The Legacy of Invisibility: Disappearing Race in Art AIDS America (2016)

On October 3, 2015 the exhibition *Art AIDS America* opened at the Tacoma Art Museum (TAM), the first of four exhibition sites around the country. Curated by Jonathan David Katz, director of the Visual Studies doctoral program at the University of Buffalo, and Rock Hushka, Tacoma Art Museum's chief curator, the show took nearly a decade to organize. Promoted as, "The first exhibition to examine the deep and ongoing influence of the AIDS crisis on American art and culture,"[1] more than 125 works were featured, from the early 1980s up to the present. Both Katz and Hushka have been working in and around gay studies, HIV/AIDS, and art for thirty years. During that time, artworks made in response to the epidemic have taken on many appearances: documentary photographs of HIV/AIDS sufferers, work made with body fluids, and conceptual pieces about loss, time, and memory. Art has played a vital role supporting HIV/AIDS activism and in constructing a collective consciousness of the epidemic. Currently, in the United States, more than 1.1 million people are living with HIV, and 50,000 new infections are expected annually. Of particular concern is the fact that people of color continue to be disproportionately affected by the virus. It is estimated that one-third of Black trans women are diagnosed with HIV and 57% of all new HIV diagnoses for people under age 24 are Black youth. Black Americans also die more frequently and sooner from AIDS related complications than any other group in the U.S. based on their lack of access to medical care and identification of the virus happening in the late stages of development.[2] Thus, it caused an uproar when it was discovered that only four of the one-hundred-twenty-five artworks in *Art AIDS America* were by people of color. Immediately, activists from a group called the Tacoma Action Collective (TAC)

[1] Bronx Museum of Art (BMA). *Art AIDS Americ*a Press release. 2016.
[2] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Division of HIV/AIDS Prevention, National Center for HIV/AIDS. HIV/AIDS Basic Statistics. Web. 17 October 2016.

organized a series of protests, including a die-in, in the exhibition galleries. TAC also organized a meeting with the exhibition curators and several interviews and press conferences. Ultimately, the venues presenting the exhibit after the Tacoma Art Museum added in a few more works by people of color, chosen at their own discretion. Nonetheless, these efforts felt like too little, too late and many questions and concerns remained. What role does art play in the fight against HIV/AIDS? What does it mean to exclude representation of a group that is disproportionately affected by the crisis? How does the omission of race construct a particular knowledge and memory of the HIV/AIDS epidemic? Does the omission affect action in the present? And, does the exhibition's design reflect a larger problem of excluding people of color from the fine art canon?

Art - and its public exhibition - provides opportunities for aesthetic pleasure, education, discourse, and activism. Many artists, whether affected directly or tangentially by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, have addressed both their personal and the collective experience. Early on, much of the artwork produced was sold at auctions and fundraisers to raise money for research and awareness. In 1987 the first *Art against AIDS* benefit took place in New York City, proceeds went to support the American Foundation for AIDS Research (AmFAR). Critic, curator, writer, professor and member of the AIDS-activist group ACT UP, Douglas Crimp, expressed his concerns about both the event and about how art was being used as a commodity to raise money rather than as a form of activism, information, and education:

> Art does have the power to save lives, and it is this very power that must be recognized, fostered, and supported in every way possible. But if we are to do this, we will have to abandon the idealist conception of art. We don't need a cultural renaissance; we need

> cultural practices actively participating in the struggle against AIDS. We don't need to transcend the epidemic; we need to end it.[3]

Clearly Crimp understood the necessity to raise money for AIDS research. And many wealthy and prominent people stepped up to support the cause. But Crimp is also aware of a greater power in art outside of art institutions and wealthy collectors. His call is for cultural activism that speaks to the diverse communities, often poor and of color, who feel invisible and disenfranchised by commodified cultural production. Crimp is determined to see art being used to counter the silence and derision of U.S. politicians and the dominant media. "Activist art involves questions not only of the nature of cultural production, but also of the location and distribution of that production. AIDS intersects with and requires a critical rethinking of all of culture: of language and representation, of science and medicine, of health and illness, of sex and death, of the public and private realms."[4] Perhaps most importantly, he sees an opportunity for art made in and around the HIV/AIDS epidemic to command a potent critical discourse.

Moving forward, art and artists did successfully take on an activist role in the fight against HIV/AIDS. As both the art world and the epidemic rapidly evolved from the 1980s to the 1990s, art activism infiltrated many levels of society, inside and outside of public institutions. In 1993, Mary Wyrick, professor of education at SUNY Buffalo, published an article about the role of HIV/AIDS art, activism, and education that seems to be an optimistic response to Crimp's concerns. She lays out a compelling argument for the potential of work by artists and activists to raise awareness in community and educational institutions, specifically within sites that cater to a multicultural audience: "Artists call attention to the power of the artist to evoke reactions and to involve viewers. They not only skillfully use art to critique the causes of discrimination and

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[3] Crimp, Douglas, ed. *Introduction. AIDS: cultural analysis, cultural activism*. October, Vol. 43. MIT Press. Cambridge, MA. 1988. Pages 3-16. Jstor. 7 September 2016. Page 7.
[4] Ibid. Page 12.

oppression, but also critique the media representations of those conditions."[5] Her argument validates Crimp's sense that site and audience are crucial to the efficacy of the work. However, Wyrick also offers one example of how, in 1990, smaller but notable art institutions - The New Museum, The Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, and The Studio Museum in Harlem - did curate a multicultural, educational exhibition examining identity as it related to larger questions of sexuality, race, religion, age, history, myth, politics, and the environment. Titled *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s*, the exhibit brought together more than two-hundred works by ninety-four artists of Hispanic, Asian, African-American, Native American, and European heritage. The exhibition was issues-oriented, rather than a stylistic overview.[6] Although it covered many issues, HIV/AIDS was prominent. Vital to the impact of the show, Wyrick notes, "The exhibit demanded acceptance of various critical perspectives for an inclusive and contextual interpretation of artworks."[7] Site, audience, content, and representation came together to play a key role in the relationship between art and the public's awareness of the broad and devastating effects HIV/AIDS.

Concurrently, in the first two decades of the crisis, affected communities, artists and art institutions faced an ominous challenge in the form of censorship, a reduction in federally funded art grants, and homophobic, HIV/AIDSphobic legislation. Works depicting gay life, nudity, illness, body fluids, and death were deemed obscene or sick. In the controversy, the very definition of what is art was called into question. At the forefront of the censorship effort was U.S. Senator Jesse Helms. In 1989 Helms wrote legislation barring the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities from funding "obscene" art, and

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[5] Wyrick, Mary. *Collaborative AIDS Art and Activism: Content for Multicultural Art Education*. Visual Arts Research, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Fall 1993). University of Illinois Press. pp. 44-54. Jstor. 4 November 2016. Page 53.
[6] The New Museum Digital Archive. *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s*. The New Museum Annual Report. New York, NY. 1990. Web. 18 October 2016.
[7] Wyrick. Page 44.

requiring grant recipients to sign an anti-obscenity oath.[8] The legislation defined obscene art as, "including but not limited to, depictions of sadomasochism, homo-eroticism, the sexual exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts and which, when taken as a whole, do not have serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value."[9] Of the countless problematic issues stemming from this legislation – and this language – the most deadly is that of (in)visibility. In a time when HIV/AIDS was seen as a gay disease, the shift from an invisible subculture to a visible political, social, and artistic force was key to the survival of the gay community. Shortly after the legislation was passed by the U.S. Senate, American feminist scholar Peggy Phelan wrote, "It is no accident that it is art which alludes to or documents homosexuality that has become the catalyst for these debates. Homosexuality will be tolerated in this culture only to the degree that it remains invisible."[10] Similarly, the public visibility of the body of art affected by this legislation was essential for raising consciousness and securing funding for people desperately in need of life-saving action. And, critically, this body of art was vital to the narrative that would secure the history and memory of a devastating epidemic. Phelan makes clear that censorship and invisibility will have the most detrimental impact on those who have already been pushed furthest to the margins:

> The invisibility protested by these artists is much the same invisibility I face as a woman in relation to contemporary representation and part of my defense of this art comes from my visceral experience of the sickening sense of erasure which dominant culture

[8] Atkins, Robert. *A Censorship Time Line*. Art Journal, Vol. 50, No. 3, Censorship I (Autumn, 1991). College Art Association. Jstor. 4 November 2016. Page 37.
[9] Congress.gov. *H.R.2788 - Making appropriations for the Department of the Interior and related agencies for the fiscal year ending September 30, 1990, and for other purposes*. *Title III: General Provisions*. Web. 17 October 2016.
[10] Phelan, Peggy. *Serrano, Mapplethorpe, the NEA, and You: "Money Talks"*. October 1989. TDR (1988-), Vol. 34, No. 1 (Spring, 1990). The MIT Press. Cambridge, MA. Page 13.

executes so well. I also know that the entry into 'the visible' is still, fundamentally, easier for (white) men, than it is for women or people of color (straight or gay).[11]

The repercussions of the politicization of art, HIV/AIDS, and homosexuality were long lasting. Curator of *Art AIDS America* Jonathan Katz notes that because of the political backlash and subsequent legislation against same-sex or AIDS imagery, "For two decades there were no mainstream museum exhibitions about gay art in America, though smaller institutions occasionally stepped in to fill the void."[12] In addition, as the 1990s progressed, so did the treatment of HIV/AIDS. At least in the Western world, sickness and death seemed to diminish rapidly. As HIV/AIDS art and activism diminished and the epidemic seemed to disappear, so too did the representation of those still living with the disease, struggling for affordable health care, and battling shame in the public eye. Yet, HIV/AIDS did not disappear, it was pushed to the margins. And at this current moment, with new HIV infection rates on the rise – especially in young people, trans people, poor people, and people of color - *Art AIDS America* seemed perfectly timed to reintroduce into the collective consciousness the need for awareness and action.

Unquestionably, the logistics of putting together a large scale exhibition is a daunting task: raising funds, studio visits, working with collectors, selecting and procuring the work, insurance, and securing venues, to name but a few of the tasks. Often what is conceived of at the start of the process is not what ultimately becomes the exhibition. When an exhibit is built around a traumatic collective experience that has evolved over 30-plus years and affected diverse communities in different ways, it is further complicated. It is not merely an exhibition of a

[11] Ibid. Page 13.
[12] Katz, Jonathan David, Hushka. Rock. *Art AIDS America*. Exhibition catalog. University of Washington Press. Seattle, WA. 2015. Print. Page 31.

particular art movement or artist, it is not a body of work from a singular time and place. Memory, commemoration, and representation are prominent factors. Many stories and experiences – personal and collective – are embedded in the broadest range of work. Thus it is unavoidable that any exhibit of art made in response to HIV/AIDS is also about race, gender, sexuality, economics, politics, science, visibility, and empowerment. "To make of AIDS an active historical protagonist requires understanding that is in fact ours, a collective trauma with a collective impact." Katz writes in his catalog essay, "*Art AIDS America* is premised on that collectivity."[13] But, what happens then when one's lived experience is not found in the representation of the so-called "collective" experience? What does it mean to discover that you and your community have been excluded from this history? Excluded from memory? Rendered invisible?

Art AIDS America is a historical exhibition. Although it includes work from recent history as well, the exhibit documents an historical arc of artists' positions within and responses to the on-going HIV/AIDS epidemic. Art and the representation of history have a complex relationship and we can look to Postmodernism to provide a poignant critical analysis of this complexity. Historian and scholar Robert A. Rosenstone has written a great deal on the topic: "The heart of Postmodernism is a struggle against History – with a capital H. A denial of its narratives, findings, and truth claims. A view of it as the last and greatest of the White Mythologies used to legitimate Western hegemony, a false and outworn discourse that fosters nationalism, racism, ethnocentrism, colonialism, sexism – and all of the other evils of contemporary society."[14] If the exhibiting artists, art institutions, curators, gallerists, and

[13] Ibid. Page 24.
[14] Rosenstone, Robert A. Ed. Sobchack, Vivian C. *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event. the future of the past film and the beginnings of postmodern history*. Routledge. New York, NY. 1996. Print. Page 202.

collectors are essentially white, male, and upper class, then the art canon mediates their particular perspectives and ideologies. This narrow point of view both erases the histories of others and diminishes sensitivity to and awareness of the plight of others in the current moment. With all of their decades-long work in HIV/AIDS and art, it's not unreasonable to assume that Katz and Hushka were well aware of both postmodernism and the disproportionate hardship that people of color suffer. Katz writes in his catalog essay, "Artists were forced to engage in a complicated calculus whereby any work of art was tested against a complex reading of extant social networks and discursive conditions, prejudices and stereotypes, laws, customs, and institutional parameters to yield a work precisely calibrated to function in the space between possibility and foreclosure, influence and censorship."[15] This statement makes clear that the curators understand how art, and the art canon, help to write the historical narrative. Thus the Tacoma Art Collective had solid ground on which to challenge the curators and the host institution.

One of the most affecting and visible protest actions was TAC's staged die-ins inside the exhibition galleries; the die-ins not only allowed for a direct intervention with museum visitors, but also garnered a great deal of publicity. In an interview with Ted Kerr, TAC was clear about their goals, "These two curators have not only missed the point of this entire body of work, but are now willfully leveraging the spectacle of suffering to spotlight themselves as art historians. It's time for the public to take a stand and say we are not going to support this false history."[16] One of the many intentions of postmodernism was to show the collective human experience with the hopes that this expanded view would present a truer picture of humanity, broaden our understanding of each other, and challenge the domination of the few by the many. It is an issue

[15] Katz. Page 25.
[16] Kerr, Ted. *Erasing Black AIDS Histories*. The New Inquiry. 1 January 2016. Web. 31 October 2016.

of visibility. Rendered invisible, a community's contributions and adversities are lost to history and memory, and, in turn, disappeared from the agency of the present moment.

Beyond the narrative of the art canon, another layer of invisibility is found in the work itself. I see the objects in *Art AIDS America* as a collection of ephemera. The show is comprised of photographs and booklets, condom wrappers and paintings, videos and sculptures – each serving as evidence of what has taken place through the decades of the epidemic. "All of those things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired,"[17] as queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz describes. Muñoz's idea of ephemera embodies that which one would find on the sidelines, out of view, in a box stashed in closet or under a bed. He is interested in how ephemera, once brought into the light of day, can reveal the histories of people who have been excluded from the official history.[18] I'm extending Muñoz's definition a bit, but herein lies my argument: ephemera can just as easily support the hegemony. The work in the show was brought together from museum storage, private collections, and artists' studios; much of it has been out of the public view. Once exhibited in the gallery or museum however, it becomes a carefully curated box of memories. Unfortunately, in this instance, it presents a narrow point of view, an exclusionary perspective supporting only a particular memory; *Art AIDS America* is a collection of ephemera presenting signifiers of a certain experience but not the collective experience of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Another way of considering this idea comes from new media scholar Jose van Dijck who speaks of a very personal, if not private, "shoebox" collection of mediated memory. Van Dijck writes, "Memory and media have both been referred to metaphorically as reservoirs, holding our past experiences and knowledge for future use. But neither memories nor media are passive go-betweens; their mediation

[17] Muñoz, José Esteban. *Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts*. Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory. 8:2. Routledge. 1996. Page 10.
[18] Ibid.

intrinsically shapes the way we build up and retain a sense of individuality and community, of identity and history."[19] Thus, Katz's and Hushka's curation of *Art AIDS America* is a patent example of how radically a curated collection of mediated memories can shape individuality and community, memory and history. They looked only slightly to the sidelines and, in doing so, left a vast representation of experience stashed away. In response TAC made clear that there is no lack of Black artists or artwork, "We compiled a list of about 40 Black HIV+ artists that could have been included in the exhibit. At every stage in the development of this show, Black perspectives were marginal, disregarded, and moved to the sidelines. Creation is how we give ourselves resilience when no one else cares. Our voices are what we've had when we've had nothing else."[20] Silencing the voices of people of color, keeping their ephemera hidden, is a tragic loss for one of the communities that can most assuredly benefit from visibility.

Another concept that is vital to the history, memory, and awareness of the HIV/AIDS epidemic is that of postmemory. Theorist and professor Marianne Hirsch explains postmemory as, "adopting the traumatic experiences – and thus also the memories – of others as one's own, or, more precisely, as experiences one might oneself have had, and of inscribing them into one's own life story."[21] Hirsch is speaking specifically of the children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma taking their parent's memories as their own. Within the HIV/AIDS community family is often an expanded notion; what comprises these non-traditional families usually has little to do with a genealogical relationship or a nuclear family. Because of shame, unaccepting family or community values, or an unwillingness to share past trauma and memory around

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[19] van Dijck, Jose. *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age*. Stanford University Press. Stanford, CA. 2007. Print. Page 2.
[20] Kerr. *Erasing Black AIDS Histories*.
[21] Hirsch, Marianne. Eds. Bal, Mieke, Crewe, Jonathan, Spitzer, Leo. *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. *Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy*. Dartmouth College. Hanover, NH. 1999. Page 9.

HIV/AIDS, postmemory must come from alternative sources. The narrative is not passed down as a familial legacy and can often only be accessed as an "outsider" collective memory. The "children" of HIV/AIDS survivors are all those who are at risk, who are ignorant of the story of the epidemic, who have little access to support and care, who are invisible. This added layer of separation makes it much more difficult for younger generations to place themselves within a history, to feel connected and empowered. In her catalog essay for *Art AIDS America*, artist, professor, and curator Teresa Bramlette Reeves says, "Our legacy and moral responsibility regarding HIV/AIDS demand that we continue the struggle against the virus and the factors that enable the epidemic's exponential explosion."[22] Yet, if one finds oneself excluded from that legacy one's life story becomes ambiguous. Without a family history, either nuclear or communal, one cannot learn from the past or take action in the present. "Postmemory is not an identity position but a space of remembrance."[23] *Art AIDS America* is a limited space of remembrance. The exhibit does not offer many of the younger generations, especially those most at risk, a narrative in support of postmemory; the work selected does not represent the legacy of people of color and therefore fails in its moral responsibility to empower those struggling to overcome the on-going epidemic.

The public face of HIV/AIDS has changed dramatically over the past few decades; in places where HIV suppressing medications are available many people are able to live healthily for many years after they have been infected. At one time Kaposi Sarcoma sores and wasting bodies were the images of the virus, now few visible signs mark the bodies of those affected – at least in Western countries and for people who have access to (very expensive) medical care. The current healthy image of people with HIV/AIDS is, unfortunately, not accurate to the reality of

[22] Katz. Page 140.
[23] Hirsch. Page 8.

what is a global pandemic nor does it reflect the dire need to continue pushing for funding, research, access to medical care, and safer sex education. Also, acutely disappeared from the current public face of HIV/AIDS is the brutal and disproportionate suffering of people of color, trans people and other marginalized communities. Initially the curators stressed that the exhibit was about how the canon of art has affected HIV/AIDS and suggested that race was not a factor in their choices, nor should it have been. In other words, for them the show was about art, art history, and art production. Ted Kerr wrote, "The AIDS Crisis Revisitation is both helpful and fraught, and at this point it is too narrow to be truly instructional or liberative. In *The New Inquiry*, Tyrone Palmer wrote about how AIDS history that is 'now remembered and canonized' was appearing 'in memory as decidedly white and middle-class.' *Art AIDS America* is absolutely guilty of this narrow, unhelpful view."[24] In an exhibition proclaiming to "give voice to perspectives that are too often suppressed, and reveal how they have changed both the history of art in America and the response to this disease,"[25] it seems a flagrant misrepresentation to have excluded the voices and perspectives of people of color. Media constructs memory and history by what it shows and by what it doesn't show. For those rendered invisible, it is not just a matter of a missing past, it is a matter of jeopardizing their present and future.

[24] Kerr, Ted. *A History of Erasing Black Artists and Bodies from the AIDS Conversation*. The New Inquiry. 31 December 2015. Web. 31 October 2016.
[25] (BMA). Press release.

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