

Queer Curating



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Challenging Hetero-centrism and Lesbo-/Homo-phobia: A History of LGBTQ exhibitions in the U.S.

Maura Reily

In this essay, I trace the historiography of LGBTQ exhibitions in the U.S. from the late 1970s to the present. Some of the key issues explored will include the concept of an artistic “sensibility” specific to sexual orientation, the curatorial “outing” of closeted artists or objects, the prevalence of lesbo- and trans-phobia, and the importance of museological interventions as “curatorial correctives.” The material outlined here is much more extensively analyzed in my book, *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating* (Thames & Hudson), which is both an examination of mainstream contemporary curatorial practice—understood at its core as a sexist, racist and Eurocentric practice—as well as a historiography of paradigm-shifting exhibitions that have countered that discrimination, such as *Magiciens de la terre*, *Elles*, *Global Feminisms*, *Ars Homo Erotica*, *En Todas Partes*, *Hide/Seek*, *Documenta 11*, among many others.

I begin my analysis in 1978, when the US artist and writer Harmony Hammond organized an exhibition entitled *A Lesbian Show* at 112 Greene Street Workshop in New York, which featured the work of eighteen artists. Hammond’s aim in the exhibition was not to discover or define a lesbian sensibility, but to present works with a broad range of aesthetic and shared thematic concerns, including “issues of anger, guilt, hiding, secrecy, coming out, personal violence and political trust, [and] self-empowerment.”¹ Indeed, according to Hammond, only a few of the works referenced lesbian sexuality, and the majority of them did not engage directly with lesbian identity or experience. The only unifying factor was that the artists were willing to be “out” in this context. This was a courageous act in 1978, since most lesbians did not want to be identified solely on the basis of their sexual orientation. As a result, most of the works dealt with “notions of camouflage or hiding,” and none was erotic in content because, as Hammond explained, the “artists were wary of the ever-present male gaze.”²

The case of *A Lesbian Show* raises some key issues that are in need of addressing in the context of LGBTQ exhibitions. First is the concept of a “sensibility” specific to sexual orientation. As with “women’s art” or “Latino art,” what is “lesbian art”? What is “gay art”? Does the art look different from that produced by non-LGBTQ artists? And, if there is a “sensibility,” how does it manifest itself in the work? The question of a gay or lesbian “sensibility” is one that has continually arisen in the historiography of LGBTQ exhibitions, from *GALAS* (1980) and *Extended Sensibilities* (1982) to *In A Different Light* (1993)—just as the idea of a “feminine sensibility” dominated women’s art production and exhibitions in the 1970s-80s.

Another issue raised by Hammond’s *A Lesbian Show* in 1978 was the artists’ willingness to “come out” publicly. Since sexuality is not generally physically manifest—as is usually the case with sex and race—it requires disclosure, a self-outing. For many this is liberating; for others, terrifying. Fear of being “outed” can be so intense that some artists have resorted to coded iconographies, as in the work of Jasper Johns, Robert

Rauschenberg, and Marsden Hartley. The gay liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s certainly changed that for some. As gays and lesbians became increasingly public, less closeted, they gained confidence and self-outing became less of an issue.

But what if artists are not “out” publicly, as was the case with Johns and Rauschenberg: should a curator “out” an artist, even if the artist had intended not to “out” him- or herself? In 2013, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) presented an exhibition of the work of Johns and Rauschenberg from the mid to late 1950s that made no mention of the fact that the two artists were lovers for six years during this period of artistic triumph, when they were moving away from Abstract Expressionism toward Pop art. Instead, the introductory placard described them as “friends” who were “in dialogue with one another” during this period. (MoMA’s profile of gay icon Andy Warhol also fails to mention he was homosexual.) Given that Johns and Rauschenberg were closeted, does this represent homophobia and/or censorship on the part of the museum? Mark Joseph Stern, writing for *Slate* believes so, arguing that, “museums have a responsibility to acknowledge and consider the sexuality of artists in their collections when it is relevant to the work they are displaying...In the case of Johns and Rauschenberg, ignoring orientation amounts to curatorial malpractice.”³ For Stern, then, the museum’s actions were censorious. The oversight was particularly egregious, he argued, because Pop art, the genre the two artists founded, was “built upon rejection of societal norms, including hyper-masculinity and heteronormativity. Its gay dimension was present from its genesis, yet a casual visitor to Johns and Rauschenberg might think Pop art merely sprung out of two buddies’ wacky experiments.”⁴ MoMA’s censorship—or “curatorial malpractice”—also called into question how thoroughly the curators Ann Temkin and Christophe Cherix had researched the abundant academic writing on the subject, including the now-canonical essay by Ken Silver, “Modes of Disclosure: The Construction of Gay Identity and the Rise of Pop Art” (1992), which argued convincingly that the artists’ homosexuality, however coded, was evident in many of their works from the 1950s.⁵ It was also a grave oversight given that three year’s prior, in 2010, the exhibition *Hide/Seek* at the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery, broke the silence on Johns and Rauschenberg, openly exploring the artists’ sexuality as it intersected with their work.

Related to the issue of censorship is the fact that many exhibitions that claim to examine LGBTQ issues and histories often omit transgender artists (and also lesbian artists, who are more often than not excluded from *group* shows, particularly those curated by men). With the exception of rare shows like *neoqueer* (2004) at the Center on Contemporary Art, Seattle, and *Citizen Queer* (2004) at the Shedhalle in Zurich, queer exhibitions generally feature far more images *of* transgendered individuals than works *by* transgendered artists. This trend is evident in the majority of the exhibitions I am presenting in this essay. A kind of transgender tokenism forms around the popularization of Nan Goldin’s images of drag queens, Andy Warhol’s famed images of himself in drag, or portraits of the US filmmaker Jack Smith. In this context, works by transgender artists, like Del LaGrace Volcano, Juliana Huxtable, Vaginal Davis, Zachary Drucker, Patrick Staff, Loren Cameron, among many others, are sidelined even within self-consciously queer curatorial projects.

Despite the latent transphobia that continues to exclude transgender artists from exhibitions, gay and lesbian artists have made significant progress in terms of visibility in the art world since the late 1970s. Art history books and curricula, many incorporating the latest queer theory, have begun to explore and incorporate sexuality. But, as was the case with MoMA’s recent Rauschenberg/Johns retrospective, in mainstream

museums the acknowledgement of sexual orientation remains strikingly absent. Thus activist exhibitions such as *Hide/Seek* have attempted to rectify this tendency by re-investigating (and occasionally “outing”) queer artistic subjects, and specifically LGBTQ-oriented art museums have formed to combat historical “sins of omission,” including the Schwules Museum in Berlin (founded in 1985) and the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in New York (founded in 1987).

Despite these gains, many mainstream (non-LGBTQ) art-world professionals are dismissive of exhibitions with selection criteria based on sexual orientation—they are considered tokenist and essentialist, and therefore no longer necessary in a post-identity world. But, as this paper reiterates, there is still a pressing need for further curatorial activism that focuses exclusively on work by artists who are not white, heterosexual, Western males. What is more, curators of queer exhibitions would also do well to strive for greater inclusivity, for as I have discussed, the majority of these exhibitions suffer from a demonstrable lack of women artists, artists of color, and non-Western artists. Sexism, racism, ethnocentrism, and even lesbo- and transphobia continue to taint curatorial practices within the LGBTQ art community itself.

Great American Lesbian Art Show (GALAS) (Woman’s Building, Los Angeles, 1980)

In Spring 1980, a collective of artists associated with the Woman’s Building in Los Angeles organized the *Great American Lesbian Art Show (GALAS)*, an initiative that sought to increase visibility for lesbian artists nationwide. As Terry Wolverton has explained, “The milieu that gave rise to GALAS was lesbian feminist, separatist, essentialist. Lesbians in general, and lesbian art in particular, existed almost entirely outside the boundaries of mainstream culture...When lesbian artists began, in the mid 70s, to seek out predecessors, they did not seem to exist.”⁶ In a brochure from the exhibition, the organizers defined lesbian art as “art made by lesbians; art which explores lesbian content; art which is woman-identified. There’s no strict definition—if you feel your creative work is lesbian in form or content, please join us!”⁷ In addition to an “Invitational” exhibition at the Woman’s Building, the GALAS project included more than two-hundred “sister” events and exhibitions in different parts of the USA and Canada, as well as the establishment of the GALAS archives.

The “Invitational,” curated by Bia Lowe, was an exhibition featuring works by ten “out” lesbian artists. The artists included a variety of work, ranging from abstract to figurative. Artists’ statements on wall panels accompanied each of the works. Some of the exhibition’s highlights included Harmony Hammond’s wall sculpture, *Adelphi* (1979), Tee Corinne’s series of solarized photographs of nude women (fig. 1), Kate Millett’s series of photographic diptychs of models (her lovers), Lili Lakich’s neon drawings of her heroines, like Djuna Barnes, and an abstract painting entitled *Ashkenazi* (1978) by Louise Fishman, which referenced her Jewish heritage. At the opening reception, to an audience of five hundred, Betsy Damon organized a performance entitled *What do you think about knives?* (1980). (Interestingly, heterosexual women were welcomed at the Invitational exhibition, while men—whether gay or straight—were excluded at certain times so that the art could be viewed in a woman-only environment.)

The GALAS Invitational received mainstream recognition in the press—a first for a lesbian art show in the USA. The *Los Angeles Times* critic applauded the exhibition as one that “blasted myths and provided models,” while the *Gay Community News* placed the exhibition in the context of lesbian invisibility and praised it as a statement of

pride and self-affirmation.⁸ In all cases, the critics objected to the selection of artists on the basis of their sexuality and commitment to lesbian visibility, rather than to the quality of their work.

Extended Sensibilities: Homosexual Presence in Contemporary Art
(New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1982)

Curator Dan Cameron's *Extended Sensibilities* was the first exhibition in a US museum to bring together work by gay and lesbian artists: eleven men and eight women were chosen as "carriers," to use the curator's term, of a "homosexual sensibility."⁹ In his catalogue essay, "Sensibility as Content," Cameron explained how he had attempted to expand the concept of "gay art" by showcasing "sensibility content"—works that he believed emerged from "the personal experience of homosexuality, which need not have anything to do with sexuality or even lifestyle."¹⁰ Cameron's underlying assumption was that if an artist identified as gay/lesbian, then this would symbolically, metaphorically, or explicitly be manifest in the work. This "sensibility content" may or may not come across as "homosexual" to those who view the art, he asserted. Cameron noted that many of the artists in the exhibition had been reluctant to



Fig. 1: Tee Corinne, *Yantra #41, Yantras of Womanlove*, 1982, gelatin silver prints joined with tape, 18.7x23.5cm.

participate, not having “come out” yet, and were fearful of repercussions to their careers, so the “homosexual content” in the work was often repressed, not overt.

Rather than including predictable contributors—such as Robert Mapplethorpe and Keith Haring—Cameron thought it more interesting to exhibit a mix of well- and lesser-known artists, and to spotlight those “whose sexuality had not been discussed in relation to their work.”¹¹ Highlights of the exhibition included: John Henninger’s *Lying Man* (1978–82), Charley Brown’s cardboard glamorizations of his transvestite friend, Gilbert & George’s *Four Feelings* (1980), Harmony Hammond’s *Grasping Affection* (1981–82), Carla Tardi’s *Spring Again* (1981), Fran Winant’s *Cindy* (1976), and Arch Connelly’s *Lens* (1982), among many others.

Extended Sensibilities received mostly negative reviews—although it was consistently praised for legitimizing homosexuality as a subject of aesthetic inquiry and for generating a much-needed debate about gay and lesbian representation in art. Most commentators criticized the exhibition as too “apolitical, asexual, and safe;”¹² others considered the quality of the works on view as “embarrassingly amateur,”¹³ “generally uninspiring,”¹⁴ and “second-rate.”¹⁵ *The Village Voice* critic dismissed the exhibition as lacking in liberationist politics but acknowledged it as an important crossover show because it had attracted an audience of gays and lesbians from outside the art world.¹⁶ (Indeed, *Extended Sensibilities* became the best-attended show to that date at the New Museum.)

Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing (Artists Space, New York, 1989)

In the fall of 1989, artist Nan Goldin organized a highly controversial exhibition at Artists Space in New York entitled *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, which focused on the response of New York artists to the AIDS crisis. Goldin selected twenty-two of her artist-friends—some already dead, some HIV-positive, many in mourning—who were then living and working on the Lower East Side of the city, and whose work addressed the AIDS epidemic in a variety of ways. In her catalogue essay, “In the Valley of the Shadow,” Goldin said she did not consider the exhibition to be a definitive statement about the state of art in the era of AIDS but “a vehicle to explore the effects of the plague on one group of artists...”¹⁷

However, even before the exhibition opened in November, it was catapulted into the national spotlight by a controversy surrounding a David Wojnarowicz essay in the exhibition catalogue, titled “Post Cards from America: X-Rays from Hell,” which denounced Senator Jesse Helms, the Catholic church, and other right-wing policymakers for their support of legislation that, Wojnarowicz argued, would further the spread of AIDS by discouraging education on safe-sex practices. The essay was so incendiary that the government withdrew its funding of the show. After much debate, and amid anti-government protests, the grant was partially restored. Goldin reported that there were, “15,000 people at the opening because of the anger at the government’s response.”¹⁸

The exhibition included works conveying both the rage of those suffering from AIDS and the psychic pain of those who care for them during their agonizing physical decline. Some of the highlights of the exhibition included Philip-Lorca diCorcia’s photographic portrait of *Vittorio Scarpatti* (1989), Greer Lankton’s life-sized sculptural work, *Freddy and Ellen* (1985), James Nares’s *Heartbeats* (1988), and Peter Hujar’s *Self-Portrait, Lying Down* (1976). A photographic installation by Dorit Cypis, *Yield (The*

Body) (1989), works from Wojnarowicz's *The Sex Series* (1988–89), and Kiki Smith's *All Our Sisters* (1989), a banner covered with silk-screened images of women and children, emphasized that no one is exempt from the ravages of AIDS. (Smith's sister, Bibi, died of AIDS in 1988.)

Witnesses received broad attention in the national press, although most of it focused on the pre-opening censorship debate, with sensationalist titles such as “Offensive Art Exhibit” and “Art for AIDS sake has feds trying to yank gallery’s grant.” *The New York Times* and *New York* magazine critics agreed that the exhibition was worthy of attention and was more of a “melancholy memorial” than an “inflammatory broadside.”¹⁹

In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice (University Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive at the University of California, Berkeley, 1995)

In a Different Light, curated by Nayland Blake and Lawrence Rinder, explored the resonance of gay and lesbian experience in 20th-century American art and featured over two-hundred objects by more than one-hundred artists (mostly US-based, mostly male), as well as ephemera such as 'zines, magazines, and record covers. (Notably, of the works displayed, eighty-two were by male artists, fifty were by women artists, and less than ten were by non-white artists.)

It did not claim to be a definitive survey of gay and lesbian art, but “a gathering of images and objects which shed new light on our collective history,” with a selection of works that conveyed gay and lesbian views of the world rather than one that “represented gay and lesbian lives.”²⁰ Instead of asking “What does gay art look like?” the curators asked, “What do queer artists do?” In so doing, they attempted to steer away from “the identification of queer as a noun or adjective and towards using it as a verb.”²¹ The show’s curators chose to use the word “queer” rather than “gay” and “lesbian” because they believed that it was fast “becoming a term that subverts or confuses group definition rather than fostering it...queer identity is spontaneous, mutable, and inherently political.” Moreover, the decision to use the word “queer” rather than gay and lesbian allowed the curators to include heterosexual artists, in addition to gay and lesbian artists, arguing that straight artists also create artworks that “contribute to the cultural dialogue of both the gay and lesbian communities and of the culture as a whole.”²² They hoped that viewers would begin to view gay and lesbian culture as being less “tied to sexual behavior and more as a mutable cultural phenomenon with issues that can be taken up by anyone.”²³ For example, they argued that drag is not exclusive to gay culture, citing cases of heterosexual cross-dressing by artists such as Vito Acconci, Lynda Benglis, Cindy Sherman, and Marcel Duchamp. By including heterosexual artists and a wide array of works with no single theme and little overtly “gay” content (which Blake dubbed as “retrograde”), the curators rejected the essentialist notion of a gay or lesbian “sensibility” (unlike Dan Cameron, who had argued for “Sensibility as Content”). In sum, *In a Different Light* was not a show of gay and lesbian images, but instead a mapping of a queer practice in the visual arts over the past thirty years, with some historical precedents sprinkled throughout.

The exhibition was organized into nine sections. Included in the “Void” section were images by artists who had developed personal iconographies to describe emotional states, particularly feelings of mournful emptiness in the wake of AIDS, like Michael Jenkins’ *Snowflakes* (1990), in which white felt dots refer both to snow and to lesions caused by the cancer Kaposi sarcoma. The section entitled “Self” presented a series of

self-portraits: one of Arch Connelly from 1982, Catherine Opie's photograph *Self-Portrait/Cutting* (1994) (fig. 2), and Mapplethorpe's photograph *Self-Portrait with Whip* (1978), were examples. The "Drag" section included works like Acconci's *Conversions Part III* (1971) and Deb Kass's *Altered Image* (1994), in which the artist cross-dresses as Warhol in drag. In the "Other" section, artists expressed the longing of unrequited love: featured here were Romaine Brooks' painting *Peter, a Young English Girl* (1923–24) and Donald Moffett's *You, you, you* (1990). The section "Couple" included pairings of same-sex couples, as in *Two Friends at Home, N.Y.C.*, by Diane Arbus (1965), and other romantic pairings. The "Family" group presented works by queer artists exploring homosexuality in relation to the heterosexual nuclear family, as in General Idea's *Baby Makes Three* (1984–89). The works in the "Orgy" section explored sexual pleasure and freedom, such as a series of erotic photographs by Tee Corinne from her *Yantras of Womanlove* series (1982). The final section presented works of utopian musings—like Jack Pierson's wall sculpture *Heaven* (1992).

The exhibition received mixed reviews. Writing for *New Art Examiner*, artist Cecilia Dougherty deemed the exhibition "horribly flawed" in that it presented artists and artworks out of context, situating them into a "queer" setting, one based on style and suggestion rather than on histories, intentions, or dialogues.²⁴ She was particularly critical of the fact that "work by women, especially by lesbians, was the most misrepresented, under-represented, and misinterpreted in the exhibit," and that when work by lesbians was shown, it was only "in gay male terms."²⁵ For example, she cited specific works by lesbian artists Amy Adler and Monica Majoli, who contributed a drawing of a nude male torso (*After Sherrie Levine*, 1994), and a painting of a gay male sex scene (*Untitled*, 1990). The *Los Angeles Times* critic considered the show a resounding success, principally because it presented gay identity as "a living, open-ended question, rather than a deadened, proscribed answer," which meant "you find yourself looking at art in ways you otherwise wouldn't."²⁶ (He asked, for example, whether Jasper Johns intended his *Ale Cans*, 1964, to be a sublimated queer couple.) David Bonetti of the *San Francisco Chronicle* was equally impressed, calling the show "ground-breaking" and commending it for its capturing of a "queer sensibility" at a moment of profound change, with the advent of the AIDS epidemic and the rise of a newly politicized generation of queer artists.²⁷

***Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*
(National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC;
Brooklyn Museum, New York; Tacoma Art Museum, Tacoma, Washington,
2011-12)**

Hide/Seek was the first major exhibition in the US to trace both the impact of same-sex desire and the defining presence of gay and lesbian artists in the making of modern portraiture. It examined more than a century of art and a variety of sexual identities, bringing together over one-hundred works in a wide array of media. The exhibition highlighted the contributions of gay and lesbian artists, many of whom developed strategies to code and disguise their own as well as their subjects' sexual identities. It included gay and straight artists depicting gay and straight subjects, and its focus on famous artists demonstrated how thoroughly sexuality permeated the 20th-century and early 21st-century canon of art.

The exhibition was divided into seven sections. "Before Difference, 1870–1918" included works produced before the division of sexes into "normal" and "deviant" via implementation of the legal codification "homosexual." Examples included Thomas Eakins' painting, *Salutat* (1898) and George Bellows's lithograph *The Shower-Bath*



Fig. 2: Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait /Cutting*, 1993, C-print, 40 x 30 inches (101.6 x 76.2 cm).
 © Catherine Opie, Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

(1917). The “Modernism” section focused on the gay subcultures in cities such as New York, predominantly during World War I (1914–18), and included Marsden Hartley’s *Painting No. 47, Berlin* (1914–15), for example, and Charles Demuth’s *Dancing Sailors* (1917). The section “1930s and After” explored the many contributions gay and lesbian artists made to US Modernism of the 1930s, including Hartley’s *Eight Bells Folly: Memorial for Hart Crane* (1933) and Grant Wood’s painting *Arnold Comes of Age* (1930). The section “Consensus and Conflict” examined work produced in the fifties and early sixties, a time of social and cultural conflict, as well as one in which the US government was obsessed with “subversion” (also known as the “Lavender Scare”), prompting artists to suppress or code gay and lesbian content for fear of exposure: Robert Rauschenberg’s lithograph *Canto XIV* (1959–60) and Jasper Johns’ *In Memory of My Feelings—Frank O’Hara* (1961) were used as prime examples. The section “Stonewall and After” focused on work produced from the 1960s to the early 21st century, which grew out of the gay liberation movement sparked by the Stonewall Riots of 1969. Hujar’s portrait of Susan Sontag (1975) and Warhol’s *Camouflage Self-Portrait* (1986) were included in this section. In the “AIDS” section, viewers encountered works that dealt directly with the AIDS crisis in the USA (or the “gay plague,” as it was also called).

Artistic responses to the crisis featured elegiac, moving works and memorials, including Félix González-Torres's candy spill, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991), and AA Bronson's lacquer on vinyl portrait of Felix Partz on his deathbed. The final section, "New Beginnings," covered the postmodern period, from the 1990s to the early 21st century, with key examples including Cass Bird's *I Look Just Like My Daddy* (2003) and a series of images from Catherine Opie's *Being and Having* (1991).

Hide/Seek ignited a public controversy during its run at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery in Washington DC, when the Catholic League and conservative congressmen publicized their objections to an edited version of a film by David Wojnarowicz, *A Fire in My Belly*, from 1987, and specifically to the sequence of ants crawling over a crucifix (fig. 3). Congress demanded the removal of the video, and the Smithsonian yielded to political pressure. It didn't stop there. That same month, Georgia congressman Jack Kingston railed against the gallery's depictions of male nudity and of US TV star Ellen DeGeneres grabbing her breasts, and called for a congressional review of the Smithsonian's funding.

The exhibition received mostly positive reviews. *The New York Times* hailed it as an historic event. Critic Holland Cotter was less generous, calling it a "let-down," and its emphasis on art stars "an exercise in Hall of Fame building."²⁸ Ariella Budick, writing for *The Financial Times*, claimed that "Not everything in the exhibition shines, but the collective impact is stunning."²⁹

Art AIDS America

(Tacoma Art Museum, Tacoma, Washington; The Bronx Museum of the Arts, Bronx, New York; Zuckerman Museum of Art, Kennesaw, Georgia; Alphawood Gallery, Chicago, Illinois, 2015–17)

The main premise of *Art AIDS America* was that since the early 1980s, AIDS has been the great, albeit repressed influence shaping art, politics, medicine, and popular culture in the USA. With some 125 objects by around 100 artists (mostly white males),



Fig. 3: David Wojnarowicz, Photo still from *A Fire in My Belly*, 1986–1987, super 8mm film transferred to video, 13:06 minutes and 7:00 minutes. Courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P•P•O•W, New York © David Wojnarowicz.

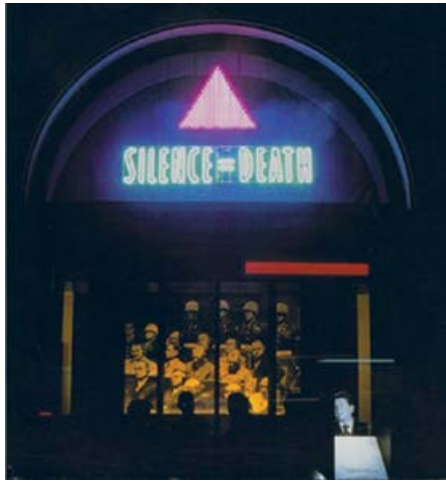


Fig. 4: Gran Fury (New York, active 1987-1994), *Let the Record Show*, 1987, window installation. Artists' Collection and New Museum, NY.

the exhibition introduced and explored a wide spectrum of artistic responses to AIDS, from the politically outspoken and covert to the quietly mournful. (Of the artists featured in the exhibition—76 male, 21 female, and 1 trans—33 self-identified as HIV-positive, while 23 had died of HIV-related causes.) By way of its inclusion of recent works by artists living with AIDS, the show also demonstrated that HIV is by no means over: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in 2015 that 1.2 million Americans are HIV-positive, with some 50,000 new cases reported each year.

One of the principal aims of the exhibition, curator Jonathan Katz explained, was to ask, “why so much art about AIDS doesn’t look like art about AIDS,” and, in response, to present the myriad ways AIDS can figure in visual art, from literal to abstract, from explicit to interpreted. AIDS art should not be considered synonymous with AIDS activist art, the curators argued. Many artists responded to the crisis by “carefully and strategically” positioning their works within the art world “in order to operate, as it were, at a subterranean level, so as to avoid censure.”³⁰ Katz is referring here to the fact that during the 1980s and 1990s, any US museum that received federal funding was forbidden to display work that made explicit reference to homosexuality or AIDS due to a legal statute authored by then-North Carolina Republican senator Jesse Helms. The desire to express one’s politics covertly also related to what Katz described as the policing coming from “postmodernist criticism at the moment, which decried authorial or expressive work.”³¹

The exhibition was divided into four categories, which were a nod to the disease’s physical, emotional, and spiritual effects on the people diagnosed, as well as to the impact on lovers, friends, and families of those living with HIV/AIDS, or of those who have simply had to navigate the world and the possibility of infection.

The first section, “Body,” concentrated on the physical ravages of AIDS on the human body, presenting works such as Ross Bleckner’s painting *Brain Rust* (2013), and Keith Haring’s bronze sculpture, *Altarpiece* (1990)—the artist’s last work before succumbing to AIDS. “Spirit,” the show’s second section, featured the first AIDS work—a painting by Izhar Patkin, entitled *Unveiling of a Modern Chastity* (1981), a large yellow canvas with huge, gaping rust-colored “wounds” referring to AIDS-related Kaposi sarcoma lesions. Also included, among others, in this section was Tino Rodriguez’s *Eternal Lovers* (2010). The largest and strongest section of the exhibition, “Activism,” denoted

works that were overtly political—including the ACT UP/Gran Fury collective’s famous 1987 window installation at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, *Let the Record Show* (fig. 4), which was re-created in the exhibition with the same pink triangle and the words “Silence = Death” in neon; also featured in this section were Kiki Smith’s *Red Spill* (1996), a memorial to her sister who died of AIDS, a suite of self-portraits by Kia Labeija, the only female HIV-positive artist of color in the show, and Charles LeDray’s *Untitled* (1991) teddy bear. The “Camouflage” section featured artists who “bury references to AIDS or sexuality” in their work, as in Wojnarowicz’s *Untitled (Buffalo)* (1988–89), a diorama of buffalo being herded off a cliff. On the surface, it does not appear to be about AIDS. But for the artist, who succumbed to the disease in 1992, the image served as “a chilling metaphor of the politics of AIDS in the U.S. in the late 1980s” and as an expression of his “rage, desperation and helplessness.”³²

Art AIDS America garnered both praise and criticism. *The Seattle Times* called the Tacoma Art Museum’s version of the exhibition “a moving new show,” and Seattle’s alternative arts and culture newspaper *The Stranger* designated it “an epic and a national treasure”—a “masterpiece,” albeit “messy” and “not perfect.”³³ However, the Tacoma edition also sparked public protests about the lack of racial diversity in the exhibition (of the 107 artists on display, only five were African American). While subsequent presentations of the exhibition attempted to address this omission by featuring additional black artists, the controversy continued throughout the show’s run. Protests persisted in Atlanta—in this instance, however, it related to the exhibition’s content, when State Representative Earl Ehrhart claimed, for example, that “a fully loaded porta-potty would be better artistic expression,” and State Senator Lindsey Tippins called the art “trash.”³⁴ Deborah Solomon of WNYC radio called the Bronx Museum’s version of *Art AIDS America* “a landmark show...a big, bold courageous show [that] deserves enormous attention,” and one that “alters art history.”³⁵

Conclusion

In conclusion, I will end with an anecdote and a bit of humor. In 2004 Christian Rattemeyer, then a curator at Artists Space (an avant-garde institution in New York that has traditionally supported work from the margins), rejected a show on LGBTQ art (entitled “Living Legacy: Queer Art Now”) because, according to him, “it is no longer the time to make such limiting judgments for selection,” and “we should shy away from exhibitions of works by Women artists, Black artists, or, as in the most recent example, African artists, selected solely on the basis of gender, ethnicity, or nationality.”³⁶ He also argued that there is no longer a need for exhibitions on so-called marginalized groups because they have now been included in contemporary art shows.

On hearing of Rattemeyer’s response, the art activists, the Guerrilla Girls, sent him the following letter:

Dear Sir,

We were privileged recently to see a letter that you sent to Harmony Hammond and Ernesto Pujol declining an exhibition proposal they had submitted to your institution. We are writing to say that we couldn’t agree more with the views you expressed in your letter!!!! You are right that in this post-ethnic era there should no longer be exhibitions of works by “Women artists,” “Black artists,” “African artists,” or, as in the co-curator’s proposal, “Queer Artists,” or any shows selected solely on the basis of gender, ethnicity, or nationality.

But we feel you didn't go far enough. Let's get real, here! In this post-studio era, how can you justify shows of "video artists," "painters," "sculptors" or "photographers?" In fact, since, any curatorial intervention limits the reading of artists' work, by pushing it into some thesis or other, we propose there should be no more exhibitions at all!

Sincerely,
Käthe Kollwitz for the Guerrilla Girls

Notes

- 1** Harmony Hammond, "A Lesbian Show at 112 Greene Street Workshop, January 21 - February 11, 1978," *In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice*, City Lights Publishers, San Francisco, 1995, p. 45.
- 2** Ibid., p. 44.
- 3** Mark Joseph Stern. 2013. "Is MoMA Putting Artists Back in the Closet?" *Slade*, February 26.
- 4** Ibid.
- 5** Ken Silver, "Modes of Disclosure: The Construction of Gay Identity and the Rise of Pop Art," *Hand Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955-62*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1992, pp. 179-203.
- 6** Terry Wolverton, "Great American Lesbian Art Show," *In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice*, City Light Publishers, San Francisco, 1995, p. 50.
- 7** From the *GALAS Brochure*, 1980, unpagued.
- 8** Diane Elvenstar. 1980. "Art from Closet to Gallery." *Los Angeles Times*, May 27, pp. G1-G2; "National network honors lesbian artists." *Gay Community News* 7.38, April 12, 1980, p. 2. [No author.]
- 9** The 19 artists were Charley Brown, Scott Burton, Craig Carver, Arch Connelly, Janet Cooling, Betsy Damon, Nancy Fried, Jedd Garet, Gilbert & George, Lee Gordon, Harmony Hammond, John Henninger, Jerry Janosco, Lili Lakich, Les Petites Bonbons, Ross Paxton, Jody Pinto, Carla Tardi, and Fran Winant.
- 10** Dan Cameron, "Sensibility as Content," in *Extended Sensibilities*, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1982, pp. 7-8. The "sensibility content" category was further sub-divided into three types: "the homosexual self," the "homosexual other," and "the world transformed."
- 11** Ibid., p. 54.
- 12** Hammond, p. 57.
- 13** James Saslow, "New York's 'Extended Sensibilities,'" *The Advocate*, Dec 9, 1982, p. 48.
- 14** Ibid.
- 15** Richard Flood, "Review: Extended Sensibilities," *Artforum*, March 1983, p. 72.
- 16** Jeff Weinstein. 1982. "Gay or Not." *Village Voice*, November 2, p. 10.
- 17** Nan Goldin, "In the Valley of the Shadow," *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, Artists Space, New York, 1989, pp. 4-5.
- 18** Nan Goldin. The Digital Journalist. http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0106/voices_goldin.htm.
- 19** Kay Larson. 1989. "Days of Rage." *New York Magazine*, November 27, p. 79.
- 20** Lawrence Rinder, "An Introduction to *In a Different Light*," *In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice*, City Lights Publishers, San Francisco, 1995, p. 1.
- 21** Nayland Blake, "Curating *In a Different Light*," *In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice*, City Lights Publishers, San Francisco, 1995, p. 11.
- 22** Rinder, p. 6.
- 23** Kevin Killian, "The Secret Histories," *Artforum International* 33.6, February 1995, p. 23.

- 24** Cecilia Dougherty. 1995. "Identity Crisis." *New Art Examiner*, September, p. 29+.
- 25** Ibid.
- 26** Christopher Knight. 1995. "Shining a 'Different Light' on both artist and viewer." *Los Angeles Times*, February 4, F1.
- 27** David Bonetti. 1995. "Looking at art 'In a Different Light'." *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 11.
- 28** Roberta Smith. 2011. "This Gay American Life, In Code or in Your Face." *New York Times*, November 18, C.23; Holland Cotter. 2010. "Sexuality in Modernism: The (Partial) History." *The New York Times*, December 10.
- 29** Ariella Budick. 2011. "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture, Brooklyn Museum, New York." *The Financial Times*, December 7 (online).
- 30** Katz, quoted in Sarah Douglas. 2015. "Is this the first AIDS artwork?" *ArtNews*, September 18.
- 31** Ibid.
- 32** Exhibition wall text, *Art AIDS America*.
- 33** Michael Upchurch. 2015. "How AIDS changed American art: Tacoma Art Museum show charts responses to the HIV crisis." *The Seattle Times*, October 19; Jen Graves. 2015. "Tacoma Art Museum's *Art AIDS America* Is a Messy Masterpiece That Reframes the Past 40 Years of American Art." *The Stranger*, October 7.
- 34** On the controversy around the exhibition, see Stan Ziv. 2016. "Exhibit at Bronx Museum Explores the Influence of HIV/AIDS On American Art." *Newsweek*, July 16.
- 35** Deborah Solomon. 2016. "Review: A Brave Show on Art and AIDS." *WNYC-Radio*, July 29.
- 36** This comes from a letter from Rattemeyer that is in the author's possession.

Maura Reilly is Executive Director of the National Academy of Design in New York, which is a membership organization of 420 contemporary American artists and architects, who represent the leading practitioners in the country. She is the Founding Curator of the Elizabeth Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, the first exhibition and public programming space in the U.S. devoted exclusively to feminist art, where she organized multiple acclaimed exhibitions, including the permanent installation of Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* and the blockbuster *Global Feminisms*. Her most recent publications include *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating* (Thames & Hudson, 2018) and *Women Artists: The Linda Nochlin Reader* (Thames & Hudson, 2015). In 2015, she was voted one of the 50 most influential people in the art world by both *Blouin Art Info* and *Art & Auction*. She received her MA and PhD from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University.