

**WITNESSES:
Against Our
Vanishing**

November 16, 1989
to January 6, 1990

**A R T I S T S
S P A C E**

David Armstrong
Tom Chesley
Dorit Cypis
Philip-Lorca DiCorcia
Jane Dickson
Clarence Elie-Rivera
Darrel Ellis
Allen Frame
Peter Hujar
Greer Lankton
Siobhan Liddell
Mark Morrisroe
James Nares
Perico Pastor
Margo Pelletier
Vittorio Scarpati
Jo Shane
Kiki Smith
Janet Stein
Tabboo! Stephen Tashjian
Shellburne Thurber
Ken Tisa
David Wojnarowicz

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**Organized by
NAN GOLDIN**

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It gives me great pleasure that ARTISTS SPACE is presenting *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*. Since we initially approached Nan Goldin about working with us, the exhibition has evolved and become more inclusive and, at the same time, more personal. Goldin has selected a group of artists, her friends, who have all shared the experience of living and working together on Manhattan's Lower East Side over a period of time during which the AIDS epidemic began to surface and destroy that particular community of artists. The ravaging effects of the disease on this group of people is only representative of the larger cultural context in which we must all face not only the immediate crisis of funding, health care, education and awareness, but life in our community with AIDS. The work of the artists in this exhibition is a kind of testimony of survival, of keeping the faith despite the insidious nature of the disease and the prejudice surrounding it.

Nan Goldin is a photographer who has made her life and community the subject of her own work. Her commitment not only to her

own work in the face of the devastation of her community by AIDS, but to the lives of these artists and to the persistence of their work is remarkable and an inspiration. She has been a pleasure to work with and I would like to thank her for her diligence and the truly important vision she has realized in *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*. On her behalf I would like to thank Vince Aletti, David Armstrong, Barbara Barg, Scott Brown, Tom Chesley, Sara Driver, Adam Engel, Allen Frame, Tim Guest, Pat Hearn, Marvin Heiferman, Jim Jarmusch, Stephen Koch, Ramsey McPhillips, Bill Stelling, Brent Sycamore, Shellburne Thurber, and Roger Weiss for their assistance in various aspects of the exhibition.

I am also grateful to David Wojnarowicz, Linda Yablonsky and Cookie Mueller for their moving contributions to this catalogue. Their words add a great deal to our experience of viewing the exhibition and potently express the loss and rage many feel as they face AIDS. Though strong language and opinions which may be offensive to some are expressed, we at ARTISTS

SPACE believe that not only do these views have a right to be heard, but that also they act as a powerful accompaniment to the visual works. While we recognize that in some cases the opinions and language contained in this publication could be difficult for some adults to confront, and may not be appropriate for children, we believe it is important to present them unedited. Though ARTISTS SPACE and its Board of Directors may not necessarily agree with all the statements made here, we continue to strongly advocate for our role as a forum for a broad range of aesthetic and social ideas vital to the dialogue which enriches contemporary culture. We have represented each of the individuals involved, whether an artist, writer or curator, as they saw fit in order to ensure the validity of this dialogue. While we recognize the purity and blattancy of this approach may cause controversy, that is not our intention. Rather, we are striving for an honest delineation of strongly held opinion and artistic representation regarding a disease which has significantly affected the arts, our

immediate community and our entire society.

I would like to add a note of special thanks to the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation for its generous support of this publication. It is particularly moving for us at ARTISTS SPACE, having had the good fortune in 1985 to show the work of artists selected by Robert Mapplethorpe (one of whom is in this exhibition) and having worked with him on their presentation, to now be able to have his name and vision associated with *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*.

It is worthy of note that this publication was not funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and, as they have requested, I would like to make clear that the opinions, findings and recommendations expressed herein do not reflect their views. In my opinion, we can be truly appreciative of the Endowment's ability, since its founding, to support quality exhibitions which deal with the social themes that contemporary artists face, and to bring a broad range of artistic ideas to the American public. I believe that this approach has reinforced those values which we as

Americans cherish. We risk controversy daily by our belief in free speech and expression, and the Endowment's capacity to take this same important risk is now being severely tested and, seems to me, to be among the best arguments we can make for their continued support by the American taxpayer.

I am also particularly pleased that this exhibition comes at a time when arts organizations all across the country will be addressing AIDS through VISUAL AIDS' "A Day Without Art." ARTISTS SPACE is proud to participate and, on December 1, 1989, our doors will close as we mourn those who have died of AIDS.

Finally, my thanks go to the artists whose powerful works have made this exhibition a truly urgent and important statement.

SUSAN WYATT
Executive Director

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IN THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW

Against Our Vanishing

is dedicated
with love to:
Kenny Angelico,
Keith Davis,
Max diCorcia,
Peter Hujar,
Mark Morrisroe,
Vittorio Scarpati,
Bibi Smith
and everyone else
we have lost
to AIDS.

In the summer of 1988 I left New York for the weekend. Now, one and a half years later, I'm on my way home. In the process of withdrawal from addiction I suffered a kind of amnesia, a profound loss of identity. During early recovery I picked up my camera again. Through my work I began to reconstruct myself, to fit back into my own skin. I discovered the light after years in the dark. I wanted to live. Most of all I wanted to reconnect with my family of friends with whom I'd lost contact in my last few years of isolation and destruction. I was full of a new hope that I wanted to share.

During this period ARTISTS SPACE invited me to curate a show. I wanted to produce an exhibition by, for and about this community of friends, whose lives and work have inspired my life and my work. But when I came back to life, I realized how much had changed, how many of those I most admired were sick or had been killed by AIDS. I have had to face that there could not be all the joyous reunions I'd envisioned when I resurfaced from my own hell. My priority became to formulate an exhibition that would include the whole community, that those who have died would be as much a part of those who still survive, and that would serve to both keep their spirit with us and allow

us to formally say goodbye.

Originally I conceived of a show entitled *Sexuality, Spirituality and Recovery in the age of AIDS*. Its primary purpose was to celebrate the indomitable spirit of our community; to prove that our way of life still exists, that we are being killed by AIDS but our sensibility could not be killed-off. To show how hard we have been hit and at the same time to affirm all that is left.

I feel my own recent recovery from addiction, and that of many of my friends, is directly related to AIDS. With the advent of a fatal illness in our midst, the glorification of self destruction wore thin. We were no longer playing with death -- it was real and among us, and not at all glamorous. We have been forced to make survival, recovery and healing our priorities as individuals and as a community. We realize that we can live the same lifestyle, but in the light. That we can still live fully in the moment but with an awareness of consequences. That we can take pride in the legacy of our past without contrition, regret, or revision, but with a new belief in the possibility of future.

I have intended all along to exhibit work that deals explicitly with sex and sexuality. The outbreak of the Helms controversy and

the new success of government censorship of art in this country has only strengthened my resolve. The influence of the New Morality and the effective use of AIDS as the most powerful tool for sexual repression makes it even more imperative to continue to create and exhibit art that portrays sexuality as a positive force. To prove that a gay aesthetic continues to flourish. To prove that sex=death is a false equation. To show that homoeroticism cannot be disappeared. To show that the strictly demarcated lines between homo and heterosexual cultures can be seamlessly crossed. That the public and private manifestations of all forms of sexuality can still be positive and liberating. That the sexual liberation movement need not become extinct but requires a new responsibility.

Over the past year four more of my most beloved friends have died of AIDS. Two were artists I had selected for this exhibit. One of the writers for this catalogue has become too sick to write. And so the tone of the exhibition has become less theoretical and more personal, from a show about AIDS as an issue to more of a collective memorial.

I am often filled with rage at my sense of powerlessness in the face of this plague. I

want to empower others by providing them a forum to voice their grief and anger in the hope that this public ritual of mourning can be cathartic in the process of recovery, both for those among us who are now ill and those survivors who are left behind.

I have asked each artist to select work that represents their personal responses to AIDS. Most have created new work especially for this exhibit. The focus of the responses vary: out of loss come memory pieces, tributes to friends and lovers who have died; out of anger come explorations of the political cause and effects of this disease. Some work concentrates on the continuum of daily life, relationships and sexuality under the shadow of AIDS, other on the physicality of the disease through the effects on the body and the individual construction of identity. And some respond with work pertaining to death and reclamation of the spirit.

This is not a show for or about the art market. I am not at all concerned here with art as a commodity but as an articulation, as an outcry, and as a mechanism for survival. This is not intended to be a definitive statement about the state of art in the era of AIDS but as a vehicle to explore the effects of this plague on one group of artists in a way that

hopefully will speak to all survivors of this crisis. By its very existence and its volume, this show proves its own premise -- that AIDS has not and will not eliminate our community, or succeed in wiping out our sensibility or silencing our voice.

I have sometimes experienced survivors in these times criticizing themselves or one another about appropriate or inappropriate ways of mourning. We are all clumsy in dealing with grief. I do not believe we need to develop a correct etiquette. Every one of our responses is valid, passivity and silence are the gravest dangers. It is not the time to distract ourselves with divisiveness.

I have also witnessed this community take care of its own, nurse its sick, bury its dead, mourn its losses, and continue to fight for each others' lives. We will not vanish.

NAN GOLDIN
Boston, October 1989



Vittorio Scarpati and Cookie Mueller, 1989; photo by Nan Goldin

POST CARDS FROM AMERICA: X-RAYS FROM HELL

Late yesterday afternoon a friend came over unexpectedly to sit at my kitchen table and try and find some measure of language for his state of mind. "What is left of life?" he asked, "What's left of living?" He's been on AZT for six to eight months and his T-cells have dropped from 100 plus to 30. His doctor says: "What the hell do you want from me?" Now he's asking himself: "What the hell do I want?" He's trying to answer this while in the throes of agitating FEAR. I know what he's talking about as each tense description of his state of mind slips out across the table. The table is filled with piles of papers and objects; a boom-box, a bottle of AZT, a jar of Advil (remember, you can't take aspirin or Tylenol while on AZT). There's an old smiley mug with pens and scissors and a bottle of Xanax for when the brain goes loopy; there's a Sony tape-recorder that contains a half-used cassette of late night sex talk, fears of gradual dying, anger, dreams and someone speaking Cantonese. In this foreign language it says:

"My mind cannot contain all that I see. I keep experiencing this sensation that my skin is too tight; civilization is expanding inside of me. Do you have a room with a better view? I am experiencing the X-ray of civilization. The minimum

speed required to break through the earth's gravitational pull is seven miles a second. Since economic conditions prevent us from gaining access to rockets or spaceships we would have to learn to run awful fast to achieve escape from where we are all heading..."

My friend across the table says, "There are no more people in their 30's. We're all dying out. One of my four best friends just went into the hospital yesterday and he underwent a blood transfusion and is now suddenly blind in one eye. The doctors don't know what it is..." My eyes are still scanning the table; I know a hug or a pat on the shoulder won't answer the question mark in his voice. And I have a low threshold for this information. The AZT is kicking in with one of its little side-effects: increased mental activity which in translation means I wake up these mornings with an intense claustrophobic feeling of fucking doom. It also means that one word too many can send me to the window kicking out panes of glass, or at least that's my impulse (the fact that winter is coming holds me in check). My eyes scan the surfaces of walls and tables to provide balance to the weight of words. A 35mm camera containing the unprocessed images of red and blue and green faces in close-up profile screaming,

a large postcard of a stuffed gorilla pounding its dusty chest in a museum diorama, a small bottle of hydrocortisone to keep my face from turning into a mass of peeling red and yellow flaking skin, an airline ticket to Normal, Illinois to work on a print, a small plaster model of a generic Mexican pyramid looking like it was made in Aztec kindergarten, a tiny motor-car with a tiny Goofy driving at the wheel...

My friend across the table says, "The other three of my four best friends are dead and I'm afraid that I won't see this friend again." My eyes settle on a six-inch tall rubber model of frankenstein from the Universal Pictures Tour gift shop, TM 1931; his hands are enormous and my head fills up with replaceable body parts; with seeing the guy in the hospital; seeing myself and my friend across the table in line for replaceable body parts; my wandering eyes aren't staving off the anxiety of his words; behind his words, so I say, "You know... he can still rally back...maybe...I mean people do come back from the edge of death..."

"Well," he says, "He lost thirty pounds in a few weeks..."

A boxed cassette of someone's interview with me in which I talk about diagnosis and how it simply under-

lined what I knew existed anyway. Not just the disease but the sense of death in the American landscape. How when I was out west this summer standing in the mountains of a small city in New Mexico I got a sudden and intense feeling of rage looking at those post card perfect slopes and clouds. For all I knew I was the only person for miles and all alone and I didn't trust that fucking mountain's serenity. I mean it was just bullshit. I couldn't buy the con of nature's beauty; all I could see was death. The rest of my life is being unwound and seen through a frame of death. My anger is more about this culture's refusal to deal with mortality. My rage is really about the fact that WHEN I WAS TOLD THAT I'D CONTRACTED THIS VIRUS IT DIDN'T TAKE ME LONG TO REALIZE THAT I'D CONTRACTED A DISEASED SOCIETY AS WELL.

On the table is today's newspaper with a picture of cardinal O'Connor saying he'd like to take part in operation rescue's blocking of abortion clinics but his lawyers are advising against it. This fat cannibal from that house of walking swastikas up on fifth avenue should lose his church tax-exempt status and pay retroactive taxes from the last couple centuries. Shut down our clinics and we will shut down your 'church.' I

believe in the death penalty for people in positions of power who commit crimes against humanity, i.e., fascism. This creep in black skirts has kept safer-sex information off the local television stations and mass transit advertising spaces for the last eight years of the AIDS epidemic thereby helping thousands and thousands to their unnecessary deaths.

My friend across the table is talking again. "I just feel so fucking sick...I have never felt this bad in my whole life...I woke up this morning with such intense horror; sat upright in bed and pulled on my clothes and shoes and left the house and ran and ran and ran..." I'm thinking maybe he got up to the speed of no more than ten miles an hour. There are times I wish we could fly; knowing that this is impossible I wish I could get a selective lobotomy and rearrange my senses so that all I could see is the color blue; no images or forms, no sounds or sensations. There are times I wish this were so. There are times that I feel so tired, so exhausted. I may have been born centuries too late. A couple of centuries ago I might have been able to be a hermit but the psychic and physical landscape today is just too fucking crowded and bought up. Last night I was invited to dinner upstairs at a neighbor's house. We got

together to figure out how to stop the landlord from illegally tearing the roofs off our apartments. The buildings dept. had already shut the construction crew down twice and yet they have started work again. The recent rains have been slowing destroying my western wall. This landlord some time ago allowed me to stay in my apartment without a lease only after signing an agreement that if there were a cure for AIDS I would have to leave within 30 days. A guy visiting the upstairs neighbor learned that I had this virus and said he believed that although the government probably introduced the virus into the homosexual community, that homosexuals were dying en masse as a reaction to centuries of society's hatred and repression of homosexuality. All I could think of when he said this was an image of hundreds of whales that beach themselves on the coastlines in supposed protest of the ocean's being polluted. He continued: "People don't die - they choose death. Homosexuals are dying of this disease because they have internalized society's hate..." I felt like smacking him in the head, but held off momentarily, saying, "As far as your theory of homosexuals dying of AIDS as a protest against society's hatred, what about the statistics that those people contracting the

disease are intravenous drug users or heterosexually inclined, and that this seems to be increasingly the case. Just look at the statistics for this area of the Lower East Side." "Oh," he said, "They're hated too..." "Look," I said, "After witnessing the deaths of dozens of friends and a handful of lovers, among them some of the most authentically spiritual people I have ever known, I simply can't accept mystical answers or excuses for why so many people are dying from this disease - really it's on the shoulders of a bunch of bigoted creeps who at this point in time are in the positions of power that determine where and when and for whom government funds are spent for research and medical care."

I found that, after witnessing Peter Hujar's death on November 26, 1987 and after my recent diagnosis, I tend to dismantle and discard any and all kinds of spiritual and psychic and physical words or concepts designed to make sense of the external world or designed to give momentary comfort. It's like stripping the body of flesh in order to see the skeleton, the structure. I want to know what the structure of all this is in the way only I can know it. All my notions of the machinations of the world have been built throughout my life on odd cannibaliza-

tions of different lost cultures and on intuitive mythologies. I gained comfort from the idea that people could spontaneously self-combust and from surreal excursions into nightly dream landscapes. But all that is breaking down or being severely eroded by my own brain; it's like tipping a bottle over on its side and watching the liquid contents drain out in slow motion. I suddenly resist comfort, from myself and especially from others. There is something I want to see clearly, something I want to witness in its raw state. And this need comes from my sense of mortality. There is a relief in having this sense of mortality. At least I won't arrive one day at my 80th birthday and at the eve of my possible death and only then realize my whole life was supposed to be somewhat a preparation for the event of death and suddenly fill up with rage because instead of preparation all I had was a lifetime of adaptation to the pre-invented world -- do you understand what I'm saying here? I am busying myself with a process of distancing myself from you and others and my environment in order to know what I feel and what I can find. I'm trying to lift off the weight of the pre-invented world so I can see what's underneath it all. I'm hungry and the pre-invented world won't satisfy my hunger. I'm a prisoner

of language that doesn't have a letter or a sign or gesture that approximates what I'm sensing. Rage may be one of the few things that binds or connects me to you, to our pre-invented world. My friend across the table says, "I don't know how much longer I can go on... Maybe I should just kill myself." I looked up from the Frankenstein doll, stopped trying to twist its yellow head off and looked at him. He was looking out the window at a sexy Puerto Rican guy standing on the street below. I asked him, "If tomorrow you could take a pill that would let you die quickly and quietly, would you do it?"

"No," he said, "Not yet." "There's too much work to do," I said. "That's right," he said. "There's still a lot of work to do..."

I am a bundle of contradictions that shift constantly. This is a comfort to me because to contradict myself dismantles the mental/physical chains of the verbal code. I abstract this disease I have in the same way you abstract death. Sometimes I don't think about this disease for hours. This process lets me get work done, and work gives me life, or at least makes sense of living for short periods of time. But because I abstract this disease, it periodically knocks me on my ass with

its relentlessness. With almost any other illness you take for granted that within a week or month the illness will end and the wonderful part of the human body called the mind will go about its job erasing evidence of the pain and discomfort previously experienced. But with AIDS or HIV infections one never gets that luxury and I find myself after a while responding to it for a fractured moment with my pre-AIDS thought processes: "Alright this is enough already; it should just go away." But each day's dose of medicine, or the intermittent aerosol pentamidine treatments, or the sexy stranger nodding to you on the street corner or across the room at a party, reminds you in a clearer than clear way that at this point in history the virus' activity is forever. Outside my windows there are thousands of people without homes who are trying to deal with having AIDS. If I think my life at times has a nightmare quality about it because of the society in which I live and that society's almost total inability to deal with this disease in anything other than a conservative agenda, think for a moment what it would be to be facing winter winds and shit menus at the limited shelters, and the rampant T.B. and the rapes, muggings, stabbings in those shelters, and the

overwhelmed clinics and sometimes indifferent clinic doctors, and the fact that drug trials are not open to people of color or the poor unless they have a private physician who can monitor the experimental drugs they would need to take, and they don't have those kinds of doctors in clinics because doctors in clinics are constantly rotated and intravenous drug users have to be clean of drugs for two years before they'll be considered for drug trials, and yet there are nine-month waiting periods just to get assigned to a treatment program, so picture yourself with a couple of the 350 opportunistic infections and unable to respond to a few drugs released by the foot-dragging FDA and having to maintain a junk habit; or even having to try and kick that habit without any clinical help and also keep yourself alive two years to get a drug that you need immediately -- thank you Ed Koch; thank you Stephen Josephs; thank you Frank Young; thank you AMA.

I scratch my head at the hysteria surrounding the actions of the repulsive senator from zombieland who has been trying to dismantle the NEA for supporting the work of Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe. Although the

anger sparked within the art community is certainly justified and hopefully will grow stronger; the actions by Helms and D'Amato only follow standards that have been formed and implemented by the "arts" community itself. The major museums in New York, not to mention museums around the country, are just as guilty of this kind of selective cultural support and denial. It is a standard practice to make invisible any kind of sexual imaging other than white straight male erotic fantasies -- sex in america long ago slid into a small set of generic symbols; mention the word sex and the general public seems to imagine a couple of heterosexual positions on a bed - there are actual laws in the south forbidding anything else even between consenting adults. So people have found it necessary to define their sexuality in images, in photographs and drawings and movies in order to not disappear. Collectors have for the most part failed to support work that defines a particular person's sexuality, except for a few examples such as Mapplethorpe, and thus have perpetuated the invisibility of the myriad possibilities of sexual activity. The collectors' influence on what the museum shows continues this process secretly with behind the scenes manipulations of curators and

money. Jesse Helms is, at the very least, making his attacks on freedom public; the collectors and museums do theirs at elegant private parties or from the confines of their self-created closets.

It doesn't just stop at images -- recently a critic/novelist had his novel reviewed by the New York Times Book Review and the reviewer took outrage at the novelist's descriptions of promiscuity, saying: "In this age of AIDS, the writer should show more restraint..." Not only do we have to contend with bonehead newscasters and conservative members of the medical profession telling us to "just say no" to sexuality itself rather than talk about safer sex possibilities, but we have people from the thought police spilling out from the ranks with admonitions that we shouldn't think about anything other than monogamous or safer sex. I'm beginning to believe that one of the last frontiers left for radical gesture is the imagination. At least in my un-governed imagination I can fuck somebody without a rubber or I can, in the privacy of my own skull, douse Helms with a bucket of gasoline and set his putrid ass on fire or throw rep. William Dannemeyer off the empire state building. These fantasies give me distance from my

outrage for a few seconds. They give me momentary comfort. Sexuality defined in images gives me comfort in a hostile world. They give me strength. I have always loved my anonymity and therein lies a contradiction because I also find comfort in seeing representations of my private experiences in the public environment. They need not be representations of my experiences -- they can be the experiences of and by others that merely come close to my own or else disrupt the generic representations that have come to be the norm in the various medias outside my door. I find that when I witness diverse representations of "Reality" on a gallery wall or in a book or a movie or in the spoken word or performance, that the more diverse the representations, the more I feel there is room in the environment for my existence; that not the entire environment is hostile.

To make the *private* into something *public* is an action that has terrific repercussions in the pre-invented world. The government has the job of maintaining the day to day illusion of the ONE TRIBE NATION. Each public disclosure of a private reality becomes something of a magnet that can attract others with a similar frame of reference; thus each public disclosure of a

fragment of private reality serves as a dismantling tool against the illusion of ONE TRIBE NATION; it lifts the curtains for a brief peek and reveals the possible existence of literally millions of tribes, the term GENERAL PUBLIC disintegrates. If GENERAL PUBLIC disintegrates, what happens next is the possibility of an X-RAY OF CIVILIZATION, an examination of its foundations. To turn our private grief at the loss of friends, family, lovers and strangers into something public would serve as another powerful dismantling tool. It would dispel the notion that this virus has a sexual orientation or the notion that the government and medical community has done very much to ease the spread or advancement of this disease.

One of the first steps in making the private grief public is the ritual of memorials. I have loved the way memorials take the absence of a human being and make them somehow physical with the use of sound. I have attended a number of memorials in the last five years and at the last one I attended I found myself suddenly experiencing something akin to rage. I realized halfway through the event that I had witnessed a good number of the same people participating in other previous memorials. What made me angry was realiz-

ing that the memorial had little reverberation outside the room it was held in. A TV commercial for hand-wipes unfortunately had a higher impact on the society at large. I got up and left because I didn't think I could control my urge to scream. There is a tendency for people affected by this epidemic to police each other or prescribe what the most important gestures for dealing with this experience of loss would be. I resent that, and at the same time worry that friends will slowly become professional pallbearers, waiting for each death of their lovers, friends and neighbors and polishing their funeral speeches; perfecting their rituals of death rather than a relatively simple ritual of life such as screaming in the streets. I feel this because of the urgency of the situation, because of seeing death coming in from the edges of abstraction where those with the luxury of time have cast it. I imagine what it would be like if friends had a demonstration each time a lover or friend or stranger died of AIDS. I imagine what it would be like if, each time a lover, friend or stranger died of this disease, their friends, lovers, or neighbors would take their dead body and drive with it in a car a hundred miles to Washington DC and blast through the gates of the white house and come to a screeching halt

before the entrance and then dump their lifeless forms on the front steps. It would be comforting to see those friends, neighbors, lovers and strangers mark time and place and history in such a public way.

But, bottom line, this is my own feeling of urgency and need; bottom line emotionally, even a tiny charcoal scratching done as a gesture to mark a person's response to this epidemic means whole worlds to me if it is hung in public; bottom line, each and every gesture carries a reverberation that is meaningful in its diversity; bottom line, we have to find our own forms of gesture and communication -- you can never depend on the mass media to reflect us or our needs or our states of mind; bottom line, with enough gestures we can deafen the satellites and lift the curtains surrounding the control room.

DAVID WOJNAROWICZ
New York, October 1989

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ET TU BRUTE?

What is living but movement partnered by breathing? To breathe is to live; to stop is to drop. Is that final?

A recent *Harper's Index*, that mad compendium of deconstructed statistical artifacts, cheerily noted how someone who loves the conceptual world figures. It says for every deep breath inhaled today, the chances it will contain a molecule of Julius Caesar's dying breath are 99 in 100.

Hey, I knew it. The air doesn't just feel closer, it is. With every long sigh that escapes my lips I can keep afloat not just the memory of those friends lost to AIDS and cancers and drugs, but their actual first words! Well, why not? They've taught me what I know. Part of what I say belongs to them.

I hear their whisperings on the wind. Ghosts hiss in my ear to wake me each morning and climb in bed with me when I sleep. While I dream they wait, poised and friendly, but not letting go. I toss and turn to some mighty haunting serenades: "Are you lonesome tonight? Is your heart filled with tears?"

Perhaps they're guiding my steps. I often feel as if, though it pours down rain, I walk between the drops. I mean, didn't I take the same drugs, have a lot of the

same sex, go to the same places at pretty much the same time as those who are sick and dying or dead? And yet, and yet...I'm okay, no, better than okay, I'm well. I almost hate to admit it.

And there's something else: I get jealous. I see how they, those bright lights growing ever dimmer in the shadow of HIV, can love like there's no tomorrow, and I'm envious. It's not as if I don't know I did that for years, but something in me still adores the irrational. It's not that I want to be sick, it's just that on those days when despair sits heavily in my lap and pulls at my chest like a helpless wretch, it's too hard to grow old without them. It's that old snub, getting out, but we who remain, watching this old century turn like some big bird making a long, furious sweep toward the sun, we have to stay and tell the tale. And it's brutal.

What can I say? How we used to carry on! I don't think I knew anyone, ten years ago, who didn't live a double life. Our secrets were the stuff of legend and we gossiped about them, played with them, all the time. We were bright and ambitious, and in our desire to do it all, have it all, touch God, we left no stone unturned. We took drugs and had indiscriminate sex we couldn't have imagined without the drugs. We took

risks, artistic and otherwise, and felt safe, charmed. We were young; feelings were still just impressions, arrogance passed for wisdom.

It was a miracle we lived through some of those alcohol-filled, drug-laden, black-leather nights, but it was lucky we had them, too. In those clubs and dark bedrooms, under those blinding coffee-shop fluorescents at 5 am, we formed a community, a defense against the threat of obscurity. We made each other important, and beautiful.

And then, with no warning, we started getting sick, some with infection, some with grief. The AIDS virus, wearing only its most insidious smile, had crashed the gates of our party.

And now, when the bad news first arrives, there's so much to do, testing, talking, reading, exploring. We make sure our friends get to their appointments, secure the proper medications, find the most comforting healers, hire nurses. We cook the right foods and get them eaten, we encourage rest and also work, keep them working, to work is to levitate, to rise above the politics of treatment, the bewildering moat of fear crawling with snakecharmers and becalmed families. We visit this hospital and

then that one, bring more food, tapes, books, friends, cards, letters, pictures, more hands to hold, keep close company and wait, and pray, absolutely, resolutely denying despair a place to sit. No, we say, quietly, not in this room, spare us.

But it just keeps coming, the same stuff keeps happening, again and again, to different people, each time moving a little closer. What can I say? It gets so when I hear the news now I cringe and I wish, for a minute, they were dead already, so we don't have to go through this humiliating process one more time. Then I hate myself for feeling that way. Oh God, I'm just so tired. Forgive me.

At the time my friend Cookie Mueller, who was always there to help me navigate the last dozen years, wrote the piece that follows, she didn't mention she had AIDS, but clearly she was feeling its power. It is reprinted from the *City Lights Review* because, as of this writing, something she once referred to as a "blue flame aura" has pierced her brain, removing her capacity for speech and some of her gestural abilities as well. But, like the magician who can liberate the linen from a fully set table while leaving the setting intact, the force of Cookie's personality, the

light of her soul, if you will, hasn't wavered one bit.

She communicates mostly in pure, nonverbal soul-sound and wild pantomime, and as I watch her frenzied signalling, I realize what rebels we still are, she and I and everyone like us, making the forbidden visible, doing away with stupid secrets and lies. In shows like this one, we can review our triumphs, air our grief, lay ourselves bare, heal, shiver. When we look up at the remaining light of day and wonder where the time went, we can see it in the work not just what we know but how we learned it. It's how we let each other know we're here.

LINDA YABLONSKY
New York, October 1989

A LAST LETTER

"It's like war time now," my aunt told me a few weeks ago. She lived in France during World War II. "You young people are losing friends and relatives just as if it were bullets taking them away."

She's right, it's a war zone, but it's a different battlefield. It's not bullets that catch these soldiers, and there's no bombs and no gunfire. These people are dying in a whisper.

In 1982, my best friend died of AIDS. Since then there have been so many more friends I've lost. We all have. Through all of this I have come to realize that the most painful tragedy concerning AIDS death has to do with something much larger than the loss of human life itself. There is a deepening horror more grand than the world is yet aware. To see it we have to watch closely who is being stolen from us. Perhaps there is no hope left for the whole of humankind, not because of the nature of the epidemic, but the nature of those it strikes.

Each friend I've lost was an extraordinary person, not just to me, but to hundreds of people who knew their work and their fight. These were the kind of people who lifted the quality of all our lives, their war was against ignorance, the bankruptcy of beauty, and the truancy of

culture. They were people who hated and scorned pettiness, intolerance, bigotry, mediocrity, ugliness, and spiritual myopia; the blindness that makes life hollow and insipid was unacceptable. They tried to make us see.

All of these friends were connected to the arts. Time and history have proven that the sensitive souls among us have always been more vulnerable.

My friend Gordon Stevenson, who died in 1982, was a filmmaker. His insights turned heads. With his wife, Muriel, who starred in his low-budget films, he was on the road to a grand film future, one that would serve to inspire and influence a lot of people. When Muriel died in a car accident in Los Angeles, it wasn't long after that Gordon started getting sick.

We thought it was mourning that was wasting him, until he was eventually diagnosed and admitted to the hospital with AIDS. He demanded that I didn't visit him there, and I honored his wish, so we talked on the phone every day and he wrote me one letter.

It was written on his own paper, with his designed letterhead: a big black heart, inscribed with the words Faith, Hope and Charity on a background of

orange. It was the last letter I received from him. He died the day I got it. I still have it, it's all frayed but the message is crisp.

*Dear Cookie,
Yesterday when I talked to you on the phone, I didn't know what to say.... Yes you're right, all of us "high riskers" have been put through an incredible ordeal -- this is McCarthyism, a witch hunt, a "punishment" for being free thinkers, freedom fighters, for being "different."*

I think if you told kids that measles was caused by excessive masturbation, and were made to wear T shirts to school that said "contaminated" so that no one would sit near them or play with them, and then put in a hospital ward with other measles patients to have swollen glands ripped out, spots cut off, radiation bombardment, and tons of poison to kill the measles, all the while their parents telling them it serves them right, masturbation is a sin, they're gonna burn in hell, no allowance, no supper for a week, and the doctors telling them that it's the most fatal disease of the century... I think you could produce a large number of measles deaths.

Instead the child is kept at home, given ginger ale, jello, and chicken soup, and reassured by a loving

mother, whom they trust absolutely, that it's nothing serious and will go away in a few days -- and it does.

Our problem is that we are all alone in the cruelest of cruel societies with no one we love and trust absolutely.

All we really need is bread, water, love, and work that we enjoy and are good at, and an undying faith in and love of ourselves, our freedom and our dignity. All that stuff is practically free, so how come it's so hard to get -- and how come all these assholes and "professionals," friends and foes, family and complete strangers are always trying to convince us to follow their dumb rules, give up work in order to be a client of theirs, give up our freedom and dignity to increase their power and control?

I still don't want you to visit me here. I'm much worse, visually, than when you saw me last, so until I'm feeling stronger and looking better, let's leave it this way.

I hope this letter finds you in good spirits. I hope you're not upset that I don't want you to visit me. I wish you happiness, love, prosperity, and a limitless future.

I KNOW, I KNOW, I KNOW that somewhere there is a paradise and although I think it's really far away, I KNOW, I KNOW, I KNOW I'm

gonna get there, and when I do, you're gonna be one of the first people I'll send a postcard to with complete description of, and map for locating...

*Courage, bread,
and roses,
Gordon*

COOKIE MUELLER

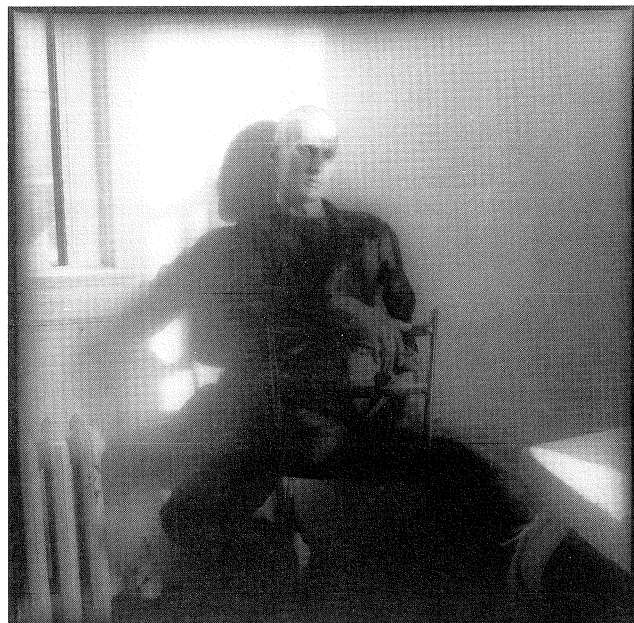
Cookie Mueller's essay first appeared in *City Lights Review*, No. 2, 1989, pp.51-52 and is reproduced here courtesy of City Lights Books, San Francisco.

DAVID ARMSTRONG

Born 1954
Lives in Watertown, MA

Kevin 1983
black and white photograph
16 x 20 inches

A prime motive for my photographs has always been to record the faces of the gay community. My own recovery from alcoholism and drug addiction occurring simultaneously with the AIDS-related illness and deaths of many friends has only served to strengthen that resolve.



TOM CHESLEY

Born 1951
Lives in Cambridge, MA

Time for Communion II
oil on canvas
68 x 64 inches

The objects in my personal vocabulary are in suspension, free from gravity. The bridge, the cage, the hospital bed, and the hospital all reoccur in my work and are always suspended in air. The recognizable objects in my painting represent the life of the resurrected. I've been near death and that experience stays close. I paint between yes and no and life and death. In the process of painting these images I have come to feel I am painting reality. Life as it is, and death as part of life. Through my own sense of resurrection and closeness to death, I feel close to the AIDS crisis.



DORIT CYPIS

Born 1951
Lives in Minneapolis, MN

"Yield" (the body) 1989
(with Linda Brooks, Ann Marsden,
Lyn Havebrick, Nan Goldin)

AIDS is symptomatic of a culture which has lost its "body". "Yield" (the body) is a step towards reclamation; a step towards surviving other's definition of my body; a step towards celebrating many bodies; a step towards recovery.



PHILIP-LORCA DI CORCIA

Born 1953
Lives in New York City

Vittorio 1989
Ektacolor print
20 x 24 inches

Max:
May 9, 1956-October 18, 1988;
Vittorio:
July 4, 1955-September 14, 1989



JANE DICKSON
Born 1952
Lives in New York City

Study for Processions 1989
ink on paper
11 1/2 x 15 inches each
Courtesy: Brooke Alexander Gallery

A chain of drunken friends threading through the New Year's Eve crowd holding hands - making me think of how we lead our lives, how we connect one to one, sharing disease, sharing health, sharing support.



CLARENCE ELIE-RIVERA

Born 1958
Lives in New York City

Freddie/Sophie 1989
C-print
16x20 inches

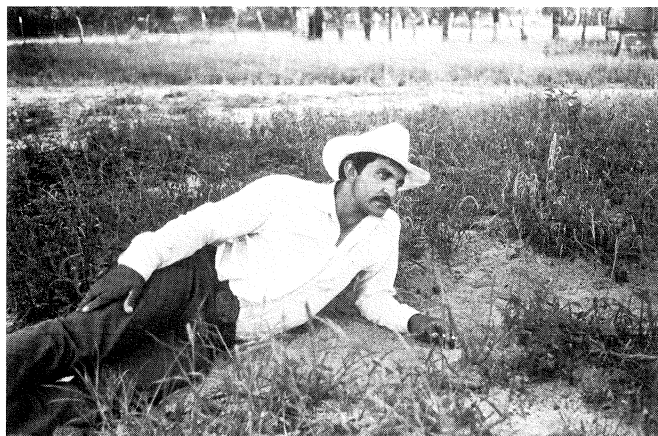
To die of natural causes has meant one died from something within. If that person "passes on" at a young age it is more difficult to accept the death. In Latino and Black communities, murder or drugs have been the leading causes of unnatural death for youth. Can we say AIDS is a natural cause of death?

DARREL ELLIS

Born 1958
Lives in Brooklyn, NY

*Self portrait after
photograph by Robert
Mapplethorpe 1989*
ink on paper
23 x 30 inches

*I struggle to resist the frozen images
of myself taken by Robert Mapple-
thorpe and Peter Hujar.
They haunt me.*



ALLEN FRAME

Born 1951
Lives in New York City

Rescue 1989
one of a pair,
black and white photographs
16x36 inches

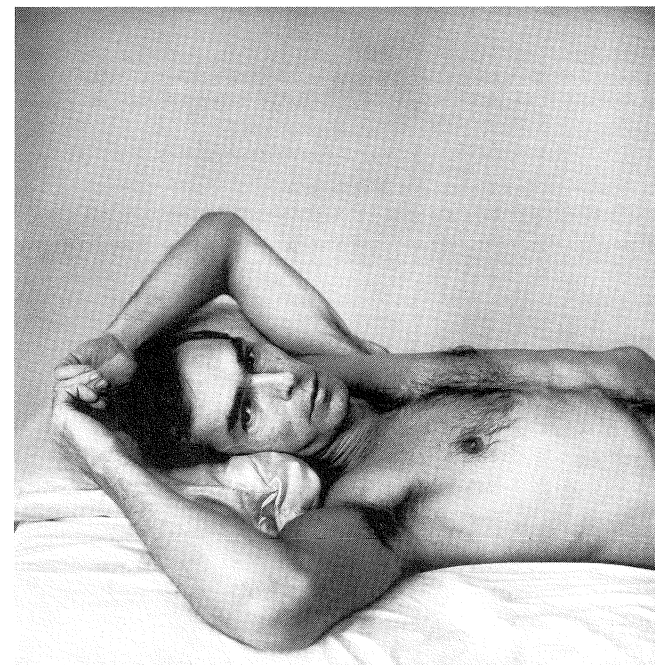
*In a matched pair of black and white
documentary portraits I suggest a
recent experience of vicarious
romance with my own boyfriend. In
another matched pair juxtaposing
photographs taken in the fifties with
photographs from the present, I look
for evidence of a continuum
of gay sensibility.*

PETER HUJAR

1934-1987
Died in New York City

Self Portrait Lying Down
black and white photograph
11 x 17 inches
Courtesy: Vince Aletti
Photo courtesy: The Estate of
Peter Hujar

*Peter Hujar was one of my mentors.
He was the quintessential portrait
photographer. He made photographs
directly from his own life, of the
friends he loved and of the objects of
his obsessions and erotic desire, with
a classical elegance. He photo-
graphed the human male body with
profound respect for its power and
vulnerability. His visual acuity was
apparent in his perfectionism about
the aesthetic surfaces of his images,
his sensitivity was obvious in the
depth of his revelations of his
subjects. He never mummified his
people but he often seemed to
hypnotize them. He captured people
at their most quiet and introspective,
externalizing their internal selves,
achieving that rare balance of
exposing the beauty of the flesh while
making visible the spirit. AIDS
robbed us of Peter's vitality
but not of his vision.*
--Nan Goldin

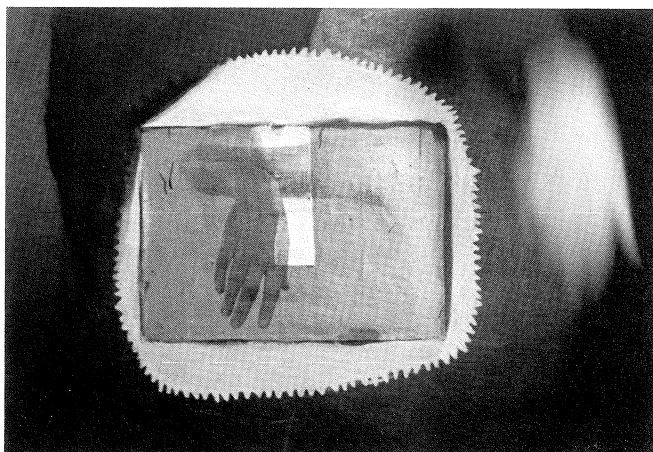
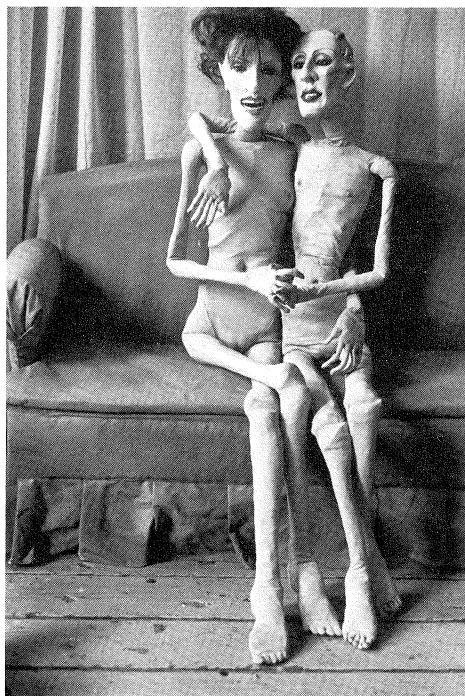


GREER LANKTON

Born 1958
Lives in New York City

Freddy and Ellen 1985
mixed media
7 feet high

Having watched so many friends die from AIDS has been like surgery without anesthesia. I have found it very difficult to relate my emotional responses to my art work. It seems like nothing I could make would adequately describe the grief I feel. The skins I have made are just mementos, like the skin we wear when we are alive becomes just a memento after we die.



SIOBHAN LIDDELL

Born 1965
Lives in London, UK

Untitled 1989 (detail)
oil on canvas
6 x 4 inches

My work is a search for clarity through residual memory. The act of doing is an act of discovery, an act of recovery, a process of uncovering. This painting reflects a sense of fragmentation, memories of loss, the endless shifting differences of sexuality; echoes of uncertainty.

MARK MORRISROE

1959-1989
Died in Jersey City, NJ

Self-portrait 1989
Polaroid
10x8 inches
Courtesy: Pat Hearn Gallery

They have stopped listening to me, so I wrote everything down in a note; who was trying to murder me and how, and then smashed the vase of flowers Pat Hearn sent me so I would have something to mutilate myself with by carving in my leg, 'evening nurses murdered me'; and I took the phone receiver and pummeled my face over and over and sprayed blood all over the walls and on this book; and then I took the butter pat from my dinner tray and greased up the note and stuffed it up my asshole so they would find it during my autopsy....

--Mark Morrisroe
January, 1989
(as excerpted from
Mark Morrisroe's biography
by Ramsey McPhillips)





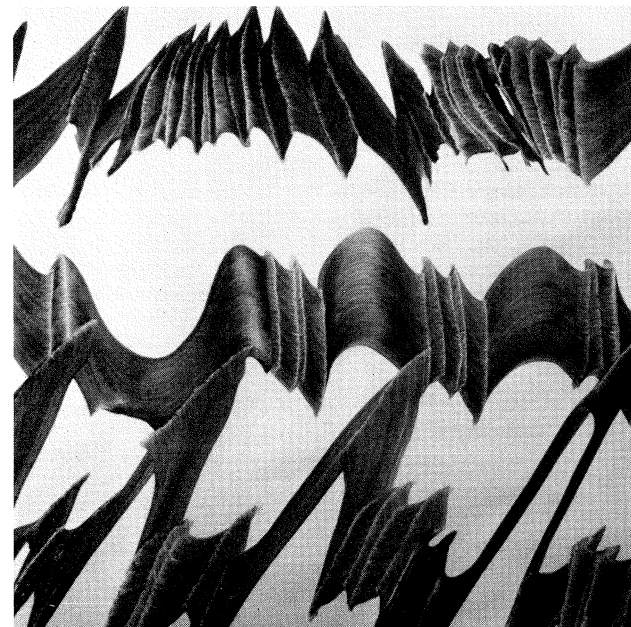
PERICO PASTOR

Born 1953
Lives in New York City/Barcelona

Time After Time 1989
watercolor on paper
15 x 117 inches

We've done it so many times. All the time, or a long time between times with plenty of time, or in no time at all. Sometimes we'll think we've made it, but time and again -- those times when we don't do it -- we'll be lost to each other, 'til the time comes when we make it again and again, time after time. We can be in each other and be lost in time

From a song by Maxine Sullivan
Lyrics by Sammy Cahn



JAMES NARES

Born 1953
Lives in New York City

Heartbeat 1988
oil on paper
Courtesy: Michael Klein Gallery

*You're with us,
we're with you.*

MARGO PELLETIER

Born 1951
Lives in North Bergen, NJ

Today 1989
charcoal and chalk on paper
38 x 50 inches

In the drawing Today I attempt to draw "the activity of concentrating" on living a full life after one finds he or she is HIV positive. Most of us, at some level, shun a deep emotional connectedness; an unleashed commitment to living, loving and working. I was thinking how this could amplify when hit so hard and constantly with one's mortality. The drawing is about the choice to go on, to "be in", to exist, to exchange, to continue with a high level of feeling. The drawing is an attempt to bring into vision the tremendous mental effort it must take, having this knowledge, to focus on today.



VITTORIO SCARPATI

1955-1989

Died in New York City

What Happened to My Lungs?

ink on paper

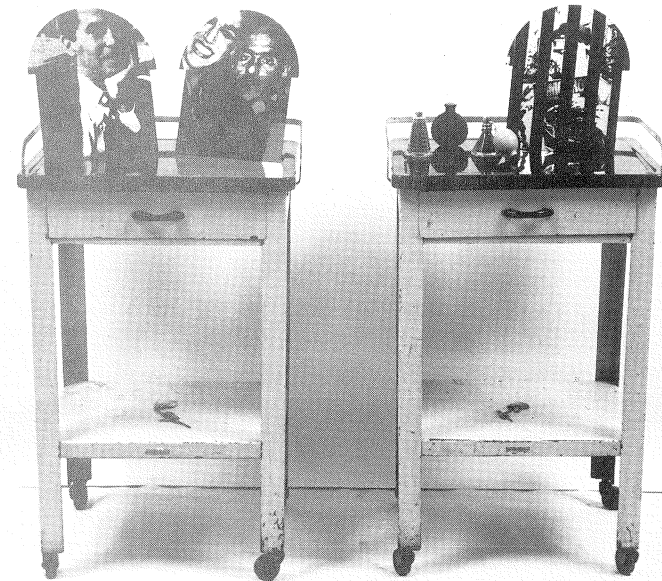
6x8 inches

Courtesy: 56 Bleeker Gallery

Vittorio Scarpati made these drawings while living in the hospital for months hooked up to machines to keep breathing after his lungs had

collapsed from AIDS-related pneumonia. Drawing became his outlet and his weapon for survival-- a way to help bear terrible pain and to sustain his sense of humor. These drawings are a visual diary of his days living in suspension, full of the mundane realities of illness and hospitalization and his memories, fantasies, and dreams. He has left behind an indelible record of his fight for life and given us a gift of wit and wisdom.

--Nan Goldin



JO SHANE

Born 1955

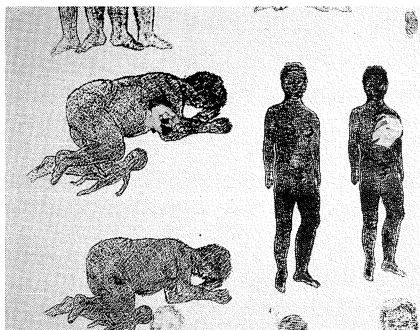
Lives in New York City

Permeable Membranes 1989

mixed media assemblage

45 x 47 x 17 inches

Memorials to Max diCorcia and Dennis Lopez; Permeable Membranes and Birdcage for Max (not pictured) also explore how memorialization transposed into nostalgia can create an imprisoning void of non-interaction. Nostalgia, as such, has been used to deny every human beings' vulnerability to HIV, ARC, AIDS and AIDS engendered loss. This work is shown in hopes of provoking an involvement with living people who are immuno-deficient and promoting participation in working towards a solution. None of us is exempt.



KIKI SMITH

Born 1954
Lives in New York City

All Our Sisters 1989
silkscreen on muslin
58x112 inches
Courtesy: Fawbush Gallery

All Our Sisters is a companion piece to one I made for the AIDS quilt in memory of the many thousands of women disappeared by AIDS. The Paper Body hovers near the ceiling as a presence of absence like the many souls of my community dead from AIDS alive in me.

JANET STEIN

Born 1955
Lives in New York City

Queen B. Easy Chair Dress 1989
mixed media

I'm interested in the metaphoric possibilities of a well dressed chair, and its beckoning promise of comfort. However, I created a hybrid and elevated it. It's been given an interior and I've crossed the language of shelter with that of the human facade.

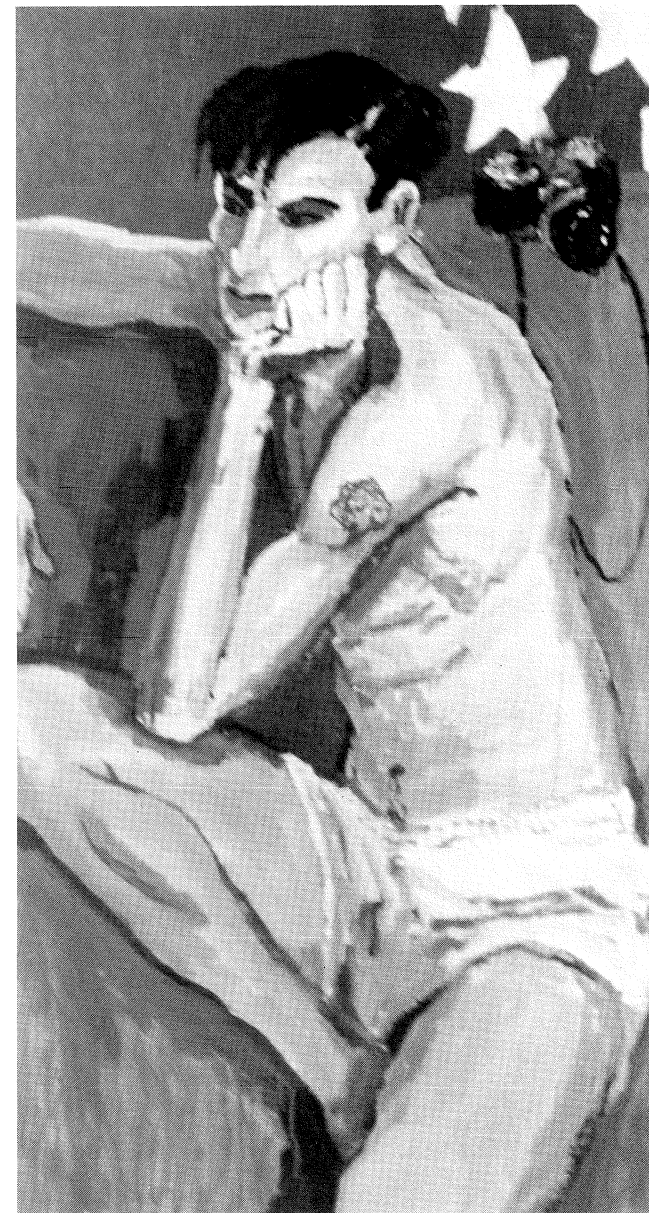


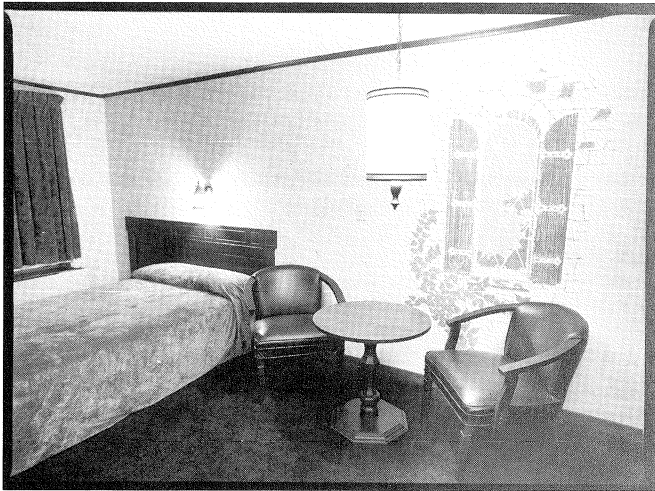
TABBOO! STEPHEN TASHJIAN

Born 1959
Lives in New York City

Portrait of Mark Morrisroe
1985-86
acrylic on canvas

Portrait of Mark Morrisroe and You can't pre guess when it's gonna strike, but baby when it does... deal with AIDS as an inescapable subject that is bound to rear its head in the subject matter of my paintings.





SHELLBURNE THURBER

Born 1949
Lives in Boston, MA

Motel Room 1987
Ektacolor print
20 x 24 inches

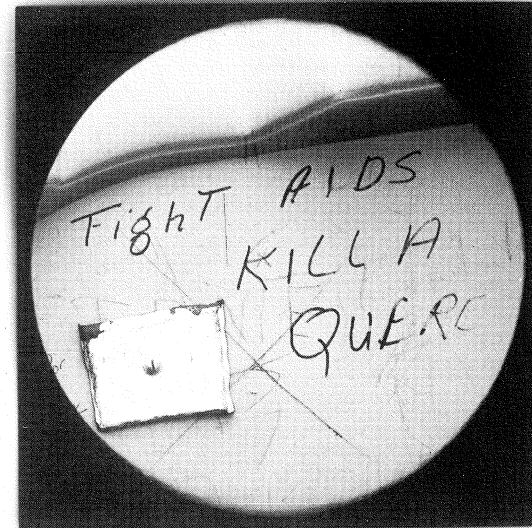
A bedroom speaks of intimacy-- the intimacy of dreams, of secrets kept under wraps during the day and allowed to surface at night, of sex. These particular bedrooms, in their emptiness and desolate anonymity, also speak of loss - spaces once occupied, now stripped of any vestige of the humanity that briefly resided in them. AIDS has left empty spaces in many lives including my own. Hopefully these images help to convey some sense of the implacable finality associated with this loss.

KEN TISA
Born 1945
Lives in New York City

Why Not Now 1986
acrylic on cotton
28 x 30 inches

Courtesy: Alexander Wood Gallery

The death of loved ones is painful and transformational. The void in one's life after is unbearable. My paintings are about the search for the spirit and the evolution the soul goes through as it passes from the physical to the metaphysical.



DAVID WOJNAROWICZ

Born 1954
Lives in New York City

america 1989
black and white photograph
8x10 inches
Courtesy: PPOW Gallery

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