



Art as Activism

Creating beauty and exploring personal and collective themes of identity, commentary, narrative, and transformation through art.

December 1, 2021 By Jill A. Frey

What to do when hit hard by a second pandemic, equally loaded with stigma, discrimination, bias, and disparity? Some might suggest digging deep into resilience or taking to the streets with public outcry. Others lobby for research, funding, policy changes, and media awareness. All solid strategies with expected outcomes. It's what we've always done.

Here's my take. Lean into beauty. With COVID currently cloaking our landscape, I call upon art to see us through. As a staff member at PCAF (previously known as Pierce County AIDS Foundation), Tacoma, WA for the past 27 years, I can account for my fair share of loss, lamentation, and outrage. And while I applaud and appreciate my nonprofit's cutting edge efforts of prevention, care, and advocacy, I land smack dab in the arena of art for what's needed to end the HIV epidemic.

AIDS and art have been linked politically and historically since the start of the HIV pandemic and for good reason. The first AIDS-related artwork, *Unveiling of a Modern Chastity* by Ishar Patkin, was completed in 1981, the same year that the CDC released its first report of the disease. Art provided an outlet for biographical art when AIDS burst onto the scene during the 1980s, and collaborative relationships between artists developed during this time like never before. Artworks unapologetically reflected the AIDS experiences of grief, loss, death, fear, rage, and stigma, and also portrayed illness and sex as a theme. Art and creativity offered a vehicle for expression, connection, and solidarity at a time when emotions were erupting and relationships severing. During the 1990s, AIDS-related artworks shifted into the portrayal of issues of impact such as racism, poverty, identity, and discrepancies.

For years, I coordinated community art engagement projects at PCAF during our annual AIDS Walks and other PCAF client and community events. At our AIDS Walks, walkers paused en route to make art. We created art together as we remembered and honored loved ones, and rededicated ourselves to continuing the work of activism.

Jess and Kris contributed to this artwork for Dual Pandemics: Experience at the Intersection, PCAF's 2021 World AIDS Day Community Art Project (on display at Tacoma Urban Performing Arts Center). Image courtesy of PCAF

I currently curate an art gallery at PCAF as well as employ arts programming for my organization and community. In its fifth year of operation, the gallery aligns with PCAF's values of social justice and equity, offering opportunity, encouraging expression and representation, and creating community. We see art as central to our mission:

“PCAF, through education and service, prevents HIV infection, assists persons affected by HIV and AIDS, addresses related health problems, and combats associated stigma and discrimination.”

From research, we know that art changes us. Art has the unique capacity to serve as both receptive and expressive experiences. It influences us by shifting opinion, instilling values, and translating experiences across time and space. Art is often recognized as the repository of a culture's collective memory, preserving what fact-based records cannot. It also can offer the means to motivate. Art has the ability to match the mounting need for action and capitalize upon the momentum to end the HIV epidemic.

Think of the [AIDS Memorial Quilt](#). First imagined in response to a vision by gay rights activist Cleve Jones in 1985, the quilt with its 3' x 6' panels--each the size of a grave--was first displayed nationally on the National Mall in Washington, DC in 1987. Since then, it has grown to over 50,000 panels, memorializing over 105,000 people, and serves as the world's largest piece of folk artwork. The AIDS Memorial Quilt is testimony to art's capacity to be communal, reaching across divides.

Think about the recent popularity of murals. Murals have been a part of our cultural landscape for thousands of years, dating back to cave paintings and global pictographs. Banksy's Balloon Girl has sparked large scale murals in our communities to identify and revitalize neighborhoods, and act as collective thought spaces. They create dialogue around a subject or community issue and expand thought through their depiction while adding value and connectedness to their community. Could billboards or media messages do the same? I think not. Words are powerful however art manages to convey beauty and interest and dialogue and provocation in a manner that is far reaching and unifying, rather than divisive. It illustrates the drive-home-message that we are all affected.

In our art gallery, local emerging and established artists are supported to exhibit their artwork and offer arts programming to clients and community members. As curator of the gallery, in its fifth year of operation, I can attest to its far reaching and resounding success. BIPOC artists are regularly sought out to strengthen inclusivity and representation, a client art show is held annually, and artists regularly give back through initiated fundraising and collaboration. Recurring

grants and sponsorships speak to its perceived success. Art and beauty are viewed as vital to well being and prioritized as critical parts of service plans, prevention strategies, and staff support. Clients report that being seen as an artist first and a client or community member second goes a long way to eliminating stigma, reducing shame, and cutting through isolation. I see promoting the gallery as a client and community-centered space to be critical. Ensuring access to the gallery significantly reduces perceived stigma for the organization's building and offices and equates our organization to any other office space where art is available and shared with others.

Our art gallery extends PCAF mission and takes PCAF's longstanding history of community art engagement, formalizing those efforts into a new endeavor. It utilizes our commitment to harm reduction using art, and serves to introduce us as a new community partner. The gallery expands our roster of PCAF ambassadors by enlisting our gallery artists who in turn serve as spokespeople. It strengthens PCAF's identity as a safe space by offering an opportunity to view art in a gallery setting and offers local artists and art activists a space for installation. It allows us as an organization to expand our commemoration of HIV Awareness Days and other significant events, more fully representing our clients and the communities we serve, supporting themes of individual and collective identity, presentation, resilience, advocacy, and beauty. The gallery serves as an arena for the expression and exchange of ideas, dialogue, and conversation, and offers a healing place for staff, clients, and visitors.

In the end, we're all aiming to do the work, to end the HIV epidemic. To make it through the current pandemic and persevere with the work that's before us in our AIDS service organizations or living with HIV. I propose art. I propose leaning in. I truly know of no other way.

World AIDS Day with this year's global theme of "End Inequalities, End AIDS" offers a similar opportunity. PCAF is presenting [Panic in the Pandemics—HIV & COVID](#), a virtual event on 12/1/21. The event features a panel discussion between engaged clients, community members, and community leaders, highlights a community art engagement project, and showcases a new short film of a client, Jessica and her son, Kris, who have both been living with HIV for over 20 years. Catch Panic in the Pandemics at 6 pm, PST, December 1, 2021 by visiting PCAF's website, www.pcaf-wa.org for more information. The link for Jessica and Kris' video's can also be found on the website along with recent artwork created for the event under the stewardship of artist Aisha Harrison. Jessica, a gallery artist in her own right, worked with her son Kris to create some of this year's artwork for our World AIDS Day art project which was then installed in local [Dining Out For Life](#) restaurant and business windows in the days surrounding World AIDS Day.

"It is art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process." Henry James.

Support PCAF:

Jill A. Frey, she/her, is the Art Gallery Curator and Personnel/Administrative Coordinator at PCAF in Tacoma WA. As a 27 year staff member and visual artist, she remains committed to creating beauty and exploring personal and collective themes of identity, commentary, narrative, and transformation through art. She believes in healing intuitively through art, and is grateful for the honor of working alongside clients, volunteers, community members, and staff to eradicate stigma and injustice.

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