

Angry Initiatives, Defiant Strategies: Community Responses to AIDS. A week-long video benefit for AIDS Action Now! Curated by John Greyson. A Space, Toronto, October 23-28

AIDS and the Black Community

Reviewed by Renée du Plessis

The program of videos curated by John Greyson to follow Toronto's AIDS Awareness Week included five tapes by and for the Black community. This selection was diverse in both message and format.

According to the printed notes, *Modern Men: Fait Atercion*, a four minute short directed by Nick Moraité, is the first Haitian-produced and Haitian-performed music video about AIDS and AIDS information. Performed in French, the video is an unconventional shoot of a performance by a clean-cut male rock group. I say unconventional only because no gimmicks are employed nor are attempts made to reinterpret the band or their song. Although the lyrics are set to an upbeat tempo, the straight shooting performance style transforms the tone, and the video is rather quiet and will offend no-one.

The style of the American video, *The HIV Anti-body Test For The Black Community*, directed by Robert Boudreaux, reflects the organization—the Multicultural Prevention Resource Centre of San Francisco—who produced it. The video emphasizes the connection between transmission of HIV and drugs through the use of a re-enacted discussion between the two "cool dudes" and a "loving heterosexual" couple. The language tends to fall into professional speak-ee whenever the actors are giving information, although the graphs used to convey facts visually are easy to follow and informative. Perhaps the most useful aspect of this video is that it introduces both the medical and social implications of the anti-body test to a mainstream viewing group.

Using rap music and a dream sequence skit, a talented young Black American theatre ensemble explores transmission through drugs in a context of peer pressure. *Till Death Do Us Part*, directed by Ginny Durrin, is an energetic video which could easily open a discussion about AIDS among young people. It's problematic but explicit message is "Don't have sex! If you do, use condoms. Don't do drugs."

This message dominates the American videos, which seem to equate condom use with safe sex and which emphasize drug use as the dominant form of transmission and heterosexual monogamy as the only type of relationship with enough legitimacy to film. None of the three above really explore context—something the remaining tapes, both from Britain, do effectively.

British tapes stress context

This Is Not An AIDS Advert, directed by Isaac Julien, is an experimental tape similar in form and length to a rock video though its message is much more subversive than those usually shown.

The video is broken into two parts—the first employing a gentle, rather haunting music score—the second an aggressive beat. The use of an experimental form gives the viewer room to manoeuvre and to interpret Julien's fleeting ART images of *THE BODY, DEATH, and PLEASURE*. Finally, the Black Gay Man is introduced. Julien's message is defiantly and explicitly stated: "No guilt in your desire." *Reframing AIDS*, directed by Pratibha Parmar, is the only video by a woman in this selection, and significantly reflects the issues from a strong feminist/lesbian perspective. Presented in conventional narrative documentary form, the video uses "talking heads—expert activists" to convey its concerns. Although the linkage of race and AIDS is a dominant and well-stated theme, what the video does best is to give context to Thatcher/Reagan AIDS policies, clearly showing that their concerns have not been safer sex but the regulation of sexualities and desires.

This is an important video but because of the documentary form used to frame Parmar's messages, I wondered how a Black working class group in Britain would react to his video, where white experts dominate the discourse and the language used tends to intellectualize the concerns. Perhaps it only reflects the diversity of the Black community, as Greyson's selection so aptly points out.

Renée du Plessis is a member of the steering committee of AIDS Action Now!

AIDS Activism

Reviewed by Gary Kinsman

The evening on AIDS activism attracted 60 people to A Space on a Friday night. The program began with *The Ads Epidemic*, directed by Toronto-based video and film artist (and curator for the whole event) John Greyson.

Bouncy, musical, and fun, this five minute video is a good antidote to the media and right-wing's epidemic of acquired dread of sex (ADS). It inverts the theme of the novel *Death in Venice* and stresses that "Safe Sex is Fun." This is the best short, pro-safe sex video around, especially for young gays.

Another short, *Contra/AIDS*, contrasted Reagan's support for the Contras in Nicaragua with his neglect of People Living With AIDS (PLWAs). It contains a very interesting tap dance sequence that compares the efficiency of the official response to the poisoned Tylenol scare to the criminal neglect of the AIDS crisis.

The third video, *The Names Project*, by David Thompson, had a major emotional impact on all of us, with many (myself included) quite visibly crying. The tape documents the unveiling of the Names Quilt at the 1987 march for lesbian and gay rights in Washington, DC. Almost the entire sound track is devoted to the reading of the names of those whose lives have been commemorated by squares on the quilt (famous names such as Michel Foucault and Rock Hudson and many I had never heard before). When the tape was filmed, there were 1,920 panels. Now there are more than 8,200. The quilt's mammoth size gives you a real sense of the magnitude of this epidemic and the years of government neglect. If only Reagan, Bush, Mulroney, Turner and others could be forced to see this video over and over again until they are moved to do something to end this crisis.

Anti-sex agenda

The next video, *Fighting For Our Lives* by Ellen Seidler, left a lot to be desired. It purports to be the story of how the gay community in San Francisco has responded to and learned to cope with AIDS. Narrator Linda Hunt clearly speaks of gays as "others," constructing a standpoint that lies somewhere outside the gay community. The central problem with this video is its reliance on Randy Shilts (author of *And The Band Played On...*), and the line that AIDS was caused by bars, baths, clubs, and gay hedonism in the 1970s. It is suggested that casual sex is intrinsically unsafe, that having multiple sex partners in and of itself leads to the spread of AIDS.

The video does provide a good discussion of the ways that race dissects the AIDS crisis and how most AIDS organizing has focused on white men. It also highlights the involvement of lesbians in the community response to this crisis. However, these two plusses don't make up for the video's endorsement of an anti-sex agenda.

Testing the Limits was one of the few videos in this series which embodied the perspective that AIDS and "HIV infection" can become a chronic but manageable condition—that it is the state and the medical establishment who stand in the way of the lives and survival of PLWAs.

The video collage of AIDS activism—demanding drug treatments to be released, safe IV drug education, AIDS and racism, women and AIDS, poverty and homelessness, safe sex for lesbians, the need for a socialized health-care system in the U.S., the Hispanic AIDS Forum, community research initiatives, opposition to mandatory (what Simon Watney calls "punitive") testing and quarantine, and empowering civil disobedience actions. We see the Washington, DC police, with their infamous yellow gloves, preparing to arrest AIDS activists. Michael Callen, a PLWA who is still alive more than five years after his diagnosis, tells us that the unthinking repetition by the medical profession and the mass media that AIDS is a fatal disease "denies any possibility of survival" for PLWAs. This leads into a discussion of some of the promising drug therapies and treatments that have been successful in dealing with AIDS-related conditions. We also hear that PLWAs need to be in control of drug trials of promising AIDS treatments.

The video ends with a still of the massive lesbian and gay rights march on Washington in October 1987. In this video we see and feel people making history.

Discussions following the videos pointed to the need for more Canadian AIDS videos. A proposal was made that there should be an AIDS ACTION NOW! video documenting AIDS activism in Toronto and Canada. Any takers?

Gary Kinsman is a member of AIDS ACTION NOW! and the author of *The Regulation of Desire*.

Sex, Porn and AIDS

by Stuart Blackley

Porn is the medium of video, not the reverse. The television set in every North American home and the video machine in alternative galleries are the same medium; only the content and context of what is shown are different, and this content dictates what the medium is: TV or Art. The content of TV is advertising, the endorsement of America. The content of Art-TV is the critique of America—or, more accurately, critical advertising, dissecting what is bad about the term "American" and retrieving the rest.

By the mid-80s a third content/media emerged, porn video, that bridged those other forms against their will. Like TV, porn video has potential access to every household, and has had rapid endorsement by American consumers. Like Art-TV, however, it has tremendous critical potential to undermine North American erotophobia with explicit demonstration of sexual pleasure and variety. Yet, reckless in its fantasy, utterly private in its consumption, gay porn video is for some symptomatic of the myth of the AIDS crisis as fallout from sexual liberation. Is it dangerously agitating, sexually unsafe propaganda for our past sins? Our sexuality is increasingly out of the closet, but can we get it out of the TV rooms?

These speculations arise from the *Sex, Porn and AIDS Video Screenings*. In all the work shown, the erotic element is there not to sweeten the AIDS information, but recognizes that sex, AIDS, sex information, politics, and art are not exclusive terms (of abuse), but absolutely interdependent if we are to produce meaningful work for the really broad audience that the AIDS crisis demands.

In Kybaratas' *Danny*, the director is conscious of the voyeurism of documenting Danny, the PLWA who is inevitably identified by his sexuality because of his disease. Throughout the video of Danny slowly unbuttoning his shirt to reveal his scarred, beautiful torso, Danny reclaims his sexuality from AIDS and we are forced to see that our attraction goes beyond morbid curiosity.

They Are Lost To Vision pillages from porn, media coverage of AIDS, and the clichés of gay sensibility—*Dark Victory*, *Tea and Sympathy*, Edith Piaf—in a sound and image montage whirling with wit and energy that suggests a possible crossover from Art-TV into the huge uniformed audiences for music video.

The most heartening videos were done by the Gay Men's Health Crisis as porn videos, but with completely safe sex scenarios. The relatively artless *Safer Sex: The Time Is Now*, directed towards the bi-video market, involves a beauteous "net" couple and boyfriend explicitly penetrating each other with appropriate condoms and advice. It is short, sexy, goofy, and effective. *Chance Of A Lifetime* is an achievement of another order, the most complete synthesis so far of porn video's powers to inform and celebrate gay sexuality. Each of its three scenarios is hot, safe, and exactly attuned to either our fantasies or fears about sex and AIDS. Whether it's the nervous romance of the inter-racial couple in the first story, the scorching S&M encounter of the second, or the funny, sexy, and moving relationship of the PLWA and his lover in the last, each story hits home with the diversity of our sexuality and loving and creative response to AIDS. Neither the euphemisms of TV nor the discourse of art can obscure the graphic messages of safe sex porn. "Explicit" sex is just that—clear, specific, uninhibited, and unafraid. As Rick Gordon sings while the credits of *Chance Of A Lifetime* roll: "Keep your liquids to yourself/ and get your imagination off the shelf."



"Chance of a Lifetime" proves that safe sex can be hot!

Many of the videos shown during *Angry Initiatives, Defiant Strategies* will be available for Canadian distribution through V-Tape at 183 Bathurst Street, Main Floor, Toronto, Ontario, M5T 2R7 or call (416) 863-9897.

A BENEFIT FOR AIDS ACTION NOW!