How “Silence = Death” Became a Rallying Cry for ACT UP

Read an excerpt from Avram Finkelstein’s new book *After Silence: A History of AIDS Through Its Images*.

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In late 1985, six gay men: Avram Finkelstein, Jorge Soccarás, Oliver Johnston, Chris Lione, Charles Kreloff and Brian Howard formed a consciousness-raising group to explore what it meant to be gay in the age of AIDS. Their friends and lovers were dying, the government wasn’t doing anything and not enough people were talking about it. Over weekly potluck dinners, the collective came together to support one another and discuss the AIDS crisis. After nearly a year of meals and meetings, Finkelstein suggested they create a political poster to spur the community into action. His new book, After Silence: A History of AIDS Through Its Images, is a glimpse into how the iconic Silence = Death poster and other AIDS-related political art came to be. As a longtime AIDS activist, Finkelstein provides an insightful look at the power of political collectives and how art inspires action.

The events in the following excerpt take place in the spring of 1987 after the Silence = Death

posters had been wheat-pasted in strategic neighborhoods across New York City. When they created the poster, the group had no idea what impact it would have, but before long, it became a mobilizing force for a new advocacy group that would come to be known as ACT UP.

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Within weeks of the [New York Native] interview [about the Silence = Death poster] I saw an announcement in the Native that Larry Kramer was speaking at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center in New York on March 10, 1987. The Native regularly covered Kramer—the only person I had seen talking about the lack of a communal response and the far-reaching political subtext. So, when I heard he was speaking, I suggested the collective skip our weekly meeting and go there instead.

The room was packed, and the atmosphere was somewhat tense. I didn't know Larry at all or travel in his circles, so I was unaware of his histrionics. I now know people were there that night who'd been on the receiving end of those tactics. We'd had a fair share of shouting in our own meetings, but it rarely reached the pitch of Larry's talk that night. He started by drawing an imaginary line down the middle of the room and asking everyone on one side to stand. He pointed at them. "You'll all be dead in a year," he began, with a frown so severe it seemed fake, though he might easily have been nervous.

"Powerful," I said to myself, making a mental note. He followed by saying we deserved to die if we didn't fight and then hammered away at why we should be storming Washington with pitchforks. He demanded that GMHC change its tax-exempt status in order to switch from services to advocacy, that it fight for more drugs to be released, confront the FDA, start lobbying Albany, and hire a PR team. When he was done ranting, he challenged the audience for ideas, shaking two outstretched hands at us, bellowing, "What are you going to do about it?!?"

Those who traveled in Larry's circles may have another take on this moment, and for all I know, that may have included everyone else in the room but the six of us, but here is how it looked to me: If he believed there was little urgency around AIDS, this audience certainly contradicted it, and it was clear we weren't the only ones ready for action. A storm had been brewing, and the people in this room were the rumbling right before a thunderclap. The silence was about to end.

Audience members were shouting out as if they knew one another, or at least they were very comfortable there, and they immediately began flinging ideas across the room. I don't remember the discussion being facilitated, and the level of activity was kinetic. People jumped out of their seats to throw out ideas, and interrupted each other with excitement. And, oh yeah, there was that rage. One person called for devising ways to acquire the illegal drug therapy AL721. Another wanted to draw attention to the potential for transfusion dependency caused by AZT. Kramer wanted pickets, protests, or arrests at a local FDA office. Someone else proposed a demonstration at the Third International Conference on AIDS in Washington, DC. Then someone suggested an 8 a.m. weekly meeting at the Community Center, like the early AIDS Action meetings during the formation of GMHC. After a short debate about dates and times, the room quickly decided to meet

at the Center two days later, at 7:30 p.m.

The first meeting of the “AIDS Action Committee”—it wasn’t named ACT UP until the meeting before the first demonstration at City Hall, when we needed to have a name—began with a recap of the ideas that came out of Larry’s speech and then immediately moved into brainstorming possible actions. There was no resistance whatsoever to direct action or civil disobedience as a strategy, and the room was not timid about targets. When I look through my journal notes, the most startling thing about that evening is the number of issues and ideas ACT UP later undertook that were all articulated on that very first night: a higher political profile for affected communities, the cost and inaccessibility of experimental drugs, the involuntary testing of women, and the impact on communities of color, on sex workers, and on IV drug users. The actions proposed that night were a virtual roadmap for the following years of ACT UP as well: a presence at the International AIDS Conferences, infiltrating the FDA, needle exchange, civil disobedience at the National Institutes of Health, pressuring the media, demonstrating at Sloan Kettering and the Statue of Liberty, blocking bridges and tunnels, seizing the Gay Pride March, coordinating a national day of actions, stopping New York Times delivery trucks.

During the beginning announcements at the following meeting, Neil Broome stood up to ask if anyone had seen the Silence = Death posters or knew anything about who had done them. He then looked around the room for the answer. There was a general murmur, and “Yeah, who did those?” seemed to rise out of it. Chris, Oliver, and I were the only ones from the collective there that night, and we were a few rows behind Neil and off to the left. We looked at each other, and then Oliver asked me if we should come out as a collective. While I was thinking, I shrugged.

Without hesitation Oliver jumped up and claimed credit. Since our group was so small, we’d agreed that two of us could constitute a quorum. And since anonymity had been my suggestion to begin with and I did not immediately object, I think he felt liberated by the lack of conflict. We were asked who we were, and I answered, still seated, “We’re a small consciousness-raising collective,” and that was all I said about it. We didn’t even have a name at that point, and had no plan to take one. There was applause, enough to make me uncomfortable, and to make Oliver beam in that way of his. While he beamed, I looked across the room, and I felt flushed. I was happy for the acknowledgment, to be honest. This roomful of activists was more than I’d hoped for. But I had no way to gauge what they were capable of yet. It felt as if there was radical potential, but it was too soon to say for sure. The ramifications were unclear, but I saw what was happening, had seen it before, and the reason this room was full was not a mystery to me.

I have since come to learn that Larry personally called people he knew to come to his talk that first night, and that might in fact be the reason many had shown up there. But that would not explain why I was there. It would not explain why the rest of my collective was there, or anyone in any of the affinity groups I would soon come to work with, or in my other collectives, or the hundreds of other people who flooded into the room over the following months who had actually never heard of Larry Kramer, because we did not know him or his work, and he did not personally call any of us. He and I came from very different worlds, and very different generations, and although I knew many film and performance people, none of them traveled in his circles and he knew as little

about The Contortions or Robert Fripp as I knew about Broadway. I was, however, there for the same set of reasons Larry was. I was there because I was not meant to see Don having a spinal tap just before he died, and his grimace of terror while they did it, but I saw it anyway through a crack in his hospital room door, and now could not think of any other way to erase the agony of it from my mind but to take to the streets.

Journal notes, Avram Finkelstein, 1986–1987. Courtesy Fales Library, New York University.Courtesy of Fales Library, New York University

I believe that ideas can be universal and that many people may have the same idea at the same time, independently from one another, often on opposite sides of the globe. That’s not to say there is no original thought. I believe in that too. But AIDS was not happening to one of us. It was happening to many of us, even though we had yet to meet one another. There are cultural

“moments” that belong to everyone, and this was one of those. Such moments may be spurred on and guided, or hammered into shape, and appropriated or claimed, but there is also a wildfire aspect to them, and that part belongs to nature. Some of us can see a moment before it arrives, and have personal histories of this kind of tuning. Others might just feel something and have no idea what it is. But I believe that if you live with your eyes open, such moments are generally plain to see. This activist response we seek to quantify in hindsight by pinpointing direct causality was in fact the result of a crisis in slow motion, and was as multifactorial as immunosuppression can be. It took a long time for many of us to realize our personal hell was a shared one, and it has been my experience that the activation of social spaces, whether through activism or cultural production, can have as much do with Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell as with policies promoted by elected officials, or centuries of institutional oppression. From the perspective of the realpolitik of political organizing, it serves to acknowledge that political agency is as rooted in pop culture as it is in critical theory, and is as connected to the psychodynamics of desire as it is to the question of communal ethics.

It would be convenient to say that the moment in question was the result of one person’s Rolodex. But similar calls had been previously made, both publicly and privately, and the result I refer to here hadn’t occurred. The questions of how ACT UP began or how it dissolved are ones more suited to the institutional uses of history, and while history is one of the methods of conceptualizing resistance, history is also capital, and capitalism has a way of unhinging history from the meaning of the political agency behind it. It would be far more accurate to say ACT UP was caused by a rolling collective realization promoted through a series of catalytic elements, events, and individuals, and while it suits the nature of storytelling to claim this as an instant, the fact is, it took half a decade to unfurl.

Wars are started by power structures. Sometimes uprisings might be as well, but rarely when they are authentic. In the aggregate, many of the people in the room may not have consciously come for this reason, but the impulse that drove ACT UP into being was a reflection of individuals finally finding one another, to stand in resistance to unthinkable hard-heartedness. I also believe the urge to create a queer “family” frequently extends outward, however tenuously, and can push communities into formation. It’s simple, I suppose, as simple as any tribal impulse is, the impulse for reassurance, at least, but it goes far beyond that. When you are queer, it’s also a matter of survival, and that was never truer than it was at this moment.

So, in a way, there was no choice but to give over, and give over fully. I had the same communal instinct Oliver had that night, and as Larry had been having, but for me, it was playing out differently. In my head, I was considering how to expand our tiny collective to include ACT UP, an idea of community that had been in my head since we first formed, and I did it without saying a word to anyone about it. We had delivered Silence = Death to the commons, and I realized, there and then, that ACT UP was the next phase of our consciousness-raising project, and we had just met the rest of our members.

We had designed Silence = Death. ACT UP was about to create it.

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Avram Finkelstein is a founding member of the Silence = Death and Grand Fury collectives. His work is included in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum, the New Museum, and the Smithsonian Archives of American Art.

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