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June 15–August 11, 2017

VOICE = SURVIVAL examines voice as a medium and a metaphor used by artists and activists confronting oppression amid the ongoing HIV/AIDS epidemic. The multidisciplinary exhibition features work and archival materials by ACT UP, Jordan Arseneault and PosterVirus, Yann Beauvais, Mykki Blanco and Adinah Dancyger, Chloe Dzubilo, Gran Fury, Andrea Geyer and Sharon Hayes, Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Gustavo Vazquez,

Shan Kelley, Audre Lorde, Donald Moffett, Pat Parker, Bob Rafsky, Kameelah Janan Rasheed, Marlon Riggs, LJ Roberts, James Romberger and Marguerite Van Cook, Vito Russo, Kiki Smith, Ultra-red, Rosa von Praunheim, and David Wojnarowicz. Curated by Claudia Maria Carrera and Adrian Geraldo Saldaña for Visual AIDS. *VOICE = SURVIVAL* is presented by the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation at The 8th Floor.

VOICE = SURVIVAL

ACT UP

Jordan Arseneault and PosterVirus

yann beauvais

Mykki Blanco and Adinah Dancyger

Chloe Dzubilo

Gran Fury

Andrea Geyer and Sharon Hayes

Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Gustavo Vazquez

Shan Kelley

Audre Lorde

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Kameelah Janan Rasheed

Marlon Riggs

LJ Roberts

James Romberger and Marguerite Van Cook

Vito Russo

Kiki Smith

Ultra-red

Rosa von Praunheim

David Wojnarowicz

Curated by Claudia Maria Carrera
and Adrian Geraldo Saldaña

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SILENCE = DEATH

Adrian Geraldo Saldaña

SILENCE = DEATH. This powerful equation, beneath a pink triangle against a black backdrop, began appearing on posters wheatpasted around Manhattan in early 1987. Small white text at the base of the poster pointedly questioned the failure of political, medical, and religious establishments to address the AIDS crisis; followed by a series of directives:

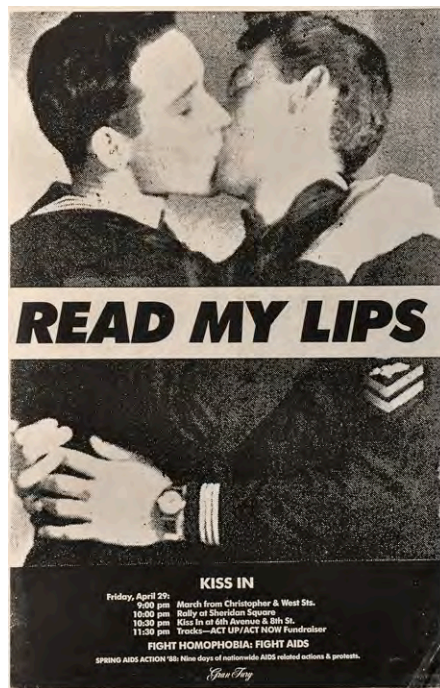
Use your power...Vote...Boycott...Defend yourselves...Turn anger, fear, grief into action.

The design from 1986 grew from the discussions and consciousness-raising efforts of the SILENCE = DEATH Project, a group of six gay activists—Avram Finkelstein, Brian Howard, Oliver Johnston (d.1990), Charles Kreloff, Christopher Lione, Jorge Socarrás. Each element was carefully chosen to provoke discussion and direct action in the LGBTQ community amid the rising numbers of AIDS-related deaths, which by the end of 1986 had reached nearly 25,000 in the U.S.

The SILENCE = DEATH graphic would become emblematic of ACT UP, serving as a worldwide call to protest and advocacy in stark contrast to government inaction and stigmatizing media coverage. It inspired a range of interpretive reframings, such as ACTION = LIFE and IGNORANCE = FEAR. It also spread across borders and languages, as with the multilingual SILENCE = MORT by ACT UP Vancouver that highlights the impact of AIDS on communities across the globe. In the same tradition of open-sourced reimagining, the



ACT UP
Silence = Mort



title of this exhibition, *VOICE = SURVIVAL*, resets both sides of the original equation, proposing a relationship between vocal empowerment and existence.

Gran Fury placed the bigotry and silence of political and religious figures within a frame of historical accountability with the ACT UP NY/Gran Fury 1987 installation *Let the Record Show*, exhibited in the window of the New Museum, organized by curator William Olander, one of Visual AIDS' co-founders. Using familiar commercial formats, the collective's clever manipulation of textual and graphic elements disrupted the dominance of prevailing systems that marginalized populations most affected by AIDS. Gran Fury's *Read My Lips* (1988) series appropriated and eroticized President George H.W. Bush's well-known campaign line "Read my lips: no new taxes." The posters featured images of same-sex desire to publicize a queer kiss-in on Sixth Avenue and emphasize that kissing does not transmit the HIV virus. Agitprop groups like Gran Fury proved that provocative messaging could be the most successful way to confront the homophobia

Gran Fury
Read My Lips (women), 1988

Gran Fury
Read My Lips (men), 1988

underpinning public indifference and outright aggression towards the AIDS community. The activists knew that controversy surrounding their campaigns would fuel the media coverage they needed to spread awareness of their cause.

Donald Moffett produced the iconic *He Kills Me* poster using bold, graphic elements in an op-art style. The poster condemns President Reagan's persistent silence on the AIDS epidemic during its early years and throughout his administration. By turning the ironic phrase into a literal statement, Moffett places the blame for American deaths squarely on Reagan. Both the represented target and its metaphoric testimony to physical vulnerability still resonate today amid the symbolism and slogans used by contemporary activist groups, such as Black Lives Matter.

Activist and writer Vito Russo authored *The Celluloid Closet* (1995), on the portrayal of gay and transgender characters in Hollywood film, and co-founded GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) in response to the *New York Post's* scurrilous and sensationalized AIDS coverage.

Donald Moffett
He Kills Me, 1987

Russo delivered his impassioned speech “Why We Fight” at the New York State Capitol in Albany, on May 9, 1988. Denouncing the erasure of queer humanity, Russo also envisioned a future without AIDS:

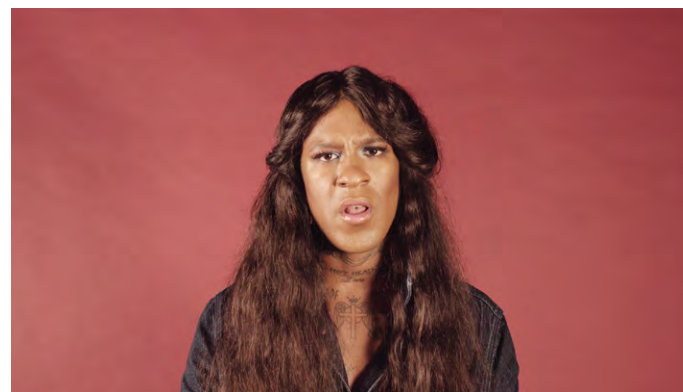
Two and a half years ago, I picked up *Life Magazine*, and I read an editorial, which said, “It’s time to pay attention, because this disease is now beginning to strike the rest of us.” It was as if I wasn’t the one holding the magazine in my hand. And since then, nothing has changed to alter the perception that AIDS is not happening to the “real people” in this country.

...Someday, the AIDS crisis will be over. Remember that. And when that day comes—when that day has come and gone, there’ll be people alive on this earth—gay people and straight people, men and women, black and white, who will hear the story that once there was a terrible disease in this country and all over the world, and that a brave group of people stood up and fought and, in some cases, gave their lives, so that other people might live and be free.

When Bob Rafsky heckled Bill Clinton at a fundraiser in 1992, he and Clinton’s now well-known rejoinder, “I feel your pain,” made national news. The incident also prompted a meeting two days later between the presidential candidate and members of ACT UP to discuss Clinton’s AIDS policies. On the eve of the election later that year, ACT UP carried the corpse of Mark Lowe Fisher, Rafsky’s partner, to the reelection campaign office of George H.W. Bush in Midtown Manhattan. There, he delivered a powerful eulogy honoring Fisher’s wish to be buried “furiously,” while placing a hex on President Bush.

This isn’t a political funeral for Mark. It’s a political funeral for the man who killed him, and so many others, and is slowly killing me: whose name curls my tongue and curdles my breath.

George Bush, we believe you’ll be defeated tomorrow because we believe there’s still some justice left in the universe, and some compassion left in the American people. But whether or not you are—here and now—standing by Mark’s body, we put this curse on you. Mark’s spirit will haunt



Mykki Blanco and Adinah Dancyger
stills from *I Want a Dyke For President*,
2016

you until the end of your days. So that, in the moment of your defeat—you'll remember our defeats, and in the moment of your death—you'll remember our deaths.

In that same election year, Zoe Leonard was motivated to write the text *I want a president*. In it, she proposes a variety of disempowered people as candidates, suggesting marginalization as a prerequisite, rather than a disqualification, for holding the most powerful office in the world. The work was adapted by filmmaker Adinah Dancyger during the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election, in *I Want a Dyke For President* (2016). The performance by Mykki Blanco, a genderqueer, HIV positive performance artist and rapper, circulated widely online, demonstrating the continuing resonance of Leonard's words for a new generation of activist artists.

Attesting to the historic erasure of violence against black people from political and social narratives, Kameelah Janan Rasheed's text-based series *How to Suffer Politely (And Other Etiquette)*, 2014 satirically appropriates the structure of etiquette guides and advice columns. *Lower the Pitch of Your Suffering* and *Tell Your Struggle with Triumphant Humor* reveal the politics of politeness rooted in white supremacy and heteropatriarchy. The implication of this politeness is that the violence enacted against oppressed groups cannot be named because it makes those in power feel uncomfortable, and possibly accountable for that violence. She writes, "Performing perfect victimhood demands that we suffer politely and not call attention to the systems that weigh on our daily lives. The violence... is also the expectation of silence, cooperation and smiling after the harm." In turn, Rasheed's naming emphasizes the necessity of shedding light on this problematic practice.

The exhibition highlights two black lesbian activists whose writing frames language and activism as crucial to survival. Audre Lorde, the West Indian-American essayist, feminist, and self-described "warrior poet," dedicated her life and creative work to confronting oppression around gender, sexual orientation and race. In her speech, *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action* (1977), she reflects on the relationship between silence and fear. Lorde begins by describing the period between hearing she has a tumor in her breast and an exploratory surgery three weeks later. Prompted to reflect on and completely reorganize her life, Lorde realized her greatest regret was remaining silent out of fear. She traced this fear to the vulnerability, and potential violence, that can arise from increased visibility as a



**LOWER
THE
PITCH
OF YOUR
SUFFERING**

Kameelah Janan Rasheed
Lower the Pitch of Your Suffering
from the series *How to Suffer*
Politely (And Other Etiquette), 2014

TELL YOUR STRUGGLE WITH TRIUMPHANT HUMOR

Kameelah Janan Rasheed
*Tell Your Struggle with Triumphant
Humor* from the series *How to Suffer
Politely (And Other Etiquette)*, 2014

minority. She reasoned that remaining silent had not protected her from pain, as it wouldn't protect her from death, and chose instead to speak out, transforming vulnerability into strength:

For we have been socialized to respect fear far more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury, that epiphany of fearlessness, the silence will choke us to death.

The fact that we are here and that I speak, even now, these words are an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us. For it is not difference that immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken.

A contemporary of Lorde, Pat Parker gained prominence in the 1970's with her singular style of feminist poetry addressing issues such as racism, lesbian sex, motherhood, and gender-based violence. Living as an out and proud lesbian of color shaped her revolutionary voice. At the opening event for the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights in 1979, Parker delivered her powerful poem *Where Will You Be When They Come*, invoking the legacy of the Holocaust to demonstrate the need for queer solidarity to prevent a gradual stripping of civil rights. Parker condemns the politics of respectability promoted by some in the LGBTQ community, cautioning that distinctions of class, race, and butch/femme will not matter when homophobia is legitimized and institutionalized. Her message resonates powerfully in a moment when the rights of LGBTQ communities continue to be violated and rescinded, despite decades of activism focused on the "respectable" goal of marriage equality:

Everytime we heard
"Who I go to bed with
is my personal choice—
It's personal not political"
and said nothing—
It was an act of perversion.

Everytime we let straight relatives
bury our dead and push our
lovers away—
It was an act of perversion.

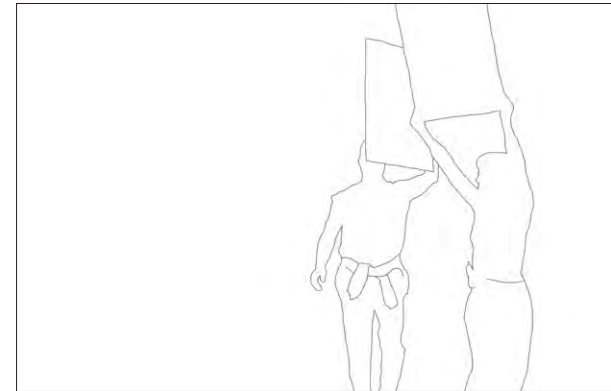
...

They will come for
the perverts
and where will
you be
When they come?

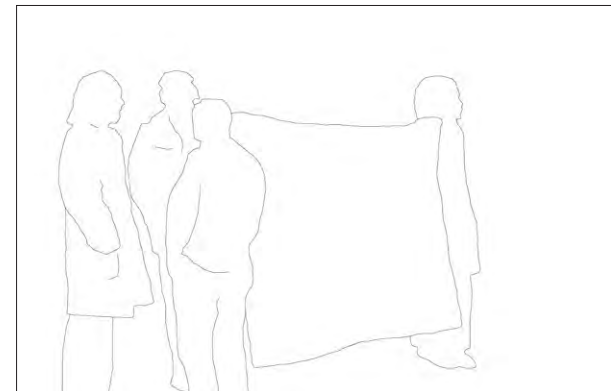
Parker's call is echoed in the collaborative piece *In Times Like These, Only Criminals Remain Silent* (2005), by artists Sharon Hayes and Andrea Geyer. Created during the administration of George W. Bush, the work is comprised of five double-sided posters that fold to form a newspaper. On the front side of each page is a line drawing depicting street protest with the details omitted, allowing the viewer to insert any number of social causes into the scene. The reverse features a litany of interrogative questions that draw out the layers of political identity, authenticity, and subjectivity that motivate activism. Intended to circulate between the public and private spheres in their newspaper form, these posters establish protest and mobilization as central to the function of democracy, regardless of cause.

Also produced during the second Bush administration, the audio works by sound collective Ultra-red exhibit a similar need for continual activism amid the departure of AIDS reporting from mainstream media. Founded in 1994 by AIDS activists and sound artists, Ultra-red includes an international roster of visual artists, social researchers, and organizers affiliated with diverse movements such as im/migrants' rights, affordable housing, sexual and gender rights, and struggles against racism and poverty. While investigating the contribution of experimental sound art to political organizing, the collective emphasizes the structures of listening through conceptually-derived performance protocols. In 2006, they released a collection of site recordings and audio remixes titled *An Archive of Silence*. The project reflects on the AIDS activist strategies of the past, "interrogat[ing] the record of those actions and practices, listening for some remainder haunting the present, to act as a kernel for a new radicality... This is the art of a broken silence."

Their 8-channel sound installation, *Untitled (for multiple voices)*, 2010, is assembled from seven performances of *SILENT/LISTEN* (2005–2006), a museum-based project the collective describes as "a series of public meetings designed to build a record of the past, present and future trajectories of the AIDS crisis on a local basis." In excavating the memory from that period of activism, Ultra-red acknowledges its absence from the public sphere, which has gravitated towards marriage equality in the U.S.

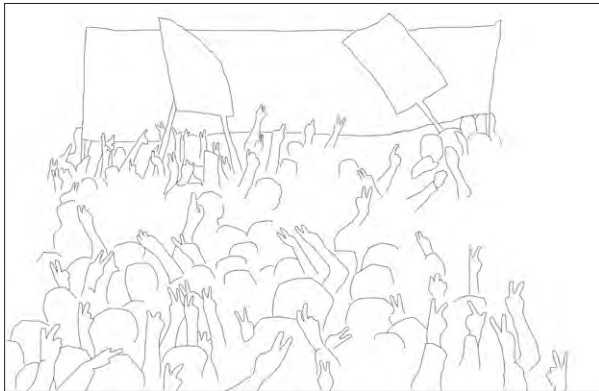


Have you ever taken a poll before? Do you have one opinion or many opinions? Do you feel that some people have opinions about almost everything, other people have opinions about just some things, and still other people have very few opinions? What about you? Would you say polls are very useful or not useful at all? Do you pay a lot of attention to the results of polls or none at all? Do you talk to people, read the newspaper, or watch TV? How many days in the past week did you watch the national network news on TV? How long does it take for you to form your opinion? Do you think your opinions are heard or that no one listens to you? Are you a part of something called public opinion? Do you think you learn more talking with one person or talking with a crowd of people? Do you listen to other people's opinion or do you shut your ears? Do you value the opinion of an ordinary person more, less, or the same as that of an expert? Has someone else's opinion about an election influenced the way you've voted once, twice, many times, or not at all? How do you feel when an opinion is voiced loudly or repetitively? How do you feel when someone refuses to offer an opinion? In general, would you say that your opinion has changed a lot, a little, or not much in the last 10 years? Do you know why it changed or is it a complete mystery? Have you ever offered your opinion to someone without being asked to do so? Have you ever had to listen to someone's opinion against your will? Do you often remain silent? Are you intimidated a lot, a little, or not at all? Do you think that when most people are speaking they are giving an opinion or speaking the truth? What does the statement "speak your mind" mean to you? Is it more important to speak or to be heard? Do you agree that the truth about a specific issue lies between the many opinions on that issue? Does it matter to agree? How do you handle alienation? How often would you say you've felt afraid, very often, fairly often, occasionally, or rarely? Do you feel you can merge in a crowd? Do you feel you are an independent thinker? Do you make up your mind and just do things? A lot or a little? Often or rarely?



Andrea Geyer and Sharon Hayes
*In Times Like These, Only Criminals
Remain Silent*, 2005

What do you believe in? Do you believe in justice? What about love? Do you believe in God? Do you believe in a Supreme Being? How many Goddesses do you believe in? Do you think the spirit helps us recognize truth? Are you very religious? What part did religion play in your family? Do you think families can be together forever? Did you go to religious services on a regular basis? Do you remember the first time you prayed? Do you remember the first story told? Do you believe in the mother creator? Do you take Saturday off? Do you take Sunday off? Why is it wrong to eat meat today? Are you covered? Are you wearing your Sunday's best? Is the body something to be rigidly disciplined or something to be pampered? Where do you feel safe? Are you still religious? Are you loyal? Are you loyal to the law? Are you loyal to your god? Are you loyal to your family? Are you loyal to your government? Do you read the Qur'an? What else do you read? Do you feel prepared? Do you know the scripts intimately? Do you understand? Do you think the holy ghost helps us recognize truth? Do you ask questions? Do you tell? Do you listen? But truly, do you know? What does religion do for us? What does it do for you? How do you achieve enlightenment? Do you feel it? Do you let yourself be moved by the breath? Does belief keep you alive? Are you psychic? What is the difference between thinking and believing? Do you know why this day is different from all the rest? Do you follow? Do you use other people's sacred ceremonies? Do you abuse other people's spiritual practices? Do you smoke a pipe? Are you aware of the border? Do you have faith? How do you survive? Do you see the end? Do you see the beginning? Do you believe in paradise? Do you believe in life after death? Do you believe in sacrifice? Do you believe in authority? Why are some people reborn in happy destinations and others are reborn in unhappy destinations? Do others call you spiritual? Do you ever mourn? Do you celebrate? Do you believe in angels? Have you ever felt the presence of a ghost? Do you avoid sacred places? Holy sites? Do you go there? With whom?



Who are you with? Are you with a group? Why are you here? Who do you speak for? What do you stand for? Can you identify yourself? Where do you live? Have you lived there for more than 2 years? Where do you work? How much money do you make? Can I see your badge? Do you have documentation? Who do you represent? Are you authorized to make decisions? Who is the spokesperson for your group? How will I know who is who? You are authorized to speak on behalf of whom? Who do you report to? Do you have a partner? Why are you by yourself? Are you nervous? Why are you acting suspicious? What do you want? Do you have a permit? Why are you asking me these questions? Are you qualified? Where are your manners? Where are your values? Do you have a goal? And why are you here? Did you read the report? What do you believe in? What do you know? Why then did you stay? Do you know your rights? Are you prepared? Do you understand your responsibility? Are you taking responsibility? What are your duties? What are you trying to do? Are you taking a position? Can you take my position? Can you sit here? Are you a witness? Are you a victim? How are you organized? Are you a member of a party? What are you looking for? Who told you to say that? Don't you think I know my rights? What are your politics? Are you active? Who are you speaking to? Do you think your actions have consequences? Why don't you turn around? Are you speaking to me? What does it mean to express yourself? Whose interests are you speaking for when you talk? Were you told to represent those interests? Are you an investor? Are you clever? Are you proud? Do you prefer to be around like-minded people? Do you have friends? Do you agree with everyone? Do you talk or do you act? Do you follow others? Do you take the lead? Why are you upset? Are you complaining? Do you complain regularly? Who do you complain to? Are you considerate in your choices? Do you find it easy to be impartial? Would you call yourself a group? Do see yourself as one, two or more? Would you call yourself a crowd or an audience?

Andrea Geyer and Sharon Hayes
*In Times Like These, Only Criminals
 Remain Silent*, 2005

In recent years, new conversations around living with HIV have emerged using web-based modes of communication alongside traditional street art tactics. PosterVirus, a public art intervention founded by Alex McClelland and Jessica Whitbread as an affiliated project of AIDS Action Now, develops artist designed poster-based responses to contemporary issues around HIV, such as undetectable viral loads and PrEP. McClelland and Whitbread then circulate the posters throughout Canadian cities, as well as online through postervirus.tumblr.com.

As PosterVirus, they partnered with performance artist Jordan Arsenault, adapting a line from his poem "The New Equation" to create the bilingual posters *Silence = Sex* and *Silence = Sexe* (2012). It denounces the contemporary pressures underlying increasing rates of transmission in young men who have sex with men, ranging from hypocritical serophobia (the fear of those living with HIV) within radical queer communities, to punitive legislation in the U.S. and Canada requiring people living with HIV to disclose their status to sex partners. Arsenault employs the original SILENCE = DEATH design to promote ongoing dialogue around disclosure and stigma, affirming that the activist strategies supported by the original poster live on in new permutations. Discussion, text, and language remain, and so does resistance against silencing in its many insidious forms—censorship, cultural amnesia, stigma, marginalization.

VOICE = SURVIVAL

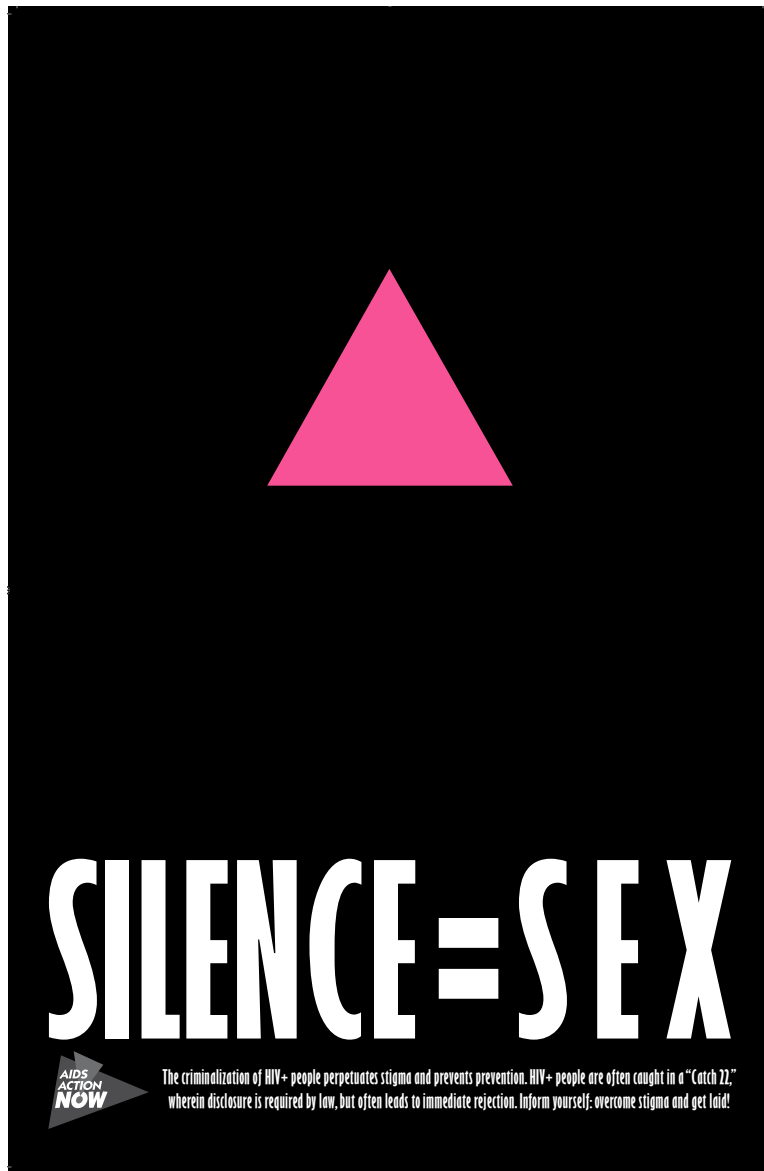
Claudia Maria Carrera

When the Living Can No Longer Speak, the Dead May Speak for Them¹

From the onset of the AIDS epidemic to the present day, the fight for survival through outspoken activism and communal connectivity has been accompanied by continual illness and death that threatens to fracture communities through the overwhelming experience of absence and loss. In the early 1990s, when a rapidly mounting death toll was spreading despair among activists, the voice emerged as a tool to enable a spiritual form of survival beyond the borders of life itself, queering normative experiences of time and space to make room among the living for the presence of the deceased.

This process is exemplified in Bob Rafsky's *Eulogy for Mark Fisher* (1992). Rafsky, a member of ACT UP NY, delivered the speech at the political funeral of his partner Mark Fisher, a central activist in the movement who had requested a protest to mark his death in his written statement "Bury Me Furiously." Rafsky's eulogy thematizes the potential of the voice to transcend death while calling for the use of activism to prolong life.

Rafsky's mobilization of the voice as both a medium and a metaphor functioned to extend Fisher's vocality beyond death, rendering the voice a site of absent presence and ghostly survival that enabled the presence of the dead to be felt during a period of mounting despair. This affective transformation challenged the disruptive effects of death on



Jordan Arseneault for PosterVirus
Silence = Sex, 2012



the collective effort to fight the epidemic, enabling a form of survival not only for ACT UP's individual members but for the movement itself.

This remarkable speech is only accessible today thanks to multiple stages of archival activism. The speech was filmed by James Wentzy for DIVA TV, one of several efforts developed by activist videographers in the 1980s and '90s to document and publicize the unfolding movement to fight AIDS. After years of scattered storage, this videotape and countless others collected through *The AIDS Activist Video Project*, a massive preservation effort spearheaded by Jim Hubbard, were rehoused at the New York Public Library in the early 2000s. More recently, the footage was digitized by David France, and since 2012 has recirculated through two documentary films, France's *How to Survive a Plague* and Hubbard's *United in Anger*. This multi-step process reflects a strong commitment by AIDS activists to preserve, historicize, and disseminate voices that would otherwise be lost to us today.

Take the Absence of a Human Being and Make Them Somehow Physical?

The potential of a human voice like Rafsky's to persist and circulate beyond absence or death relies on the continued stewardship of survivors. Several works in this exhibition frame communal care as essential to survival, both in life

Bob Rafsky
Eulogy for Mark Fisher, 1992



and after death, and in many cases have resulted from the efforts of artists and activists to preserve essential elements of voices from the past. In the context of AIDS, the practices of portraiture and memorialization function as powerful acts of resistance to erasure.

An intimate portrait of David Wojnarowicz emerges from the comic book *7 Miles a Second* (1996), illustrated by James Romberger and colored by Marguerite Van Cook. Developed in collaboration with Wojnarowicz before his death and completed by Romberger and Van Cook afterwards, the work uses Wojnarowicz's own writing to disseminate his words, ideas, and life story in a vivid and accessible manner. Set against the saturated backdrop of seedy 1970s New York City, his description of his life as a child sex worker and then a person living

David Wojnarowicz,
James Romberger
and Marguerite Van Cook
page from *7 Miles a Second*, 1996



with AIDS is raw and highly personal. Hallucination and dream sequences powerfully communicate the surreal and alienating experience of witnessing loved ones' bodies succumbing to disease, and feeling one's physical self deteriorate while combatting a victim-blaming rhetoric with resonant rage.

The pages displayed in the exhibition feature Wojnarowicz's poignant reflections on the potentials and pitfalls of the voice—especially as mediated by technology—when seeking connection and relief in the midst of intense illness. One caption declares, “I wish I could dial the telephone and speak to my dead friends,” while the panels behind it show him letting a call go to his answering machine because he feels “dizzy and fucked up from a jaw infection,” and anyway “it aggravates [him] to speak to people with a degree of normalcy to their lives.” Another spread depicts Wojnarowicz turning on the TV “to try to get some focus outside of my illness,” only to be confronted with a talking head spewing hateful narratives about people with AIDS. Yet these accounts of the failures of vocal communication themselves are articulated clearly, thanks to the careful renderings of Romberger and Van Cook.

As reflected by his involvement in developing *7 Miles a Second*, Wojnarowicz thought deeply about the politics of preservation in relation to the voice throughout the final years of his life, saying “I think what I really fear about death is the silencing of my voice—I feel this incredible pressure to leave something of myself behind.” In audio recording, he found a powerful means of confronting the continual and compounding losses of the AIDS epidemic. Always sensitive to the ephemerality of experience and precarity of existence, he maintained a practice of recording sounds and soundscapes to preserve impressions and experiences, and sporadically created “audio journals” to document his thoughts, feelings,

David Wojnarowicz
audio cassette tapes,
1987–89 and undated

and dreams in a fluid, spontaneous way. As friends fell ill in the 1980s, he began interviewing them and their loved ones as a means of preserving their voices in perpetuity.

Inspired by this practice, an arrangement of audio recordings drawn from the David Wojnarowicz Papers at the NYU Fales Library & Special Collections for *VOICE = SURVIVAL* creates a sonic portrait of the artist out of his own practices of audio documentation. The selections, which play through recording devices of the period, center around the death of Wojnarowicz's mentor and former lover Peter Hujar, perhaps the most profound loss he faced. In the installation, his intimate, light-hearted interview of an ill Hujar about his photography career plays from a shoebox recorder, while a handheld recorder plays an audio journal created one year after Hujar's death, in which Wojnarowicz discusses his feelings about living in Hujar's apartment while experiencing similar symptoms to those Hujar had described. Nearby, an answering machine plays voice messages from a tape labeled “Time period of Pete's death” that features a broad array of people's voices coordinating hospital visits and expressing collective concern about Hujar, and later Wojnarowicz.

This sound installation aims to memorialize the artist through his own efforts to memorialize others. Of the affective power of sound to preserve one's presence beyond death, Wojnarowicz wrote, “I have loved the way memorials take the absence of a human being and make them somehow physical with the use of sound.” Much like the effect at the close of Rafsky's speech, the voices of Wojnarowicz's community carry forward his own, enacting its own kind of queered temporality and spatiality while testifying to the communal networks of care that enabled survival and eased passing.

LJ Roberts's work *Portrait of Deb from 1988–199?* (2012–2013) exemplifies the deep effort and care involved in bringing an archive to life. The artist uses the painstaking practice of single-strand embroidery to create a highly unique portrait of one person's history of activism. In 2011, Roberts was given an archive of activist buttons, stickers, and other ephemera belonging to a friend's ex-partner, who had been active in ACT UP-NY, the Women's Health Action Mobilization, and the Lesbian Avengers from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s. Inspired by the materials, Roberts sewed together a rich representation of the network of intersectional politics for which Deb advocated.

Shan Kelley's text-based piece *Self-Portrait* (2013) turns to the future instead of the past, addressing itself to viewers with a plea for communal care. It reflects the persistence of Wojnarowicz's own desire to “leave something of [himself]



LJ Roberts
Portrait of Deb from 1988–1997, 2012–13

behind,” a concern among a younger generation of HIV+ artists. With each letter of the title imprinted through light exposure on a separate cyanotype, the piece highlights the potential for traces of one’s voice and agency to survive beyond one’s lifespan.

*The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action*³

Several works explore the empowering capacity of the voice to express subjective experience, communal identity, and critical analysis as a means of breaking through isolation and internalized oppression. By calling out hate speech that induces silence and overcoming the fear to speak out on behalf of oneself and one’s community, the works in the exhibition break down taboos and connect people to create recognition, pride, and collectivity.

German filmmaker Rosa von Praunheim’s documentary *Silence = Death* (1990) confronted the culture of silence around the early AIDS crisis by revealing the responses of HIV+ artists in 1980s New York. The iconic image of Wojnarowicz with lips sewn shut on the film poster sets the stage for vocal performances by Wojnarowicz and singer Diamanda Galas that rage against the social forces behind such adversity. Through wracking shouts and cries, the artists attack the theocratic ideologies underlying the processes of moralistic othering and fear-mongering that enabled the pandemic to flourish by rendering certain lives expendable. Tracing the proliferation of these discourses from the Old Testament chapter of Leviticus to the political and religious leaders of the 1980s and ’90s, these passionate performances suggest that the most appropriate response to the “murderous” hate fueling “this killing machine called America,” as Wojnarowicz put it, may in fact be violence, in vocalization if not action.

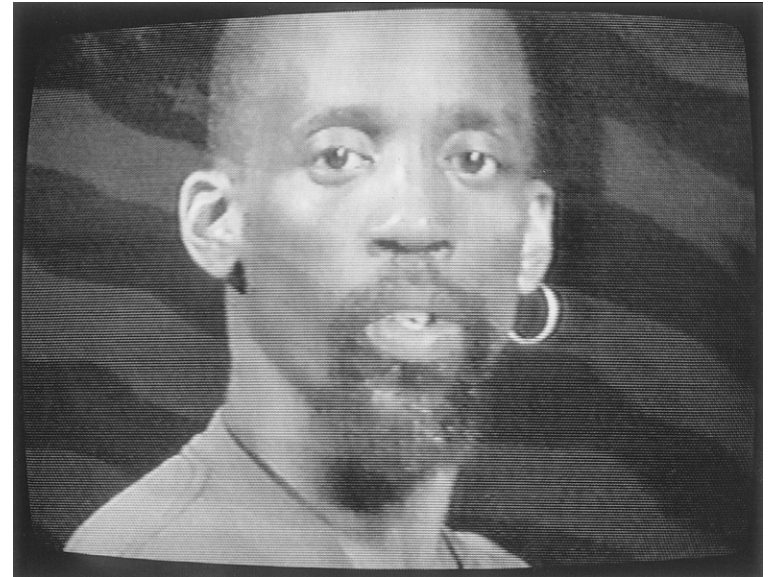
Tongues Untied (1989) by Marlon Riggs focuses instead on the subjective experience, exploring the impacts of speech—both liberatory and hateful—and silence—both protective and oppressive—on the black gay experience in the context of the early AIDS crisis. Using a collage aesthetic, the film blends together autobiographical monologues by Riggs and poetic performances by other black gay writers, archival footage and performative enactments of homophobic hate speech in the black community, and documentary recordings of black queer discussion groups and protest marches. Through these varied modes of verbal expression, *Tongues Untied* traces the empowerment of moving past shame and fear to embrace one’s intersectional identity with communal pride and speak one’s truth with “tongues untied.”



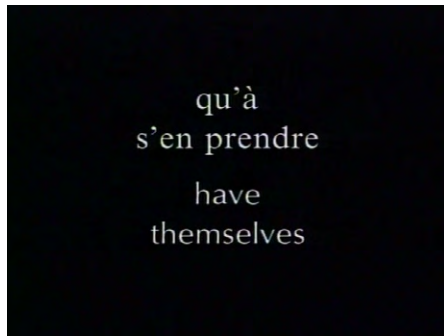
Rosa von Praunheim
stills from *Silence = Death*, 1990



Marlon Riggs
still from *Tongues Untied*, 1989



Marlon Riggs
still from *Anthem*, 1991



Anthem (1991) by Marlon Riggs, *Still Life* (1997) by Yann Beauvais, and *A Declaration of Poetic Disobedience* (2005) by Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Gustavo Vazquez explore the potential of language both to enforce and to challenge the global systems of oppression that enabled the pandemic to spread. Through animated text, poetic declamation, chanting, song, and dance, these short films re/claim suppressed and alternative modes of communication to confront slavery, settler colonialism, and the very concept of the nation-state, reframing discourse to reject political border control of land, body, and identity.

In *Anthem*, Riggs uses a music-video aesthetic incorporating poetry and spoken word to examine the meaning of citizenship for gay African Americans in a nation built on slavery. In the film, Trinidadian poet Colin Robinson confronts the suppression of language, culture, and identity among African slaves and indigenous Caribbeans when he declares, “I must remake my history, rewrite history, redecline a past and conjugate a future—rearranging syllables is revolution.” Blending vogue sequences and house music beats with ethnographic footage

Yann Beauvais
stills from *Still Life*, 1997

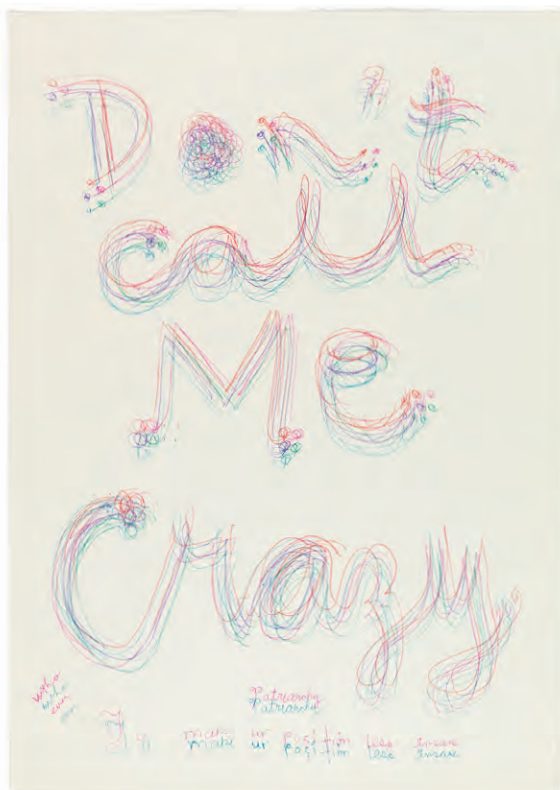


of tribal drumming and dancing, *Anthem* situates cultural production by queer people of color in the same lineage as traditional African cultural practices, putting forward the adoption of a queer-embracing, pan-African diasporic identification as the means for “a chain of tongues unchained” to reclaim their cultural inheritance.

In *Still Life*, French video artist Yann Beauvais makes jarring use of text, color, sound, and translation to indict the forms of obfuscation and disinformation used by those in power to perpetuate the systems of othering that exacerbated worldwide infection rates. The work translates the impacts of colonialism, capitalism, moralism, and neoliberalism on the experience of AIDS across different contexts and languages in order to voice a powerful, unified critique of the repressive structures underpinning Western society. In *A Declaration of Poetic Disobedience*, filmed by Gustavo Vazquez, Chicano performance artist, writer, and activist Guillermo Gómez-Peña of La Pocha Nostra performs a fierce incantatory proclamation of refusal to be silenced by those in power. Positioning indigenous practices and identities, diasporic connections, and migrational networks of solidarity as subversive processes, it resounds powerfully amid the heightened violence against immigrants and indigenous peoples today.

Works in other media feature parallel testimonials to the subjective effects of hate speech and call out the hypocritical use of such speech to silence and marginalize specific groups.

Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Gustavo Vazquez
still from *A Declaration of Poetic Disobedience* from *The New Border*, 2005



Chloe Dzubilo's text-based works confront the ongoing pathologization of trans people by individuals and institutions alike. In *Pathologizing Me/Us* (2009), Dzubilo succinctly denounces the complex practice of gaslighting, declaring, "Don't call me crazy / To make ur position less insane." Presented as an audio recording, Pat Parker's emotionally evocative poem *Don't Let the Fascists Speak* (1977) reveals the implicit violence of white supremacist speech. With the same resonance today as when it was written, the poem argues that the effects of such rhetoric should disqualify it from protection under the First Amendment right to free speech.

How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic⁴

Beyond their capacity to resist, language and voice are imbued in many of the works with the potential to express subversive sexuality. In a context where sexual practices declared

Chloe Dzubilo
Pathologizing Me/Us, 2009



immoral were hijacked by a virus that takes advantage of human connectivity, the erotic capacities of the embodied and relational voice were explored by a number of artists. In the face of widespread condemnation, bold demonstrations of homosexuality and promiscuity functioned as ways to challenge sexual hegemony. The voice sustained the erotic capacity to flow across newly necessitated boundaries between bodies, preserving life-sustaining forms of connection.

A series of plaster sculptures made by Kiki Smith between 1983 and 1993 strongly insinuates the erotic entanglement of voice, sound, and the body. Typically titled *Tongue in Ear*, each sculpture features a long, sinuous red tongue reaching toward a green-tinged ear, evoking elements of sexual play such as licking and kissing. The alternate title *Sound Search*, used for an edition gifted to David Wojnarowicz in 1983, highlights the voice as a tool of intimacy by foregrounding the sonic elements of close tongue to ear interactions such as

Kiki Smith
Tongue in Ear, 1983–93



whispering, dirty talk, or just breathing. The visceral quality of the sculpture prompts reflection on the contours of the internal organs and passageways that shape the vocal sounds that flow from a person's mouth to another's ear.

Gran Fury's *Read My Lips* posters from 1988 represent the blending of the voice and sexuality in AIDS activism. They pair historical images of gay and lesbian intimacy with a phrase appropriated from George H.W. Bush, typically used for emphasis. The posters promoted a kiss-in protest, staged to counter homophobia and the stigma around kissing due to misconceptions about HIV transmission, through an act of eroticism that "spoke" louder than words. In her book *Moving Politics*, sociologist Deborah Gould highlights the erotic charge arising from such meldings of speech and sexuality as a sustaining factor in the AIDS activist movement.

Closely weaving sexuality and vocality, Marlon Riggs' *Anthem* urges listeners to "pervert the language" and positions the black gay poet community as "griots shaping language into power, food, and substitute for sex, into tools like weapons of survival, rage, and passion, with the clarity of spit." In *Tongues Untied*, Riggs' overcoming of shameful silence to speak his truth is inseparably linked to his racialized experience of sexuality. The film culminates in the declaration, "Black men loving Black men is THE revolutionary act."

Shan Kelley
Self Portrait, 2013

VOICE = SURVIVAL celebrates the survival of subjecthood, the marginalized and disempowered, communal values, connectivity and networks, and even the dead that are enabled through the voice. In the exhibition, the multivalent metaphors and potentials of vocality, rendered particularly meaningful in the context of the AIDS epidemic, reveal the impact of vocal expression to carry life-or-death implications. Today, these works are a call to arms, in a moment when entrenched advocates of right-wing fear-mongering threaten to drown out hard-won progress—together we must continue to challenge the causes of inequity and repressive societal structures through the virality of the voice.

NOTES

1. Rafsky, Bob. "Eulogy for Mark Fisher." Political Funeral for Mark Fisher, ACT UP-NY, 2 November 1992, 6th Ave and W 43rd St, New York, NY. Speech.
2. Wojnarowicz, David. "Postcards from America: X-Rays from Hell." *Witnesses Against Our Vanishing*, Exhibition catalogue, 16 November 1989–16 January 1990, Artists Space, New York, NY.
3. Lorde, Audre. "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action." Lesbians and Literature Panel, MLA Annual Convention, December 1977, Chicago, IL. Address.
4. Crimp, Douglas. "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic." October, Vol. 43, *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* (Winter, 1987), pp. 237–271.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

ACT UP, *Silence = Mort*, date unknown. Poster reproduction from photograph, 11 × 17 in. Courtesy of John Kozachenko and the AIDS Activist History Project.

Jordan Arseneault for PosterVirus, *Silence = Sex*, 2012. Offset printed poster, 12 × 18 in. Courtesy of the artist and PosterVirus.

yann beauvais, *Still Life*, 1997. Video: 4:3, color, sound, 11:34. Courtesy of the artist.

Mykki Blanco and Adinah Dancyger, *I Want a Dyke For President*, 2016. Video: 16:9, color, sound, 2:02. Performed by Mykki Blanco. Directed by Adinah Dancyger. Text by Zoe Leonard (1992). Produced by Thomas Gorton for DAZED. Make Up by Raisa Flowers. Camera and Sound Assistance by Alice Plati. Courtesy of the artists and Dazed.

Chloe Dzubilo, *Untitled (Ain't Nothing Like Knowin')*, 2008. Ink on paper, 6 × 10 in. Courtesy of the Estate of Chloe Dzubilo and PARTICIPANT INC, New York.

Chloe Dzubilo, *Pathologizing Me/Us*, 2009. Ink on paper, 24 × 18 in. Courtesy of the Estate of Chloe Dzubilo and PARTICIPANT INC, New York.

Gran Fury, *Read My Lips* (men), 1988. Poster reproduction from digital scan, photocopy on paper, 11 × 17 in. ACT UP; Spring AIDS Action '88. Courtesy of Avram Finkelstein.

Gran Fury, *Read My Lips* (women), 1988. Poster reproduction from digital scan, photocopy on paper, 11 × 17 in. ACT UP; Spring AIDS Action '88. Courtesy of Avram Finkelstein.

Andrea Geyer and Sharon Hayes, *In Times Like These, Only Criminals Remain Silent*, 2005. Five double-sided posters on newsprint, 15 × 22 ¼ in. each. Courtesy of the artists, Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin and Parque Galeria, Mexico City.

Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Gustavo Vazquez, *A Declaration of Poetic Disobedience* from *The New Border*, 2005. Video: 4:3, color, sound, 14:01. Courtesy of artists and the NYU Hemispheric Institute Digital Video Library.

Shan Kelley, *Self Portrait*, 2013. Cyanotypes on archival paper, 5 × 7 in. each. Courtesy of the artist.

Audre Lorde, *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action* (original draft), 1977. Sound, 16:43. No. SPW1150. Delivered at "Lesbians and Literature" panel discussion at 1977 MLA Annual Convention in Chicago, IL. Courtesy of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, Herstories Audio/Visual Collections.

Donald Moffett, *He Kills Me*, 1987. Poster, offset lithography, 23 ½ × 37 ½ in. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York, Aspen. © Donald Moffett.

Pat Parker, *Don't Let the Fascists Speak*, 1977. Sound, 2:54. Performed at Third World Gay Caucus Cultural Evening on May 18, 1977. Courtesy of Pacifica Radio Archives, used with permission by Anastasia Dunham-Parker-Brady.

Pat Parker, *Where Will You Be*, 1979. Sound, 2:48. Delivered at the National March On Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, October 14, 1979. Courtesy of Queer Radio Archives, used with permission by Anastasia Dunham-Parker-Brady.

Bob Rafsky, *Eulogy for Mark Fisher*, 1992. Excerpt from *How to Survive a Plague*, 2012, directed by David France. Video: 16:9, color, sound, 3:12. Delivered on November 2, 1992. Original footage by James Wentzly. Courtesy of James Wentzly/DIVA TV and David France.

Kameelah Janan Rasheed, *Lower the Pitch of Your Suffering* from the series *How to Suffer Politely (And Other Etiquette)*, 2014. Archival inkjet print, 24 × 36 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Kameelah Janan Rasheed, *Tell Your Struggle with Triumphant Humor* from the series *How to Suffer Politely (And Other Etiquette)*, 2014. Archival inkjet print, 24 × 36 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Marlon Riggs, excerpts from *Tongues Untied*, 1989. Video: 4:3, color, sound, 58:00. Courtesy of Signifyin' Works and Frameline Distribution.

LJ Roberts, *Portrait of Deb from 1988–1997, 2012–13*. Single-strand embroidery on cotton, 28 × 24 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Vito Russo, *Why We Fight*, 1988. Excerpt from *Fight Back, Fight AIDS: 15 Years of ACT UP*, 2002, directed by James Wentzly. Video: 4:3, color, sound, 11:45. Delivered at ACT UP demonstration in Albany, NY, on May 9, 1988. Original footage by DIVA TV. Courtesy of James Wentzly/DIVA TV.

Kiki Smith, *Tongue in Ear*, 1983–93. Plaster and oil, 7 × 6 × 3 ½ in. Courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery, New York.

Ultra-red, *An Archive Of Feelings, 1987 to 1992*, from *An Archive of Silence*, Public Record No. 2.04.002, 2006. Audio from *Voices From The Front* (1992), *Stop The Church* (1990), *Silence = Death* (1990). Sound, stereo WAV, 2:35. Courtesy of the artists.

Ultra-red, *Protocol for a Listening Session*, 2010. Laserjet print on paper, 23 ½ × 16 ½ in. Glasgow variation. Courtesy of the artists.

Ultra-red, *Untitled (for multiple voices)*, 2010. Multi-channel sound installation with Mac Mini, 8-channel sound card, eight monophonic audio speakers, 45:33. Courtesy of the artists.

Rosa von Praunheim, excerpts from *Silence = Death*, 1990. Video: 16:9, color, sound, 63:00. Courtesy of Rosa von Praunheim Filmproduktion.

David Wojnarowicz, archival audio from David Wojnarowicz Papers. Sound. Courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz, P.P.O.W., New York, and Fales Library & Special Collections.

David Wojnarowicz, archival materials from David Wojnarowicz Papers. Digital surrogates of selected cassette tapes and journal pages. Courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz, P.P.O.W., New York, and Fales Library & Special Collections.

David Wojnarowicz, James Romberger, and Marguerite Van Cook, pages from *7 Miles a Second*, 1996. Text by David Wojnarowicz, drawing by James Romberger, coloring by Marguerite Van Cook. Print of digital scan of original panel drawings, 23 × 30 in. Courtesy of the artists.

Thank you to all the artists who made themselves and their work available for this exhibition. Additional thanks to Leila Aswabani, Joseph Barbieri, Annelis Beadnell at P.P.O.W., Bowdoin Museum of Art, Marlene Cancio and Victor Bautista at the NYU Hemispheric Institute, Angela Conant, T De Long, J.D. Doyle, Anastasia Dunham-Parker-Brady, Sandra Elgear at Testing the Limits, Frank Eraso, Avram Finkelstein, John Frame at Queer Radio Archives, David France, Lia Gangitano at PARTICIPANT INC, Thomas Gorton and Fiona Cook at DAZED, Jim Hubbard and the AIDS Activist Video Preservation Project of the Estate Project for Artists with AIDS, Rachel Kay at Marianne Boesky Gallery, Carolyn Lieba Francois-Lazard, Alex McClelland and Jessica Whitbread at PosterVirus, Lisa Offermann at Tanya Leighton Gallery, Sara Rafsky, Sarah Rodimon at the AIDS Activist History Project, Emelia Scheidt, Kelly Reynolds and Lindsay McGuire at Pace Gallery, Robert Sember, Charlotte Sheedy Literary Agency, Signifyin' Works, Marvin Taylor, Sophie Glidden-Lyon and Nicholas Martin at the Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University, Markus Tiarks at Rosa von Praunheim Filmproduktion, Mark Torres and Shawn Dellis at Pacifica Radio Archives, Emma Tramosch and La Pocha Nostra, James Wentzly and DIVA TV, Alexis Whitham at Frameline Distribution, The Estate of David Wojnarowicz, Maxine Wolfe, Colette Montoya-Sloan and Saskia Scheffer at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, and David Zaza and Logan Myers at McCall Associates.

Special thanks to Michael Clemow for design and production of exhibition media.

Our deepest gratitude goes to Nelson Santos, Alex Fialho, and Esther McGowan at Visual AIDS and to Sara Reisman, George Bolster, Anjuli Nanda and Matt Johnson at The Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation for the generous support that made this exhibition happen.

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Brochure design by McCall Associates

The 8th Floor is an exhibition and events space established in 2010 by Shelley and Donald Rubin, dedicated to promoting cultural and philanthropic initiatives and to expanding artistic and cultural accessibility in New York City.

The 8th Floor is located at 17 West 17th Street and is free and open to the public. School groups are encouraged. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Friday, 11am–6pm. The8thfloor.org

Visual AIDS utilizes art to fight AIDS by provoking dialogue, supporting HIV+ artists, and preserving a legacy, because AIDS is not over.

Founded in 1988, Visual AIDS is the only contemporary arts organization fully committed to HIV/AIDS awareness through producing and presenting visual art projects, exhibitions, public forums and publications—while supporting artists living with HIV/AIDS and honoring the artistic contributions of the AIDS movement. VisualAIDS.org

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