

ART & AIDS

REPRESENTING A CRISIS

In the early years of the AIDS epidemic, the work of artists served largely to express the sense of loss and grief through memorial pieces that commemorated the lives of the friends, family and lovers claimed by the syndrome. Artists have also played a role in raising money for research through organizing benefit performances and other types of fund-raising activities. While these two very necessary functions will remain integral to the artistic response to AIDS, more and more work is reflecting a greater awareness of the political and cultural subtexts underlying the crisis. This emerging body of work is springing forth from a broad base of artists in all disciplines, activists, and grassroots service organizations.

The development of a politically-charged art that questions traditional representations of the epidemic (or, more appropriately, epidemics) and the role artists can play in confronting the myriad issues surrounding AIDS have been the focus of attention at a number of recent showings, panels, and conferences over the last few months.

In November, the University of Western Ontario's James Miller hosted "Representing AIDS: Crisis and Criticism," billed as an interdisciplinary conference on the impact of AIDS on contemporary art, culture and thought. Sessions on visual and performing arts, literature, and video included themes such as "The Representation of Women in Zambian AIDS Posters," Reading the NAMES Project Quilt," and "The Homosexual Body." While other AIDS conferences have noted the artistic response, Miller, in his opening address, said these have been "mostly to provide cultural diversion and tragic relief for healthcare professionals tired by endless technical discussions of viral mutation, T-cell counts, and the miracle of latex." He added that a conference like this would not have been possible in the early stages of the epidemic, since, as he said, "it has taken several years for novelists, playwrights and visual artists, and cultural theorists to produce a body of work on AIDS worth studying from an interdisciplinary angle." Included in this work is contemporary drama, fiction, film, painting, sculpture, installation art, and philosophical literature generated in response to the epidemic. Above all, Miller stressed, "we are here to assert that the medical battles against HIV cannot be isolated from the cultural turmoil stirred up by the AIDS crisis, or from the critical and artistic responses to that turmoil."

John Greyson, the Toronto video artist who was responsible for *The ADS Epidemic* among other videos, hosted a panel entitled "Angry Initiatives, Defiant Strategies: Representing AIDS in Independent Video." He spoke of the broad diversity of responses he's noticed in the course of assembling a one-hour compilation of clips from independent video artists and cable-access producers, with everything from traditional documentaries dealing with AIDS discrimination, to plays and performance pieces dealing with more personal aspects, as well as deconstructions of mass media coverage. He pointed out that most of this work isn't getting seen, isn't on broadcast TV or in theatres, because it's mostly speaking from a grass-roots

WE DON'T NEED A CULTURAL
RENAISSANCE... WE DON'T NEED TO
TRANSCEND THE EPIDEMIC, WE
NEED TO END IT"
— DOUGLAS CRIMP

position on a local level. These kind of productions generally feature the voices of people with AIDS speaking on their own terms about their own lives, as opposed to the typical mass media two-minute treatment, which often uses PWAs to validate a pre-written story conceptualized in advance according to the reporter's ideological framework and agenda. He pointed out the subtler work of Andy Fabo and Steven Andrews as being just as important as the overtly political activist work, as it explores the relationship of people to their bodies, their sexuality, and their wellness or illness, a relationship that Greyson considers immensely political in itself.

This relationship to the human body was the focus of a colorful slide show given by Fabo, who prefaced his remarks with a concern about what he called the "prophylaxis of safe text," a type of insulation from the reality of AIDS by what he called a transparent sheath of discourse. He pointed out that "talk can clarify our concerns, re-evaluate strategies, and mobilize us, but it can also

mesmerize us into thinking that we are doing something about AIDS because we are hearing about it."

Dividing most AIDS art into two spheres, the public work, exploring AIDS as a social phenomenon, and the private, examining the effect on the individual, Fabo warned that too much emphasis on the private sphere, without a tempering by the public one, can evolve into selfindulgent hermeticism, isolated from much-needed political action. He noted that the NAMES Project Quilt, simultaneously art object, ritual, and process, effectively wedded these two spheres by making it clear that remembering is a political act and an important step in moving from bereavement to determined activism. He concluded by drawing an analogy between the crisis of modernism in art and a similar crisis in the medical sciences. Fabo pointed out that the post-war optimism and faith in medical progress was shattered by AIDS, and similarly, the art world's progression into modernism was disrupted by new work which questioned its inherent ideas of progress, reductionism, and universality, and called for a certain degree of complexity and nonconformity, insisting on the value of difference.

In her October magazine essay, "AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification," feminist and teacher Paula Treichler noted that "the AIDS epidemic is simultaneously an epidemic of a transmissible lethal disease and an epidemic of meanings or signification." In his address at the London conference, "Safe Sex, Safe Theatre," Michael Cadden argued that the theatre has been a principal site for the creation and transmission of those meanings. Cadden noted that while works such as William Hoffman's As Is, Larry Kramer's The Normal Heart, and Harvey Fierstein's Safe Sex have been useful in focusing attention on AIDS as a personal affliction and a social calamity, they also operate as morality plays, often implicitly suggesting a causal relationship between a character's underdeveloped gay identity and AIDS, between the closet and the hospital, between sex and death.

Cadden remarked that these critically-acclaimed and commercially successful scripts point to some of the homophobic assumptions at work in our culture and theatrical complicity in those assumptions, including the temptation to blame the patients for their illness. In As Is, the notions of sin and punishment are reinforced by a

hospice worker who left the priesthood to impart "wisdom" to those "in need of improvement." Cadden pointed out that Kramer's The Normal Heart condemns not only politicians, the media, and the medical establishment for their failure in combatting AIDS, but most of all the gay community for having endorsed the "lifestyle" it implies has "caused the disease." Cadden characterized the lead character's final redemption from "promiscuity" and conversion to married monogamy as a sellout to the popular press narrative of AIDS as nature or God's punishment for life in the sexual fast lane.

On the other hand, Cadden credited San Francisco's Theatre Rhinoceros' The A.I.D.S. Show (Artists Involved with Death and Survival) with targeting precisely the moralizing of the illness found in other works. In Doug Holsclaw's It's My Party, a safe sex proponent refuses to reject his past by declaring "I like sex. I like to get drunk and smoke grass and use poppers and fuck with strangers. Call me old-fashioned but that's what I like." It is this repudiation that Cadden called a liberating alternative to the homophobic and erotophobic narrative that dominates theatrical writing about AIDS. And while Kramer's, Hoffman's and Fierstein's works have been praised by gay and straight critics alike as honest, courageous, artistic contributions to the body of theatrical literature, Cadden reminded the audience that, as Douglas Crimp has pointed out, "we don't need a cultural renaissance, we need cultural practices actively participating in the struggle against AIDS.... we don't need to transcend the epidemic, we need to end it."

In his address, conference organizer James Miller discussed the novel's past and present role in social criticism. He compared the work of Dickens to that of San Francisco journalist Randy Shilts in And the Band Played On. Miller pointed out how the book's flowing narrative closely adheres to the chronical structure and bourgeois moral code of its Victorian prototypes. Hailing Shilts as "one of the great contemporary masters of straight, middleclass fiction," he admired Shilts' Dickensian talent for weaving a thousand plots together into a coherent cautionary tale. He also noted Shilts' capacity for vivid caricature, most notably of villains such as Robert Gallo and Mayor Koch, although he credited Patient Zero with being a "truly original creation of Shilts' homophobic imagination."

His analysis joined the mounting chorus of criticism the book has drawn from many quarters of the gay community since it was first published. He remarked that the book gave straight (and some gay) readers just what they wanted: large dollops of guilt and fear. Miller expressed concern that novelists who follow Shilts' successful lead might do more harm than good in moralizing about the causes of the current epidemic, simply because they distract from the crucial issue of how to end it.

Miller felt that while novels of social criticism can alert the "general population" to evils lurking in "their" society, they can also reinforce prevailing family values about the clean and the corrupt. He seriously questioned whether such novels have any constructive role to play in ending the AIDS crisis and proposed the invention of a new kind of "AIDS fiction:" the novel of cultural activism, one that would present PWAs as actively engaged, along with lovers, friends, and families, in the struggle to end the epidemic. This hypothetical work would ideally have as its central figure a cultural activist whose agenda provides the main impetus for the plotline. This novel would also amplify the voices of PWAs, above the din of safe sex commentary, eulogizing, and rhetoric that currently drowns them out. To be effective on a large scale, such a work would have to show that straights are not insulated from the epidemic by sexual practice or cultural privilege, and thereby establish channels of empathy between the larger and smaller communities of readers.

While most such activist work has been in the visual or performance arts, Miller argued that cultural activism could and should be extended to the much wider domain of the verbal arts. Few novels Miller has read would qualify for a model of a cultural activist novel. Most AIDS novels function as most AIDS art does: as instruction, memorial, or commodity. But just as the function of other art practices is being redefined by the AIDS crisis, the function of the novel of social criticism appears equally ripe for such an evolution.

In one of the conference's real highlights, Douglas Crimp, an art critic, writer, and activist who edited the special AIDS issue of October magazine, delivered a first-rate critique of several mainstream AIDS productions, and then offered an example of an alternative production that countered the distorted, homophobic misrepresentations in the mainstream work. His talk, entitled "For a Militant Subjectivity: Representing AIDS in Independent Video," focussed on the New York Museum of Modern Art's exhibition of Pictures of People by Nicholas Nixon, AIDS: A National Inquiry, a PBS-TV documentary, and an episode of CBS-TV's 60 Minutes entitled "AIDS Hits Home."

The Nixon photographs, a black-and-white series of stark images of emaciated people with AIDS wasting away in hospital beds, purport to "tell the story of AIDS, to show what this disease truly is and how it affects those who have it," according to the slow's catalogue. Crimp quoted a number of enthusiastic reviews praising Nixon's skill in capturing the essence of his subjects. As he showed the gruesome images on a slide projector, Crimp pointed out the work only reiterates the PWAs image as ravaged, disfigured, debilitated, alone, and resigned to their deaths. He read from an ACT UP flyer, "No More Pictures Without Context," which was handed out outside the museum. It said, in part, "we believe that the representation of People With AIDS affects not only how viewers will perceive PWAs outside the museum, but, ultimately, crucial issues of AIDS funding, legislation, and education... we demand the visibility of PWAs who are vibrant, angry, loving, sexy, beautiful, acting up, and fighting back... stop looking at us; start listening to us." Crimp acknowledged an early, liberal desire to show the "human face of AIDS," which then turned into a genre of sorts, a perceived artistic necessity, and Nixon's macabre deathbed images are only the latest incarnation, as are similar photos by Rosalind Solomon, which Crimp also dissected.

He then went on to describe the lurid CBS program AIDS Hits Home, which exemplified nearly every AIDS stereotype the media have created over the years: gay men in tight jeans walking arm in arm in the Castro, impoverished Africans, immigrating Haitians, prostitutes on streetcorners, the disembodied arms of IV drug addicts, and the latest media creation, the "heterosexual," seen only in aerobics classes, discos, single bars, always ready for sex. Rather than guiding him to social agencies or AIDS service organizations, they notify the authorities and proceed to document the subsequent futile attempts by health officials, policemen, and the vice squad to lock him up, in their effort to portray the supposed conflict between individual rights and public welfare.

The Frontline crew eventually lose track of Fabian when the local gay community shelters and protects him. Nevertheless, the program ends with the usual coda: 'The inevitable happened: Fabian's AIDS symptoms returned... he died on November 17th...," and an interview with his grave-digger.

The film aired despite protests from AIDS groups in the U.S., who claimed it was unfair to people with AIDS. Noting the work was first and foremost unfair to Fabian Bridges, Crimp also suggested they might have protested the show's implication that public health is somehow endangered by the free movement of PWAs, who supposedly "irresponsibly spread AIDS to unknowing victims." Crimp also noted the production's race and class biases, its exploitation of Fabian and his family, and the extraordinary misinformation about AIDS conveyed by bureaucrats in the film, along with the crew's obviously greater interest in getting their footage than in the psychological and physical welfare of their protagonist. He drew attention to a scene in which Fabian says he wanted to be remembered as "being somebody, because a whole lot of people just go." Here we have, Crimp suggests, the terms of the contract between the crew and Fabian. It is this pact which gave the crew the alienation they were looking and offered to give Fabian a few brief moments of glory in the mass media. It is this seductive and coercive pact, Crimp suggested, that



IN THE MIDST OF THE CONTINUING DEATHS ALL AROUND HIM, FINKELSTEIN SAID HE DIDN'T FEEL COMFORTABLE SITTING AT A PANEL DISCUSSING THE ESTHETICS OF POSTER DESIGN

The People With AIDS are all shown as shadowy figures in hospital beds, all men, all white, all (it's assumed) gay. In one especially telling juxtaposition, a gay man with AIDS is set against his straight, healthy, identical twin brother, as a painfully obvious intended moral lesson.

Crimp condemned the program for reinforcing the hopelessness so common to mass media accounts of AIDS (any optimistic statements made by PWAs were followed with voice-overs announcing "six weeks later she was dead"). Crimp also denounced Dan Rather and the CBS crew for brutally invading the privacy of PWAs, exploiting their personal circumstances for public spectacle, all the while ignoring the social factors that made AIDS a crisis in the first place, factors that still perpetuate it.

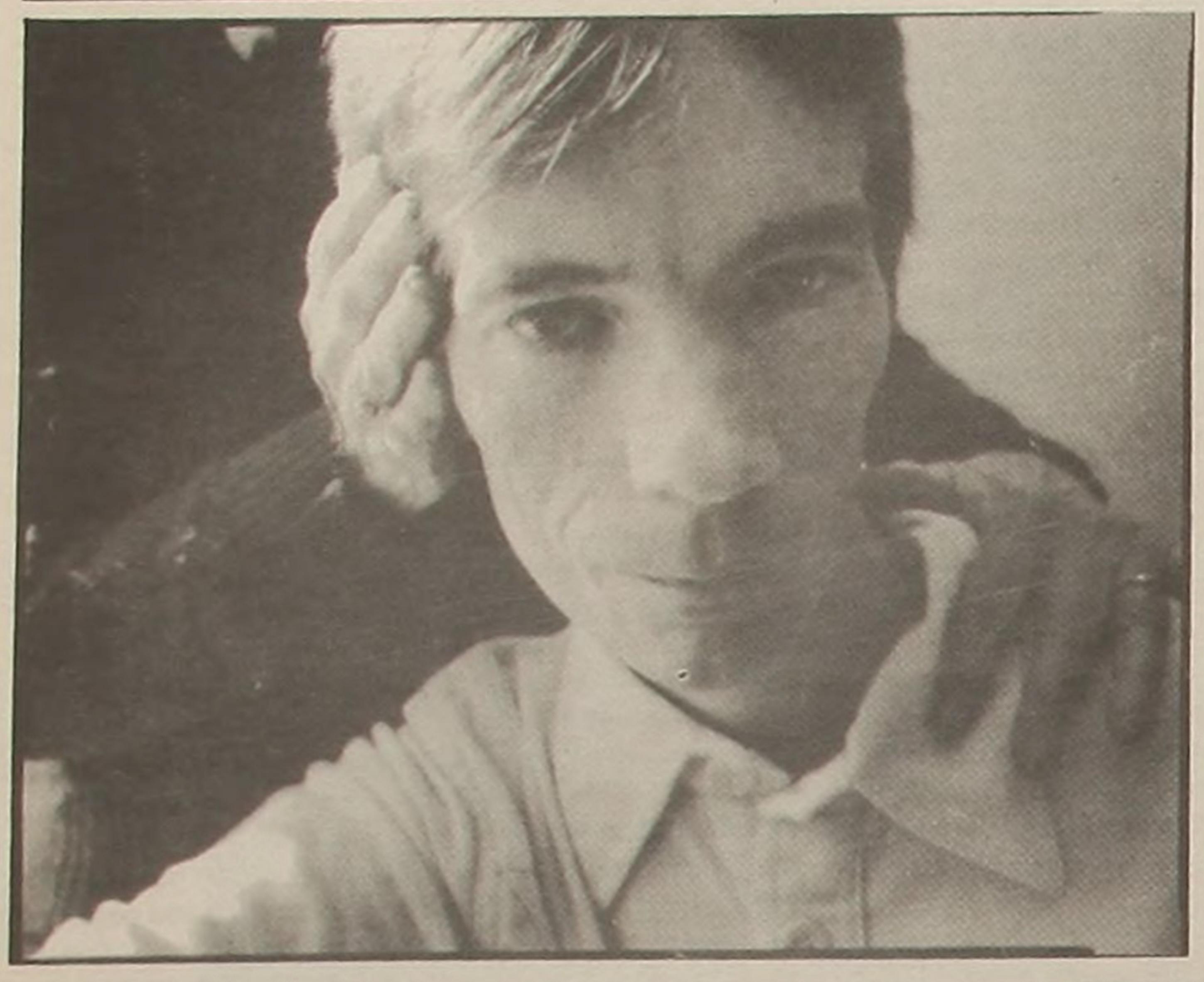
He then went on to describe the PBS-TV Frontline special, Fabian's Story, billed as "a portrait of a man with AIDS who continued to be promiscuous." Crimp, dubbing this "the most extended and vicious story of a PWA television has yet presented," detailed the travels of Fabian Bridges, a homeless, black, gay man with AIDS, and his systematic degradation at the hands of virtually every institution in society, including, above all, the producers of the show itself. The film crew follows Fabian as he is rejected, one by one, by every member of his family and thrown out into the streets, where he starts working as a hustler. In the course of an exceptionally invasive, prying hotel-room interview, the crew discovers Fabian and his tricks aren't always practicing safe sex. The show then faces the dilemma of "what to do about Fabian," overlooking his partners' equal responsibility in preventing HIV transmission, and the ineffectiveness of many public education programs.

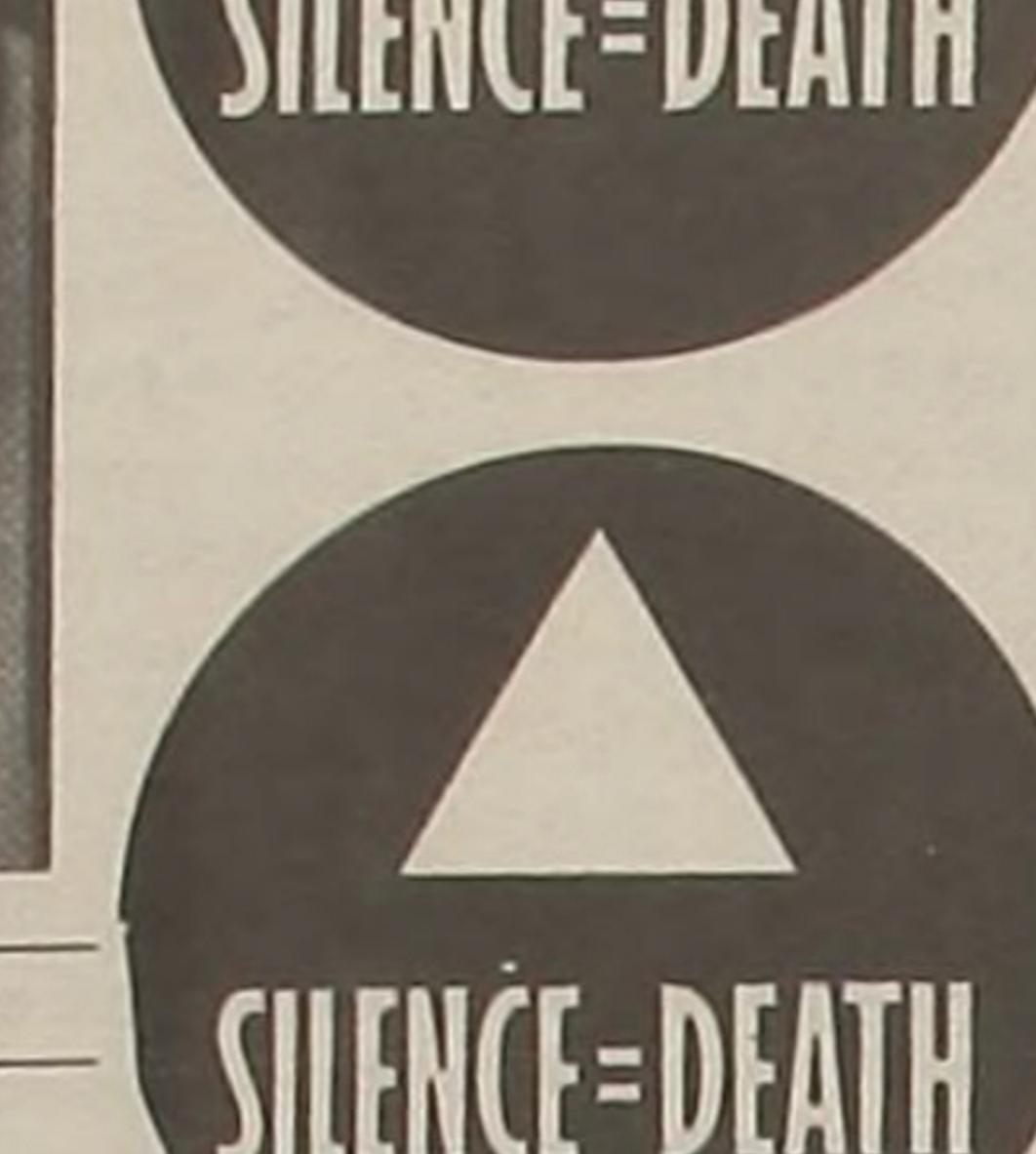
is also at work in the photos of Nicholas Nixon and Rosalind Solomon.

While acknowledging the media image of the PWA as demeaning, sometimes vicious, and always over-determined by false presumptions and stereotypes about those affected by AIDS, Crimp pointed out that most media criticisms of representations of gays and other marginalized groups focus on stereotypes. But what portrait of a gay person or a PWA would one feel comfortable with? The problem with confronting stereotypes, Crimp said, is in tacitly siding with those who would distance themselves from the image portrayed, agreeing that it is "other." He suggested our responsibility, above all, is to defend Fabian Bridges, as one of us: to say that it is unfair to represent a gay man as a hustler is to collaborate in the media's condemnation of hustlers, refusing along with them this particular manifestation of difference.

Similarly, are the Nixon photos really "untrue," that many PWAs don't become disfigured, helpless, and die? Crimp ventured that in confronting the negative images of Nicholas Nixon, CBS, and Frontline, independentlyproduced art should not seek to just offer positive countertypes, but instead to affirm the stereotype. Citing Danny Kybartas' videotape Danny, Crimp described how, while duplicating many aspects of stereotypical PWA portraiture, the video also reclaims them for those who are living with AIDS. Danny, a PWA, is shown in the video not only as beset with skin lesions, but also as a feeling, thinking, even sexy human being.

After Crimp's powerful address, the video Danny was shown, an appropriate close to the conference. The event





Nicholas Nixon, "Tom Moran," November 1987, gelatin silverprint, 8" X 10".

was held as part of an ongoing graduate seminar on AIDS and the Arts (to be repeated this fall) led by Miller, a Faculty of Arts professor, a specialist in Medieval Studies, and a former English professor at Harvard. The four-month course included a diversity of topics, such as Western images of disease before AIDS, the governing metaphors of modern epidemiology and virology, AIDS as popular entertainment in the broadcast media, feminist critiques of heterosexist and erotophobic AIDS discourse, and the impact of AIDS on current conceptions of gay life and culture, among many others.

Douglas Crimp, commenting on the October issue he edited, pointed out the journal's limited and specialized academic and art world readership. He also noted what he called the art world's traditional alienation from social issues, evidenced in the strictly memorial and fundraising responses in the first years of the AIDS crisis. He wanted to use the October issue to help artist understand that AIDS was an issue distinctly tied into questions about sexual difference and the politics of representation that many intellectuals had been tackling for years. He combined texts from grass-roots workers with more intellectual, theoretical discourse, in order to produce a collection of work useful to academics and activists alike. He was also personally responding to, in his own essay, the anti-sexual rhetoric railing against "promiscuity" that dominates both straight and gay constructions of the epidemic.

A week later, in a New York artist space in the heart of Soho, Crimp and other local activists involved in alternative AIDS media hosted a panel discussion called "AIDS Activism: Media as Direct Action," held in conjunction with a program of recent independent videotapes, "The AIDS Crisis is Not Over." Moderator Gregg Bordowitz introduced himself as an activist, video documentarian, and HIV-positive gay man, then gave a brief history of the AIDS activist movement to set up the evening's discussion, which raised a variety of issues surrounding the production of AIDS activist media.

Each panelist described the ways in which the AIDS crisis has necessitated the kind of work they produce: Jean Carlomusto, who co-produces the Living with AIDS Gay Men's Health Centre cable show with Bordowitz, talked about the need to provide life-saving safe sex and IV drug use information that isn't being aired in the dominant media, as well as show people ways they can become involved in the struggle to end the crisis. She also personally felt the need to address lesbian invisibility by exploring the distinct challenges AIDS poses for lesbians.

Installation and video artist Ray Navarro spoke about the need for Blacks, Hispanics, and women in New York City to connect the AIDS struggle to larger issues of racism and health-care that these populations have been facing for years. He also talked about confronting homophobia (his own and others) in the course of doing cultural productions geared to those communities.

Avram Finkelstein, a member of the art collective "Gran Fury," recounted his work doing political postering in the 60's, and traced its evolution to the current "Silence=Death" posters, which he helped design. The stark image of a pink triangle on a black backdrop is now a common sight in many American cities, and is spreading to Canada. He described that poster project as an attempt to politicize a largely apolitical audience (gay, white men) by using a glossy, Madison Avenue format in a high-

visibility context, plastered over movie billboards, where people don't usually expect to find political statements.

He expressed a concern, though, about "merchandising the revolution" and recalled an incident at a Chicago gallery where he was asked by some Marxists when ACT UP was coming to Chicago. He pointed out the considerable activist work already going on in the city, but they just wanted to know when the fancy T-shirts and buttons would be arriving! Finkelstein expressed his ambivalence about the ultimate effect the Silence=Death poster campaign had, and the commodity aspect of his work. He noted that activist artwork is already being commodified and historicized, with political posters that were originally handed out for free ending up on the walls of prestigious Soho art galleries, even the Smithsonian Institute. In the midst of the continuing deaths all around him, he said he didn't exactly feel comfortable sitting at a panel discussing the esthetics of poster design.

Bordowitz commented on the collective nature of much activist artwork, and referred to the six-member "Testing the Limits Collective," which makes video editing decisions by consensus. He said such a collective process is necessary when there are so many diverse issues and personal experiences that need to be represented.

AIDS IS ITS OWN MOST POTENT SYMBOL AND NEEDS NO HISTORICAL COMPARISONS

This diversity of issues and experiences was reflected in one of the largest exhibitions of AIDS-related artwork yet, AIDS: The Artist's Response, a two-month gallery show and series of events held this past spring at Ohio State University's Wexner Centre for the Arts in Columbus. Organized by San Francisco art critic, historian and activist Jan Zita Grover, this ambitious undertaking, four years in the making, featured theatre performances, video screenings, and a special two-day conference and community forum in early March, entitled "AIDS Art Activism," which drew artists and activists from across North America and Europe.

The gallery show featured every manner of artistic expression: paintings, drawings, photographs, pamphlets, sculpture, slides, and installations, including an odd exhibit of 20 empty one-quart jars lined up in a row, depicting the theoretical amount of saliva required for HIV transmission. Safe-sex posters from around the world hung beside savage portraits of death and dying, including the highly controversial Nicholas Nixon work mentioned earlier. Grover, who curated the show along with local activist and teacher Lynette Molnar, insisted that this was not supposed to be merely a selection of "politically correct" or critically-acclaimed favourites, selected by conventional artistic or political criteria, but instead a representative sampling of all the work done around AIDS since the beginning of the crisis. Grover hoped that juxtaposing all this work would enable viewers to better judge the inherent strengths and weaknesses of individual works.

Grover also wanted to explore the relationship between AIDS, art, and feminism. Grover said she was tired of hearing gay men say "this is the first time that people affected

by a health crisis are taking control of their own lives and doing something about it," reminding the audience that the women's health movement of the 60's and 70's has much to teach modern-day AIDS activists.

The weekend conference served as an open forum for artists and activists to share their work and link up to discuss strategies for producing and distributing alternative media, and included sessions on AIDS and Video, Cultural Analysis and Cultural Activism, Theatre and Performance, and Artists and AIDS: In and Out of Galleries. Many discussions focussed on how to bring this increasing body of activist artwork out of the art world and expose it to a wider audience.

John Greyson detailed his latest work chronicling the activities of Toronto's AIDS ACTION NOW!, and pointed out many of the difficulties in documenting a complex and constantly-changing situation.

Douglas Crimp, who seems to be at most of these conferences, tackled the sensitive issue of producing "politically correct" art. He referred to a Los Angeles show, Against Nature: A Show by Homosexual Men, in which he argued that the curator had effectively reinvested the term "homosexual" with the medical notions of disease and deviance that gay activists have been contesting for years.

Singer-songwriter Michael Callen, diagnosed with AIDS seven years ago, spoke at length about the role music played in his life and work as an activist. He noted that the human voice has the ability to inspire people in a way that no instrument can. He lamented the near-total absence of music at the conference and remarked that the one musical event, an outrageous and thoroughly entertaining performance by California activist and prostitute Carol Leigh (a.k.a. Scarlot Harlot) seemed to lift spirits in a different way than any of the panel discussions had. His song "Living in Wartime" (from his Purple Heart LP) was featured as the opening theme for Testing the Limits: Part One, a moving 28-minute tape which traces the early history of ACT UP New York. Callen said his music is a necessary release for him as well, something he can escape to for a while, so he can recharge his batteries, and he reminded conference-goers, many who mentioned the problem of activist burn-out, to "do what you have to do away from AIDS to come back to the fight refreshed."

British filmmaker Stuart Marshall, who produced the highly-acclaimed Bright Eyes for Britain's Channel 4, spoke about his latest film about the experiences of lesbians and gay men in Nazi Germany. He noted that era has been held up as an exemplary instance of anti-gay oppression, and raised to the level of mythological significance in the age of AIDS. Marshall felt it was important to accurately document that period in gay history, since so many historical analogies and metaphors have been drawn from it by modern-day AIDS activists. One of the film's subjects, an elderly gay man, was quick to point out that in Nazi Germany silence equalled survival, speech and action equalled death, a direct reversal of today's AIDS activist slogans. The old man admitted that it was a very hard struggle back then, but that it was easier to survive Nazism than it is to survive AIDS. This made it clear to Marshall that it was inappropriate to use this historical moment as the symbol of ultimate horror: AIDS is its own most potent symbol and needs no historical comparisons.

Addressing the issue of representation, he said one of the biggest tasks artists face is to find a "language" of AIDS that begins to approach the complex and contradictory realities of the syndrome. Far from being a homogeneous and consistent discourse, Marshall sees this "language" as being, by necessity, fractured, problematic, contradictory, and multi-dimensional, but all the same a language that would help us understand and respect our differences, while also suggesting many mutually supportive political and cultural strategies.

In one of the last speeches at the Columbus conference, feminist educator and linguist Paula Treichler, who described her work as deconstructing and monitoring medical constructions of AIDS, defined culture as "the way forms of expression are created, the nature of our symbolic life, the nature of representation, and how these symbols and forms of expression operate within systems of power relations." She thereby defined cultural activism as "re-appropriating the right to construct and define reality, and challenging the way it is forced upon us by existing power structures." If these conferences, panels, and exhibitions demonstrate anything, it is that artists, in all disciplines, have a key role to play in challenging mainstream representations of AIDS, in addition to the elegiac memorials and fundraisers. In an illness so fraught with myths, prejudice, and fear, politically-engaged art that actively addresses questions of representation is more and more becoming an important component in the struggle to end the crisis.

Colman Jones is a writer, activist, musician, and has produced documentaries on AIDS for CBC Radio's Ideas.