The Arts: A View with a Room

How one living room changed a neighborhood

December 1, 1994 By Stephen Greco

A guy down the street died a few weeks ago. I didn't know him, but I miss him terribly, because I'd gotten into the habit of regularly peering into his windows.

It was last spring when I noticed that the interior of this apartment, unlike those of most ground-floor spaces in New York City, was radically visible from the sidewalk. The windows were naked and once the weather warmed up, they were always open. There was often a bunch of cute, skinny, twenty-something guys hanging around inside, eating, talking on the phone, watching TV -- all the while illuminated by lighting that was nothing short of theatrical. The effect was clearly unignorable, which kept me from feeling like a pervert once I had begun to follow this little domestic diorama like a soap opera.

The show inside changes frequently. One time, votive candles would be burning on the mantelpiece; another time, disco music would be blasting into the street. Sometimes, in the background, you'd see a red glow emanating from another room or, in the foreground, the blue flicker of a video screen peeking up from the window sill. The element that changed most dramatically though -- and my biggest hint that whoever lived there might be gay (besides the shaved heads and the tank tops) -- were the slogans. Emblazoned on a mirrored wall at the back of the living room, in giant red letters, were phrases such as One Million and Counting and We Are All Victims! New ones came all the time. At first I sniffed at the idea of using one's private space for public display; then I came to welcome those daily affirmations that we are all, despite the distractions of Haiti and O.J., still living and dying in a world with AIDS.

I happen to know a real voyeur in my neighborhood who can show you where a certain bodybuilder likes to masturbate in the middle of the night with a pillow over his head. But he knew nothing about the AIDS shrine on my block, so I began to ask around. I was beginning to consider writing about the inhabitants and wanted to ask some questions: How old are they, what do they do for a living, how did they come to live this way, what kind of response are they getting from passers-by?

Ongoing, site-specific performance installations about AIDS are not the norm on my Brooklyn street. Throughout the summer you would see people slowing down when walking past the apartment, like they thought it might be OK to peer in for a moment but not like they'd been

planning to do so. I never saw any violent reactions, which didn't surprise me, since what these guys were doing was not confrontational exactly; it was simply assertive. I couldn't help thinking how different it was from the way my lover Barry and I did AIDS seven years ago, five doors away.

After months in the hospital, Barry had returned home for his final weeks. Friends visited mournfully. Rabbis and shrinks made house calls. Barry's family and I took care of him as best we could, which, now that I think about it, often involved keeping the front drapes closed. Not that we were secretive about AIDS. Quite the contrary: Barry and I both wrote about it. Emotionally, however, I think we processed our day-to-day experience of the disease by way of the classic sighs and shudders that had been perfected during tuberculosis and invented, perhaps, during the Plague. The guys down the block, on the other hand, had not turned to religion or psychology for emotional paradigms but, amazingly enough, to art and performance, which had allowed them to come up with something as new to feeling as HIV was to virology. The result was a thoroughly modern presentation of suffering, if you will, involving anger, humor and the wisdom of MTV's *The Real World*. In a world of simulacra, this was a real show. And what is art but show?

If only more people had seen it. It was late in the summer, after I'd finally decided I should introduce myself, that the slogans grew more spiritual: You're Born. You Die. You're Reborn. A friend told me that one of the guys had AIDS and before long, I saw the windows draped with ghastly looking clear plastic tubing and IV bags. Then the show was over. A few weeks ago the blinds were pulled and lights are no longer visible inside. My friend told me the guy had died -- just a day after I had discussed writing this piece with my editor.

Of course, I regret waiting until too late to learn the man's name -- David -- let alone to say hello and trade vegetarian recipes. I keep hoping that there will be some way that his boyfriend, if he remains there, can keep the windows open to memorialize an act of creativity that was as natural as drawing breath. But closed as they are, the windows still say something: That time is indeed finite. If you want to invite yourself into the company of gifted people who are inventing new ways to live, you should do it now.

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