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The embattled body: AIDS and the current crisis of representation

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The Revolver

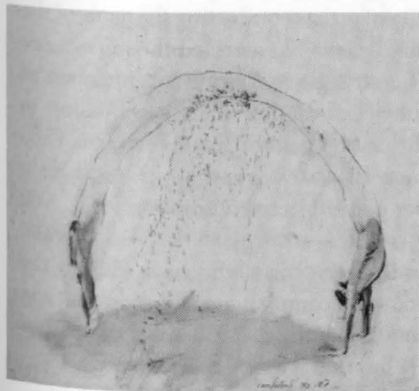
By DOT TUER

THE EMBATTLED BODY: AIDS AND THE CURRENT CRISIS OF REPRESENTATION



Above: Andy Fabo
Superheater 1988
Pages 153-153A and 180-181
Multimedia bookwork
Courtesy Paul Chapnick

Below: Stephen Andrews
rainfalling 1988
Oil stick, graphite on parchment
17 x 14 in.



In the theoretical writings that currently shadow the visual arts, a hybrid and highly charged polemic surrounding the body and representation has emerged in the late 1980s. The phenomenon of the body has been dissected with arguments drawn from such diverse sources as feminism's critique of patriarchy, the scientific aspirations of psychoanalysis and the philosophical project of deconstruction, finally to be reread as a mediated object that splinters under scrutiny into a thousand competing discourses. The body, it is argued, packaged by media, divided by gender and contained by a public/private split, has simply disappeared.

The inflammatory conclusion of this postmodern condition, in which the body can only ever be a site of theoretical tropes or a subject of appropriation, may seem ridiculously abstract to most people. It is particularly so to artists who insist upon a location for the body that expresses the lived experiences of sexual, racial or cultural differences silenced in a North American context. But despite the efforts of artists to challenge the notion of the body that is both constructed and contained by the status quo, the predominance of postmodernism has affected the attitudes and projects of contemporary art practice. Artists who seek to articulate an oppositional social and political experience are dismissed as naïve and materially simplistic, while theorists of the new age announce not only the end of the body, the end of history and the absence of politics, but the end of art.

The naming of AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) as a

counterpoint to the cynical and bewildering complex of discourses that describe and contain the body would seem at first to disarm the polemic of a postmodernism that denies the body the validity of experience. When people are living with and dying of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), abstractions of the body's disappearance become particularly repellant, even obscene. But in identifying AIDS as a site of the body's disintegration, and perhaps one of the underlying causes of art criticism's current anxieties, one does not dismantle a crisis in representation. Rather, AIDS, as a medical syndrome seemingly without an origin and wrapped in media glitz, doubles the stakes in the postmodernist claim to a body that cannot exist outside the metaphors and narratives that frame it.

AIDS as a subject of clinical research is still clouded by controversy and a constantly evolving vocabulary. What is known is that regardless of sexual orientation, it is the education on and incidence of safe sex and safe drug practices that contain the virus. AIDS as a media disease, however, has become a label of highly inflammatory dimensions. It has become synonymous with promiscuity, with homosexuality, with a modern-day plague. It blurs the distinction between public and private spheres, bringing sexuality out of the closet and into the glaring lights of media fascination. As a locus where technology and morality meet, and where sexuality and death conflate, AIDS is both a linguistic and material crisis of our society.

Within the sphere of the visual arts,

the body's sexuality and morality have traditionally been the subject of both figurative and abstract expression. In the face of the AIDS crisis, however, assumptions concerning the intentionality and interpretation of these subjects have dramatically altered. Images of bodies and death are vulnerable to a number of preconceptions and misconceptions brought about by the AIDS crisis. Representations of sexuality and transgression have become subject to an AIDS-era revisionism, which can read these images as both dangerous and prophetic. But nowhere is the contradiction between the body and its image greater than in the work of artists who have sought an expression of the homosexual body within art and who must now deal with the image of gay sex and AIDS perpetrated by the mass media.

Homosexual images of the body have been a subtext throughout the history of art, but until the appearance of AIDS, the exploration of the homosexual body occurred at the margins of the mainstream art world. These images were then coded and recirculated, masked by the prevailing assumption of heterosexuality. In the age of AIDS, however, the homosexual body is no longer an absent body but a front-page headline. "GAY PLAGUE" screamed the tabloids in the early 1980s, while explicit and objectifying photographs of AIDS "victims" portrayed the choice of this particular sexual orientation as a disease-riddled death sentence. In this context, postmodernism's rhetorical conclusion that the body has disappeared takes on a chilling resonance.

Artists who seek to locate the homosexual body in the context of the AIDS crisis are caught, paradoxically, between the need to combat the hysteria of the mass media and the need to represent personal experiences of fear and death. The *Names Project Quilt*, which originated in San Francisco, is perhaps the most widely publicized artistic response to the representational crisis of AIDS. An ever-expanding quilt pieced together from squares commemorating individuals who have died from AIDS, the *Names Project* is both a collective memorial and an activist insistence that death be remembered with dignity rather than brutalized and depersonalized by media

headlines.

In contrast to the *Names Project*, which draws upon a feminist strategy of recording memories and reclaiming artistically disowned forms, the recently formed Act Up (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) coalition of New York City uses civil disobedience, posters, video and installation strategies. Speaking out against a system that has equated sex with death, Act Up uses the slogan "SILENCE = DEATH" to actively condemn both mass media disinformation and government inaction. These artists and community activists insist that the pessimism of postmodernism be replaced by a radical explosion of self-determined representation.

In Canada, artists have chosen to work both collaboratively and individually to create responses to the AIDS issue that are personal and creative as well as political. The Canadian videos that were featured as part of *Angry Initiatives, Defiant Strategies*, a week-long series of screenings held at A Space in October 1988 and organized by Michael Balser, Tim McCaskell, Richard Fung, David McIntosh, Gary Kinsman and John Greyson, were humorous and metaphorical in their approaches to the AIDS issue. Greyson's *Ads Epidemic*, first screened as one of a series of video installations in a Toronto shopping mall, utilizes the Thomas Mann novella *Death in Venice* to contrast the plague paranoia generated by the media (embodied by a caricature of Aschenbach) with the pleasure Tadzio and his friend enjoy while practicing safe sex. Michael Balser and Andy Fabo's *Survival of the Delirious* overlays contemporary scenes of a young man testing HIV positive with reenactments from a Cree and Ojibway myth. In a larger context, the themes and strategies used in these videos belong to a growing concern on the part of Toronto visual artists to create images that address not only the public ramifications of the AIDS crisis but also the dissolution of meaning and the paradoxes of sexuality and death embodied by the issue.

In particular, the poignant and often fragile images of Andy Fabo and Stephen Andrews stand out as individual responses that reclaim both the body and art as territories of reflection. Stephen Andrews' *rainfalling* (1988), for example, in which an elongated male figure is

separated at the waist and joined by an arc, strikes a subtle balance between the experiences of the body's mortality and its living possibilities.

In Andy Fabo's recent show *Technologies of the Self* at the Garnet Press Gallery in Toronto, his bookworks and large-scale mixed-media drawings insist upon a space within visual representation to explore the complexity of responses the AIDS virus has generated in both the private and public spheres. He seeks to eroticize images of safe sex, which, combined with references to botany, conductors, all-seeing eyes and satellite dishes, create a stunning visual narrative that juxtaposes nature and science, sexual desire and media oppression. In Fabo's work the body does not disappear but becomes a conduit for the discourses that penetrate and surround it. The body is electrified and alive, treading gingerly between a memorial of the past and a vision of the future.

Fabo's and Andrews' works are neither confrontational nor populist in tone. In contrast to the call for an activist strategy, exemplified by the American critic Douglas Crimp in his anthology *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, these Toronto artists have chosen to locate their practice and theory at the crossroads of critical, political and aesthetic concerns. In a talk entitled "Imagining the Body (during the AIDS epidemic)" given at a conference on "Representing AIDS: Crisis and Criticism" in November 1988, Andy Fabo emphasized the need not only to privilege the public sphere but to understand that "community is created when we articulate our private hopes, fears, joys and sorrows." Citing the diverse artistic responses to the AIDS crisis in the work of Regan Morris, Stephen Andrews and Shelagh Keeley, Fabo not only located a community of artists combatting the panic of the mass media but asserted the importance of a struggle to "represent ourselves as subjects." Rather than succumbing to the death knells of postmodernism, Fabo suggests a strategy where political realities and subjective vision can meet. And it is in this strategy, in the work of Fabo and other artists who have chosen the body as a complex site of exploration and contradiction, that I believe the end of art has found a new beginning.