An Oral History of AIDS and Art

Listen to (or read) 40 in-depth interviews with artists who created work during the early epidemic.

November 12, 2018 By Trent Straube

What was it like in the New York art world at the height of the AIDS epidemic? Why not listen to Ross Bleckner, Nan Goldin or Kenny Scharf tell you all about it? They're a smattering of the 40 art luminaries interviewed (each for nearly five hours!) about HIV and their lives as part of a project of the Archives of American Art. What's more, most of this incredible resource is available online as audio files and transcripts.

Titled "Visual Arts and the AIDS Epidemic: An Oral History Project," this collection of eyewitness accounts was funded with a grant from the Keith Haring Foundation. (The Archives of American Art collects primary sources that document the history of art in the United States; it's a part of the Smithsonian Institution.)

This summer, the Whitney Museum of American Art hosted a symposium based on the "Oral History Project." You can watch a video of the event below.

You can read more about the "Oral History Project" on the Archives of American Art website here, which will lead you to a page for each of the 40 artists. On those pages, you'll find an audio excerpt, an overview of the interview and in many cases a full transcript, including a PDF you can download. You can listen to most of the full interviews if you register on the site, and those that are not accessible online are available with advance notice at the Washington, DC, and New York City headquarters of the archives.

"While there have been many documentaries, films, exhibitions and books chronicling the AIDS epidemic, none has focused on in-depth, firsthand accounts of key figures in the visual arts—telling the larger story in their own words," says Liza Kirwin, deputy director of the Archives of American Art. "They are still grieving but also celebrating survival and celebrating the memories of so many artists who died. In the 1980s, many artists mobilized for political action and that became their all-consuming purpose, while others responded in more private ways. Their friends, their partners were dying, and their community was dying, and they had no choice but to make themselves heard."

We're still listening to them today.

Here’s a complete list of the 40 artists in the “Oral History Project”:

Dough Ashford

Ron Athey

Charles Atlas

Julie Ault

Nayland Blake

Ross Bleckner

Gregg Bordowitz

Nancy Brooks Brody

AA Bronson

Douglas Crimp

John Dugdale

Joy Episalla

Avram Finkelstein

Lia Gangitano

Gary Garrels

Nan Goldin

Sunil Gupta

Lyle Ashton Harris

Geoffrey Hendricks

Jim Hodges

Frank Holliday

Bill Jacobson

Bill T. Jones

Alexandra Juhasz

Zoe Leonard

Patrick Moore

Jack Pierson

Hunter Reynolds

Eric Rhein

Sur Rodney

Kenny Scharf

Rosalind Fox Solomon

Joey Terrill

Julie Tolentino

Marguerite Van Cook

Robert Vazquez-Pacheco

Jack Waters

James Wentzy

Frederick Weston

Carrie Yamaoka

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/oral-history-aids-art