to unite the Jewish community through the remembrance of their tumultuous past. Therefore, with this religious reference, Gran Fury created “the perfect framework” to “reinforce the importance of a re-examination of commonalities within a community of activists that was showing signs of spinning apart after years of loss, frustration, and constant activism.” This artwork acted as a tool to unite the affected communities – asking personal, reflective questions to the audience, instigating a conversation among the group of AIDS activists, and providing an introspective approach to the AIDS crisis.

By the time of the poster of *The Four Questions* in 1993, Gran Fury was garnering clear success and recognition, as seen by their increase in commissions and exhibition opportunities. The bus panel *Kissing Doesn’t Kill* was a participant of the 1989 public art project titled “Art against AIDS on the Road,” in association with the American Foundation for AIDS Research (AmFAR); other notable contemporary artists included Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, and Robert Mapplethorpe – affirming Gran Fury’s powerful voice within the country. As a further testament to their wide reception, they received invitations from the Whitney Museum and the Venice Biennale to exhibit within the following two years. Their reach was expanding, as they exchanged small-scale posters for the grandeur of bus panels, billboards, street signs, and

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61 Ibid.


63 Ibid.,” 237.

64 Ibid.
While Gran Fury faced small and large levels of censorship to limit the scope of their objectives, they were still able to present their message to the public – despite the negative or positive reception – with newspapers like the New York Times, magazines like October, multi-city installations, museum exhibitions, television broadcasts, and protests. For instance, within the same year, Gran Fury repurposed slogans, such as “Kissing Doesn’t Kill…,” onto fake currency to throw across the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, an entity made up of companies who were benefitting from the rising prices of the drug AZT. As this demonstration halted trading for the day, they gained national acknowledgement, epitomized by the New York Times coverage and a subsequent drop in the price of AZT. While Gran Fury stated that “art is not enough” within one of their own designs, the legacy of their artwork still contributed to the gradual success of the grander AIDS activist movement – such as “the ways in which the drug approval process was accelerated, the inclusion of patient groups in that process, the reduction of pricing for life-saving drugs,” and “the broader movement to make healthcare more affordable and increase access for all Americans,” as member Loring McAlpin stated in an interview with The Atlantic. By confronting the public with typically concealed images and influential slogans, Gran Fury was reshaping reservations

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66 Ibid., 241.
68 Drinkall, “Gran Fury: Read My Lips.”
and expectations towards the AIDS epidemic with each visual demonstration. Therefore, through their artwork, like Let the Record Show, AIDS: 1 in 61, All People with AIDS Are Innocent, Kissing Doesn’t Kill, and The Four Questions, art adapted a function for showcasing the truth of the crisis, for eliciting conversations about the medical and political community, and for de-victimizing the individuals with AIDS.
The AIDS Memorial Quilt: How A Quilt Helped A Grieving Community

As expressed during the outdoor display of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt in Washington D.C. in 1992, “To those who closed their eyes to AIDS, please take a moment to see a memorial of this kind and open your eyes and hearts before closing your eyes permanently…” These words encapsulate one of the many objectives of this community-based work: to build a basic level of understanding and compassion among Americans about the human effect of AIDS. By 1996, only four years after this display in 1992, there were over 37,472 panels sewn together in square patches. Initiated by activist Cleve Jones in 1985, the AIDS Memorial Quilt brought together multiple communities with panels that showcase individual stories and insights into people who were affected by AIDS. These quilt patches were created by loved ones from across the country, recognizing the character and personalities of those who died from the virus. Consequently, this artwork adapted two roles: (1) a therapeutic tool for the mourning community, as individuals – from family to lovers to co-workers – knit meaningful, private memories and words into the quilt for the public to see and appreciate, and (2) a mechanism for the general public to visualize the universality of this disease’s impact. While it was created in the mid-1980s to 1990s, the current 48,000 panels – which are dedicated to more than 100,000 individuals – have maintained the work’s legacy into the


71Lewis and Fraser, “Patches of Grief and Rage,” 434.


73Lewis and Fraser, “Patches of Grief and Rage,” 434.
21st century, as it transformed into a key educational symbol of the AIDS epidemic and reflected one of “the largest community arts projects in history.”

In the fall of 1985, Cleve Jones was leading the organization and formation of the annual candle-light march in San Francisco for Mayor George Moscone and politician Harvey Milk, who were assassinated in 1978. However, after reading a paper headline that said “1,000 San Franciscans Dead from AIDS” and seeing many of Jones’s friends and neighbors being diagnosed, this march transitioned into an opportunity to respect the “martyrs” of the AIDS epidemic who “have been condemned to an early and painful death,” as he explained in the book *Remembering the AIDS Quilt*. Consequently, during this demonstration, the attendees covered the federal building of the department of Health and Human Services with handwritten posters that honored those who have died at the hands of AIDS. A patchwork-like image was accidentally created, engulfing the audience with numerous names of friends, family members, and loved ones. Thus, the idea of a quilt was born.

To use the beauty and power of quilt-making for social goals was not a new concept. While traditional American knit artwork was regarded as models of “refinement,” “industry,” and “patriotism” from the 1910s-1950s, this historical analysis

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77Morris and Jones, *Remembering the AIDS Quilt*, Prologue.

78Ibid.
often discounts the role of quilts as social, political, and aesthetic statements. By the 1970s, due to the influx of social awareness and progressive movements, there was an increased appreciation for quilt art and greater recognition of the impactful role of female quilt-makers on American history, especially in regards to African American women. As Margot Kelley reflected, “Perhaps the most resonant quality of quilt-making is the promise of creating unity amongst disparate elements, of establishing connections in the midst of fragmentation.” For example, the Freedom Quilting Bee of Alabama, also regarded as the Quilts of Gee’s Bend, exemplified Kelley’s sentiments. Beginning in the early 20th century, a small population of African American female quilt-makers in Gee’s Bend, Alabama knit abstract, minimalist designs on a large scale for nearly four generations, selling them to local leaders of the community to sustain themselves and to continue their artistic craft. Thus, they represented the ability of quilt art to provide representation, to create a sense of identity, and to unite communities. In addition to the quilt’s power of unity, this art form has provided a platform to express personal stories and private sentiments since the nineteenth century. This approach was epitomized by the “Radical Rose design,” or a flower with a black center, which emerged in the North.

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82 Whitsitt, “In Spite of it All,” 454.

during the Civil War to express concealed support and sympathy for the slaves. While a knitted quilt evokes a sense of tradition and memory, there is also a quiet strength that is embedded in its fabric – as knit artworks have brought individuals together since the foundation of the United States.

Thus, inspired by the American tradition of quilt art and the warm essence associated with knit work, the AIDS Memorial Quilt became a “symbol of solidarity, of family and community” and a possible tool to “bridge that gap of age-old prejudice,” as Jones once stated. It was an opportunity to destigmatize the illness and show the country that this is a “shared national tragedy,” as Peter Hawkins wrote in his article “Naming Names.” Jones created the first panel in dedication to his best friend, Marvin Feldman; on a white sheet that was the approximate size of a grave, he boldly spray-painted five pink stars of David around his name with a stencil (Fig. 6). As he stenciled out his name, he created the model for future panels, instigating a movement whose impact would remain for generations.

By 1987, this was regarded as the NAMES Project, which represented a plan to lay out individually made quilt panels on the National Mall in Washington D.C. for the National March for Lesbian and Gay Rights on October 11th, as well as many future public exhibitions. For its development, there were multiple individuals involved – such

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85 Morris and Jones, *Remembering the AIDS Quilt*, Prologue.


87 Ibid., 757-758.

88 Morris and Jones, *Remembering the AIDS Quilt*, Prologue.
as Joseph Durant, Ron Cordova, and Michael Smith – working together to manage the quilt submissions, to monitor the incoming resources, and to increase its public awareness.\textsuperscript{89} These submissions were allowed from anyone, whether the relationship between the quilt creator and the individual being honored was minimal or intimately close. While it initially had difficulty gaining nationwide interest, it gradually became a well-known project with the help of influential figures – like Mayor Dianne Feinstein of San Francisco, a Neiman Marcus employee, and local community members – who donated sewing machines, money, and even provided massages for the volunteers.\textsuperscript{90} This art project was uniting people throughout the country, as they expressed their feelings of loss and love with their artwork and then sent it to strangers in California for a public display. When a quilt panel was sent, an instant connection developed. As Jones said, “There wasn’t a day that I didn’t cry.”\textsuperscript{91}

By the day of the first national march in 1987, there were approximately 2,000 panels with nearly 1,920 names – sewn into twelve-by-twelve foot squares with nine-foot walkways of white fabric to allow for close proximity between the audience and the patches.\textsuperscript{92} In the center, blank cloth squares, also referred to as “signature squares,” were laid upon the ground, creating a space where visitors could leave a response and write their thoughts and emotions to this overwhelming display.\textsuperscript{93} With these carefully placed

\textsuperscript{89}Morris and Jones, \textit{Remembering the AIDS Quilt}, Prologue.

\textsuperscript{90}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{91}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{92}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{93}Lewis and Fraser, “Patches of Grief and Rage,” 435.
panels and the welcome embrace of physical contact with the panels, the demonstration became a performance. For each performance, the quilt was initially positioned into a lotus fold – as the four corners of each twelve-by-twelve foot square were folded into the center until tightly wrapped. Then, with a composite team of eight people, each fold was opened in stages; for each stage, four people would unfold the corners, until the entirety of the panels was revealed, deepening the gravity and emotion of the event.

Throughout this entire process, the names of the Quilt were reverently read to the audience by several figures: Cleve Jones, Art Agnos, Whoopi Goldberg, Robert Blake, Lily Tomlin, Harvey Fierstein, Nancy Pelosi, and Joseph Papp. To further the honorific nature of the event, symbols were strategically integrated to recognize those who have helped throughout the AIDS crisis, exemplified by the white-dressed unfolders who represent the efforts of the nurses during the epidemic.

In addition to the quilt and its theatrical unveiling, hundreds of letters were sent to accompany its display, emphasizing the immense effect that the AIDS crisis has held on communities. As an activist named Gert McMullin wrote in her letter to her best friend who passed away from AIDS:

“Roger, I have learned one thing in my life. Don’t get to know someone and become friends after they died. I never got the chance to run and play with you or

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94 Morris and Jones, *Remembering the AIDS Quilt*, Prologue.

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid.

98 Ibid.
to watch you have the time to be happy. You have given me one thing – a determination to be the kind of person you would admire.”99

Her words and the multitude of letters reflect upon the universality of grief and loss in relation to the AIDS epidemic. While these individuals were from all types of areas across the country, they were brought together by their pain and sorrow. After this first display in Washington D.C. in 1987, it was clear that this quilt was providing an outlet for the grieving community, a way to mourn and respect the dead during this isolating crisis. As Jones explained, “When we got home to San Francisco, the mailbox was overflowing. People all over America had been inspired by the panels and had sent us poems and photographs, paintings, screenplays, and play scripts… And everyday brought letters from all over the country and around the world, many accompanied by quilts.”100

Thus, to respond to this national interest, the quilt was brought around the country, allowing nearly 15 million individuals to visit the display by 2006.101 As time progressed, these sentiments towards the public artwork remained constant, as evident in several examples, such as the quilts of Duane Kearns Puryear, Dr. Tom Waddell, Vito Russo, Tom Biscotto, and David Thompson.

At 16 years old, Duane Kearns Puryear was diagnosed with HIV; nearly six years later, in 1987, his disease advanced to AIDS.102 By 1991, he had passed away from this  

99 Morris and Jones, Remembering the AIDS Quilt, Prologue.

100 Ibid.


terminal disease. However, even with the constraints of the virus, he was able to utilize his energy for activism, for greater public awareness and understanding. After hearing about the AIDS Memorial Quilt, he designed his own panel in preparation for his own death and displayed it to the public, alongside the thousands of other panels knit together. On a white panel, his quilt reads “My name is Duane Kearns Puryear. I was born on December 20, 1964. I was diagnosed with AIDS on September 7, 1987 at 4:45pm. I was 22 years old. Sometimes, it makes me very sad. I made this panel myself. If you are reading it, I am dead…” in thick, black letters (Fig. 7). With these short, direct sentences, he encapsulated the impact of the disease by incorporating his own feelings and his own mortality into the quilt. In addition to its meaning, the artwork’s composition aided in its ability to capture the attention of the audience – supported by its simplistic nature and by the sharp contrast between the white background and black text. As Stephanie Poole wrote, this panel became a chance “to do something about contracting the virus;” thus, he developed it into a tool to educate the public by associating his own face with the disease. Instead of allowing a loved one to craft a quilt after his death, he took control of his situation, creating a therapeutic, yet functional artwork that had the context and the power to capture the attention of thousands of people.

While Duane Kearns Puryear received his AIDS diagnosis in his early years, Dr. Tom Waddell was diagnosed in 1985, when he was 48 years old. By this time, he had

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104 Ibid., 58-59.
105 “Gay Games Founder Dr. Tom Waddell,” Federation of Gay Games, https://gaygames.org/TomWaddell.
already begun to make a difference in communities across the country. Since he was a young child in New Jersey, he always had an interest in athletics, such as gymnastics, football, and track. While he attended medical school and became a practicing physician, his interest in athletics continued throughout his life, performing as a decathlete in the 1968 Olympics. By 1972, after an injury to his knee during a high jump event, he began to primarily focus on medicine, while also undergoing self-exploration as a gay man in San Francisco. Influenced by his own experiences and his interest in athletics, he founded the Gay Olympics in 1982, traveling throughout the country to gain the support of the people. While he faced legal issues with the United States Olympic Committee over the name, Dr. Waddell was courageous, remaining strong and supportive of his public event among legal battles that extended to the Supreme Court. Even though his diagnosis was in 1985, he was able to live his life to the fullest – continuing his role as a public health physician in San Francisco, having his daughter, Jessica Waddell Lewinstein, with an athlete named Sara Lewinstein, and even winning a gold medal in a javelin event at the second rendition of the Gay Games in 1986. By the time of his death in 1987, he had an enormous legacy with supporters from across the world, as he created a safe, welcoming space for athletes of the LGBTQ+

106 Federation of Gay Games, “Gay Games Founder Dr. Tom Waddell.”
107 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
109 Ibid.
110 Ibid.
111 Ibid.
community. Depicted with approximately 12 panels in his honor, his impact and his character were immortalized into the AIDS Memorial Quilt. Reflecting his perseverance and dedication to the LGBTQ+ community, many of his panels contain symbols and memories to honor him. For instance, unlike Duane Puryear’s simple quilt, one of Dr. Tom Waddell’s panels has a complex composition. Placed on a simple, white cloth to heighten the content of the artwork, Visa cards are used to spell out his name and to form a border around the panel’s rectangular shape (Fig. 8). Thus, it reads “Dr. Tom Waddell, Olympian” with an iridescent quality. Adjacent to his name, there is a card-based Olympic flame and a smaller text that states “This panel is made of Visa cards which were cancelled by thousands of people to protest Visa’s support of the anti-gay U.S. Olympic Committee.” Thus, with the quilt’s overwhelming arrangement, choice of medium, and political message, it became a way to show communities what this man, who was infected with AIDS, had done for everyone. This designed artwork became a memorial for Dr. Tom Waddell, showing his mark on the world for the public to see and understand.

Similar to the lifestyles of Duane Kearns Puryear and Dr. Tom Waddell, Vito Russo lived a life of activism, influencing change in society and in artistic culture. While he died young from AIDS at age 44 years old, he lived an eventful life as a film historian, critic, writer, and activist. Born in Manhattan in 1946, he grew up with a working-class

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112 Federation of Gay Games, “Gay Games Founder Dr. Tom Waddell.”

Italian family, where he initially found himself “as an outsider to American culture.”  

By the time he was in high school, he began to explore his identity in places around New York. As he grew up, he began to establish his love for movies and interest in popular culture, especially its representation of LGBTQ+ culture. After attaining his master’s degree in cinema from New York University in 1971, he began to publicly speak out against social issues with many publications, like “The Celluloid Closet,” which critically examine the cinematic depiction of the gay community. However, like many gay individuals during this time period, he was consistently faced with the deaths of coworkers, friends, and loved ones, like his partner Jeffrey Sevick, who died of AIDS in 1986. Thus, in addition to his film analyses, he had a dedication for politics to gain support and recognition for LGBTQ+ rights – becoming involved with many activist organizations, such as the Gay Activists Alliance, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation, and ACT-UP. As he said during an ACT UP demonstration in Albany in 1988, “AIDS is really a test of us, as a people. When future generations ask what we did in this crisis, we’re going to have to tell them that we were out here today. And we have

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116 Ibid., 74.

117 Holden, “Vito Russo.”

118 Ibid.

to leave the legacy to those generations of people who will come after us.”120 By the time of his death in 1990, he had lived up to these words, establishing this legacy of activism and change for the future generations. With all of his actions, his words, and his publications, he was still a coworker, a loved one, a friend, and a son. To commemorate his honor, several panels of the AIDS Memorial Quilt were in his name. In particular, one quilt showed the love and respect for his character, created by his family. Placed against a light pink background, the panel reads “Vito Russo, author of ‘The Celluloid Closet’” in black ink (Fig. 9). A few letters were transformed into symbols of his life – as the “i” became the Empire State Building; the first “o’ became a globe; and the second “o” became a film wheel. Underneath his name, a handwritten message reads “We could have told you Vito. This world was never meant for one as beautiful as you. Love, Mom, Dad, Charles, Linda, Vicki, Leslie, and Charlie.” Therefore, while this dedicated quilt did not contain a vast amount of words, its simple composition and the use of fundamental symbols encompassed Vito Russo’s character. At the same time, it also developed into a tool to allow the family to mourn, to honor his identity, and to send him a message through the artwork. As Peter Hawkins wrote in his article, the Quilt is “commonly treated as places to speak out loud to the dead or to leave behind written messages for them to read – as if the name of the deceased itself provided a medium of communication with another world.”121 In the midst of this public display, private messages filled the panels to cope with the feelings of loss and love.

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121 Hawkins, ”Naming Names,” 760.
For Tom Biscotto’s quilt, the complexity and the fragmentation of its composition only reflect the impact he had on his community. As the former stage manager of the Goodman Theater in Chicago and cofounder of the Godzilla Rainbow acting troupe, Tom Biscotto was a fundamental part of the Chicago arts community.122 Organized by Jim Rinnert, his lover of 13 years, this artwork consists of ten fragments for each letter of his complete name – created by nearly 14 people and one macaw (Fig. 10).123 While the first red letter “T” was created by Rinnert, the following letter “O” was created by an actress of the Godzilla Rainbow acting troupe named Lily; her dedicated section includes an oval-shaped floral pattern with a glitter-based border and a white background with stamped blue camels, inspired by their trip to Morocco together, where Tom jokingly accepted a trade of 4,000 camels for Lily.124 For the third letter, Kib, who was his friend from Toronto, formed the letter “M” with a replica of Tom’s nose, birch-bark, and snakeweeds to represent his “earthiness” qualities.125 By the ninth and tenth letters, many of his friends knit the double “T” together, creating two red, tree-like figures on an empty white cloth.126 As Tom Biscotto’s name is spelled out, each loved one implemented materials that symbolized a private sentiment, a memorable story, or a representation of his character. While the arrangement of the letters lacks physical unity and cohesion, the process of quilt-making united and connected his groups of friends and loved ones. As

123Ruskin, The Quilt: Stories from the NAMES Project, 22.
124Ibid., 23.
125Ibid.
126Ibid.
Cindy Ruskin explained, “Late one night, while playing Tom’s records, drinking, laughing a lot and crying a little, they sewed the pieces together and spelled out the name of their friend.”

While the preceding panels were all created by family, friends, and lovers, David Thompson’s panel was knit by a stranger, a distant individual. Before passing away from AIDS in 1986, David Thompson was a librarian at Stanford University; as a testament to his kind and giving nature, he had prearranged 300 yellow roses and an accompanying note to be sent to the entire library staff after his death. Thus, to further honor his legacy and character, his lover wrote a death notice in the paper on October 23rd, 1986. However, the impact of this death notice extended far beyond Thompson’s community. As the quiltmaker Cindy wrote to his lover:

“Please know my intent, when making this panel, was not to invade your memories or life with David. I have no memories to share of him, but I do share one thing with you. On October 23, 1986, a pain went through my heart that was unbearable. A loneliness for the loss of a complete stranger -- a potential friend. To this day, I cry when I think of how you must miss each other. You see, I had to know his name would be among the others. To be seen by his friends and the friends he would have had. Also, this panel has released some of my pain for

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127 Ruskin, The Quilt: Stories from the NAMES Project, 23.
128 Ibid., 63.
129 Ibid., 62.
130 Ibid., 63.
David. A very confusing pain for me, because I have never loved a complete stranger.”

Inspired by her emotions, her panel was formed on a rectangular, sky blue panel – spelling out his name, David R. Thompson, in sharp, black letters in the center of the quilt (Fig. 11). Throughout the entire space, there are swift paint splotches of red, yellow, blue, green, white, and black, contributing a sense of dynamism and energy to the panel. With this colorful composition, the overwhelming nature of the artwork parallels the overwhelming sentiments of the artist, who was stricken by the inexpressible qualities of grief and loss for an individual whom she never had the opportunity to meet.

Thus, these five examples exemplify the abilities of the AIDS Memorial Quilt to transcend artistic tradition, allowing these quilts to become a tool for activism and for the grieving process. This artwork “redescribes the entire nation in terms of the epidemic – it says, America has AIDS,” persuading the “government to act with compassion toward its citizens,” as Peter Hawkins and Gust Yep explained in their articles.131 Thus, as the quilt grew larger with increasing submissions, the power and influence of this work simultaneously grew as well. This is evident with the completed study on “the persuasive effect of the AIDS NAMES Quilt on behavioral intentions,” performed by professors of Communications among multiple American universities.132 In this study, the researchers had two objectives. First, they wanted “to determine whether intentions toward engaging in supportive behaviors toward people living with AIDS (PLWA) would be affected by

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viewing the AIDS Quilt;” second, they were interested in determining “whether intentions towards PLWA would be influenced by directness of experience with homosexuals or PLWA.” With these two inquiries, two questionnaires were distributed to 107 undergraduate students (65 female, 42 male) at a large university in the southeastern United States – where they were initially asked if they were a part of the LGBTQ+ community, a person living with AIDS, or both; the first questionnaire targeted behavioral intentions, while the second questionnaire asked about the feelings and sentiments towards the quilt. For this study, there were four patches, consisting of 36 smaller panels, from the collective AIDS Memorial Quilt on display. The results were clear. For individuals who initially knew a person with AIDS and/or was a part of the LGBTQ+ community, there was little to no change on behavioral intentions after viewing the AIDS Memorial Quilt; however, for individuals who had no connection to a person with AIDS and/or was not a part of the LGBTQ+ community, there was a “significant impact upon the behavioral intentions” after viewing the AIDS Memorial Quilt. Thus, with exposure to the quilt, this group of individuals were more likely to engage in supportive behaviors towards people living with AIDS. Therefore, this study provided a quantitative value to the effect of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, showing its ability to establish a greater level of understanding of this disease’s impact among the public. When an individual who was generally disconnected from the AIDS crisis sees the

134 Ibid., 116.
135 Ibid., 118.
136 Ibid.
enormity of the quilt in a public setting, it provided a tangible, visual depiction of the immensity of death and despair that the epidemic had caused. These handmade quilts had the power to evoke compassion and empathy from simple passersby. As the quilt’s organizer Cleve Jones said, it provided “a glimpse of the lives behind the statistics … an extraordinary, dramatic illustration of the magnitude of this epidemic – to the president, to Congress, and to the country.”\textsuperscript{137}

However, while art historian and critic Douglas Crimp was “deeply moved – by the sheer enormity of loss, by the varied sentiments about so many people’s lives, and by the grief-stricken responses of fellow mourners,” he still found himself ambivalent towards the quilt, specifically in terms of the spectacle of mourning that emerges from the display.\textsuperscript{138} As he asked, “Does a visit to the quilt, or the media’s approving attention to it, assuage the guilt of those who otherwise have been so callous, whether that callousness takes the form of denial or of outright disgust?\textsuperscript{139} Furthermore, with the lack of specific symbols that relate to LGBTQ+ culture throughout the quilt, Crimp wonders “Does the quilt sanitize or sentimentalize gay life?”\textsuperscript{140} While these questions cannot be definitively answered, this massive art installation was able to fulfill Cleve Jones’s mission to illustrate the universality of the pain and to “demonstrate that AIDS – a crisis of the social body – reveals the interconnectedness of peoples’ lives in a seemingly

\textsuperscript{137}Lewis and Fraser, “Patches of Grief and Rage,” 439.


\textsuperscript{139}Crimp, “The Spectacle of Mourning,” 198.

\textsuperscript{140}Ibid., 200.
individualistic society,” as Steven Gambardella explained. In addition to its ability to raise awareness and connect, the creation of these quilts provided a means to mourn, to grieve, and to accept the loss that these individuals had experienced. This project and its public displays became “a place where people actively share memories in order to provide testimony to the lives lost to AIDS and to find healing in the midst of loss,” as writer Sturken said in the journal Socialist Review. With the implementation of signature squares in the center of the display and the ability to send a quilt from anywhere in the world, visitors were able to experience a safe space, an area to completely mourn these individuals. This is evident with some of the comments left on the signature squares within the displays:

“As I mourn the loss of my brothers – I feel somewhat comforted by knowing and seeing the love displayed here.”

“For Bob, four years ago we met here as volunteers and began our life together. Two days ago I returned here as a volunteer without you. Today I have come back to see your panel and to hear your name and to feel your presence beside me again.”

Since many individuals were pressured by the stigma and the shame that society infringed upon those affected by the AIDS crisis, this public artwork provided a way to express their feelings, to communicate with the deceased, to visit their loved ones once again. Similar to the works of Gran Fury, this quilt brought the artwork into a public

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142 Lewis and Fraser, “Patches of Grief and Rage,” 443.

143 Ibid., 444-445.
setting, confronting the audience with the harrowing reality of the AIDS epidemic to
instigate greater reception towards the issues surrounding the public health crisis. Thus,
as seen with the letters sent, the messages written, and the quilt panels themselves, the
AIDS Memorial Quilt adopted a few purposes, transcending beyond the traditional use of
visual art as decoration and into a role of functionality.
Felix Gonzalez-Torres: A Story of Love and Loss

As contemporary artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres once responded in an interview with artist Tim Rollins, “I need the viewer; I need the public interaction. Without the public, these works are nothing. I need the public to complete the work. I ask the public to help me, to take responsibility, to become part of my work, to join in.” This declaration epitomizes Gonzalez-Torres’s approach to visual art. Grounded in public settings, his artwork paradoxically delves into some of the most private sentiments of the audience, touching on universal emotions and simultaneously transforming his art into a tool to de-vilify AIDS. By the late 1980s, he was internationally renowned for his sentimental, minimalist works that implemented utilitarian objects – as he participated in nearly hundreds of exhibitions within his lifetime. These ranged from the collective shows at the Whitney Biennial in 1991 and the Venice Biennial in 1993 to retrospective exhibitions at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1995, the Sprengel Museum in Germany in 1997, and the Biblioteca Luis-Ángel Arango in Bogotá in 2000. While he died twenty-five years ago in 1996, his legacy has continued into the present-day generation – as his artwork is installed in galleries, private homes, and public streets with continued impact of his themes of grief and loss on other pandemics, like COVID-19.

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146Guggenheim, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres.”

Born in Guáimaro, Cuba in 1957, Felix Gonzalez-Torres grew up with a strong arts education.\textsuperscript{148} After moving to the United States in 1979, he attended the Pratt Institute in New York for his undergraduate studies, concentrating in photography.\textsuperscript{149} Shortly after his graduation, in 1987, he obtained a Masters of Fine Arts from the International Center of Photography in New York.\textsuperscript{150} To increase the depth of his formal art education, he participated in the Whitney Museum of American Art’s Independent Study Program, introducing him to a range of Postmodernist theories that were written by Michel Foucalt, Walter Benjamin, and many others.\textsuperscript{151} These philosophers confronted the idea of cultural authority and the idea of representation itself, inspiring artists to ask questions like, “To whom is representation addressed and who is excluded from it?” and “In what ways does representation define and perpetuate class structure, sexual difference, and racial difference?” – as curator Nancy Spector discussed.\textsuperscript{152} Thus, while discussing his academic background, Gonzalez-Torres explained:

“Some of their writings and ideas gave me a certain freedom to see. These ideas moved me to a place of pleasure through knowledge and some understanding of the way reality is constructed, of the way the self is formed in culture, of the way language sets traps…”\textsuperscript{153}

\textsuperscript{148}Guggenheim, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres.”
\textsuperscript{149}Nancy Spector and Felix Gonzalez-Torres. \textit{Felix Gonzalez-Torres} (Guggenheim Museum, 1995), 3.
\textsuperscript{150}Guggenheim, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres.”
\textsuperscript{151}Spector and Gonzalez-Torres, \textit{Felix Gonzalez-Torres}, 4.
\textsuperscript{152}Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{153}Ibid., 4.
To further his cultural and academic experience, he joined the art collective Group Material in 1987. Group Material – which was founded by Julie Ault, Mundy McLaughlin, and Tim Rollins – intertwined the political with the artistic, creating various forms of public interventions, like subway signage, and large-scale group exhibitions that focused on various social issues, such as gender inequality and the AIDS epidemic. With this foundation, they utilized the aesthetics of art to send political statements to the public. As Gonzalez-Torres explained, “The most successful of all political moves are ones that don’t appear to be political.” While he only collaborated with Group Material until 1991, their artistic focus and practice were parallel to his work throughout his career.

Among all of his professional pursuits, he was also a gay man living in the United States, who developed a strong love for his partner Ross Laycock. After meeting in 1983, they maintained an intense relationship for nearly eight years, living in a few cities, most consistently in Toronto. However, after a couple of years of progressive symptoms, Ross died from AIDS in 1991, leaving Felix Gonzalez-Torres with an immense feeling of grief and loss. Only five years later, Gonzalez-Torres passed away.
from AIDS in Miami.  

During the time after Ross’s death, Gonzalez-Torres’s artwork became inspired by their time together. It became a way to immortalize those memories between them; as he explained in an interview, “I think one of the reasons that I made artwork was for Ross.” With this deeply personal relationship with the epidemic, he applied his private feelings to his artwork, showing the all-inclusive nature of the terminal illness to the public. Inspired by the artistic movements of Minimalism and Conceptual art that preceded him, his artwork uniquely implements common, traditionally utilitarian objects – like pieces of paper, clocks, and light fixtures – to instigate an artistic dialogue with the audience, to allow the public to collaborate in creating the meaning of the work, and to create a paradoxical nature between the public and the private. With this interest in the viewer, Felix Gonzalez-Torres uses his artwork as a tool to illustrate the comprehensive nature of the AIDS illness to the public by showing the universality of love and loss, specifically the loss of time and the loss of body. Thus, within this section, I will be analyzing three key artworks that epitomize these objectives: Untitled (Perfect Lovers), Untitled (Placebo), and Untitled (Toronto).

Created in 1987, Untitled (Perfect Lovers) encapsulates two commercial, black-rimmed clocks that are physically aligned to the touch and perfectly synced to each other (Fig. 12). Mounted on a wall, this artwork can often blend into its surroundings, appearing as ordinary devices from a distance; however, Felix Gonzalez-Torres created “potential poetic associations and possibilities for personification” for the pair of

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162 Gonzalez-Torres and Rollins, "Interview by Tim Rollins,” 5-31.

163 Spector and Gonzalez-Torres, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 16-18.
The two clocks lay adjacent to each other, ticking in a harmonious manner. In his eyes, love exists in pairs, as two individuals progress through time together. They exist as “a community of two” – experiencing life, facing challenges, growing old. However, these battery-operated clocks cannot continue forever – similar to human life. At an unknown moment, the clocks will stop working – whether at the same or different time. One will continue, while the other is left behind. Yet, for this artwork, the batteries can be replaced, and the clocks can resume in their paralleled, harmonic nature. Through these metaphorical installations, Gonzalez-Torres created a symbol of infinite love, juxtaposed with the imminent threat of time. Expressing these sentiments, he wrote an accompanying letter to Ross in 1988, saying:

“Don’t be afraid of the clocks, they are our time, time has been so generous to us. We imprinted time with the sweet taste of victory. We conquered fate by meeting at a certain TIME in a certain space. We are a product of the time, therefore we give back credit where it is due: time. We are synchronized, now and forever. I love you.”

Therefore, with the symbolism of this installation and his message to Ross, he transformed the Minimalist approach to art – which re-contextualized unconventional objects, like industrial materials, to create a “phenomenological experience” – by

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164 Spector and Gonzalez-Torres, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 75.

165 Ibid., 143.

166 Ibid.

infusing human sentiments and private experiences into his artwork.\textsuperscript{168} As he said in 1991, “Time is something that scares me… or used to. This piece I made with the two clocks was the scariest thing I have ever done. I wanted to face it. I wanted those two clocks right in front of me, ticking.”\textsuperscript{169} He utilized his fear, his pain, and his sadness towards Ross’s diagnosis and their impending death to highlight the impact of the overwhelming, disastrous nature of the AIDS epidemic. Similar to the function of a panel within the AIDS Memorial Quilt, this installation provides a glimpse into the private influence that the disease had on an individual’s life.

Concurrently, while private sentimentality was a central component to the work, the clocks were still placed within the “public sphere,” where Gonzalez-Torres believed they could “generate interaction, participation, and interpretation” among the viewers.\textsuperscript{170} The pair of clocks could be found in inconspicuous locations, such as on the walls of a gift shop, near the check-in desk of a museum, in offices, in stairwells, near the front entrance of a gallery, and even private homes (Fig. 13).\textsuperscript{171} The vagueness and simplicity of the clocks allowed the artwork to be adapted to each individual, creating an object that could be understood and reimagined into their own personal context. Since Gonzalez-Torres avoided specific symbols that were solely relatable to the artist, he developed a tool to establish a basic level of human understanding of the grief and anguish that the


\textsuperscript{170}Spector and Gonzalez-Torres, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 59.

AIDS epidemic has caused – whether or not the audience had been personally affected by the illness. With this minimalistic, yet complex installation, every human being that stood among this work’s presence had the ability to relate to his synchronous feeling of love and the simultaneous pressure of time.

Furthermore, within the context of the period and the interplay between the private and the public, Gonzalez-Torres’s pair of clocks – and the other artworks within this series of doubles – also stood as a political symbol of gay love and desire. His subtle references, such as the repeated use of the same clock, allude to the concept of homosexuality, highlighting the most severely impacted community of the AIDS epidemic. During a period of strict congressional censorship of the arts between the 1980s and 1990s, the subdued allusions to the LGBTQ+ community were important to maintain the integrity of Gonzalez-Torres’s interests. As Spector explains, “Such paired images… ‘Just two of the same; same sex, same material, same stuff,’ as [Gonzalez-Torres] asserts – cannot be censored, cannot be erased.”

Thus, while the pair of clocks initially appear as an understated installation, “The meaning is really just there. One only has to look,” as he later described.

By 1991, Felix Gonzalez-Torres had createdUntitled (Placebo), as a part of his series of candy-based installations (Fig. 14). Typically displayed in a rectangular shape on the floor of a gallery or museum, this artwork consists of nearly 1,200 pounds of hard candy.
candies – or approximately 40,000 pieces – that are wrapped in silver foil, contributing to the iridescent quality to the work (Fig. 15).\textsuperscript{176} Similar to \textit{Untitled (Perfect Lovers)}, the context of the installation is fundamental to its understanding. As HIV/AIDS treatments were researched, many studies implemented the use of a placebo, which typically consisted of sugar-based forms, to determine a drug’s efficacy; consequently, many of the patients effectively received no treatment, rendering parts of the community abandoned and hopeless.\textsuperscript{177} With this context, Gonzalez-Torres transformed common candy into a metaphor for the wholly inadequate response to the epidemic – emphasized by the juxtaposition between the sugar-based object and the reference to placebo groups. Thus, \textit{Untitled (Placebo)} portrays “the dangers of false hopes and empty promises.”\textsuperscript{178} However, like his previous work, the sociopolitical references are subtle, forcing the viewer to develop their own meaning, to create their own connections, and to engage in their own experience. To further contribute to the depth of the installation, the viewers are prompted to take a piece of candy. As more and more candies are removed from the collective display, the artwork slowly disappears, contributing to the overall symbolism of the work in a couple of ways. First, as a silver-wrapped candy is picked up by a viewer, it transforms into a souvenir of their experience with the exhibition; as Susan Stewart wrote, “The souvenir reduces the public, the monumental… into the miniature, that which can be enveloped by the body… that which can be appropriated within the


\textsuperscript{177}France, \textit{How to Survive a Plague}, 169, 173.

\textsuperscript{178}Spector and Gonzalez-Torres, \textit{Felix Gonzalez-Torres}, 66.
privatized view of the individual subject.” By allowing individuals to take a piece of candy with them, they are subsequently taking a piece of the installation with them, sustaining the memory and nostalgia of the emotional experience, as Spector explains. It becomes a “keepsake for his or her own (re)collection,” transitioning the public installation into a private moment between the viewer and the artwork. Thus, Gonzalez-Torres created a traveling form of art that showed the audience the harrowing reality of the governmental and medical response to the AIDS epidemic. His candy-based artwork – which requires replacement once it has completely disappeared – became a tangible tool that educated the public and concretized the experience into their memory, ensuring a lasting impact among the audience.

Second, influenced by post-Minimalist sculpture, Gonzalez-Torres’s series of candy-based installations also represented the body – “deemphasizing the figurative” and creating a more nonspecific illustration to provide space for the viewer’s imagination and interpretation. His artwork can morph into any form that the audience believes it to be. However, as each piece of candy is removed throughout the exhibition, the metaphorical image of the body slowly dissipates. Within the context of the epidemic and the death of Gonzalez-Torres’s partner Ross, this gradual removal of the artwork became

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179 Spector and Gonzalez-Torres, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 65.
180 Ibid.
181 Ibid.
182 Ibid.
183 Ibid., 144, 156-157.
184 Ibid.
representative of the loss of body and the loss of physicality with an AIDS diagnosis. As he explained:

“I was losing the most important thing in my life – Ross, with whom I had the first real home, ever. So why not punish myself even more so that, in a way, the pain would be less? This is how I started letting the work go. Letting it just disappear. People don’t realize how strange it is when you make your work and you put it out to be seen and say, simply, “take me.” You watch them take pieces of the work – pieces of yourself – and start going out the door. And you feel like saying, “excuse me, but that is mine. Bring it back.”  

Thus, within the context of the placebo treatment trials, this version of his candy-based artworks depicted the loss of control that the patients endured at the hands of political and medical communities. As researchers completed their double-blind trial, the placebo-receiving patients were oblivious to their regression – leaving them optimistic, yet isolated and quickly dying. Gonzalez-Torres’s artwork symbolized the direct involvement of the body in politics, as the body is discriminated against and utilized for advantageous purposes, as philosopher Michel Foucault described.  

In the case of the AIDS epidemic, the body became “an object” of study, of examination, of exploration to find answers to undetermined questions. Through his candy spill, he has reconstructed

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185 Spector and Gonzalez-Torres, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 155-156.


the artwork into a tool that directly illustrates the dehumanizing treatment that patients have experienced throughout the AIDS crisis.

In 1992, Gonzalez-Torres completed *Untitled (Toronto)*, which encompasses two identical sets of 15 to 25 white light bulbs that are strung on a white wire, connected to an energy source with a 45-foot extension cord (Fig. 16). The light strings are not separated, but intertwined, rendering it difficult to discern the beginning and the end of the two strings. While the material remains consistent for each public display, its location and spatial position vary for each exhibition, as he granted the installer the independence to determine how the strings occupy the space “because of the democratic function of the work.”

Throughout its several exhibitions, this pair of light strings have been suspended from the ceiling, lined the edge of a wall, been placed in a pile on the floor, and hung across a room. Similar to his previous works, a simplified, conventionally utilitarian object has been transformed into a work of art – filled with depth and complexity that can be subjectively interpreted by the audience. Gonzalez-Torres has continued the allusions of gay love, through camouflaged symbolism and references, like the homogenous nature between the pair of light strings. Additionally, parallel to *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, there is a finite quality to this installation, since light bulbs do not have the power to infinitely illuminate the space. Like the clocks, the pair of light

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188 Spector and Gonzalez-Torres, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 184.

189 Ibid.

190 “Untitled’ (Toronto),” The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, [https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/untitled-toronto](https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/untitled-toronto).

191 Spector, Nancy and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, pg. 72.
strings will not dim together. At an unknown moment, one of the strings will darken, leaving the other string to glow alone.

By 1992, Ross had passed away from AIDS nearly a year before, leaving Gonzalez-Torres with indescribable feelings of grief and loss. While this artwork is labeled “Untitled,” the parenthetical subtitle provides a significant glimpse into the influence of his work – inspired by the couple’s long periods of time in Toronto. These light installations reflect upon the temporality of life and the beauty of love, yet also embrace their functional quality as a source of light; he enjoyed the ways in which light strings fall and drape in a space. As he discussed his travels with Ross in an interview with Nancy Spector, he reflected upon his photograph of light strings at a street fair; he said, “It was so simple and so beautiful, just the way we had it in Cuba. I looked up and immediately took a picture because it was a happy sight.” Thus, he has applied his own private sentiments and his own personal stories to this public installation, subsequently destigmatizing and humanizing the illness. While many people in the United States only associated this disease with the LGBTQ+ community, his artwork shined a spotlight on its effect on the most basic human needs: love, safety, and comfort.

Therefore, these three artworks epitomize his determination to showcase a unique perspective of the epidemic. As he reflected in his interview with Spector:

“When people think about AIDS, they think of images of hospital beds, medicine, needles, and all such garish things. That’s not AIDS. That’s part of it, but AIDS,

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193 Spector and Gonzalez-Torres, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 191.
194 Ibid., 192.
also, unfortunately, includes discrimination, fear, shame, desperation, and political repression. The fact that gays still cannot serve openly in the military, because people still want to believe it’s just a gay disease – that’s AIDS too. I don’t need to see an image of someone dying in a hospital bed to understand AIDS. No one needs to see that; we’ve seen it before, and we’ll see more.”

With his use of untraditional, simple objects as the foundation of his artistic approach, Felix Gonzalez-Torres creates an open-ended platform for the public to interpret and apply their own individualized experiences. Through his heart-wrenching messages that reflect upon the universality of love and loss, he transformed the image of the AIDS epidemic. As Giannella Ysasi Tavano wrote in regards to the art of medicine, Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s works “amplify social inequalities and reveal sources of personal and community suffering.” Thus, he widened the conversation to demonstrate that the AIDS crisis did not just relate to the LGBTQ+ community, but to anyone who had experienced the pain and despair of grief.

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196 Spector and Gonzalez-Torres, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 166.

Conclusion

By 1996, nearly four years after a shift in presidential administrations from Reagan to Clinton, the AIDS epidemic began to experience slight, hopeful changes. The number of new AIDS diagnoses started to decline for the first time since 1981. A new treatment of protease inhibitors – which prevent a key, progressive step in HIV replication – was found to be effective in fighting AIDS, progressing HIV towards becoming a “manageable disease.” Subsequently, four medications were approved by the FDA: indinavir, viracept, ritonavir, and saquinavir. While there were still nearly 50,000 diagnosed cases in 1996, there was light at the end of the tunnel, as leaders of the country began to accept the severity of the epidemic.

However, for nearly two decades, the most affected communities of the AIDS crisis were left fearful, hopeless, and abandoned by political figures, medical communities, and the overall society. Artists of the LGBTQ+ community were forced to take charge, propelled by their worries about their community, their identity, and their wellbeing. The three selected examples of this thesis – Gran Fury, the AIDS Memorial Quilt, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres – epitomized this action and passion, as they applied different, unique approaches to the public health crisis. The art collective Gran Fury utilized paper-based works, prints, and large public installations. The AIDS Memorial Quilt, through its tragic display of names, brought public attention to the epidemic. Felix Gonzalez-Torres utilized his own body as a medium to protest society’s indifference to the AIDS crisis.

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199 Ibid.

Quilt embedded the tradition and history of quilt-making into its art, while Felix Gonzalez-Torres contrastingly re-contextualized modern objects, like clocks and light fixtures, into minimalist, deeply emotional artworks. Despite these differences in form, each wanted the same outcome: to increase public awareness and to see an end to AIDS-related deaths. Among the wide array of installations and displays, the artists were able to provide a voice to the socially ostracized LGBTQ+ community, to publicize the mortifying truth of the country’s response to the AIDS epidemic, to demonstrate the devastating impact of AIDS on individuals, to mourn, and to show the interconnectedness of the American public.

As Douglas Crimp explained, “Art is what survives, endures, transcends; art constitutes our legacy.” Thus, this thesis aimed to show how art developed into a mechanism to help with the discrimination, isolation, and abandonment of the LGBTQ+ community in their critical time of need. As Gran Fury’s posters, the AIDS Memorial Quilt’s panels, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s art installations entered into the public domain and collaborated with the audience, the artists expanded their narrative outside of the LGBTQ+ community, confronting individuals who did not have a direct association with the epidemic or a comprehensive understanding of the related issues and their influence. These artworks not only altered the stigmatizing perspective towards an AIDS diagnosis, but simultaneously exemplified the power of art in creating conversation and catalyzing sociopolitical change.

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Figures

Fig. 1, ACT UP and Gran Fury, *Let the Record Show*, window installation, 1987, New York

Fig. 2, Gran Fury, *AIDS: 1 in 61*, offset lithograph, 1988
Fig. 3, Gran Fury, *All People with AIDS Are Innocent*, photocopy, 1988

Fig. 4, Gran Fury, *Kissing Doesn’t Kill*, billboard installation, 1989
Fig. 5, Gran Fury, *The Four Questions*, photocopy, 1993

Do you resent people with AIDS?
Do you trust HIV-negatives?
Have you given up hope for a cure?
When was the last time you cried?

Fig. 6, Cleve Jones, *Marvin Feldman*, quilt panel, 1987

Fig. 7, Duane Kearns Puryear, *Untitled*, quilt panel, 1987
Fig. 8, Dr. Tom Waddell, quilt panel, 1987

Fig. 9, The Family of Vito Russo, Vito Russo, quilt panel, 1990
Fig. 10. *Tom Biscotto*, quilt panel, 1987

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Fig. 12. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, two wall clocks, 1987-1990
Fig. 13, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, two wall clocks, 1987-1990

Fig. 14, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Placebo)*, candy, individually wrapped in silver cellophane (endless supply), 1991
**Fig. 15**, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Placebo)*, candy, individually wrapped in silver cellophane (endless supply), 1991

**Fig. 16**, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Toronto)*, light bulbs, extension cord, and porcelain light sockets, 1992
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