Aesthetics and Loss

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I had a friend, a painter, named Kris Johnson, who died two years ago of AIDS. He was in his early thirties. He'd shown here and there, in bookstores, arty coffee shops, that kind of thing, first in Minnesota, then in Los Angeles. He painted over colour photos he'd first colour-xeroxed — images of shopping trolleys in carparks, of giant palms, their small heads black as warts against the smoggy sun: California images.

He read *Artforum* religiously; he would have been happy to see his name in its pages. The magazine represented for him a lien on his future, a promise of the serious work he was about to embrace as soon as he could get out of the fast lane. Like many people who are both beautiful and gifted, he had to explore his beauty before his gift. It dictated his way of living until two years before his death. His health had already begun to deteriorate and he'd moved to Santa Fe, where he painted seriously during his last few months.

By now everyone knows about how the AIDS virus is contracted and how it manifests itself. The purely medical horrors of the disease have received the

attention of the world press. What interests me here is how artists of all sorts — writers, painters, sculptors, people in video and performance art, actors, models — are responding to AIDS in their work and their lives. If I narrow the focus, I do so not because I think artists are more important than any other group but because of the impact the epidemic has had on aesthetics and on the life of the art community, an impact that has not been studied.

The most visible artistic expressions of AIDS have been movies, television dramas, and melodramas on the stage, almost all of which have emphasised that AIDS is a terribly *moving* human experience (for the lover, the nurse, the family, the patient) which may precipitate the coming-out of the doctor (the play *Anti Body* 1983, by Louise Parker Kelley) or overcome the homophobia of the straight male nurse (*Compromised Immunity* 1986, by Andy Kirby and the Gay Sweatshop Theatre Company, from England) or resolve longstanding tensions between lovers (William M. Hoffman's play *As Is* 1985, and Bill Sherwood's beautifully rendered movie *Parting Glances* 1985). Although Larry Kramer's play, *The Normal Heart* 1985, is almost alone in taking up the political aspects of the disease, it still ends in true melodramatic fashion with a deathbed wedding scene. John Erman's *An Early Frost* 1985, a made-for-television movie on NBC, is the *Love Story* of the 1980s. The best documentary is perhaps *Coming of Age* 1986, by Marc Huestis, who filmed scenes from the life of a friend of his diagnosed with the virus.

But even on artists working away from the limelight, AIDS has had an effect. Naturally, the prospect of ill health and death or its actuality inspires a sense of urgency. What was it I wanted to do in my work after all? Should I make my work simpler, clearer, more accessible? Should I record my fears, obliquely or directly, in my work, or should I defy them? Is it more heroic to drop whatever I was doing and look disease in the eye, or should I continue going in the same direction as before, though with a new consecration? Is it a hateful concession to the disease even to acknowledge its existence? Should I pretend Olympian indifference to it? Or should I admit to myself, 'Look kid, you're scared shitless and that's your material'? If Yeats thought sex and death were the only two topics worthy of adult consideration, then AIDS wins hands down as subject matter.

It seems to me that AIDS is tilting energies away from the popular arts (including disco-dancing, the sculpturing of the living body through working

out the design of pleasure machines — bars, clubs, baths, resort houses) and redirecting them toward the solitary 'high' arts. Of course I may simply be confusing the effects of ageing with the effects of the disease; after all, the Stonewall generation is now middle-aged, and older people naturally seek out different pursuits. But we know how frightened everyone is becoming, well beyond the 'high risk' group that is my paradigm and my subject here.

What seems unquestionable is that ten years ago sex was a main reason for being for many gay men. Not simple, humdrum coupling, but a new principle of adhesiveness. Sex provided a daily brush with the ecstatic, a rehearsal of forgotten pain under the sign of the miraculous — sex was a force binding familiar atoms into new polymers of affinity.

To be sure, as some wit once remarked, life would be supportable without its pleasures, and certainly a sensual career had its melancholy side. Even so, sex was, if not fulfilling, then at least engrossing — enough at times to make the pursuit of the toughest artistic goals seem too hard, too much work given the mild returns. 'Beauty is difficult', as Pound liked to remind us, and the difficulties held little allure for people who could take satisfaction in an everyday life that had, literally, become ... sensational. Popular expressions of the art of life, or rather those pleasures that intensified the already heady exchange within a newly liberated culture, thrived. The fortune that was lavished on flowers, drugs, sound systems, food, clothes, hair: people who were oppressed by the brutality of the big city or by their own poverty or a humiliating job could create for at least a night, or a weekend, a magical dream-like environment.

Now all this has changed. I feel repatriated to my lonely adolescence, the time when I was alone with my writing and I felt weird about being a queer. Art was a consolation then — a consolation for a life not much worth living, a site for the staging of fantasies reality couldn't fulfil, a peopling of solitude — and art has become a consolation again. People aren't on the prowl any more, and a seductive environment is read not as an enticement but as a deathtrap. Fat is in; it means you're not dying, at least not yet.

And of course we do feel weird again, despised, alien. There's talk of tattooing us or quarantining us. Both the medical and the moralistic models for homosexuality have been dusted off only fifteen years after they were

shelved; the smell of the madhouse and the punitive vision of the Rake Chastised have been trotted out once more. In such a social climate the popular arts, the public arts, are standing still, frozen in time. There's no market, no confidence, no money. The brassy hedonism of a few years back has given way to a protective grey invisibility, which struck me forcibly when I returned to New York recently after being away for several months. As Joe Orton quotes a friend in his diaries, all we see are all these old norms, all norming about.

But if the conditions for a popular culture are deteriorating, those promoting a renewed high culture have returned. Certainly the disease is encouraging homosexuals to question whether they want to go on defining themselves at all by their sexuality. Maybe the French philosopher Michel Foucault was right in saying there are homosexual acts but not homosexual people. More concretely, when a society based on sex and expression is de-eroticised, its very reason for being can vanish.

Yet the disease is a stigma; even the horde of asymptomatic carriers of the antibody is stigmatised. Whether imposed or chosen, gay identity is still very much with us. How does it express itself these days?

The main feeling is one of evanescence. It's just like the Middle Ages; every time you say goodbye to a friend you fear it may be for the last time. You search your own body for signs of the malady. Every time someone begins a sentence with 'Do you remember Bob ...' you seize up in anticipation of the sequel. A writer or visual artist responds to this fragility as both a theme and as a practical limitation — no more projects that require five years to finish.

THE DREAM OF FLOWERS

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The body becomes central, the body that until recently was at once so natural (athletic, young, casually dressed) and so artificial (pumped up, pierced, ornamented). Now it is feeble, yellowing, infected — or boisterously healthy as a denial of precisely this possibility. When I saw a famous gay filmmaker recently, he was radiant with a hired tan: 'I have to look healthy or no one will bankroll me.' Most of all the body is unloved. Onanism — singular or in groups — has replaced intercourse. This solitude is precisely a recollection of adolescence. Unloved, the body releases its old sad song, but it also builds fantasies, rerunning idealised movies of past realities, fashioning new images out of thin air.

People think about the machinery of the body — the wheezing bellows of the lungs, the mulcher of the gut — and of the enemy it may be harbouring. 'In the midst of life we are in death', in the words of the Book of Common Prayer. Death — in its submicroscopic, viral, paranoid aspect, the side worthy of William Burroughs — shadows every pleasure.

The New York painter Frank Moore told me last fall that in developing possible sets and costumes for a new Lar Lubovitch ballet he worked out an imagery of blood cells and invading organisms, of cells consuming themselves — a vision of cellular holocaust. In his view the fact of death and the ever-present threat of mortality have added a bit to the sometimes empty rhetoric of East Village expressionism. 'Until now anger has been a look, a pose,' he told me. Now it has teeth.

The list of people in the art world who have died of AIDS is long and growing longer. I won't mention names for fear of omitting one — or including one

Duane Michals, United States, *The Dream of Flowers* 1986, four gelatin silver photographs. Courtesy of the artist.

that discretion should conceal (it's not always possible to verify how much a patient told his family).

Maybe it's tactless or irrelevant to critical evaluation to consider an artist, writer, dealer, or curator in the light of his death. Yet the urge to memorialise the dead, to honour their lives, is a pressing instinct. Ross Bleckner's paintings with titles such as *Hospital Room*, *Memoriam* and *8,122+ As of January 1986*, all 1986, commemorate those who have died of AIDS, and incorporate trophies, banners, flowers and gates — public images.

There is an equally strong urge to record one's own past — one's own life — before it vanishes. I suppose everyone both believes and chooses to ignore that each detail of our behaviour is inscribed in the arbitrariness of history. Which culture, which moment we live in determines how we have sex, go mad, marry, die and worship, even how we say Ai! instead of Ouch! when we're pinched. Not even the soul that we reform or express is God-given or eternal; as Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish* 1978: 'The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body.' For gay men this force of history has been made to come clean; it's been stripped of its natural look. The very rapidity of change has laid bare the clanking machinery of history. To have been oppressed in the 1950s, freed in the 1960s, exalted in the 1970s, and wiped out in the 1980s is a quick itinerary for a whole culture to follow. For we are witnessing not just the death of individuals but a menace to an entire culture: all the more reason to bear witness to the cultural moment. The sincerity and romanticism of Duane Michals's images possess exactly this commemorative feeling.

Art must compete with (rectify, purge) the media, which have thoroughly politicised AIDS in a process that is the subject of a book to be published shortly in England. It is *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and the Media*, by Simon Watney. (Watney, Jeffrey Weeks, Richard Goldstein and Dennis Altman rank as the leading English-language intellectuals to think about AIDS and homosexuality.)

This winter [1986–87] William Olander at the New Museum in New York has organised 'Homo Video: What We Are Now', an international gay and lesbian program that focuses in part on AIDS and the media. For instance, Gregg Bordowitz's '*... some aspects of a shared lifestyle*' 1986, deals with the contrast between the actual disease and the 'gay plague' image promoted by the media. John Greyson's *Moscow Does Not Believe in Queers* 1986, inserts

lurid Rock Hudson headlines into a taped diary of ten days at a 1985 Moscow youth festival, where Greyson functioned as an 'out' homosexual in a country that does not acknowledge the rights — or even the legitimate existence — of homosexuals. And Stuart Marshall's *Bright Eyes* 1986, tracks, among other things, the presentation of AIDS in the English media.

If art is to confront AIDS more honestly than the media have done, it must begin in tact, avoid humour, and end in anger.

Begin in tact, I say, because we must not reduce individuals to their deaths; we must not fall into the trap of replacing the afterlife with the moment of dying. How someone dies says nothing about how he lived. And tact because we must not let the disease stand for other things. AIDS generates complex and harrowing reflections, but it is not caused by moral or intellectual choices. We are witnessing at long last the end of illness as metaphor and metonym.

Avoid humour, because humour seems grotesquely inappropriate to the occasion. Humour puts the public (indifferent when not uneasy) on cosy terms with what is an unspeakable scandal: death. Humour domesticates terror, lays to rest misgivings that should be intensified. Humour suggests that AIDS is just another calamity to befall Mother Camp, whereas in truth AIDS is not one more item in a sequence but a rupture in meaning itself. Humour, like melodrama, is an assertion of bourgeois values; it falsely suggests that AIDS is all in the family. Baudelaire reminded us that the wise man laughs only with fear and trembling.

End in anger, I say, because it is only sane to rage against the dying of the light, because strategically anger is a political response, because psychologically anger replaces despondency, and because existentially anger lightens the solitude of frightened individuals.

I feel very alone with the disease. My friends are dying. One of them asked me to say a prayer for us all in Venice 'in that church they built when the city was spared from the ravages of the plague'. Atheist that I am, I murmured my invocation to Longhena's baroque octagon if not to any spirit dwelling in Santa Maria della Salute. The other day I saw stencilled on a Paris wall an erect penis, its dimensions included in centimetres, and the words 'Faut Pas Rêver' (You mustn't dream). When people's dreams are withdrawn, they get real angry real fast.

Don't Leave Me This Way

ART IN THE AGE OF AIDS

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(front cover)
Nayland Blake, United States, *Don't Leave Me This Way*, 1989, bus shelter poster, originally commissioned by the American Foundation for AIDS Research (AmFAR). Courtesy of the artist and AmFAR.
(back cover)
Jamie Dunbar, Australia, *Taking Centre Stage. Protester holding white carnation — from ACT UP's mound of white carnations representing Australians who had died of AIDS, fifth national conference on HIV/AIDS, Sydney, November 1992*. 1992, gelatin silver photograph. Courtesy of the artist.