

# Fluid Exchanges

## Artists and Critics in the AIDS Crisis



Edited by James Miller

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## FLUID EXCHANGES

### Artists and Critics in the AIDS Crisis

AIDS is an acronym that was largely unknown only a decade ago. Today AIDS has meaning for virtually everyone in the western world. But the nature of its meaning varies wildly, from the stark reality faced by people infected by the HIV virus and those who love them to those who encounter AIDS only as a 'plague' hysterically exploited in the media. In between lies a range of expression about AIDS in art, literature, drama, film, and critical theory.

In this volume, an international group of contributors discuss the ways in which the arts and humanities have presented AIDS. They exchange ideas across lines of liberalism and radicalism, art and theory, social realities and political agendas. In the process they raise difficult questions: How does the vocabulary of AIDS shape popular conception about HIV infection? How can we counter the response to AIDS that equates sex with death and health with piety? What is the impact of AIDS on gay identity?

Since AIDS first became known to the general public ten years ago, its medical and political aspects have largely eclipsed the spiritual and cultural dimensions. These essays address that imbalance. They consider the impact of AIDS, not only on the bodies of persons with HIV infection, but on the hearts and minds of us all.

JAMES MILLER is Faculty Professor of Arts, University of Western Ontario, and author of *Measures of Wisdom: The Cosmic Dance in Classical and Christian Antiquity*.

**To my students in 'AIDS and the Arts'**

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# Acknowledgments

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When David Stimpson first suggested to me that a book could be formed from the papers of the 'Representing AIDS' conference, he also urged me to sound out the idea with Prudence Tracy at the University of Toronto Press. Her encouragement to go ahead with it – come what may – got it off the ground in the spring of 1989.

Come what may, of course, inevitably came: reactionary forces opposed to the radical character of the project slowed down its realization in spite of our urgent sense of its usefulness in the discourse wars sparked by the epidemic. Forced to rethink my counter-discursive tactics, I depended on Prudence's unshaken confidence in the project to guide me through the tricky process of reconceiving it as more than an academic archive. Fortunately, her editorial wisdom prevented me from proceeding with a dull volume of conference proceedings when that was all I thought it would ever be allowed to be. With diplomatic skills worthy of her allegorical namesake, she went to bat for this book more often, I'm sure, than I'll ever know.

Thanks to her dialectical fairmindedness, the manuscript was sent out to readers whose divergent political and cultural viewpoints assured it a thorough going-over from all sides. William Zion challenged its diversity of approaches and provoked me to defend the discord of its marginalized agendas. Peter Millard questioned the value of polemical strategies that came off as tactless attacks, but also criticized the dispassionate tact of arguments that ignored the urgency of the crisis. Paula Treichler pointed out the weak links in the chain

of articles (starting with the original draft of my introduction) and called for a clarification of the organization of the contents. John St James exposed much else that needed clarifying or rewording. Their invaluable readings virtually reshaped the book.

If James Etherington, Catherine Finlayson, and Peta Lomberg of London Life had not expanded my vision of cultural activism to include much beyond the classroom and the gallery, the London sections of the book would have been narrowly focused on academic issues. Their continuing support for the local and international projects reflected in this volume is much appreciated by all the London contributors. Thanks to a subvention from the Visual AIDS Committee, whose work has been supported by generous grants from London Life since 1988, the cost of photographing the AIDS posters reproduced in these pages has been sizeably reduced and the price of the paperback edition held within reasonable bounds.

To the resource centre at the AIDS Committee of London, a copy of this book will be gratefully donated by me on behalf of the Visual AIDS Committee. Betty Anne Thomas and the dedicated ACOL staff have never failed to help me out whenever I needed a statistic checked, a poster hunted down, a medical term defined, a newspaper article retrieved, or a community-based hug administered.

My colleagues at Western, Tom Lennon, Madeline Lennon, John Nicholas, Richard Green, and Alice Mansell, offered their personal (which is to say political) support of the 'AIDS and the Arts' program from its beginnings in 1988. Melissa Hardy helped me to face the terrors of nuclear-family meltdown by springing me from the closet of my own cowardice with her characteristic courage. Linda Nicholas kept my spirits up by proving that there really was a beach at the end of it all. John Stracuzza gently outed me to myself, with a little help from *Idomeneo*.

The steady friendship of all these people through the tumultuous days of my coming out – which coincided, not coincidentally, with the long coming-to-be of this anthology – sustained it as well as me.

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## **FLUID EXCHANGES**

**Artists and Critics in the AIDS Crisis**



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# Introduction

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JAMES MILLER

Since 1985, when the first AIDS activist groups proclaimed their radical agendas in the United States, Britain, and Canada, artists and critics have joined forces in increasing numbers to fight the epidemic of fear and bigotry attending the AIDS crisis. Their alliance with the activists continues into the 1990s all along the undefended border between the university and what used to be known as the Real World. Drawn together at international conferences and local gallery openings, at private vigils and public demonstrations, they have found a common project in fighting AIDS discrimination with words and images that challenge the discursive foundations of contemporary social reality. This volume is part of that ongoing critical project.

The engagement of artists and critics in AIDS activism did not come about simply because the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) had already infected many members of their overlapping communities by the mid-1980s. Nor was it due entirely to the angry momentum of local protest groups rallied to the defence of human rights or civil liberties in the dark years before the epidemic was widely perceived as a threat to the 'general public.' The rapid sophistication of artistic and critical responses to the AIDS crisis no doubt reflects the cosmopolitan character of the specific publics where 'AIDS awareness' as a social cause was born. Its genesis in New York, San Francisco, Toronto, Montreal, and London was favoured by ethnological as well as epidemiological factors: the peculiar self-reflexiveness of these cultural capitals, with their interconnected universities and museums and

multitudes of commercial and alternative art galleries, inscribed itself on the tabula rasa of the new illness from the start and promoted its very mysteriousness as a subject for immediate artistic and academic meditation.

Of course other epidemics have affected the production of cultural objects and the construction of cultural history, and often deeply. But never so rapidly or so politically as AIDS: though millions of people in the Third World die of cholera or malaria each year, who has ever marched down Fifth Avenue for the rights of cholera victims or attended a Queen Street exhibition of postmodern malarial art? In the capitals of the First World, AIDS was perceived as a crisis for the arts even before it received its official medical name.

Perhaps what remained of late-sixties liberalism in the academic life of the 1970s had something to do with the conception of AIDS awareness as an activist aesthetic project – if only because the university (or at least some universities) continued to offer ideological support for various disenfranchised groups mobilized during the heyday of the student rebellions. Chief among these were women, blacks, and gays, whose liberationist causes were being championed on the alternative art scene well before the epidemic struck. After its outbreak representatives from all three oppressed constituencies, notably female prostitutes, Haitian immigrants, and male homosexuals, found themselves swiftly and searingly reclassified as 'high-risk groups' in the discriminatory discourse of public health. When early reports of the 'special' vulnerability of women, blacks, and gays to immune deficiency surfaced in the mainstream media, their advocates in the arts (some of whom were male, white, and straight) were quick to express opposition to the dominant political construction of the AIDS crisis in the West, which included, as it still does, the perniciously consoling role of the 'AIDS victim.'

Yet even such a coincidence of ethical sympathies, a continuity of old countercultural allegiances, is not enough to explain the exceptional imaginative vigour and intellectual thrust of their militant strategies on the newly mapped battleground of cultural activism. Nothing invented at the university in recent years has acted as more of a stimulus to the socially reforming zeal of AIDS activism than 'critical theory,' a dynamic and complicated fusion of radical social philosophies and sceptical reading techniques. If academics were in need of a jump-start after the spluttering decline of structuralism, which had failed to provide them with a key to all mythologies, they got more than they bargained for in the crackling 'poststructuralist'

channels into which their faculties of arts and social sciences were decisively tapping. Try as they might to contain it within conventional disciplines and course-offerings in the late 1970s, the multilateral explosion of critical theory through the 1980s has rocked the privileged foundations of the university itself. It was a blast to be felt all over the map, including the map of the Real World where the AIDS crisis was being constructed as a global menace to the good life of Western capitalist democracies.

Crucial to the ideology of radical AIDS activism are the twin concepts of social marginalization and inferiorization developed by theorists in the arts and social sciences and expanded by politically active artists influenced by critical theory. Borne on the university currents of feminism, civil libertarianism, and gay liberation, these notions have passed without resistance into the sophisticated counterdiscourse of groups like ACT UP ('AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power') in America, OutRage in Britain, and AIDS ACTION NOW! in Canada. As an institutional forum for utopian social transformations, the university has provided artists and activists with a common ground of liberationist consciousness where they have strengthened each other's resolve to confront the AIDS crisis by calling for a profound rethinking of social order and the operations of political power.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the present volume should have been published by a university press for readers in the Real World who want to do more than read about the AIDS crisis. In dealing with the fantasy world of political agendas, the contributors to the volume have not forgotten the worldly reality of tight money and discriminatory funding. Consequently, with the encouragement of the University of Toronto Press, we have agreed to donate all profits from the sale of this publication to AIDS ACTION NOW! in recognition of its constructive use of the mainstream media to end the scandalous ban on the sale of experimental drugs (such as dextran sulfate, manufactured in Ontario) to persons with AIDS in Canada.

As an application of critical theory to an actual crisis, this work could not be a quiet little anthology of artistic musings and academic meditations on sex, death, and the indomitable human spirit. It is too urgent in its outspokenness, too large in its cultural concerns, to be vaulted up like a time capsule in the silence of a university library. Lob it at anyone who tries to bury it there. With its volatile mixture of postmodern scepticism, radical feminism, gay liberationism, and liberal individualism, this volume is bound to explode on contact with the family values of the New Right and to shake up quite a few other

well-organized prejudices and cherished belief systems in the process. Its contents spring from heated discussions among artists and critics mobilized against AIDS by their strong theoretical convictions. Where their convictions differ or clash, no attempt has been made to neutralize or reconcile them from a position of external editorial power. To have done so would have been to falsify the complex evidence of their engagement with the issues and to ignore the stubbornly democratic spirit of their debates.

As a result, this volume is markedly dialectical in character. The diversity of arguments in it, enunciated from various national, political, and sexual standpoints, is meant to provoke constructive debate on the role of the arts in AIDS activism for the 1990s, even as it reflects the engagement of artists and critics with the ethics and politics of AIDS representation in the 1980s.

The urgent need for such engagement was proclaimed in 1987 by British art critic Simon Watney in *Policing Desire*, a provocative study of discriminatory AIDS commentary in the British media. It was also proclaimed in 1987 by American cultural theorist Douglas Crimp in his manifesto-like essay 'AIDS: Cultural Analysis / Cultural Activism.' The latter work introduces an archive of critical articles and activist documents by various authors (including Watney) edited by Crimp under the same title as his essay and published as a thematically unified issue of the New York theory journal *October* (winter 1987). This now legendary issue was reprinted in 1988 by MIT Press as an academic book, which made it look somewhat less radical – or at least less avant-garde – than its electrifying jolts of kulturkritik actually are by comparison with the elegiac biographies, analgesic deathbed dramas, and bourgeois cautionary tales that still dominate the non-medical literature on AIDS.<sup>1</sup>

As an extension of the still relatively small theoretical branch of that literature, this anthology owes much to the ground-breaking work of Watney and Crimp. They are the gay eminences behind it, and though what we have produced is not presented as a 'gay studies book' in the narrowly ghettoized sense, any more than theirs were, the continuities of form and method between their applications of critical theory to the AIDS crisis and ours are obvious enough to require only brief comment.

Watney's community-rousing voice is to be heard all through these pages, in direct quotations, in turns of phrase, in footnotes, and in the final polemical essay, which he contributed as an entrelacement of its

psychosexual and sociopolitical themes. Crimp's direct impact on the volume, apart from the frequent references to his key concept of cultural activism and his controversial privileging of activist aesthetic practices, is noticeable chiefly in its anthological structure. Besides critical essays, contemporary artworks, and media clips, this collection, like his, includes a number of archival documents relevant to the politics of AIDS resistance. Where Crimp published the 'Denver Principles' of the American PWA Coalition, for instance, I have reproduced the text of the international 'Manifeste de Montréal.'<sup>2</sup>

Like the *October* anthology, moreover, this volume is emphatically not the work of any one critic or artist. It is a collective effort, which means that in some measure its contributors had to come to terms with their theoretical and professional differences in order to define their common goals as cultural activists. Too often in the past, scholars in the tenured security of the university looked down on the unstable art world as theoretically unsophisticated or anti-intellectual – even when strongly principled artists who were challenging the heterosexist and capitalist ethos of that world were ransacking the academy for critical terms and concepts that they subsequently modified in their often textually abstruse work. On the disputed border between the academy and the art world a vainglorious competition persists between text-based and image-based thinkers – a hangover from the ecphrastic rivalry between philosophical poets and painters of the Renaissance. The *October* anthology in its very form argued that this competition should, and could, be abandoned in the interests of forging a strong alliance between critics and artists to meet the cultural challenges of the epidemic. Such an alliance was forged anew in the production of this volume.

Though its contributors have particularized the activist agenda to suit their own political ideas, intellectual concerns, and artistic visions, most of them have looked to the social philosophy of Michel Foucault for critical guidance and have chosen discourse analysis as the best theoretical starting-point from which to attack the problematics of AIDS representation. That Foucault's social philosophy of 'discipline' and 'disciplines' has been fashionably applied to many critical problems in the arts throughout the 1980s is no reason in itself for this choice, of course. Nor is the darkly ironic circumstance that Foucault himself died of AIDS in, of all years, 1984. Rather, it is his strong theoretical emphasis on the historical inseparableness of knowledge systems and power structures, and on the isolating medical 'gaze' that constructed the systems and structures currently dominat-