A Specific Point of View

Gagliostro and Finkelstein translated anger into art

March 1, 1997 By Stephen Greco

Sure, AIDS was a wake-up call. But from what? Not from a new dream about sex and freedom. *That* has suffered more from American's standard body-hating in the past 15 years than from any damned microbe. If the epidemic roused us from anything, it was from persistent complacency toward media messages-a nightmare of aparthy that has been intensifying since Americans mastered the planet in World War II, after which fewer and fewer U.S. children have been taught to think independently or, as adults, been given reason to do so.

No one has sounded reveille louder than the activist writers, editors, artists, designers and other "consciousness industry" workers who have used their power to effect a kind of holy subversion of the status quo. These were the visionaries who, when strange things started happening to people's immune and health care systems, didn't automatically go with the programs-the news programs, that is.

One such is artist Vincent Gagliostro. As a teenager he was a McGovern and antiwar campaigner; later he jumped into the New York City gay-rights movement during the legendary Firehouse days. When ACT UP happened, he was there-and soon started designing for the group. "My work grew out of organizing demos and having a specific point of view as to what the graphics should be about," Gagliostro says.

When the artist die-alone or with collaborators such as ACT UP leader Avram Finkelstein or as part of the AIDS art collective Gran Fury-was to doctor images of presidents and archbishops to look like devils, to invigorate classic revolutionary-poster schemes with the color of this generation's blood, to push boldfaced capital letters slant-ward until they screamed, and to punch holes in corporate logos with images of a raised fist. He did this on posters, postcards, flyers, banners, handouts-things historians sometimes refer to as "ephemera," meaning short-lived. But these paper and plastic goods crackled with such intelligence and clarity that they have proved longer-lived than much of the news that was once deemed fit to print.

In fact, these ephemera and the public action they accompanied were largely what moved AIDs from the edge to the center of national attention. Museums are no asking to show this work-something that seems to puzzle Gagliostro.

“I wonder why people are looking at it right now,” he says. “I hope the interest is not in any way archival. I mean, I’d sit at ACT UP week after week and think, ’This isn’t my first choice. I don’t want to be here.’ And then I’d realize the choice had been made for me. There was no alternative. And I wonder why there’s an alternative now.”

The artist pauses. It’s a stern moment.

“My only reason for saying yes to people who want to show this work is that maybe it will serve as a reminder, make people uneasy. Because that’s what it did at the beginning-make people uneasy. Which is maybe why people reacted and moved their asses a little.”

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/AIDS-art-activism-12536-8091