Poster Art

Three curators discuss their recent exhibitions and the pivotal role of HIV and AIDS posters.

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While HIV remains a contemporary scourge, the history of the disease has increasingly been the focus of journalists, scholars and curators, among others. For decades, HIV and AIDS posters have urged people to protect themselves and others and to question—and even change—their own behaviors. Employing innovative graphic design, HIV and AIDS posters have also inspired protest and forged a sense of shared identity among activists. Three recent art exhibitions emphasize the pivotal role played by HIV and AIDS posters since the virus emerged in the early ’80s. Donald Albrecht curated Up Against the Wall: Art, Activism, and the AIDS Poster, which was presented at the University of Rochester’s Memorial Art Gallery. Andy Campbell worked with the ONE Archives and ONE Archives Foundation to curate Days of Rage. Theodore (ted) Kerr organized AIDS, Posters & Stories of Public Health: A People’s History of a Pandemic for the National Library of Medicine (NLM). Below is an edited conversation between the three curators on the role of HIV and AIDS posters.

Theodore KerrCourtesy of Issue Project Room/Cameron Kelly

Kerr: Let’s start with the elevator pitch for each of our exhibitions.

Albrecht: The first large-scale exhibition and book devoted to one of the world’s largest collections of HIV/AIDS posters.

Kerr: An online and physical touring exhibition that uses the NLM’s digital collection to showcase people’s response to HIV.

Campbell: A digital-born exhibition about graphic design and activism that seeks to

bring design back to the body—it includes things like memory, touch and historical reflection.

“It Can’t Happen to Me, Not!,” Robert BirchCourtesy of ONE Archives at the USC Libraries

Donald, what decisions did you have to make to give an accurate representation of that collection?

Donald AlbrechtCourtesy of Donald Albrecht

Albrecht: I decided to organize my show by message because that's what the posters are ultimately about. While the aesthetics are important, it's the messaging that's significant. We were tied to a particular size of space of 5,000 square feet. There's only so many posters you can put in there without getting museum fatigue. I think we ended up with about 165.

Campbell: I found the experience of looking at the more than 4,600 posters that have been digitized by ONE Archives deeply pleasurable because I found things I had never seen before and got new information to integrate and to build on what I already knew.

Kerr: I have a long-dormant frustration regarding mainstream HIV prevention posters that dominated the gay bars and STD [sexually transmitted disease] clinics of my youth. They warned

me about HIV but failed to even hint at any of the other complex elements of the epidemic. I became focused on the idea that people who cared about similar things as me had made something I could help share and contextualize years later. I also had to consider gallery fatigue. At first, I felt restrained because there was so much content I wanted to share. But I began to appreciate boundaries. While the internet might seem infinite, people's attention is not.

Andy CampbellCourtesy of Paige Schilt

Campbell: We could have created an interface that displayed the 4,600-plus posters. But attention deficit is exactly the reason we didn't do that. We created limits around the exhibition and initially invited five people to act as interpretive guides through whichever posters they selected from the collection. We created rules and then, of course, gave the participants the flexibility to break those rules. For example, Alan Bell chose four poster series rather than five individual posters. His whole

point in choosing multiples was that one poster could never bear the burden of representation by itself.

“Africa We Care. We Can Make a Difference,” Gauteng AIDS ProgrammeCourtesy of the AIDS Education Collection, University of Rochester

Kerr: What do you think an AIDS poster exhibition can do?

Albrecht: Well, it can provide a general audience with a range of visual and textual expressions about AIDS across the globe. It can also tell the story of AIDS, reminding people of aspects of the disease’s history that may have been forgotten. We added a lot of information for context. The museum interviewed about a dozen local people about their experience of AIDS, which personalized it. A poster exhibition can’t bring back the feeling and the experience of the time it was created, but we tried to solve that with photo enlargements of some of the AIDS posters used in street protests, showing how they functioned in the wild.

“Stop AIDS: OK”, AIDS-Hilfe SchweizCourtesy of the AIDS Education Collection, University of Rochester

Campbell: The show I curated was an activist poster exhibition—not specifically about AIDS, but AIDS was a primary touchstone. I don’t think we had a single person who didn’t choose something HIV- or AIDS-related. In terms of what an AIDS poster can do, I think I’d agree with Alan Bell, who said one poster by itself has a fairly limited scope. Most posters designed during the ’80s and ’90s were either targeted to specific communities or bound in some way to a message or way of thinking about where the crisis was at the moment. An exhibition can connect some of those points and identify holes in what we know about the entire body of graphic work that was and is still being created in response to the pandemic. I think a poster exhibition can do connective and

introductory work about the past and the present.

Albrecht: Let’s talk about the posters and their designs. I came into the exhibition thinking that most people, when they think of AIDS posters, think of the Silence = Death graphic or work by Gran Fury. But I found that the further we got away from those, the more interesting the posters became.

“The Government Has Blood on Its Hands. One AIDS Death Every Half Hour,” Gran Fury Courtesy of the AIDS Education Collection, University of Rochester

Kerr: Fascinating. Growing up, images of ACT UP, Gran Fury and Silence = Death were not easy for me to find. There is something bittersweet about how once-elusive images of grassroots action are now the dominant images we consider as we curate.

Albrecht: A lot of the Gran Fury posters are very corporate-looking; by design, they are a riff on Madison Avenue advertising.

Kerr: That strategy worked in the era the posters were made and continues decades later. It’s incredible. It also means that part of our job as curators is to fill in the space between infamous activist images and images from the government and large nonprofits.

Ironically, it was often easier to find contextual information about a hand-drawn poster by an anonymous artist, for example, than a widely circulated image that came out of an advertising agency.

Campbell: There is an asymmetry in the research potential. It’s really hard to know how something came together. The lack of information around large organizations, like an ad agency, also extends to smaller ones that may have no archive per se. You would think the more atomized personal thing would be harder to locate; certain kinds of small organizations or groups often don’t exist anymore. And I guess that’s another thing an AIDS poster exhibition can do: provide research and exploration into the work that has come before us and ask questions as a way to leave a trail for the work yet to do!

Click here to read the full conversation between the curators.

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