

# AIDS DEMOGRAPHICS

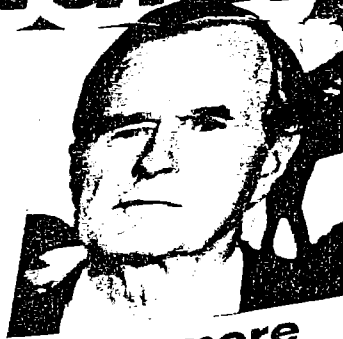
*Douglas Crimp*  
*with Adam Rolston*

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**GUILTY**



**"Testing is more  
cost-effective  
than treatment."  
George Bush  
Presidential Candidate**

**ACT UP**

**SILENCE = DEATH**

**GUILTY**

## **AIDS ACTIVIST GRAPHICS: A DEMONSTRATION**

*New York City, January 1990*

This book is intended as a demonstration, in both senses of the word. It is meant as direct action, putting the power of representation in the hands of as many people as possible. And it is presented as a do-it-yourself manual, showing how to make propaganda work in the fight against AIDS. The AIDS activist graphics illustrated here were all produced by and for ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, "a diverse, nonpartisan group united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis." ACT UP New York was founded in March 1987. Subsequently, autonomous branches have sprung up in other cities, large and small, here and abroad—Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco; Atlanta, Boston, and Denver; Portland and Seattle, Kansas City and New Orleans; Berlin, London, and Paris. Graphics are part of the action everywhere, but we confine ourselves to those associated with ACT UP New York as a matter of expediency. We live in New York—the city with the highest number of reported cases of AIDS in the world. We are members of ACT UP New York. We attend its meetings, join the debate, march in demonstrations, and get arrested for acts of civil disobedience here. And we're familiar with New York ACT UP's graphics, the people who make them, the issues they address. The limitation is part of the nature of our demonstration. We don't claim invention of the style or the techniques. We have no patent on the politics or the designs. There are AIDS activist graphics wherever there are AIDS activists. But ours are the ones we know and can show to others, presented in a context we understand. We want others to keep using our graphics and making their own. Part of our point is that nobody owns these images. They belong to a movement that is constantly growing—in numbers, in militancy, in political awareness.

Although our struggles are most often waged at the local level, the AIDS epidemic and the activist movement dedicated to ending it is national—and international—in scope, and the U.S. government is a major culprit in the problems we face and a central target of our anger. ACT NOW, the AIDS Coalition to Network, Organize, and Win—a national coalition of AIDS activist groups—has coordinated actions of national reach, most notably against the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in October 1988. Health care is a national scandal in the United States; the FDA, the Centers for

*Photo: Tom McKitterick*

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Disease Control (CDC), and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) are all critical to our surviving the epidemic, and we have monitored, lobbied, and fought them all. We have also taken our demands beyond U.S. borders. The Fifth International AIDS Conference in Montreal in June 1989 was *our* conference, the first of these annual, previously largely scientific and policy-making AIDS roundups to have its business-as-usual disrupted by the combative presence of an international coalition of AIDS activists. We took the stage—literally—during the opening ceremonies, and we never relinquished it. One measure of our success was that by the end of the conference perhaps one-third of the more than 12,000 people attending were wearing SILENCE = DEATH buttons.

That simple graphic emblem—SILENCE = DEATH printed in white Gill sanserif type underneath a pink triangle on a black ground—has come to signify AIDS activism to an entire community of people confronting the epidemic. This in itself tells us something about the styles and strategies of the movement's graphics. For SILENCE = DEATH does its work with a metaphorical subtlety that is unique, among political symbols and slogans, to AIDS activism. Our emblem's significance depends on foreknowledge of the use of the pink triangle as the marker of gay men in Nazi concentration camps, its appropriation by the gay movement to remember a suppressed history of our oppression, and, now, an inversion of its positioning (men in the death camps wore triangles that pointed down; SILENCE = DEATH's points up). SILENCE = DEATH declares that silence about the oppression and annihilation of gay people, *then and now*, must be broken as a matter of our survival. As historically problematic as an analogy of AIDS and the death camps is, it is also deeply resonant for gay men and lesbians, especially insofar as the analogy is already mediated by the gay movement's adoption of the pink triangle.<sup>1</sup> But it is not merely what SILENCE = DEATH says, but also how it looks, that gives it its particular force. The power of this equation under a triangle is the compression of its connotation into a logo, a logo so striking that you ultimately *have* to ask, if you 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.

Although identified with ACT UP, SILENCE = DEATH precedes the formation of the activist group by several months. The emblem was created by

six gay men calling themselves the Silence = Death Project, who printed the emblem on posters and had them "sniped" at their own expense.<sup>2</sup> The members of the Silence = Death Project were present at the formation of ACT UP, and they lent the organization their graphic design for placards used in its second demonstration—at New York City's main post office on April 15, 1987. Soon thereafter SILENCE = DEATH T-shirts, buttons, and stickers were produced, the sale of which was one of ACT UP's first means of fundraising.

Nearly a year after SILENCE = DEATH posters first appeared on the streets of lower Manhattan, the logo showed up there again, this time in a neon version as part of a window installation in the New Museum of Contemporary Art on lower Broadway. New Museum curator Bill Olander, a person with AIDS and member of ACT UP, had offered the organization the window space for a work about AIDS. An ad hoc committee was formed by artists, designers, and others with various skills, and within a few short months *Let the Record Show*, a powerful installation work, was produced. Expanding SILENCE = DEATH's analogy of AIDS and Nazi crimes through a photomural of the Nuremberg trials, *Let the Record Show* indicted a number of individuals for their persecutory, violent, homophobic statements about AIDS—statements cast in concrete for the installation—and, in the case of then president Ronald Reagan, for his six-year-long failure to make any statement at all about the nation's number-one health emergency. The installation also included a light-emitting diode (LED) sign programmed with ten minutes of running text about the government's abysmal failure to confront the crisis.<sup>3</sup> *Let the Record Show* demonstrated not only the ACT UP committee's wide knowledge of facts and figures detailing government inaction and mendacity, but also its sophistication about artistic techniques for distilling and presenting the information. If an art world audience might have detected the working methods of such artists as Hans Haacke and Jenny Holzer in ACT UP's installation, so much the better to get them to pay attention to it. And after taking in its messages, who would have worried that the work might be too aesthetically derivative, not original enough? The aesthetic values of the traditional art world are of little consequence to AIDS activists. What counts in activist art is its propaganda effect; stealing the procedures of other artists is part of the plan—if it works, we use it.

ACT UP's ad hoc New Museum art project committee regrouped after

finishing *Let the Record Show* and resolved to continue as an autonomous collective—"a band of individuals united in anger and dedicated to exploiting the power of art to end the AIDS crisis." Calling themselves Gran Fury, after the Plymouth model used by the New York City police as undercover cars, they became, for a time, ACT UP's unofficial propaganda ministry and guerrilla graphic designers. Counterfeit money for ACT UP's first-anniversary demonstration, WALL STREET II; a series of broadsides for New York ACT UP's participation in ACT NOW's spring 1988 offensive, NINE DAYS OF PROTEST; placards to carry and T-shirts to wear to SEIZE CONTROL OF THE FDA; a militant *New York Crimes* to wrap around the *New York Times* for TARGET CITY HALL—these are some of the ways Gran Fury contributed to the distinctive style of ACT UP. Their brilliant use of word and image has also won Gran Fury a degree of acceptance in the art world, where they are now given funding for public artworks and invited to participate in museum exhibitions and to contribute "artist's pages" to *Artforum*.<sup>4</sup>

But, like the government's response to the AIDS activist agenda, the art world's embrace of AIDS activist art was long delayed.<sup>5</sup> Early in 1988, members of the three ACT UP groups Gran Fury, Little Elvis, and Wave Three protested at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) for its exclusion of AIDS activist graphics. The occasion was an exhibition organized by curator Deborah Wye called "Committed to Print: Social and Political Themes in Recent American Printed Art." Work in the show was divided into broad categories: gender, governments/leaders, race/culture, nuclear power/ecology, war/revolution, economics/class struggle/the American dream. The singleness of "gender" on this list, the failure to couple it with, say, "sexuality," already reveals the bias. Although spanning the period from the 1960s to the present, "Committed to Print" included no work about either gay liberation or the AIDS crisis. When asked by a critic at the *Village Voice* why there was nothing about AIDS, the curator blithely replied that she knew of no graphic work of artistic merit dealing with the epidemic. AIDS activists responded with a handout for museum visitors explaining the reasons for demonstrating:

- We are here to protest the blatant omission from "Committed to Print" of any mention of the lesbian and gay rights movement and of the AIDS crisis.
- By ignoring the epidemic, MOMA panders to the ignorance and indifference that prolong the suffering needlessly.

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- By marginalizing 20 years of lesbian and gay rights struggles, MOMA makes invisible the most numerous victims of today's epidemic.
- Cultural blindness is the accomplice of societal indifference. We challenge the cultural workers at MOMA and the viewers of "Committed to Print" to take political activism off the museum walls and into the realm of everyday life.

The distance between downtown and uptown New York—and between its constituent art institutions—was rarely so sharply delineated as it was with MOMA's blindness to SILENCE = DEATH, for it was only a few months earlier that Bill Olander had decided to ask ACT UP to design *Let the Record Show*, after having seen the ubiquitous SILENCE = DEATH poster the previous year: "To me," he wrote, "it was among the most significant works of art that had yet been inspired and produced within the arms of the crisis."<sup>6</sup> For more traditional museum officials, however, a current crisis is perhaps less easy to recognize, since they "see" only what has become distant enough to take on the aura of universality. The concluding lines of MOMA curator Wye's catalogue essay betray this prejudice: "In the final analysis it is not the specific issues or events that stand out. What we come away with is a shared sense of the human condition: rather than feeling set apart, we feel connected."<sup>7</sup> The inability of others to "feel connected" to the tragedy of AIDS is, of course, the very reason we in the AIDS activist movement have had to fight—to fight even to be thought of as sharing in what those who ignore us nevertheless presume to universalize as "the human condition."

But there is perhaps a simpler explanation for MOMA's inability to see SILENCE = DEATH. The political graphics in "Committed to Print" were, it is true, addressed to the pressing issues of their time, but they were made by "bona fide" artists—Robert Rauschenberg and Frank Stella, Leon Golob and Nancy Spero, Hans Haacke and Barbara Kruger. A few collectives were included—Group Material and Collaborative Projects—and even a few ad hoc groups—Black Emergency Cultural Coalition and Artists and Writers Protest Against the War in Vietnam. But these were either well-established artists' organizations or groups that had been burnished by the passage of time, making the museum hospitable to them. The Silence = Death Project (whose AIDSGATE poster had been printed in the summer of 1987) and Gran Fury (who by the time of the MOMA show had completed their first poster, AIDS: 1 IN 61) were undoubtedly too rooted in movement politics for MOMA's curator to see their work within her constricted aes-

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thetic perspective; they had, as yet, no artistic credentials that she knew of.

The distance between downtown and uptown is thus figured in more ways than one. For throughout the past decade postmodernist art has deliberately complicated the notion of "the artist" so tenaciously clung to by MOMA's curator. Questions of identity, authorship, and audience—and the ways in which all three are constructed through representation—have been central to postmodernist art, theory, and criticism. The significance of so-called appropriation art, in which the artist forgoes the claim to original creation by appropriating already-existing images and objects, has been to show that the "unique individual" is a kind of fiction, that our very selves are socially and historically determined through preexisting images, discourses, and events.

Young artists finding their place within the AIDS activist movement rather than the conventional art world have had reason to take these issues very seriously. Identity is understood by them to be, among other things, coercively imposed by perceived sexual orientation or HIV status; it is, at the same time, willfully taken on, in defiant declaration of affinity with the "others" of AIDS: queers, women, Blacks, Latinos, drug users, sex workers.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, authorship is collectively and discursively named: the Silence=Death Project, Gran Fury, Little Elvis, Testing the Limits (an AIDS activist video production group), DIVA TV (Damned Interfering Video Activist Television, a coalition of ACT UP video-makers), and LAPIT (Lesbian Activists Producing Interesting Television, a lesbian task group within DIVA). Authorship also constantly shifts: collectives' memberships and individual members' contributions vary from project to project.

Techniques of postmodernist appropriation are employed by these groups with a sly nod to art world precursors. In a number of early posters, for example, Gran Fury adopted Barbara Kruger's seductive graphic style, which was subsequently, and perhaps less knowingly, taken up by other ACT UP graphic producers. In the meantime, Gran Fury turned to other sources. Their best-known appropriation is undoubtedly the public service announcement on San Francisco (and later New York) city buses produced for "Art Against AIDS on the Road," under the auspices of the American Foundation for AIDS Research. Imitating the look of the United Colors of Benetton advertising campaign, Gran Fury photographed three stylish young interracial couples kissing and topped their images with the caption KISSING DOESN'T KILL: GREED AND INDIFFERENCE DO. The punch of



the message, its implicit reference to the risk of HIV transmission, and its difference from a Benetton ad derive from a simple fact: of the three kissing couples, only one pairs boy with girl. If their sophisticated postmodern style has gained art world attention and much-needed funding for Gran Fury, the collective has accepted it only hesitantly, often biting the hand that feeds. Their first poster commission from an art institution was discharged with a message about art world complacency: WITH 42,000 DEAD, ART IS NOT ENOUGH. Familiar with the fate of most critical art practices—that is, with the art world's capacity to co-opt and neutralize them—Gran Fury has remained wary of their own success. Such success can ensure visibility, but visibility *to whom?*

For AIDS activist artists, rethinking the identity and role of the artist also entails new considerations of audience. Postmodernist art advanced a political critique of art institutions—and art itself as an institution—for the ways they constructed social relations through specific modes of address, representations of history, and obfuscations of power. The limits of this aesthetic critique, however, have been apparent in its own institutionalization: critical postmodernism has become a sanctioned, if still highly contested, art world product, the subject of standard exhibitions, catalogues, and reviews. The implicit promise of breaking out of the museum and marketplace to take on new issues and find new audiences has gone largely unfulfilled. AIDS activist art is one exception, and the difference is fairly easy to locate.

The constituency of much politically engaged art is the art world itself. Generally, artists ponder society from within the confines of their studios; there they apply their putatively unique visions to aesthetic analyses of social conditions. Mainstream artistic responses to the AIDS crisis often suffer from just such isolation, with the result that the art speaks only of the artist's private sense of rage, or loss, or helplessness. Such expressions are often genuine and moving, but their very hermeticism ensures that the audience that will find them so will be the traditional art audience.<sup>9</sup>

AIDS activist artists work from a very different base. The point of departure of the graphics presented in this book—and of the work in video mentioned here—is neither the studio nor the artist's private vision, but AIDS activism. Social conditions are viewed from the perspective of the movement working to change them. AIDS activist art is grounded in the accumulated knowledge and political analysis of the AIDS crisis produced

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collectively by the entire movement. The graphics not only reflect that knowledge, but actively contribute to its articulation as well. They codify concrete, specific issues of importance to the movement as a whole or to particular interests within it. They function as an organizing tool, by conveying, in compressed form, information and political positions to others affected by the epidemic, to onlookers at demonstrations, and to the dominant media. But their primary audience is the movement itself. AIDS activist graphics enunciate AIDS politics to and for all of us in the movement. They suggest slogans (SILENCE = DEATH becomes "We'll never be silent again"), target opponents (the *New York Times*, President Reagan, Cardinal O'Connor), define positions ("All people with AIDS are innocent"), propose actions ("Boycott Burroughs Wellcome"). Graphic designs are often devised in ACT UP committees and presented to the floor at the group's regular Monday night meetings for discussion and approval. Contested positions are debated, and sometimes proposed graphic ideas are altered or vetoed by the membership. In the end, when the final product is wheatpasted around the city, carried on protest placards, and worn on T-shirts, our politics, and our cohesion around those politics, become visible to us, and to those who will potentially join us. Sometimes our graphics signify *only* internally, as when an ACT UP affinity group went to TARGET CITY HALL wearing T-shirts silk-screened with a photograph of the actress Cher. The group adopted the movie star's name as a camp gesture, and each time someone asked what it meant, CHER became an acronym for whatever could be concocted on the spot: anything from "Commie Homos Engaged in Revolution" to "Cathy Has Extra Rollers."

*Art Is Not Enough,*  
1988,  
*Gran Fury.*  
Poster, offset lithography,  
18 x 13 1/2".

ACT UP's humor is no joke. It has given us the courage to maintain our exuberant sense of life while every day coping with disease and death, and it has defended us against the pessimism endemic to other Left movements, from which we have otherwise taken so much. The adoption of the name CHER for an affinity group makes this point. A tradition of Left organizing, affinity groups are small associations of people within activist movements whose mutual trust and shared interests allow them to function autonomously and secretly, arrive at quick decisions by consensus, protect one another at demonstrations, and participate as units in coordinated acts of civil disobedience. ACT UP's affinity groups function in all of these ways, but our affinities, like our identities, are complexly constituted. Because being queer is an identity most of us share, one of our

**WITH 42,000 DEAD**

**ART  
IS NOT ENOUGH**

**TAKE  
COLLECTIVE  
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THE AIDS  
CRISIS**

*Gran Fury*

happiest affinities is camp. ACT UP graphics reflect that part of our politics too.

ACT UP has now become so adept at graphic production that we are able to have professionally produced posters even at "zaps," those small protests organized on the spur of the moment to respond to an emergency situation or a tip-off: the *New York Times* has just published a particularly damaging article; President Bush will be in town this week to speak at a Republican fundraiser; the New York City health commissioner is giving a lecture tomorrow at a health care facility. Having well-prepared visuals at such quickly arranged demonstrations is especially disarming to our opponents, who begin to fear our ubiquity. Protest movements have always had all-night poster-painting parties to prepare for such eventualities; ACT UP's innovation is to get the wheels of mechanical reproduction turning on equally short notice.

In addition to our large, well-organized demonstrations, ACT UP has staged hundreds of smaller protests and zaps over the past two and a half years. Most of them go unmentioned here, as do a few of our bigger demonstrations. The purpose of this book has been limited to presenting ACT UP's graphics in the context of demonstrations about major issues; we have therefore written only a partial history of a very complex political movement. One day in the future, when a far more complete history will be written, we hope ACT UP will have been just an episode—the episode compelled by the AIDS crisis—in the formation of a new mass movement for radical democratic change.

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1. Although factions within the AIDS activist movement have employed holocaust metaphors indiscriminately—*genocide*, for example, is a term that often appears in early ACT UP fact sheets—it should be remembered that forced, punitive quarantine has been both a constant threat and, in some places and for some groups, a reality for people with HIV infection. For a detailed consideration of the gay and AIDS activist movements' adoption of the pink triangle, see Stuart Marshall, "The Contemporary Political Use of Gay History: The Third Reich," paper presented at *How Do I Look? A Queer Film and Video Conference*, Anthology Film Archives, New York, October 21–22, 1989 (conference papers forthcoming).
2. "Sniping" is a means of ensuring that posters pasted on hoardings will remain there for a specific time period without being covered over by anyone else's posters. In New York City, "snipers" are usually paid by promoters to put up rock concert advertisements and to replace them if they are torn down or pasted over.
3. For a more complete description of *Let the Record Show*, see the introduction to Douglas Crimp, ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 7–12.
4. Gran Fury, "Control," *Artforum* 28 (October 1989), pp. 129–30, 167–68.
5. Long, that is, in relation to how time is and must be figured in the AIDS crisis. We do not mean to imply that the agenda of AIDS activist artists includes any special interest in art world acceptance—far from it. The art world is only one of many sites of struggle. Our point is that, whatever the position of AIDS activist artists, art institutions should recognize all vital forms of aesthetic production.
6. Bill Olander, "The Window on Broadway by ACT UP," in *On View* [hand-out] (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1987), p. 1.
7. Deborah Wye, *Committed to Print: Social and Political Themes in Recent American Printed Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1988), p. 10.
8. "I am a member of the gay community and a member of the AIDS community. Furthermore, I am a gay member of the AIDS community, a community that some would establish by force, for no other end but containment, toward no other end but repression, with no other end but our deaths—a community that must, instead, establish *itself* in the face of this containment and repression.

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We must proudly identify ourselves as a coalition" (Gregg Bordowitz, writing about the Testing the Limits video collective, in "Picture a Coalition," *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, p. 195).

9. Individual artists' aesthetic responses to AIDS have not always been genuine or moving; sometimes they are exploitative and damaging. To take a notorious example, Nicholas Nixon's serial photographic portraits of people with AIDS (PWAs) reinforce mainstream media stereotypes of PWAs as isolated, despairing victims. When the photographs were shown at the Museum of Modern Art in the fall of 1988, ACT UP members protested, demanding NO MORE PICTURES WITHOUT CONTEXT. Part of the context excluded from Nixon's pictures, of course, is everything that kills people with AIDS besides a virus—everything that AIDS activists, PWAs among us, are fighting.

*Photo: T. L. Litt*