Moments of Stillness [SLIDESHOW]

An interview with Stephen Barker, whose portraits show early AIDS activists, minus all the anger

September 13, 2017 By Trent Straube

The photographs included in your upcoming show, The ACT UP Portraits: Activists & Avatars, 1991–94, don't depict scenes from protests and marches. Were you trying to offer a counterpoint to that more-common historical narrative?

While I also photographed protests—including the funeral march where Mark Fisher's body was carried illegally up Sixth Avenue [in Manhattan] to the Republican National Committee headquarters in November '92—I knew there was something in addition to this anger and grief and muscle. There was a historical self-consciousness, a stillness, an awareness of the weight of everything we were up against. These are portraits of individual activists who've stepped onto a national stage to challenge deeply ingrained stigma, revulsion and indifference—to upend the status quo in services, medical research and treatment. The audacity of their intent was inspiring, and is inspiring again, now, in 2017.

How did you choose the subjects and locations?

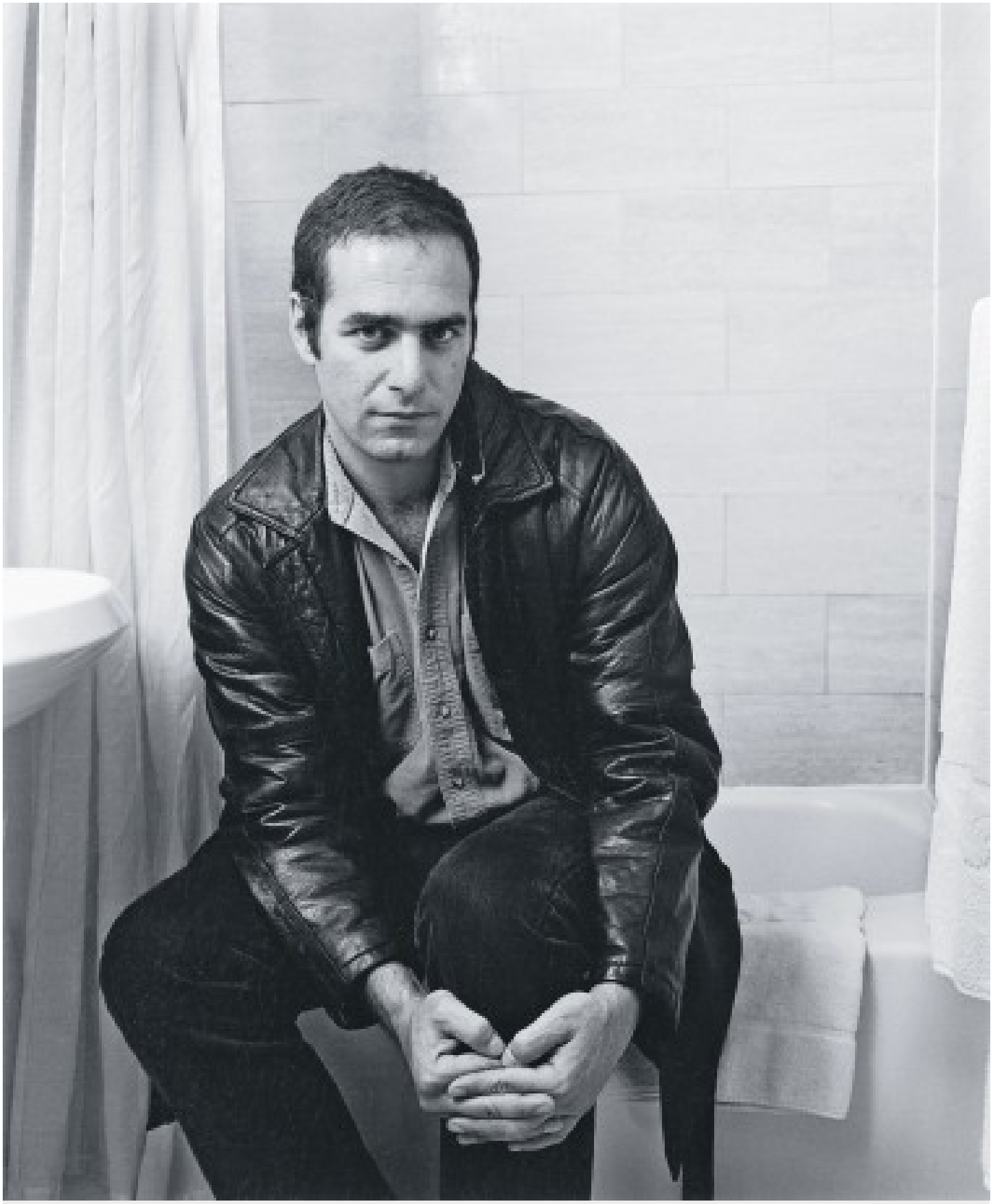
I had emptied out half of my 300-square-foot apartment to make space for a studio and came across sheet metal to use as a backdrop. Friends—mostly fellow ACT UP members—would agree to come by for pictures. This was never [meant to be] an encyclopedic project; it grew organically to include a handful or so of the friends and fellow activists I admired. But it is, I believe, representative of something, a certain fire and tension, felt then by many. In November '92, I also went with TAG [Treatment Action Group] members to Washington, DC, to photograph them in their hotel rooms between meetings of the AIDS Clinical Trials Group conference.

What's your background as an activist?

I came to ACT UP in 1989—after some time as a GMHC buddy [a volunteer who helps care for a person with AIDS]—and, trying to find my place within it, I found my anger that IV drug users were entirely written off by the government even though commonsense harm reduction could have been made available. A group of us would gather at Rod Sorge's apartment on Rivington Street on the Lower East Side and bag hundreds of bleach kits, referral lists and condoms to be distributed when we "strolled" through hard-hit neighborhoods to exchange clean syringes (smuggled in from Canada) for used ones. We chanted "ACT UP!" and folks would come out of nowhere with varying degrees of trust and fistfuls of blunt, bloody needles, grateful that their works wouldn't need to be shared. They relied on us—and our illegal Canadian channels—to help limit the spread of the virus.

I somehow came to be coordinator of the Brooklyn Needle Exchange. Later, with a hard-fought change in the New York State public health law, we were able to open a legal office on Avenue C—now located at 25 Allen Street—and my activism morphed into a 30-hours-a-week volunteer office job. I decided to rededicate myself to making art full-time and left in ’92 to make work about invisibility and disenfranchisement. As the artist Shirin Neshat says: “Art is our weapon. Culture is a form of resistance.”

The ACT UP Portraits: Activists & Avatars, 1991–94, on exhibit September 14 to October 20, Daniel Cooney Fine Art, 508–526 W. 26th St., #9C, New York, NY.



David Barr, Treatment Action Group/GMHCCourtesy of Stephen Barker

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