



Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences

1993

## Second decade: AIDS + community + television

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### Suggested citation:

McIntosh, David (1993) Second decade: AIDS + community + television. *C Magazine*, 39. pp. 13-18. ISSN 1193-8625 Available at <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/1063/>

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# Second Decade: AIDS + Community + Television

BY DAVID MCINTOSH

AIDS does not exist apart from the practices that conceptualize it, represent it, and respond to it. We know AIDS only in and through those practices. This assertion does not contest the existence of viruses, antibodies, infections or transmission routes. Least of all does it contest the reality of illness, suffering and death. What it does contest is that there is an underlying reality of AIDS upon which are constructed the representations, or the culture, or the politics of AIDS. If we recognize that AIDS exists only in and through these constructions, then hopefully we can also recognize the imperative to know them, analyze them, and wrest control of them.

Douglas Crimp in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*



Over the last ten years, since AIDS first came to public awareness, the most cogent conceptualizations and the most effective responses to the epidemic have been created in the marginalized but developing nexus of power, knowledge and experience of the lesbian and gay community. Working in conjunction with gay and lesbian community organizations (health centres, rights groups, newspapers and magazines), queer artists, critics and academics have successfully merged our aesthetic and theoretical projects with a practical social agenda of direct action to fight AIDS. We have taken on the "epidemic of signification"<sup>1</sup> surrounding the "invention"<sup>2</sup> of AIDS by deconstructing the homophobia, racism and misogyny underlying the construction of AIDS in language, mass media, scientific/medical practice and institutional behaviour, and we have addressed the physical health crisis of AIDS by constructing images and texts designed to promote collective action, AIDS awareness, safe sex and increased funding for care and treatment of people with AIDS or HIV. We have developed community-based strategies to promote self-representation in the production of work and to ensure that these materials grow out of and respond to specific local contexts. We have utilized every possible artistic medium (film, video, photography, painting, installation, posters, performance, pop music, dance, theatre, fanzines, graffiti, short stories, novels) and every imaginable artistic strategy (satire, melodrama, civil disobedience, didacticism, pornography, appropriation, historical recreation, collective authorship, autobiography) to achieve our objectives.

These by-any-means-necessary tactics have produced an immense body of diverse, focused and inspired work but most of it remains

marginalized within the communities that created it. Potential audiences for this work are not likely to even be aware of its existence unless they are clearly self-identified with specific communities, participate in their information networks and are predisposed to seek out information about AIDS. Accordingly, over the last ten years lesbian and gay activist artists have also begun to problematize the paradigm of community and to consider its limitations.

Second Decade, a collective of video artists and AIDS activists, has continued to build on the legacy of activist art and to reconceptualize notions of community in a groundbreaking public-service announcement production project. Their recently completed tapes are the ostensible subject of this article but the historical and cultural context within which they have been produced must first be set.

While community-based (deconstruction, production and communication) strategies have proven relatively effective in reaching self-identified community members, "there are many men and women who inhabit a world of borderlines."<sup>3</sup> A hint of where these elusive borderlines might lie was offered recently in a *New York Times* article concerning medical anthropology: "Dr. Anita Pivnick, at Montefiore Medical Centre in the Bronx, told of a recent examination that revealed that a patient had been engaging in anal sex. But when the doctor asked him if he had ever had sex with another man, he repeatedly said no. Finally the doctor asked him, 'Has another man's penis ever touched your anus?' The man replied 'Oh yeah, all the time.'"<sup>4</sup> This man did not even consider getting fucked in the ass by another man sex, let alone gay sex; his construction of self and body pertained to no community identity and as such no

community-based safe-sex strategy would ever reach him. There are certainly many millions of misinformed, repressed or confused men and women who inhabit similar borderlines that defy community and who are priorities for safe-sex education.

The same *New York Times* article demonstrates the fragility and co-optability of the construction of community in the hands of institutional discourse. The New York office of AIDS Surveillance compiled medical anthropologists' and sociologists' research into a map of concentration of HIV infection in New York by ZIP code, ostensibly for the purpose of targeting AIDS information more effectively. It was determined that "HIV infection clustered in two of nine ZIP codes" populated largely by gay men in the Chelsea/Clinton and Greenwich Village/Soho areas. However, the study took no responsibility for determining the needs of these people or how they could be addressed. In this instance, the notion of community as a self-determining collectivity growing out of shared identity and objectives has been trashed in favour of a proceduralized notion of community as real estate and a list of names and addresses. What has been targeted is not a virus, an epidemic or behaviour but people in their homes. And the mass distribution of the map of HIV concentration serves as a deranged travel advisory and threat of quarantine.

Communities otherwise working in coalition can find themselves in conflict over the specifics of differing representational and identity issues. Cindy Patton has documented the furor over the publication of Phillip Hannan's simple and naturalistic photograph of a semi-hard cock with a condom on it in *GO*, the *Gays of Ottawa* newspaper. The safer-sex intentions of this photo were interpreted as "pornographic" by a local

group of lesbian feminist *GO* readers who deemed the photo "assaultive to women, especially to female victims of male sexual violence."<sup>5</sup> In most instances, inter-community conflicts over representational strategies can be accommodated in joint efforts but in some cases differences are not negotiable.

The work of reconceptualizing community boundaries around shifting multiple identities, deconstructing the perils of institutional co-optation and negotiating competing community interests has enriched and strengthened those involved in the process. But the fact remains that current community structures and resources cannot conduct the mass distribution and communication required to end the epidemic. An obvious solution is to connect the extensive body of community-based and self-representational AIDS education strategies and materials to existing mass communication networks. The primary obstacles to this convergence of community and mass media are politically and religiously motivated censorship, which is more determined to contain queer representation than to contain

irresponsibility and misinformation. The choice of title for the documentary, *Beyond Loss*, incorrectly suggests complacency, acceptance and defeat – that we have become inured to feelings of loss and grief. The terms "plague" and "gay cancer" are both used in the report but no analysis or correction of the inaccuracy or homophobia behind them is offered. Interior monologues from Dale Peck's novel *Martin and John* are recreated as flat, anguished mini-dramas. Rob Flack's vibrant and erotic imagery is made to look flakey and New Age. All of the art and artists are portrayed as self-absorbed, isolated and piteously melancholic. Haunting, dirgeful music is played over montages of painted text such as "torso rot" and "sick" and video images of garbage rotting in the street while the reporter makes cataclysmic statements about the "disease-riven landscape" and "life infected with the everyday horrors of AIDS." Her droning text poses the relationship between sex and death as the eternal truth through which to interpret the artists' work. The reporter then makes absurd "curatori-

The refusal of broadcast television to deal with self-representation and direct action in the AIDS crisis assumes genocidal proportions when we consider that the role of broadcast television as the primary purveyor of collective consciousness is increasingly totalizing. As narrow-bandwidth, prosthetic communication proliferates, television stands in for substance and human scale – full-bandwidth bodily interaction – in more and more peoples' lives.<sup>7</sup>

Everyone, regardless of construction of collective identity or of self, maintains a relationship with the inescapable spectacle of television. In this context, the decision of ten queer artists, collectively known as Second Decade,<sup>8</sup> to join forces to produce a series of 30-second safe-sex and AIDS-awareness public service announcements designed specifically for network broadcast seems particularly innovative and necessary. Television holds the potential to effect massive shifts in sexual behaviour toward safer ground and to reframe the perception and reality of AIDS and people with AIDS; the compact 30-second format increases the

## meanwhile, sex is used by television

the AIDS epidemic, and sedimented corporate and creative media structures more concerned with profits and stellar careers than with social responsibility.

Of all the mass media, television has remained the most resolutely resistant to queers, artists, activism and self-representation when it comes to AIDS education. In fact, television has been one of the primary offenders in preventing AIDS and HIV infection from being conceptualized as anything but the "gay plague." The June 8th documentary on AIDS and art presented by *CBC Prime-Time News* is the most recent example of televi-

al" claims to historicizing the relationship between art and AIDS over the last decade, however, minimal research would have revealed a rich and well-documented history of collective action by artists and critics to intervene directly in education about AIDS prevention and treatment. The documentary simply ignores the crucial role of media artists such as John Greyson, Michael Balsler, Richard Fung, Andy Fabo, Debbie Douglas and Gabrielle Micallef in the fight against AIDS and rewrites the history WE have lived with a poison pen in its privileged institutional hand.<sup>6</sup>

chance that viewers will take in the information as they surf their TV options. Second-Decade participants began planning and fundraising in May 1992 and arrived at the Banff Centre for the Arts in January 1993 to begin production of their public service announcements (PSAs).<sup>9</sup>

The use of PSAs to promote broad-based awareness is not a new strategy in the fight against AIDS and HIV. In 1989 the Ontario Ministry of Health launched a series of 60-second spots featuring talking-head testimonies by "real people" stating that they have AIDS and

entreat viewers not to do what they did. These vague and voyeuristic spots were built on suspect educational strategies of showing viewers what a person with AIDS looks and sounds like and of encouraging identification with the individual speaker through teary-eyed maudlinism to scare them into behavioural change. In 1992, these spots were scrapped by the NDP government in favour of a new Ontario Ministry of Health series of four PSAs that dealt with representational issues from a slightly more progressive position: they all operated as neatly contained, narratively structured mini-dramas; they were targeted at youth; and they attempted to reference race, gender and sexual orientation concerns with regard to AIDS and HIV. But they failed to represent the negotiation of condom use between people about to have a sexual encounter or to portray people as sensual or amorous, let alone sexual, beings. Sexual contact, the primary path of HIV transmission, remained unacknowledged, censored and contained. Based on antiquated "advocacy advertising" models, both the 1989 and the 1992

rather a racially mixed collective of lesbian and gay film and video artists and community-based AIDS activists, a number of them HIV+. While each of the ten participating artists was responsible for originating the concept and content for their PSA, scripts were workshopped and produced collectively. Their shared underlying artistic approach was to appropriate and critique contemporary commercial advertising codes and conventions while maintaining the integrity of each artist's particular practice. Furthermore, the producing group was self-determining and not obligated to any approval mechanism beyond itself.

Three of the Second-Decade spots reveal their origins in the director's art practice quite directly while they promote awareness by demonstrating the complexities of AIDS in running text overlays. Based on his eponymous multi-media installation, Andy Fabo's *Diagnosis* is designed to explain that AIDS is not a disease but a syndrome and to encourage people to get information to protect themselves. Over a continuous pan of a chain of people standing arm in arm,

time and across the bottom of the screen like headlines, ending with the punch line: "2001 ... A Cure for AIDS??? Don't wait for a cure. Protect yourself now. Kissing is safe." Zachery Longboy's contemplative and associative *Living Tree* refers to his performances and installations to create piercing images of AIDS awareness. Small brown pill bottles with words like "HIV ... condoms ... responsibility ... you ... me ... safe sex" printed on them hang from a large tree and swing gently in the wind. Around the base of the tree Stoney Nation dancers and a drummer move in a sacred circle. Intercut with these images are close-ups of people tied to the tree. The effect of this precise and elegantly constructed tape is unforgettable.

Three other PSAs couch their serious intentions in more blatantly humorous appropriations and critical rewritings of television-commercial conventions. Anne Golden's *Safe Soap* parodies the ages-old daytime TV tradition of associating women with soap. A woman is zapped from channel to channel and from backdrop to backdrop as she caresses a detergent box emblazoned with a

sparkling safer-sex logo. It won't do a thing for her laundry but it protects her and her partners. Jim MacSwain's youth-oriented *Who Has AIDS?* rewrites the endlessly seductive barrage of Saturday morning advertisements for toys and games. A group of teens are playing the new board game *Who Has AIDS?* – which is sweeping the nation, and one boy picks up a question card that asks "What group of Canadians is most at risk?" to which he correctly replies "Us!" David Findlay's *Ready For You* takes on the music video format to urge teens to use condoms with sumptuous

fast-paced images of fresh faces and active bodies bouncing to a pounding house-beat.

The last three videos utilize succinct visual vocabularies based on grand cinematic narrative and stylistic codes to bracket their condom and glove-use messages. Charline Boudreau's elegant and elaborately constructed *Love and Latex* throws us back to a time and place reminiscent of *Casablanca*. A couple in formal attire performs a highly ritualized and erotic pick-up that is dotted with casual images of condoms in silver cigarette cases, latex gloves in the pocket of the tuxedo jacket. A deeply coded aspect of this tape is that the seemingly heterosexual couple is actually two women, a fact that escapes those who don't want to see it. Phillip Roth's multi-layered *Latex Saves Lives* plays with mad-scientist horror conventions while inverting the image of doctor as healer. A man in operating gown and mask approaches a tray of menacing surgical tools and puts on latex gloves. As he turns to the operating table, he falls through space, loses his clothes (except for the latex gloves) and finds himself caressing another man's naked body. A more fully clothed heterosexual version of this PSA was also produced. And finally, in the campy *Condoms Are a Girl's Best Friend*, David MacLean pays homage to the Hollywood icon of icons – Marilyn Monroe. Two men sit on their ordinary sofa, eating popcorn, immersing themselves in the Marilyn fantasy they are watching on TV. Marilyn mugs and squeaks as she rubs her latex-gloved and rhinestone-ringed fingers over the rippling pecks and bulging thighs of a hunky body-builder. Back in front of the TV, the two boys start necking and rip off their shirts to get down to business. Marilyn's gloved hand appears out of a plant beside the sofa to hand them

a condom and the lights go out. And, of course, an instrumental version of *Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend* plays throughout. A more fully clothed heterosexual version of this PSA was produced as well.

Technically, the PSAs all look like they actually belong on television; sophisticated and distinctive imagery, slick digital effects, hot music, pushy editing and tight concepts code this work as part of the flow of TV. In terms of their representational politics, the PSAs depict a range of body contact from modest to erotic, from kissing to caressing, which leaves no doubt as to what latex is to be used for – if not exactly how. Quite intentionally all of the PSAs portray bodies in groups, underscoring the ideas that we are all living with AIDS and that no body is isolated or alone. And, finally, they all engage in what continues to be a fundamental artistic act – they provide basic information about AIDS and safe sex.

Despite the clarity of the artistic and educational strategies and the professional execution of the basic concepts, the potential impact of the Second-Decade PSAs is very much dependent on one variable beyond the control of the producers: agreement from broadcasters to run the spots. Broadcast on Channel Four in Britain and PBS in the US is currently being negotiated and local, regional and national Canadian broadcasters are being courted but none have yet committed to screenings. Closed-circuit screenings at video and television festivals throughout North America and Europe have been very well received, however, this convergence of art, AIDS education, community and television can't be considered complete until the intended goal of broadcast has been secured. The urgency for action to end the AIDS crisis has not diminished over

the last decade and the role of television broadcasters in the second decade of living with AIDS must be reconstituted as responsive and responsible, interventionist and informative. Connecting the Second-Decade project to its intended audience would be a laudable first step in that direction.<sup>10</sup>

Art does have the power to save lives, and it is this power that must be recognized, fostered and supported in every way possible.... We don't need a cultural renaissance; we need cultural practices actively participating in the struggle against AIDS.<sup>11</sup>

Illustrations, p. 11, left to right

Top row: David Findlay, *Very Ready*; David MacLean, *Condoms Are a Girl's Best Friend*; Charline Boudreau, *Step Out Smartly*

2nd row: James MacSwain, *Who Has AIDS?*; Anne Golden, *Safe Soap*

3rd row: Zachery Longboy, *Living Tree*; Anne Golden, *Safe Soap*

Lower right: Zachery Longboy, *Living Tree*

Bottom: Michael Balsler, *Kiss & Cure*

#### NOTES

1. Paula Treichler in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), p.31
2. Cindy Patton, *Inventing AIDS*, (NY & London: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1990)
3. Samuel Delaney in *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 3/2 (Bloomington: Indiana U. Press, 1991), p.34
4. "Targeting urged in attack on AIDS," *New York Times*, 7 March 1993; in its infinite irresponsibility the *Times* does not indicate if the man in question was counselled in safer-sex practices
5. Cindy Patton in *A Leap in the Dark*, ed. Allan Klusacek & Ken Morrison (Montreal: Vehicule & Artex, 1992), pp.192-93
6. For an analysis of the means by which the screening of Marlon Rigg's *Tongues Untied* on PBS was derailed, see Ron Gregg's "PBS and AIDS: AIDS Chapter One" in *Jump Cut* 37 (Berkeley: Jump Cut Associates, 1992); details of Rogers Cable censorship of the Toronto Living With AIDS programme can be found in my article "Peripheral Connections Vs. the

## to sell everything except safe sex.

series were conceived and produced by issue experts in the advertising industry and health bureaucracies. Their potential impact was mediated by a timid, retentive notion of public acceptability; meanwhile, sex is used by television to sell everything except safe sex.

Second Decade's approach to AIDS education through PSAs differed radically from these prior efforts in a number of very basic ways. Structurally, the producing body was not an "expert" ad agency or a government bureaucracy entangled in its own politics and procedures but

text listing the pharmaceutical treatments for opportunistic infections rolls up the left side of the frame and text listing many opportunistic infections rolls up the right side of the frame. The many layers of image, text and sound are carefully merged into a cohesive and arresting jolt. Michael Balsler's *Kiss & Cure* reflects his ongoing artistic concern with psychedelia and sci-fi. Against a shimmering, freaky, digitally-processed backdrop of microscopic and macroscopic life, panels of people kissing slide across the screen while AIDS key-words from the last ten years march across

Consciousness Industry" in *The Independent Eye* 13/1 (Toronto: CFMDC, 1991)

7. These notions are elaborated in Allucquere Roseanne Stone's "Virtual Systems" in *Zone*, ed. Jonathan Crary & Sanford Kwinter (NY: Urzone, 1992), p.608. Some extreme examples of TV's impact: on two separate nights in May of this year, some forty thousand people gathered at Toronto's SkyDome to watch broadcast TV together - a hockey playoff and the last episode of *Cheers*; obsessive fans assimilate and contest TV by writing and circulating their own *Star Trek* plots, some featuring Spock and Kirk as lovers, complete with curiously exciting depictions of a hard Vulcan cock (see Constance Penley in *Technoculture*, U. of Minnesota Press, 1991)

8. Members of the Second-Decade collective were: series producer & video artist Michael Balser from Toronto; video & film artist Charline Boudreau from Montreal; sound artist & musician Phillip Dwja from Montreal; visual & video artist Andy Fabo from Toronto; video artist David Findlay from Toronto; video artist & programmer Anne Golden from Montreal; video & performance artist Zachery Longboy from Vancouver; video & perfor-

mance artist David MacLean from Toronto; film & video artist James MacSwain from Halifax; and film & video artist Philip Roth from New York

9. Aspects of the Banff Centre's involvement are detailed in my article, "Sex-obsessed Censors" in *Xtra!* 221 (Toronto: Pink Triangle Press, 1993)

10. Second-Decade preview tapes are available from V Tape in Toronto

11. Douglas Crimp in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, p.7

catch:  
letter

I am writing in reference to the article by Robert Fones, "Colour and Technique in the Work of Joanne Tod, Greg Curnoe and Jaan Poldas" (C 38). I enjoyed the article but noticed an error.

Fones stated that fluorescent paint was invented in the 1950s. This is not true. Fluorescent pigments have been in use at least since the 1930s and they have been used in a variety of ways. A discussion on

luminous paints included in the Symposium on Paint, held in Buffalo in 1943, noted that fluorescent materials had been used before the war to dye fabric for decoration and staging, to produce plastic Christmas ornaments and to make lacquers for paintings and posters.

It is unclear when artists may have started using such materials. One of the problems associated with their early use was the speed with which they faded in strong light. Greg Curnoe's use of a fluorescent paint medium is linked to the fact that advances during World War II in paint research and manufacture radically changed the paint industry in the 1950s. It was a time when many new or improved products became available; these included latex, vinyl, alkyd and acrylic paints, to name four. Many of these were tailored for specific uses with increased durability and light-fastness often touted as key features.

John Gayer

Ron Martin

Solo Exhibition at the Christopher Cutts Gallery  
Opens Saturday October 30 & Closes November 27, 1993  
Statement: July 26, 1993

Is it possible for artists to produce accessible statements without sacrificing their ideas to the idea of accessibility? Is it possible to write a statement that will communicate new and unfamiliar ideas? What considerations are involved in writing an artist's statement? The first is the artist's desire to communicate, to identify ideas. The second is the artist's desire to find the means to express ideas in words on paper: choices have to be made regarding the structure and focus of the issues held by both artist and viewer.

What the artist and viewer have in common is their vulnerability to the changes in their circumstances. For instance, when someone close to you dies - especially if that person has been a significant part of your life - you feel dislocated from yourself. In such circumstances you are compelled to find a means of reaffirming your values. In being so located by a death I have become aware that it is possible to re-create that displacement, through the construction of the abstract components of an art object. The viewer is compelled to absorb the abstract components in order to re-create their circumstance: the viewer becomes the instrument of a critical subject. Thus, a critical subject gains the freedom to pursue a model of consciousness.

The content and medium of this art - the critical subject - should not be confused with the three fundamental components of a work of art, which are the abstract, the symbolic, and the real. (The abstract components comprise the formal elements, that is, the possibilities inherent in the conventions of art making. The symbolic component corresponds to unconscious experience, our presence in the world. The real component links the information of diverse concrete elements to make art.) The relationship of statement to content and medium are the specifics that effectively determine the tools we use to create a form. A second set of determinants concerns that which the completed work articulates and embodies. A relationship between these two sets of determinants provides us with the means of observing and distancing our situation. Because of our common desire to see and re-create our circumstance the displacement or distancing of abstract components in a work of art provides viewer and artist alike with the means to extend our inner capacity to create meaning.

Together, viewer and artist enter a work of art through the imagination. The power to imagine makes possible a better communication of the value of existence. It is preferable to create our circumstance than to be passively shaped by our circumstance. To participate in our circumstance is to bring to art the reality of life itself. In wanting to communicate our unconscious knowledge of being whole we contemplate the idea of individuality, which is fundamental to our feeling about one other and the things that connect us in the world.

If it is our intent to reveal through our creations what we are as human beings, then art must reflect the structure of our intelligence. In providing concrete evidence of our intelligence we invite others to re-construct the circumstance under which our reality is created. A cultural object is a product of committed interest and obliges us to examine the structure of our collective intelligence. The structure of a work of art presents an opportunity to contemplate change in ourselves and in the Post-modern condition of seeing the world.

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