

But is it

Art
?

**The Spirit of
Art as Activism**

Edited by

Nina Felshin

Bay Press
Seattle

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Printed in the United States of America.

First Printing 1995

Second Printing 1996

Third Printing 2006

Bay Press

1411 4th Avenue, Suite 830

Seattle, Washington 98101

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Text set in Adobe Garamond, display type set in Franklin Gothic and Regency Script

Cover design: Philip Kovacevich

Cover photos: (top) Gran Fury, *The Government Has Blood on Its Hands* (detail), photo by Gran Fury; (center) David Avalos, Louis Hock, and Elizabeth Sisco, *Welcome to America's Finest Tourist Plantation*, courtesy of the San Diego Union Tribune; (bottom) WAC, *Pink Slips for Quayle and Bush*, photo by Teri Slotkin

Frontispiece: WAC, *Pink Slips for Quayle and Bush*, photo by Teri Slotkin

Page 8: Gran Fury, *The Government Has Blood on Its Hands*, photo by Gran Fury

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

But is it art?: the spirit of art as activism / edited by Nina Felshin.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-941920-29-1 : \$24.95

1. Arts—Political aspects. 2. Politics in art. 3. Social problems in art. 4. Mass media and the arts. 5. Performance art. 6. Artists and community. 7. Arts, Modern—20th century.

I. Felshin, Nina.

NX650.P6B88 1995

94-36846

700'.1'03—dc20

CIP

For my parents, Seon and Dorothy Felshin

This Is to Enrage You:

Gran Fury and the Graphics of AIDS Activism

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.

—Douglas Crimp

Kissing Doesn't Kill

A large advertisement affixed to the side of a city bus offers three interracial couples dressed in high-contrast colors and posed against an expanse of white monochrome. Each of the couples is kissing. Both the brightly patterned clothing worn by the figures and the overall visual style of the image simulate the well-known "United Colors of Benetton" ad campaign. Indeed, at first glance, we may think we have encountered yet another in that would-be provocative, if ultimately vacant, series of advertisements. It only takes another moment, however, to notice the differences this image has propelled into the space of advertising and to recognize that its agenda has nothing to do with boosting retail sales of Italian sportswear: two of the three couples are of the same sex, and a banner caption extending above the entire image declares, "Kissing Doesn't Kill: Greed and Indifference Do." In smaller type, a box of text to the right reads, "Corporate Greed, Government Inaction, and Public Indifference Make AIDS a Political Crisis."

Kissing Doesn't Kill was produced by Gran Fury, a self-described "band of individuals united in anger and dedicated to exploiting the power of art to end the AIDS crisis."¹ During the course of a relatively brief career—the group was founded in 1988 and (unofficially) disbanded in 1992—Gran Fury created some of the most arresting AIDS

KISSING DOESN'T KILL: GREED AND INDIFFERENCE DO.



**CORPORATE GREED,
GOVERNMENT INACTION,
AND PUBLIC INDIFFERENCE
MAKE AIDS
A POLITICAL CRISIS.**

Gran Fury, *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, bus panel, 1989–90. 136" x 28".
Courtesy of Creative Time

United Colors of Benetton advertisement, 1987, fall/winter campaign.
Photo by Oliviero Toscano



activist graphics of its day. *Kissing Doesn't Kill* exemplifies the spectacular strategies often exploited by the collective: it mimics the codes of capitalist pleasure and visual seduction to capture the viewer's attention and direct it to the AIDS crisis. Equally as important, it affirms the power of queer desire in the face of an ongoing epidemic, insisting that lesbians and gay men fight the efforts of the larger culture to render their sexuality—their desiring bodies—invisible.² *Kissing Doesn't Kill* also challenges misinformation about AIDS, rejecting early accounts (and rumors) that erroneously included kissing as a risk behavior and saliva as a likely fluid of transmission.³ As in all its work, Gran Fury locates the root cause of the AIDS crisis

not in HIV infection but in larger social forces and constituencies—the government, the corporate culture, the mainstream public—that ignore, remain silent about, or profit from the pandemic. Finally, *Kissing Doesn't Kill* functions as a mobile advertisement, traveling through various neighborhoods of the city rather than remaining within the bounds of any one community or subculture. It courts as wide a consumer audience as possible, jockeying alongside other advertisements and mass-produced images within the public spaces of urban culture. “We are trying to fight for attention as hard as Coca-Cola fights for attention,”⁴ observes Gran Fury member Loring McAlpin of the group's mass-market ambitions.

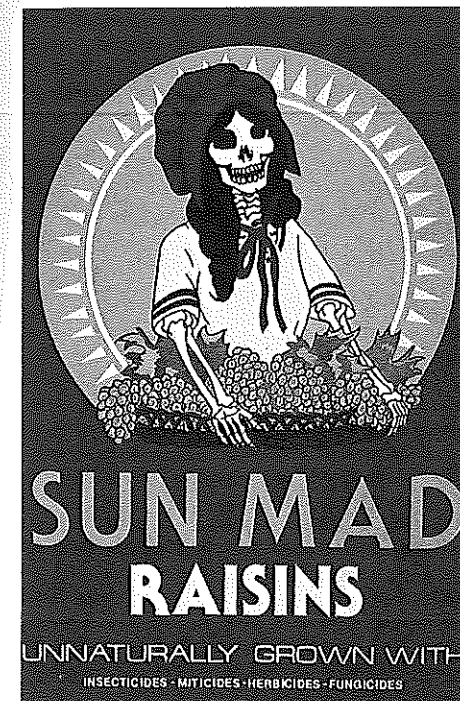
Since its initial appearance in 1989, *Kissing Doesn't Kill* has become something of an activist classic, widely reproduced in both the mainstream and alternative presses, reprinted several thousand times as a poster, even restaged as a music video and broadcast on European MTV and American public television.⁵ Gran Fury member Avram Finkelstein describes the success of *Kissing Doesn't Kill* as deriving from the fact that it puts “political information into environments where people are unaccustomed to finding it. . . . It's very different from being handed a leaflet where you automatically know someone's trying to tell you something and you may not be receptive to hearing it. But when you're walking down the street and you're gazing at advertising . . . who knows what goes through [your] mind?”⁶

Gran Fury frequently displayed its work at or on sites such as urban billboards, bus shelters, subway trains, newspaper vending machines, and television screens—sites where the work might be mistaken, if temporarily, for a familiar form of mainstream media. The collective simulated the glossy look and pithy language of advertising to seduce its audience into dealing with the difficult issues of AIDS transmission, research, funding, and government (non)response, issues that might otherwise be avoided or rejected out of hand. In catching viewers off-guard, Gran Fury sought to shock them into a new awareness of—and new activity about—the AIDS crisis.

In contrast to *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, activist graphics of the 1970s and early 1980s often employed self-consciously “craftsy” modes of fabrication, including freehand drawing, silkscreens, rough-hewn stencils, and woodcut printing. Through these handmade means, such posters sought a visual style appropriate to their grassroots context and counter-capitalist politics. The graphic look of Leslie Bender's *Stop Gentrification*, for example, measures an unmistakable distance from the dominant imagery of consumerism, a distance that constitutes part of its critique of real-estate development on the Lower East Side of New York City.

When market advertising was mimicked by protest posters of the 1970s and early 1980s, it was simultaneously upended, as in Esther Hernandez's *Sun Mad Raisins* of 1981. Hernandez replaces the wholesome face and healthy body of the familiar “raisin girl” with the skull and bones of a corpse, thereby indicting Sun Maid's use of environmental contaminants through a monstrous revision of its corporate logo.

Against such work, Gran Fury relied on visual pleasure, rather than terror, in creating its AIDS activist imagery. In part, this was because the collective was challenging the mainstream representation of the AIDS crisis—and of people living with AIDS—as alien, pathetic, monstrous, and/or murderous. As Jan Zita Grover has documented, early advertisements for AIDS prevention frequently presented the crisis “via fright—dead bodies on gurneys, PWA's [People with AIDS] close to death, dead IV drug users with needles stuck in their arms.”⁷ Since Gran Fury's aim was not to frighten its audience about infection but to provoke them to anger and political action, it avoided such imagery



Leslie Bender, *Stop Gentrification*, poster, 1981. Also appeared as printed stencil on city walls and sidewalks, New York.

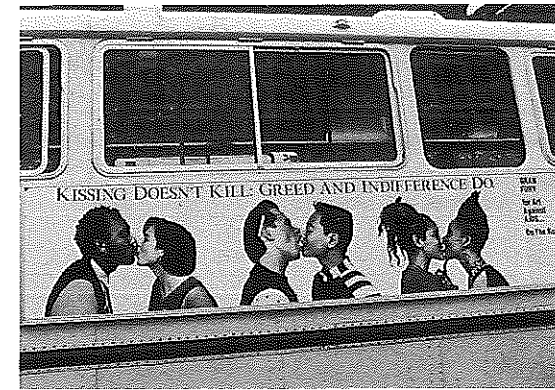
Esther Hernandez, *Sun Mad Raisins*, poster, 1981.

outright. As collective member Marlene McCarty puts it, “There was no way we were going to make victim photography” or extend “the dominant representation of AIDS as pathetic images of people dying in hospital beds.”⁸ Rather than portraying AIDS as a matter of individual abjection or personal pathos, Gran Fury addressed the larger social and political context of the epidemic.

In producing affirmative images of gay and lesbian desire, Gran Fury also insisted on the centrality of sexual liberation to its practice of AIDS activism and on the ideal of (safe) sexual freedom in the midst of the crisis. As early as 1985, queer theorists such as Cindy Patton were arguing that “AIDS must not be viewed as proof that sexual exploration and the elaboration of sexual community were mistakes . . . lesbians and gay men . . . must maintain that vision of sexual liberation that defines the last fifteen years of [our] activism.”⁹ In its defiantly joyous homoeroticism, *Kissing Doesn't Kill* offers just such a liberationist vision, now resituated within the context of the crisis.¹⁰

Kissing Doesn't Kill was initially created for *Art Against AIDS On the Road*, a 1989 public art project organized in conjunction with several auctions of contemporary art to benefit the American Foundation for AIDS Research (AMFAR).¹¹ The invitation for Gran Fury to participate in the project, alongside such high-profile artists as Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, and Robert Mapplethorpe, was itself indicative of the art-world attention the collective was receiving at the time. Invitations to exhibit at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Venice Biennale, among other prestigious venues, would soon follow. By exploiting such attention and the financing and public access that accompanied it, Gran Fury could stage its graphics in ever more ambitious formats. Its output—initially, photocopied posters wheat-pasted on city streets—soon evolved into state-of-the-art billboards, bus panels, subway placards, street signs, and music videos.

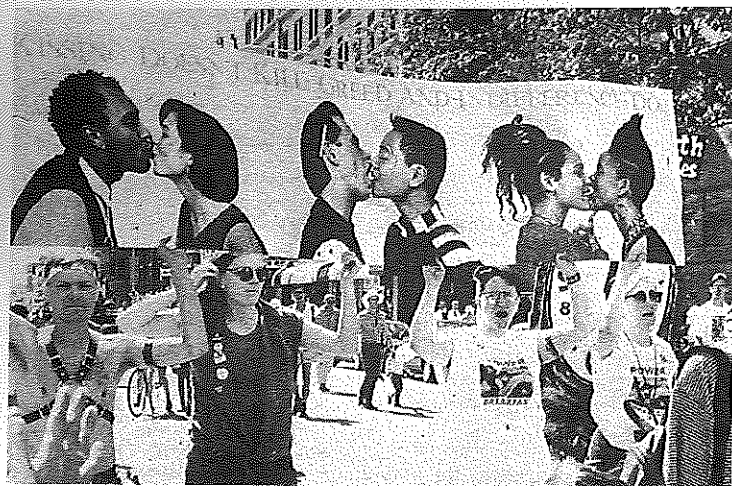
Even as Gran Fury became celebrated within the contemporary art world, the collective insisted on its connection to the larger AIDS activist movement and on the necessity of situating its work within the public sphere. “It would have been easy to be confined and co-opted by the art world,” recalled McAlpin. The struggle not to be so compromised while “using the art world and its money to achieve our activist ends”¹² remained a continuing challenge for the group.



Gran Fury, *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, 1989, 136" x 28". Bus panel installed on San Francisco MUNI as part of *Art Against AIDS On the Road*. Photo by Gran Fury

Even within the terms of a campaign as progressive as AMFAR's, Gran Fury ran into problems with project organizers over questions of content. AMFAR, an organization largely devoted to fundraising and reliant on corporate donations, refused to run the rejoinder text of the bus panel: “Corporate Greed, Government Inaction, and Public Indifference Make AIDS a Political Crisis.” Gran Fury was thus faced with the decision of eliminating the rejoinder text or dropping the entire project. The group decided in favor of the former, believing that the visual power of the kissing couples, alongside the force of the primary slogan, was strong enough to stand on its own. In San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and Chicago, *Kissing Doesn't Kill* was thus displayed in an incomplete fashion, though viewers in those cities had no sense of what they were missing.

Stripped of its rejoinder text, *Kissing Doesn't Kill* now addressed the AIDS crisis rather loosely.¹³ Some viewers concluded that the ad was chiefly about the right of lesbians and gay men to kiss in public. In Chicago, this “misreading” abetted the efforts of conservative politicians to prohibit the poster's exhibition on mass transit. City alderman Robert Shaw, for example, argued that *Kissing Doesn't Kill* “has nothing do with the cure for AIDS. It has something to do with a particular lifestyle, and I don't think that is what the CTA [Chicago Transit Authority] should be [in] the business of promoting.”¹⁴ Shaw further claimed that the graphic was “directed at children for the purposes of recruitment.”¹⁵ Shortly before *Kissing Doesn't Kill* was to arrive in Chicago in June 1990, the Illinois State Senate passed a bill

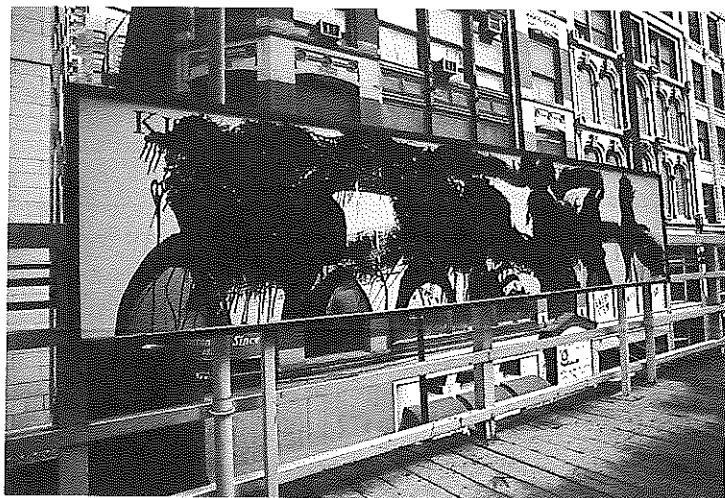


ACT-UP Chicago members carrying *Kissing Doesn't Kill* in Gay Pride Parade, June 1990.

Photo by Lisa Ebright, originally published in *Windy City Times*, June 28, 1990

The defacement of *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, 1990, Chicago.

Photo by Bill Stamets/Impact Visuals



outlawing the public display of “any poster showing or simulating physical contact or embrace within a homosexual or lesbian context where persons under 21 can view it.”¹⁶

Marchers in that summer’s Chicago Gay Pride Parade carried *Kissing Doesn’t Kill* as a symbol of their struggle against public intolerance and legislative censorship.¹⁷ The American Civil Liberties Union soon joined forces with the local lesbian and gay community to protest the bill as unconstitutional. After weeks of lobbying and often vitriolic debate, the bill was defeated in the State House of Representatives. In August 1990, several dozen *Kissing Doesn’t Kill* graphics were displayed on Chicago buses and subway platforms. Within twenty-four hours of their installation, however, nearly all were defaced by vandals, a defacement widely reported in both the local and national press.

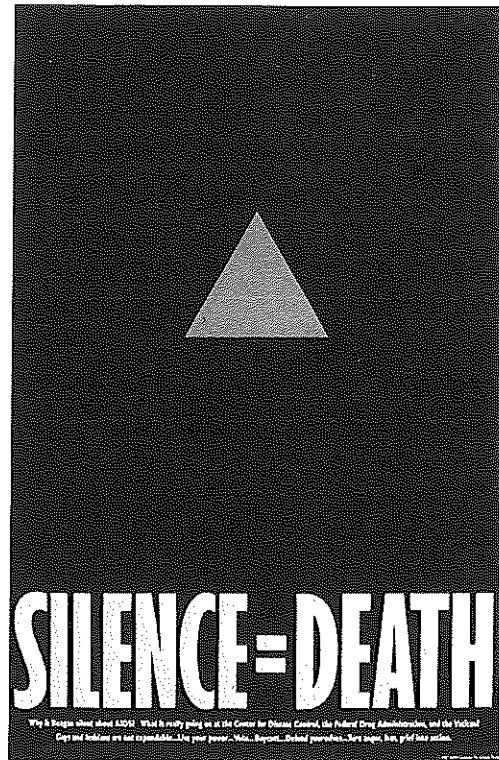
The controversy surrounding *Kissing Doesn’t Kill* in Chicago, as well as the press coverage that controversy provoked, opened up a significant dialogue about homosexuality, homophobia, AIDS, and visual representation. Such controversy formed a strategic part of Gran Fury’s activism, extending the political reach of its graphic production by tapping into the power of the mass media to spark and sustain public debate. The “work” of Gran Fury’s art thus occurred as much in its reception as in its initial production, as much in its coverage by the press as in its original display by the collective.

Kissing Doesn’t Kill became Gran Fury’s most widely seen—and in that sense its most successful—contribution to AIDS activism. Yet the bus panel marks but one project in a far more ambitious production, a production whose history extends back to the earliest days of ACT-UP. Before discussing Gran Fury’s work in further detail, we should return to the larger AIDS activist movement from which it sprang.

SILENCE = DEATH

*Ronald Reagan delivered his first public speech on the AIDS epidemic on May 31, 1987. By this time, 36,058 American citizens had been diagnosed with the syndrome and 20,849 had died as a result of its complications. Nearly six years had elapsed since the first AIDS-related deaths in the United States.*¹⁸

Gran Fury, *SILENCE = DEATH*, poster, 1986, for *SILENCE = DEATH* project. Offset lithography, 24" x 29". Subsequently used as placard, T-shirt, button, and sticker. Photo by Gran Fury



In late 1986, posters featuring pink triangles floating above block typeface reading “SILENCE = DEATH” seemed to saturate the streets and storefronts of lower Manhattan. This saturation occurred not only through the quantity of the posters reproduced (there were approximately 2,000) but also through the visual power and mystique of their design. The ironic appropriation of the pink triangle, the Nazi marker of homosexual men imprisoned in the death camps, combined with the blunt admonishment of the text, signified gay outrage while refusing to give away too much, refusing to speak explicitly or at length. It was only when one moved in fairly close to the poster that the specific accusations were lodged. Along the bottom edge of the image, the fine print read: “Why is Reagan silent about AIDS? What is really going on at the Center for Disease Control, the Federal Drug Administration, and the Vatican? Gays and Lesbians are not expendable . . . Use your power . . . Vote . . . Boycott . . . Defend yourselves . . . Turn anger, fear, grief into action.”¹⁹

SILENCE = DEATH was revived the following year by the newly formed AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP), a group that vowed to answer the poster’s call by turning its anger into direct political action to end the AIDS crisis.²⁰ Shortly after its incorporation in March 1987, ACT-UP began reproducing the graphic on stickers, buttons, T-shirts, and protest placards. *SILENCE = DEATH* effectively announced ACT-UP’s “image” and political agenda to New York City and soon became synonymous with the group’s radical forms of civil disobedience: provoking arrest, stopping traffic, mounting guerrilla street theater, and otherwise interrupting “business as usual” at such venues as the New York Stock Exchange, Grand Central Station, and St. Patrick’s Cathedral. Like the public zaps and demonstrations that ACT-UP staged, the *SILENCE = DEATH* logo insisted on the voice and visibility of those battling the AIDS crisis. Equally as important, it represented ACT-UP to ACT-UP, solidifying the group’s self-image by serving as both rallying cry and symbol of collective identification.

The signifying power of *SILENCE = DEATH* persisted long after individual ACT-UP demonstrations had concluded. Wherever the logo surfaced in public space, so too did its potential for focusing awareness on the pandemic. As ACT-UP members Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston argue:

It is not merely what SILENCE = DEATH says, but how it looks, that give it its particular force. The power of this equation under a triangle is the compression of its connotations into a logo, a logo so striking that you ultimately have to ask, if you

ACT-UP demonstration, June 30, 1987 at Federal Plaza, New York City. Photo by Donna Binder/Impact Visuals



don't already know, "What does that mean?" And it is the answers we are constantly called upon to give to others—small, everyday direct actions—that make SILENCE = DEATH signify beyond a community of lesbian and gay cognoscenti."²¹

The slick visual style of *SILENCE = DEATH* imbued it with a particular kind of cultural power, a power usually reserved for mass-market advertising. As Rolston put it, "It looked like a corporate logo, like some institution was speaking to me. It's the appropriation of the voice of authority. Like a trick."²²

SILENCE = DEATH would prove but the first in a remarkable series of graphic designs that ACT-UP has used to mobilize its forces and signify its anger in spectacular formats. Having witnessed, during the early years of the epidemic, an absence of mainstream press reporting on AIDS or, worse, the scapegoating of gay men and IV drug users as the threat and "deviant" cause of the crisis, ACT-UP understood the importance of taking representation into its own hands, of creating imagery and agitprop that would force AIDS onto the public agenda.²³

One of the earliest examples of such imagery was an ambitious reworking of the *SILENCE = DEATH* logo that appeared in November 1987. At that time, Bill Olander, a curator at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City and himself an ACT-UP member, invited the collective to create an installation in the museum's window on lower Broadway. An ad hoc committee of approximately thirty ACT-UP members, some (but by no means all) of them artists and graphic designers, collaborated on a project they entitled *Let the Record Show*.

Crowned by the *SILENCE = DEATH* symbol, now illuminated in hot-pink neon, the window offered a "rogues' gallery" of six public figures (among them Jesse Helms, William F. Buckley, and Ronald Reagan) who had aggravated the AIDS crisis. The figures were represented by cardboard silhouettes and set against the backdrop of a mural-size photograph of the Nuremberg trials. As with the pink triangle, the Nuremberg photo summoned the purposefully "risky" analogy of the Holocaust to the AIDS crisis. Lest anyone think the comparison overblown, a concrete slab stationed directly beneath each silhouette bore an AIDS-related quote from that figure. Jerry Falwell's slab proclaimed that "AIDS is God's judgment of a society that does not live by his



Let the Record Show, 1988, mixed media. Created by an ad hoc committee of ACT-UP New York for the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York.

rule,” while Jesse Helms’s declared that “the logical outcome of testing is a quarantine of those infected.” Ronald Reagan’s concrete slab stood empty, reflecting his years of (deadly) silence on the crisis. The final element in the installation was an LED sign that flashed statistical information about the epidemic as well as activist rallying cries (“ACT-UP, fight AIDS, fight back!”) in response to that information.

Although *Let the Record Show* was sponsored by the New Museum, it became, by dint of its placement in an exterior window on lower Broadway, part of the sidewalk culture of a heavily commercial block in downtown Manhattan. This liminal location—at once inside an art space and extending into the public sphere of the city street—became an influential model for later AIDS activist art work.

Also exemplary was the collective process through which *Let the Record Show* was created. Tom Kalin, a filmmaker who worked on the window project and later became a member of Gran Fury, recalls:

There were big workshop sessions, like the one where the slabs of concrete were made by cutting rubber stencils. All the labor-intensive work was being done in someone’s studio with fifteen to twenty people there at a time. Various people came in for specific tasks. I came in myself because I knew how to do mural photography. Other people came with their own abilities—the person who made the neon and so on.²⁴

Kalin underscores the (amiable) division of labor among a large group of activists with different kinds of technical expertise and training. The shared creative effort behind *Let the Record Show* resonates with its complex layering of representations (the LED sign, the neon logo, the cardboard silhouettes, the concrete slabs, the photo mural), representations that respond to the AIDS crisis in a complex and collective fashion rather than in an individual, authorial voice.

Spinning Off from ACT-UP

Following the success of *Let the Record Show*, a group of approximately fifteen ACT-UP members decided to form a collective devoted to the ongoing production of AIDS activist imagery. They took the name Gran Fury, a reference both to their own rage in the midst of the epidemic and, somewhat campily, to the specific model of Ply-

mouth sedan that the New York City Police use as squad cars. Although several commercial and fine artists were part of the collective, so too were a hairdresser, a costume designer, an architect, a filmmaker, and a nurse. The heterogeneity of the group’s constitution underscored its activist—rather than expressly artistic—commitments. The group’s activist ethos was also reflected in its early insistence on anonymity. During the initial years of their collaboration, Gran Fury members refused to be photographed by the press or individually credited for their work. As one participant put it: “Our activism was the important thing, not our appearance. If there was going to be a photograph in a story on Gran Fury, we wanted it to be a photograph of the work.”²⁵

Though organized as an autonomous collective, Gran Fury worked in close alliance with ACT-UP New York, producing agitprop to accompany the larger group’s demonstrations and serving, in the words of Crimp and Rolston, as ACT-UP’s “unofficial propaganda ministry and guerrilla graphic designers.”²⁶ For an ACT-UP demonstration on Wall Street in March 1988, for example, Gran Fury printed up small handbills that simulated the appearance of currency on one side and lodged aggressive accusations on the other. The slogan on the flip-side of the ten-dollar bill read: “White Heterosexual Men Can’t Get AIDS . . . DON’T BANK ON IT,” a response to the presumption of AIDS as a gay or minority disease. The verso of the fifty-dollar bill proclaimed: “WHY ARE WE HERE? Because Your Malignant Neglect KILLS,” an indictment of public indifference to the crisis. The most expensive currency, the hundred-dollar bill,



Gran Fury, *Wall Street Money* (on streets of financial district, New York), flyer, photocopy, recto-verso (three versions), 8 1/2" x 3 1/2". Created to accompany ACT-UP's *Wall Street II* demonstration, March 24, 1988.

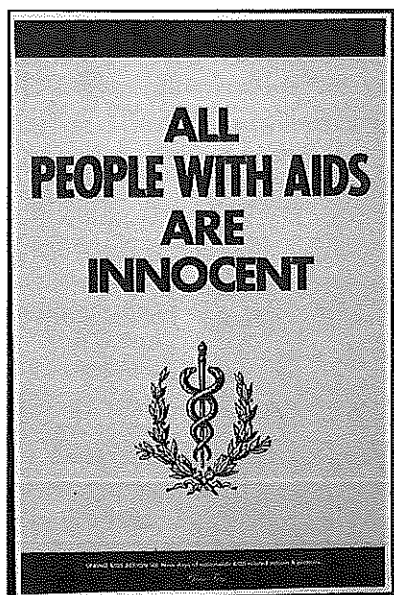
Photo by Gran Fury

carried the most direct confrontation: "FUCK YOUR PROFITEERING. People are dying while you play business."

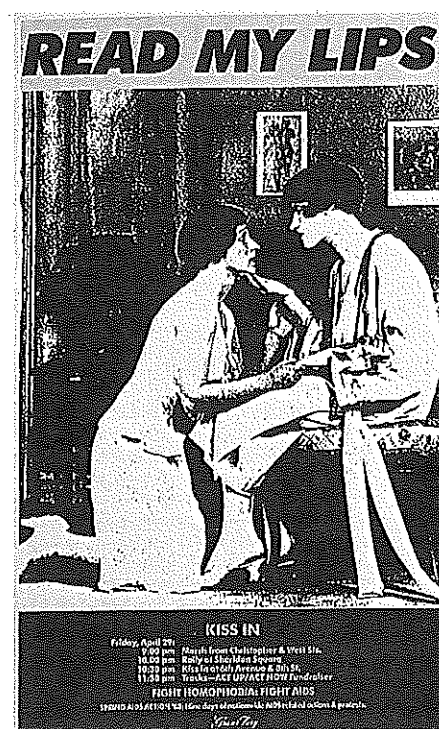
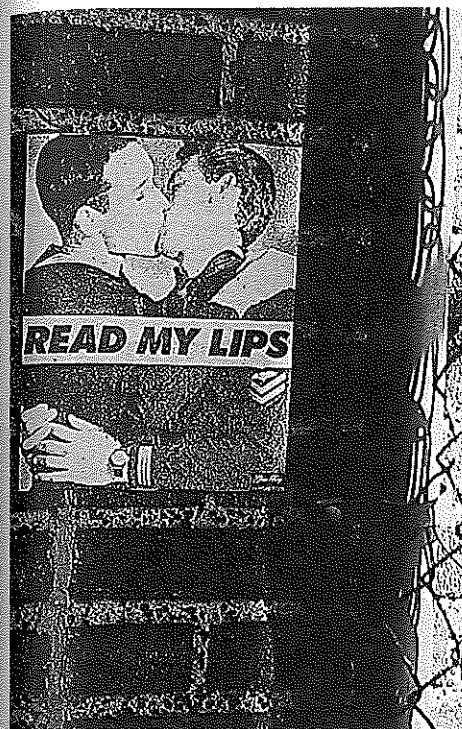
Gran Fury's money functioned successfully as an attention-getting device, not only for the Wall Street workers passing by on their lunch hour but also for the mass media. The image of fake currency showering the streets of the financial district—and of well-dressed passersby momentarily duped into thinking the money genuine—made for a telegenic image on the nightly news and helped secure increased press coverage for the Wall Street demonstration. When collaborating with ACT-UP, Gran Fury considered not only how its graphics would function within the demonstration but also how they would "read" in coverage by the mainstream press. The impact of Gran Fury's work thus extended into its subsequent reproduction on the nightly news and in the local papers.²⁷

Read My Lips

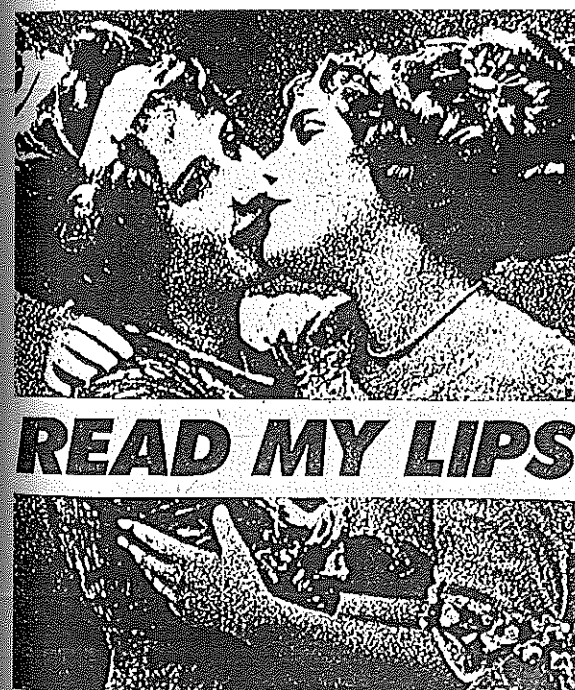
In the spring of 1988, the "nine days of protest" were held in various cities throughout the United States. The first coordinated action of a now national coalition of ACT-UP chapters, these protest days were devoted to demonstrations around nine different AIDS issues, among them AIDS in prison, women and AIDS, homophobia, HIV testing and treatment, and health care. Gran Fury, working in subsets of two,



Gran Fury, *All People with AIDS Are Innocent*, poster, 1988. Offset lithography, 10 1/2" x 16 1/4". Created for *Nine Days of Protest*, April 29–May 7, 1988.



Gran Fury, *Read My Lips (boys)*, poster, 1988. Offset lithography, 10 3/4" x 16 3/4". Also used as a T-shirt. Created for *Nine Days of Protest*, April 29–May 7, 1988. Photo by Gran Fury



Gran Fury, *Read My Lips (girls)*, poster, 1988. Offset lithography, 10 1/8" x 16 1/2". Created for *Nine Days of Protest*, April 29–May 7, 1988.

Gran Fury, *Read My Lips (girls)*, poster, 1988. Offset lithography, 10" x 16 1/2". Also used as T-shirt.

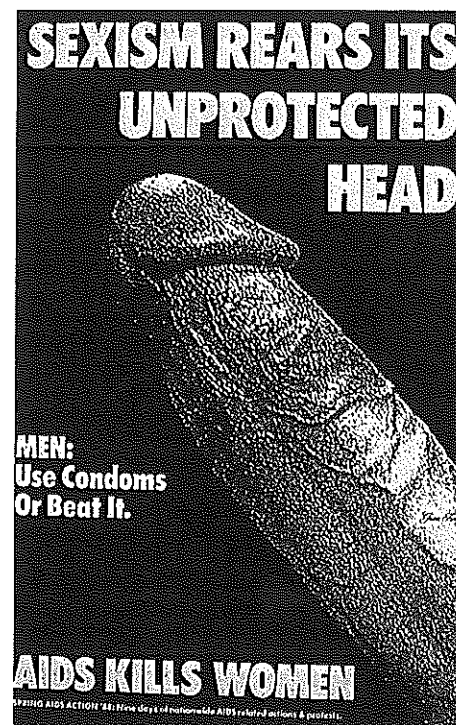
produced a separate graphic project for each day of protest. The group's health care poster, *All People with AIDS Are Innocent*, stood as an eloquent rebuttal to the media's categorization of gay men and IV drug users as the "guilty" carriers of AIDS and infected children, hemophiliacs, and heterosexuals as "innocent" victims.²⁸ The poster employed the single graphic element of a caduceus, the winged staff with interlocking serpents that symbolizes the medical profession. Taken together, symbol and slogan "demand[ed] of health care professionals that they live up to their purported ethical standard of equal and compassionate treatment for all, including all people with AIDS."²⁹

For the day of protest against homophobia, Gran Fury combined the phrase "Read My Lips" with historical images of same-sex couples: a World War II shot of smooching sailors and a 1920s photograph of two women gazing, with longing intensity, into each other's eyes. *Read My Lips* would acquire an extra layer of significance (and irony) a few months later when George Bush made his notorious vow "Read my lips: no new taxes," during his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention.

In *Read My Lips*, as in *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, the representation of same-sex desire becomes an act of defiance because it is projected, with style and activist bravado, into the public sphere. *Read My Lips* was initially created in conjunction with a massive "kiss-in" (in which hundreds of same-sex couples made out at the same moment) organized by ACT-UP New York as the central action of its anti-homophobia day of protest. While public displays of affection between heterosexual couples are routine, even banal, those between same-sex couples remain relatively rare because of the threat of bias-related violence (or "queer-bashing") to which gay men and lesbians are routinely subject. According to ACT-UP, its kiss-in was held as "an aggressive demonstration of affection" that would "challenge repressive conventions that prohibit displays of love between persons of the same sex" while protesting "the cruel and painful bigotry that affects the lives of lesbians and gay men."³⁰ As a graphic, *Read My Lips* might be said to perform the same functions, though with an added historical resonance: the recovery of homoerotic imagery from the first half of the twentieth century ties the contemporary act of same-sex kissing to a larger legacy of queer culture and self-representation.

As several lesbians in ACT-UP were quick to point out, however, the women's graphic for *Read My Lips* was troubling insofar as it reduced lesbian eroticism to a gaze, a fixed distance, a refined delicateness: while the sailors smooched, the flappers just looked. When Gran Fury subsequently revived *Read My Lips* as a T-shirt, the 1920s image was replaced with a Victorian one of two women in the midst of a passionate embrace. Such revision was characteristic of Gran Fury's working method: the group's graphics, placed in dialogue with the larger AIDS activist movement, were open to the criticism and creative input of that movement.

The representation of women's issues by Gran Fury, a predominantly gay male collective, would surface as a problem in another of the graphics produced for the nine days of protest. The poster for the "women's" day of demonstration featured a close-up image of a monumentally erect penis surrounded by three slogans: "Sexism Rears Its Unprotected Head" in largest type at the top, "Men Use Condoms or Beat It" to the left of the shaft, and "AIDS Kills



**MEN
USE CONDOMS
OR BEAT IT**

Gran Fury, *Sexism Rears Its Unprotected Head*, poster, 1988. Offset lithography, 10 ³/₈" x 16 ³/₈". Created for *Nine Days of Protest*, April 29–May 7, 1988.

Gran Fury, *Men Use Condoms or Beat It*, crack-and-peel sticker, 1988. 8 ¹/₂" x 7 ¹/₄". Also used as T-shirt and button.

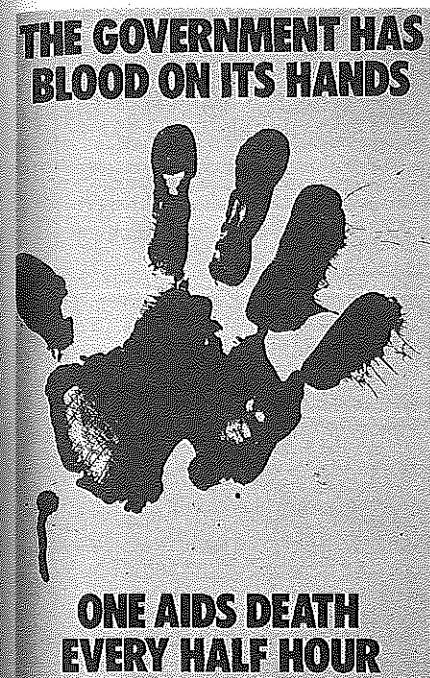
Women” along the bottom margin. Though unanimously approved by Gran Fury, the poster was received with marked ambivalence by some members of ACT-UP, especially by several women who felt the graphic glorified phallic power more forcefully than it encouraged safer sex.³¹

In a fine piece of reediting, Gran Fury isolated the best part of its poster, the central slogan, “Men Use Condoms or Beat It,” and reproduced it on a series of crack-and-peel stickers, T-shirts, and buttons. With its block type and bold black-on-yellow color scheme, the graphic now recalled a “MEN AT WORK” construction sign, an association that enhanced its subtly confrontational humor. On its own, *Men Use Condoms or Beat It* performed well and wittily, challenging both straight and gay men to practice safer sex without presuming to speak for women.

The Government Has Blood on Its Hands

Gran Fury never hesitated to appropriate graphic designs when such borrowings suited its activist aims. Consider, for example, the group’s 1988 poster of a bloody, outstretched handprint sandwiched between two slogans: “The Government Has Blood on Its Hands” and “One AIDS Death Every Half Hour.” The poster, which indicted the government’s inaction on AIDS while grabbing the viewer’s attention with the graphic appeal of that bloody, open handprint, directly recalled John Heartfield’s: *A Hand Has 5 Fingers. With 5 You Can Repel the Enemy! Vote List 5.* Heartfield’s graphic was created for the German elections of 1928, a year in which the number five carried a double significance, marking both the date of the election and the row on the ballot where Communist party candidates were listed.³²

Rather than merely simulating Heartfield’s design, Gran Fury revised and updated it. Where Heartfield’s image featured the sullied hand of a worker, reaching up and out as if to stop us in our tracks, Gran Fury’s graphic depicted a handprint, a trace of a body that is no longer present, presumably because it has died from government neglect. To extend the graphic impact of *The Government Has Blood on Its Hands*, members of Gran Fury would dip their own hands in red paint and then register their handprints on street signs, mailboxes, and kiosks near where the poster had been displayed. This strategy set



Gran Fury, *The Government Has Blood on Its Hands*, poster, 1988. Offset lithography, 21 ³/₈" x 31 ³/₄". Also used as placard, T-shirt, and sticker.

John Heartfield, *A Hand Has 5 Fingers. With 5 You Can Repel the Enemy! Vote List 5*, 1928. Communist party campaign poster.

Gran Fury, *Untitled* (bloody handprints), 1988. Red paint on mailboxes and city streets, downtown New York City. Photo by Gran Fury

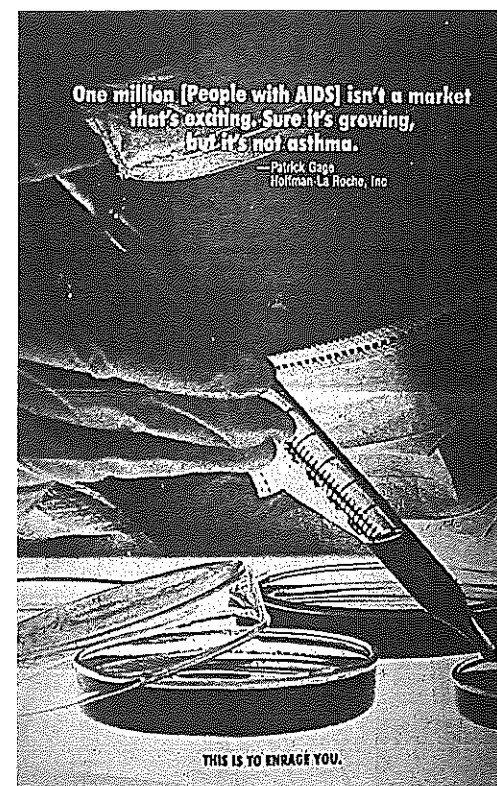
Gran Fury, *New York Crimes*, four-page newspaper, 1989. Web offset, each page 15" x 22 1/4". Created to accompany ACT-UP's *Target City Hall* demonstration, March 28, 1989.



up a call-and-response between the painted handprints and the printed poster: the poster's message clarified the meaning of the red handprints even as the handprints dramatized the anger and immediacy of the poster. The dripping handprints also announced that Gran Fury would not confine itself to the expected forms of street art and political agitprop: wheat-pasted posters would never mark the limits of the group's activist outrage.

New York Crimes

Throughout its history, Gran Fury sought out new textual and graphic devices to communicate its political message. To accompany an ACT-UP demonstration at New York City Hall in 1989, for example, Gran Fury created the *New York Crimes*, a four-page simulation of the *New York Times* that cannily captured the graphic and typographical look



Gran Fury, *New York Crimes*, back cover of four-page newspaper, 1989. Web offset, each page 15" x 22 1/4". Created to accompany ACT-UP's *Target City Hall* demonstration, March 28, 1989.

of its predecessor. The articles, at once informational in content and outraged in tone, were written by members of ACT-UP. They assailed the city's handling of the AIDS crisis with such headlines as "N.Y. Hospitals in Ruins, City Hall to Blame, Koch Fucks Up Again." The *Crimes* also carried Gran Fury graphics such as the microscopic image of a virus superimposed with an arrow pointing to a map of city hall. The graphic's caption: "Scientists discover real reason behind the high incidence of HIV infection in New York." Once again, Gran Fury located the root cause of the worsening crisis not in HIV infection or unsafe sex but in government neglect and inaction.

The back cover of the *New York Crimes* featured a full-page graphic of a lab technician, in surgical mask and gloves, drawing a specimen sample from a petri dish. The image was punctuated by a quote from an executive at the drug company Hoffman-La Roche: "One million

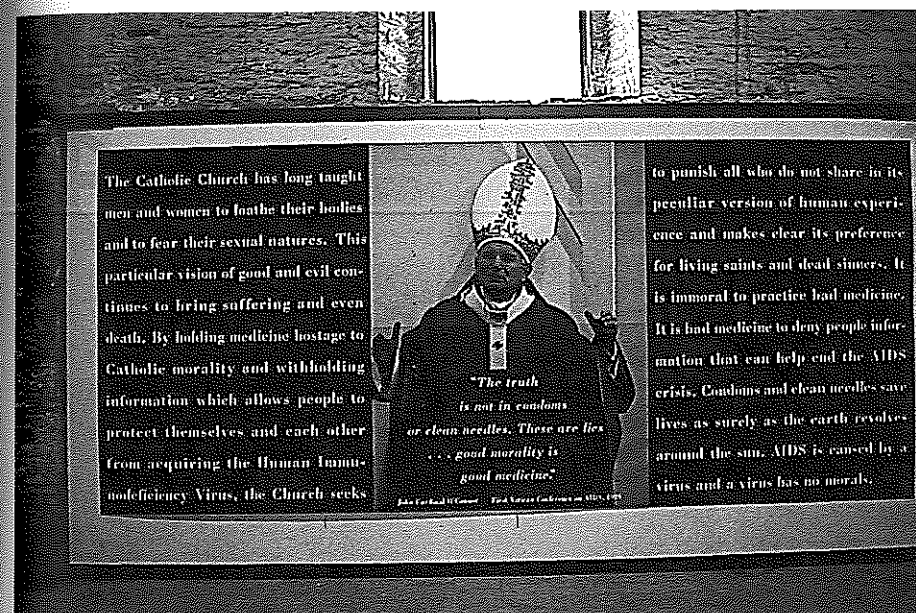
[People with AIDS] isn't a market that's exciting. Sure it's growing, but it's not asthma." In response to such blithe profiteering, a caption beneath the photograph declared: "This Is to Enrage You."

Gran Fury came up with a novel strategy for circulating the *New York Crimes*. At 4:00 a.m. on the morning of ACT-UP's demonstration at city hall, Gran Fury members wrapped copies of the *Crimes* around issues of the *New York Times* for sale in newspaper vending machines. This intervention was possible because newspaper machines provide access to an entire stack of issues for the price of a single paper. Later that day, purchasers of the *Times* were unwittingly confronted with the urgent appeal and informational articles of the *Crimes*. Like other Gran Fury projects, the *New York Crimes* effected a "shock of misrecognition" as an ostensibly familiar form of mass culture gave way to its activist simulation.

The Pope and the Penis

The Venice Biennale, a survey of contemporary art held every other summer, is perhaps the single most prestigious exhibition on the international art circuit. The invitation to display work at the 1990 Biennale marked Gran Fury's ultimate validation by the art world, a validation met with some ambivalence by the collective. On one hand, the group had always committed itself to producing work for the public sphere rather than for interior art spaces. On the other, the Biennale, as an international spectacle and major media event, could provide a significant forum for Gran Fury's message and extend the public reach of its activism.

The collective decided both to accept the Biennale's invitation and to use the Venetian venue as an opportunity to address the Catholic Church's position on AIDS. Gran Fury thus created a site-specific work entitled *The Pope and the Penis*, which juxtaposed two multi-color billboards, the first a reworked version of *Sexism Rears Its Unprotected Head*, with the text magnified and the erect penis diminished in scale. The second billboard, organized as a triptych (a traditional format for Roman Catholic altarpieces), presented an image of the Pope with a quotation reflecting the Church's position on the AIDS crisis: "The truth is not in condoms or clean needles, these are lies . . .



Gran Fury, *The Pope and the Penis* (details), 1990. Billboards, 224" x 96" each. At Venice Biennale. Photo by Gran Fury

good morality is good medicine.”³³ Gran Fury’s response to this position, printed against a monochrome of (ecumenical) purple, stood on either side of the papal image:

The Catholic Church has long taught men and women to loathe their bodies and to fear their sexual natures. This particular vision of good and evil continues to bring suffering and even death. By holding medicine hostage to Catholic morality and withholding information which allows people to protect themselves and each other from acquiring the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, the Church seeks to punish all who do not share in its peculiar version of human experience and makes clear its preference for living saints and dead sinners. It is immoral to practice bad medicine. It is bad medicine to deny people information that can help end the AIDS crisis. Condoms and clean needles save lives as surely as the earth revolves around the sun. AIDS is caused by a virus and a virus has no morals.³⁴

Upon discovering the content of Gran Fury’s work, the director of the Biennale, Giovanni Carandente, declared that the group’s contribution was not considered art and vowed to resign if it were exhibited. Simultaneously, Italian officials at the Venice airport were refusing to release Gran Fury’s billboards from customs. The collective, furious over the suppression of its work, held a press conference in its assigned (though still empty) exhibition stall. When the press arrived, it found the following text painted on the walls where *The Pope and the Penis* should have hung:

Two billboards by Gran Fury are being held in Italian Customs. One billboard, with a picture of the Pope, criticizes the Catholic Church’s position on condoms and AIDS education. The other billboard, with a picture of an erect penis, mandates that men use condoms to prevent the spread of the AIDS virus. The director of the Biennale, Giovanni Carandente, has threatened to resign if the billboards are exhibited. The Biennale officials refuse to intervene to secure the work.

Accounts of the “*Scandalo alla Biennale*” immediately appeared in Italian newspapers alongside reproductions of the *Pope* (though, predictably, not the *Penis*) billboard. Within forty-eight hours, Gran Fury’s work was released from customs and installed in the American exhibition space. The director of the Biennale did not resign.



Italian press coverage of Gran Fury at Venice Biennale, 1990. Left to right: “Scandalo alla Biennale,” *Il Gazzettino*, May 25, 1990: 6; “Papa e Aids è scandalo alla Biennale,” *La Nuova Venezia*, May 25, 1990: 1; “Biennale, l’arte dello scandalo,” *La Repubblica*, May 26, 1990: 23.

Photo by Richard Meyer

Once again, Gran Fury used the very threat of censorship as a strategic part of its activism, manipulating controversy to increase the impact and political resonance of its graphic work. As one collective member put it, “In the end, the director’s posturing backfired. There was lots of negative publicity for him, and it just escalated the attention the piece got, something we hadn’t counted on. He became, in effect, our partner.”³⁵

By producing work that transgressed the boundaries of “acceptable” art and by willfully courting the category of the blasphemous, Gran Fury catapulted the issue of AIDS to the front pages of the Italian press. Several articles on the Biennale *scandalo* included sidebar stories on the increasing problem of HIV infection in Italy and the government’s (non)response to that problem. Gran Fury member Donald Moffett notes that “the strongest thing was not the object [the billboard] itself, but the discussion the object generated . . . it allowed us to break outside the cloistered territory of the Biennale.”³⁶ Such strategic breakouts were, of course, one of the primary ambitions of Gran Fury’s activism.

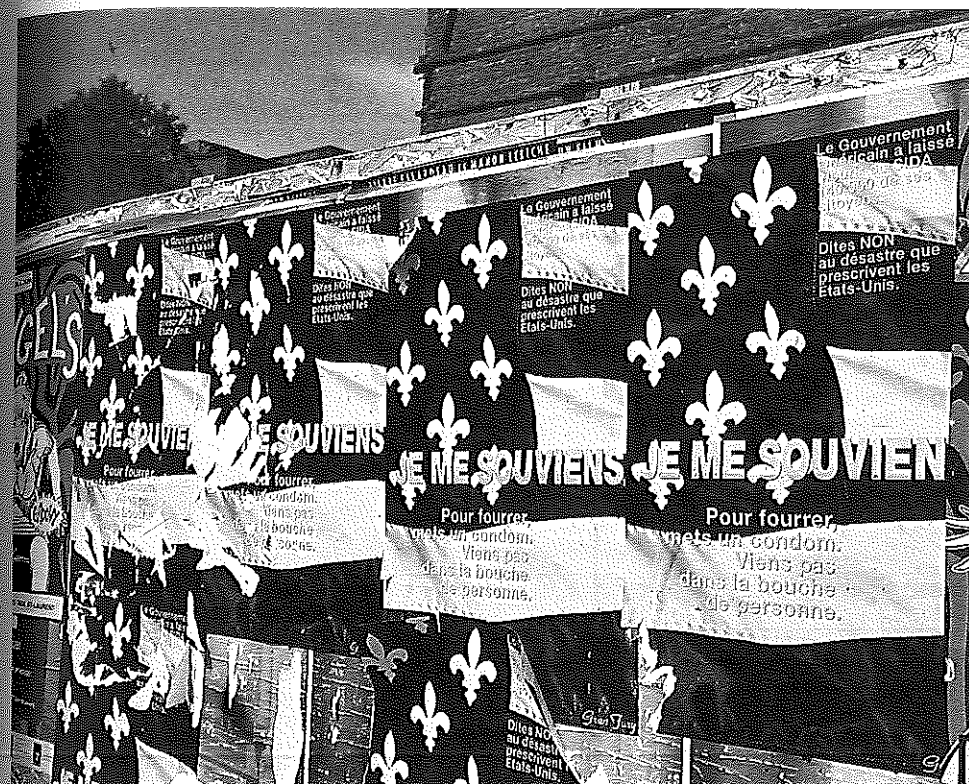
Never Forget

In 1992, Gran Fury was invited by the Montreal Museum of Contemporary Art to participate in an exhibition entitled *Pour la suite du*

monde ("So That the World May Continue"). With the financial backing of the museum, Gran Fury produced posters for the streets and subways of Montreal as well as a closely related work for the central atrium of the museum. The posters presented a hybrid of the Quebec and American flags: the *fleur de lys* and blue-and-white color scheme of the former were combined with the alternating stripes and upper-left rectangle of the latter. For the graphic's primary slogan, Gran Fury appropriated a phrase loaded with political meaning for the local audience: "*Je Me Souviens*" ("I remember," or, idiomatically, "never forget"). This phrase, which appears on every Quebec license plate, implores French Canadians to remember their autonomous identity and resist attempts by outside forces, specifically English-speaking Canada, to colonize their culture.

In borrowing *Je Me Souviens* for its graphic, Gran Fury sought to redirect the slogan's meaning to the AIDS epidemic. Within the terms of the street poster, the phrase now implored viewers "to remember" the practice of safer sex, information about which was printed on the bottom of the poster: "*Pour fourrer, mets un condom*" ("When fucking, use a condom") and "*Viens pas dans la bouche de personne*" ("Don't come in anyone's mouth"). *Je Me Souviens* also directed the Montreal public "to remember" the mistakes of the American government so as not to repeat them, a directive made explicit on the upper-right corner of the graphic: "*Le Gouvernement américain a laissé mourir du SIDA 140,000 de ses citoyens. Dites NON au désastre que prescrivent les États-Unis*" ("The American government has let 140,000 of its citizens die from AIDS. DON'T import the American prescription for disaster").³⁷ Gran Fury grounded *Je Me Souviens* in the specifics of the U.S. epidemic because that was the situation with which the collective was directly familiar.

As with *The Pope and the Penis* in Venice, Gran Fury here designed a graphic it knew would be arresting, even incendiary, for the local audience. Some Montreal viewers, however, professed as much confusion as outrage over the appropriation of their cultural symbols and slogans.³⁸ The connections between French Canadian patriotism and the AIDS crisis in the United States were not, it would seem, immediately apparent. Local critics and press commentators wondered why Gran Fury was instructing a Montreal audience *not* to follow the



Gran Fury, *Je Me Souviens*, poster, 1992. Offset lithography. Displayed on streets of Montreal. Photo by Gran Fury

American example on AIDS by combining the nationalist symbols of both cultures.³⁹

Je Me Souviens also proved controversial within the Montreal chapter of ACT-UP, some of whose members felt that their activist voices had been silenced by the more celebrated ones of the New York collective. Douglas Buckley, a spokesperson for Montreal ACT-UP, declared that Gran Fury's poster "reflects an imperialistic, American context and has nothing to do with the AIDS crisis in Quebec. These are American statistics, an American point of view, an American reality all superimposed on some of the most potent of Quebec symbols."⁴⁰

The problems surrounding the reception of *Je Me Souviens* in Montreal reflected a larger dilemma for Gran Fury: How could the collective continue to produce work for foreign venues when its

Issues of private despair and denial do not lend themselves to the seductive imagery and sloganeering perfected by Gran Fury.

knowledge of the AIDS epidemic was rooted in an American—and specifically, a New York—context? As one member points out, Gran Fury was, by the early 1990s, "becoming a kind of institution in the art world for AIDS activist work, getting offers from all around the world to come and do projects . . . while we could speak to the community in New York, it was extremely difficult to go to another place and address their situation."⁴¹ Gran Fury's attempt to "globalize"

its activism by producing work for such far-flung venues as Venice, Berlin, and Montreal became an increasingly vexing issue for the collective.

Although Gran Fury was not aware of it at the time, the Montreal project would mark the last effort of the group as it had been constituted since 1988. While modest projects bearing the Gran Fury logo have appeared in the two years since Montreal, these have been the work of a much smaller subset (typically three to four members) of the original collective. It is likely that the members of this subset will soon retire the name Gran Fury and reorganize as a new collective.⁴²

A number of factors contributed to the disbanding of the original collective, including Gran Fury's own progress in raising public awareness about the AIDS crisis. By 1992, numerous informational projects on AIDS (created not only by activist groups but by main-

stream ad agencies and AIDS service organizations) had appeared throughout the United States, on public transportation, billboards, television, and in mass mailings. Within this expanded field of AIDS representation, Gran Fury's work no longer seemed such a necessary (or radical) intervention. The year 1992 also marked the moment of Bill Clinton's election, a moment which appeared (at the time) to signal a major breakthrough in terms of the federal government's responsiveness to the epidemic.⁴³ After five years of graphic production, Gran Fury had reason to believe that its activist message had, to some extent, been heard.

Alongside this guarded optimism, however, many Gran Fury members were experiencing a mounting sense of exhaustion about the AIDS crisis, a fatigue resulting from years of fighting the epidemic while losing ever more friends and colleagues to it. Such collective fatigue had also affected the larger AIDS activist community. ACT-UP New York, like other chapters throughout the country, suffered a steady decline in both activity and membership during the early 1990s. According to a 1993 article in *New York Newsday*:

Where ACT-UP once attracted 800 people to its Monday-night meetings, now the organization is happy to get a sweaty crowd of 150–200. ACT-UP's budget, a million dollars in 1991, is now half that amount. Multiple, well-organized, well-publicized demonstrations—once the hallmark of ACT-UP—have dwindled to a dozen a year, and those that do happen . . . get no coverage in the Washington or New York papers. . . . Even Larry Kramer [the founder of the organization] was quoted as saying, "ACT-UP is dead."⁴⁴

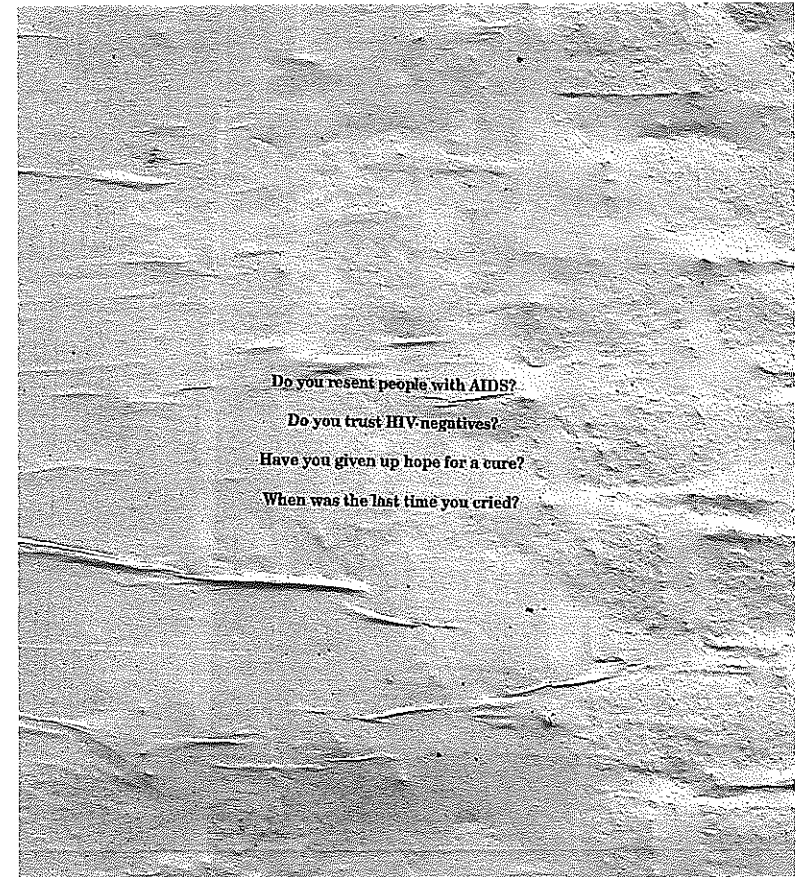
Of course, ACT-UP was (and is) not dead, and, as one of the group's own slogans puts it, "The AIDS Crisis Is Not Over." Yet, as we all move further into the second decade of the epidemic, there is, as Douglas Crimp has written, "a new kind of indifference, an indifference that has been called the 'normalization of AIDS'. . . . How often do we hear the list recited?—poverty, crime, drugs, homelessness, and AIDS. AIDS is no longer an emergency. It's merely a permanent disaster."⁴⁵ It may well be this sense of "normalization"—this resignation and numbness—that AIDS activism must now address. Unlike corporate greed or government inaction, issues of private despair and denial

do not lend themselves to the seductive imagery and sloganeering perfected by Gran Fury in the late 1980s and early 1990s. What strategies of address, then, are appropriate to this moment of the crisis? And what of the future of AIDS activist imagery?

As mentioned above, a small offshoot of Gran Fury has produced occasional public art projects since 1992. The most significant of these to date has been a black-and-white poster, wheat-pasted on the streets of downtown Manhattan, whose modest format and negligible cost recall the earliest graphics of ACT-UP. The rhetorical tone of the poster, however, marks a departure from everything that has come before. Rather than grabbing the viewer's attention in a spectacular fashion, it speaks modestly, even softly. Devoid of graphic imagery, the poster is entirely textual. In small, typewritten print it poses a series of questions to the viewer: "Do you resent people with AIDS?" "Do you trust HIV-negatives?" "Have you given up hope for a cure?" and "When was the last time you cried?"

Rather than making a demand (e.g., *Read My Lips, Use Condoms or Beat It*), the poster asks us to reflect on the psychic stakes of the AIDS crisis and our own ambivalence about those stakes. Rather than direct action, it calls for introspection and individual analysis. In doing so, it marks a turning point, not only for the members of Gran Fury who created it but for AIDS activists more generally. Underlying the four questions printed on the poster is a larger question that each of us must now ask:

How can we continue to fight an epidemic that, after all these years of anger and activism, still shows no signs of going away?



Gran Fury, untitled poster, 1993. Offset lithography, 20" x 24". Photo by Gran Fury

Gómez-Peña, Guillermo. "Death on the Border: A Eulogy to Border Art." *High Performance* 14 (Spring 1991): 8–9.

Jaffe, Maggie, and Deborah Small. *1492*. San Diego: [self-published], 1986.

Kelley, Jeff, ed. *The Border Art Workshop (BAWITAF), 1984–1989: A Documentation of 5 Years of Interdisciplinary Art Projects Dealing with U.S.–Mexico Border Issues (A Binational Perspective)*. (English text). New York: Artists Space; San Diego: Centro Cultural de la Raza and La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1989.

Pincus, Robert L. "The Spirit of Place: Border Art in San Diego." *Visions* 3 (Spring 1989): 4–7.

Small, Deborah, Elizabeth Sisco, Carla Kirkwood, Scott Kessler, and Louis Hock. "NHI." San Diego: [self-published], 1992.

Small, Deborah, ed. *There Are 206 Bones in the Human Body*. San Diego: [self-published], 1988.

2 This Is to Enrage You: Gran Fury and the Graphics of AIDS Activism

Notes

1. Gran Fury fact sheet and exhibition history (unpublished). Personal archives of Loring McAlpin, New York City. From its inception as an art collective in 1988 until its unofficial disbanding in 1992, Gran Fury remained deeply rooted within the lesbian and gay community and, more specifically, within the activist politics of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP). All of the participants in Gran Fury had also been members of ACT-UP, and the art collective was initiated as a spin-off from the larger activist coalition. While ACT-UP organized direct political actions, Gran Fury created imagery and agitprop (much of which accompanied ACT-UP demonstrations) to rouse the public to action and anger over the AIDS pandemic. The relationship between ACT-UP and Gran Fury is discussed later in the essay.
2. The same-sex couples in *Kissing Doesn't Kill* are noticeably more passionate than the opposite-sex one: the two men kiss with open mouths; the women smile and sexily caress; the heterosexual pair kiss rather gingerly and stand relatively far apart from one another.
3. The most notorious episode concerning kissing and AIDS transmission occurred in August 1985 when Rock Hudson revealed that he had AIDS. Stills of Hudson kissing Linda Evans (taken from the television show *Dynasty*) were reproduced throughout the tabloid press, and the (supposed) possibility of transmission via that kissing was extensively discussed. See, for example, "Fear and AIDS in Hollywood," *People*, September 23, 1985, 13; "Has Linda Anything to Fear?" *The Globe*, August 13, 1985; "Linda Evans and *Dynasty* Cast Terrified—He Kissed Her on Show," *National Enquirer*, August 12, 1985.
4. Loring McAlpin, cited in Karrie Jacobs, "Night Discourse," in Karrie Jacobs and Steven Heller, eds., *Angry Graphics: Protest Posters of the Reagan/Bush Era* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1992), 12.
5. Gran Fury produced a rapidly edited video montage of forty kissing couples of various gender and racial constitutions. The footage was then edited down to four MTV-style "videos," and set to a popular music sound track. One of these videos was shown on PBS in conjunction with World AIDS Day, December 1, 1991. Others have been broadcast on British, German, and French versions of MTV.
6. Avram Finkelstein, cited in "Gran Fury," interview with David Deitcher, in *Discourses: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture*, ed. Russell Ferguson, William Olander, Marcia Tucker, and Karen Fiss (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1989), 198.
7. Jan Zita Grover, "AIDS: Public Issues, Public Art," *Public Art Issues* (1992): 6.
8. Marlene McCarty, interview with the author, May 19, 1994.
9. Cindy Patton, *Sex and Germs: The Politics of AIDS* (Boston: South End Press, 1985), 142.
10. In a 1989 interview, Tom Kalin argued that works such as *Kissing Doesn't Kill* were both politically adversarial and sexually affirmative: "Speaking personally, I think that along with being enraged and wanting to engage in direct action . . . we should also be giving ourselves something to look forward to. The media and information that we make doesn't have to be only adversarial. It can also be affirmative at a certain level and necessarily should be that way." Avram Finkelstein, another collective member, responded, "Of course, in the given context being affirmative about sex is being adversarial." See "Gran Fury," in *Discourses*, 201.
11. AMFAR has been described as "a massive fundraising enterprise which solicits contributions and makes grants in the name of biomedical and social scientific research about AIDS." See Kristen Engberg, "Marketing the (Ad)just(ed) Cause," *New Art Examiner* 18 (May 1991): 27.
12. Loring McAlpin, interview with the author, April 20, 1993.
13. Like every other graphic in the campaign, *Kissing Doesn't Kill* was accompanied by an *Art Against AIDS On the Road* logo.
14. Robert Shaw, cited in Gary Washburn, "AIDS 'Kiss' Posters Going Up on CTA," *Chicago Tribune*, August 15, 1990, 1, 8.
15. Robert Shaw, cited in David Olson, "CTA Postpones AIDS Awareness Display," *Windy City Times*, June 14, 1990, 1. Shaw's charge of "homosexual recruitment" was widely echoed by other local politicians and press columnists.
16. Robert Shaw, cited in Rick Pearson and Paul Wagner, "Senate Votes to Ban AIDS Posters from CTA," *Chicago Tribune*, June 23, 1990, 1.
17. Following the bill's defeat, Chicago's Mayor Richard Daley, rather than affirming Gran Fury's right to exhibit the poster, encouraged it to produce a "less offensive" image for the mass transit system, a proposal that the collective "unequivocally refused." See Engberg, "Marketing the (Ad)just(ed) Cause," 27.
18. These statistics are cited in Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 597.
19. The graphic was originally created by a collective of six gay men called the *SILENCE = DEATH* project. Several of the members of the *SILENCE = DEATH*

project subsequently became members of ACT-UP, and one, Avram Finkelstein, also became a member of Gran Fury.

20. ACT-UP originated in March 1987 when playwright Larry Kramer, in a lecture on AIDS at the Lesbian and Gay Community Center of New York, warned his audience: "At the rate we're going, you could be dead in five years. . . . If what you are hearing doesn't rouse you to anger, fury, rage, and action, [we] have no future here on Earth." According to one account, "Discussion following Kramer's speech ended in the resolve to meet again two days later, a meeting at which nearly 300 people would form the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. ACT-UP, 'a diverse, nonpartisan group united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis' set about immediately to plan its first demonstration." See Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston, *AIDS Demo Graphics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990), 27–28. Kramer's 1987 speech is cited by David Friedman, "ACT-UP's Second Act," *New York Newsday*, August 24, 1993, Part 2, 42.
21. Crimp and Rolston, *AIDS Demo Graphics*, 14.
22. Adam Rolston, cited in Jacobs and Heller, eds., *Angry Graphics*, 12.
23. For an excellent account of ACT-UP's history as seen through their graphic work, see Crimp and Rolston, *AIDS Demo Graphics*.
24. Tom Kalin, cited in "Gran Fury," in *Discourses*, 196.
25. John Lindell, interview with the author, May 4, 1994. Although Gran Fury eventually allowed itself to be identified by the press, it always preferred to be known as an anonymous collective of AIDS activists rather than as a group of individual artists. For a detailed discussion of the relationship between anonymity and activism, see Elizabeth Hess's essay on the Guerrilla Girls in this volume.
26. Crimp and Rolston, *AIDS Demo Graphics*, 16.
27. In a recently published "roundtable discussion," ACT-UP/Gran Fury member John Lindell made this point even more strongly: "We knew that the 'real' demonstration was meaningless. The important question was, 'How does it look on camera?'" See "Survey on Terror and Terrorism," *Documents* 2, no. 4/5 (Spring 1994): 19.

As Cindy Patton pointed out in 1985, "The early identification of AIDS with the at-risk gay population set the tone for media coverage, delivery of medical care, and even for research. The media continued to link the illness with irresponsibility and sex, blaming gays for their illness. Hemophiliacs, transfusion cases, children, and wives of men with AIDS who came down with the syndrome were consistently called "innocent victims," who through no fault of their own were standing in the path of a dread disease.
28. Cindy Patton, *Sex and Germs: The Politics of AIDS* (Boston: South End Press, 1985), 23.
29. Crimp and Rolston, *AIDS Demo Graphics*, 53.
30. ACT-UP fact sheet on the New York "kiss-in," April 29, 1988, cited in *ibid.*, 55.
31. I have argued elsewhere that *Sexism Rears Its Unprotected Head* sent a series of mixed messages to its viewing audience. Why, for example, should the image of an unsheathed penis necessarily signify unsafe sex and the murder of women: isn't that "unprotected" organ as much a threat to gay men as to (straight) women? And what

of the several sexual practices that the possessor of this penis might enjoy with either a male or female partner, practices such as (modified) oral sex, hand-jobs, frottage, or just plain visual pleasure and exhibitionism? The graphic also ignores women's choices in negotiating safer sex, choices that go beyond a man's agency to either "use condoms or beat it." The poster's ostensible mission of "protecting women" thus seems unconvincing (even ventriloquized). Quite problematically for AIDS activism, *Sexism Rears Its Unprotected Head* equates the erect cock with (dangerous) heterosexual intercourse while eliding gay male sex and ignoring the lesbian body—and its sexual practices and relation to AIDS—altogether. While Gran Fury selected the image of the monumental penis, at least in some measure, for its sexual appeal, that appeal is disavowed by the surrounding text. But the erotic power of the phallic image cannot be dismissed simply by labeling it "the ugly head of sexism." See Richard Meyer, "Representing Ourselves," *Outweek*, August 15, 1990, 59.

32. Steven Heller, "Hit and Run: A Legacy of Unofficial Graphic Protest," in Jacobs and Heller, eds., *Angry Graphics: Protest Posters of the Reagan/Bush Era* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1992), 4.
33. This quote, as Gran Fury's billboard makes clear, is taken not from the Pope himself but from remarks made by John Cardinal O'Connor, the Archbishop of New York, on the occasion of the First Vatican Conference on AIDS in 1989.
34. The final element in the work, a panel of print reminiscent of museum wall text, provided information about grassroots AIDS prevention efforts throughout the world, from street theater in Cameroon to clean-needle distribution in Germany to safe-sex strip shows in Bangkok.
35. McAlpin, interview, April 20, 1994.
36. Donald Moffett, interview with the author, May 19, 1994.
37. Gran Fury created two separate graphics for its Montreal project: one intended for street display, the other for exhibition on public transportation. Both graphics bore the *Je Me Souviens* slogan and the motif of the composite flag. While the street poster offered instruction on safer sex (the text of which is cited on p. 78), the subway poster declared, "*La politique aura toujours le dessus sur la santé des gens. Les personnes atteintes du SIDA qui se tiennent informées et participent activement à leur traitement vivent plus longtemps et en meilleure santé. Le sécurisexe, c'est la responsabilité de chacun. Sois sage au lit.*" ("When politics and health come in conflict, politics will always win. People with AIDS who keep themselves informed and actively participate in their treatment live longer and in better health. Safer sex is the responsibility of each person. Be good in bed.") Montreal's mass transit agency refused to display Gran Fury's posters on the metro. The "subway" posters were therefore wheat-pasted on the streets of the city.
38. See, for example, Jocelyn Lepage, "Gran Fury pour l'ouverture du MAC: L'impudence grossière comme force de frappe," *La Presse* (Montreal), May 30, 1992, E3; "Publicité contre le SIDA interdite dans le métro," *Le Soleil* (Montreal), June 2, 1992, C3; Paul Gladu and Jean-Marc Blier, "La dialectique a remplacé la toile et la palette . . ." *La Presse* (Montreal), July 26, 1992, C2.
39. My account of the local response to *Je Me Souviens* is taken from the press coverage the poster received in Montreal (see note 38) as well as from the description of its public reception given by Emeren Garcia, Head of Traveling Exhibitions, Museum of Contemporary Art, Montreal. Emeren Garcia, interview with the author, April 21, 1994.

40. Douglas Buckley, cited in Ann Duncan, "Contemporary Art Museum a Knockout," *The Gazette* (Montreal), May 30, 1992, K3.
41. McAlpin, interview, April 20, 1994.
42. McAlpin, interview, April 20, 1994. Mark Simpson, interview with the author, May 2, 1994.
43. President Clinton's subsequent betrayal of his campaign promises concerning AIDS research and funding are discussed in (among other places) David Friedman, "ACT-UP'S Second Act," *New York Newsday*, August 24, 1993, 42-43, 63.
44. *Ibid.*, 43.
45. Douglas Crimp, "Right on Girlfriend," in Michael Warner, ed., *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 304.

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3 Group Material Timeline: Activism as a Work of Art

Notes

- The following is a list of Group Material exhibitions, installations, and public projects.
- Public Interventions*, installation design, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, April 1994.
- Campaign*, for *Public Domain*, Centre d'Art SantaMoniCA, Barcelona, Catalunya, March 1994.
- Democracy Wall*, for *In and Out of Place*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, October 1993.
- Tomorrow*, San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, October 1993.
- Cash Prize*, for *In Public Seattle*, advertisements in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, November 1991.
- AIDS Timeline*, for the Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City, April 1991.
- Collaboration*, for *Social Studies: 4 + 4 Young Americans*, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin, Ohio, October 1990.
- AIDS and Insurance*, bus advertisements, sponsored by Real Art Ways, Hartford, Connecticut, September 1990.
- AIDS Timeline*, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut, September 1990.
- Democracy Poll*, newspaper insert, subway station billboards, and electronic billboard, sponsored by Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, Berlin, Germany, June 1990.