AIDS Is Not Over

Visual AIDS marks 30 years of supporting the arts to fight HIV with new leadership and renewed focus.

August 13, 2018 By [Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.](#)

Esther McGowan is executive director of Visual AIDS. The nonprofit HIV organization, according to its mission statement, "utilizes art to fight AIDS by provoking dialogue, supporting HIV-positive artists and preserving a legacy, because AIDS is not over." She became executive director in 2017. Previously she had been associate director since 2012.

Lucas Michael

Before Visual AIDS, McGowan held various roles in nonprofit management, including development and marketing director for The Center for Fiction, development and special events consultant for clients such as the Bronx Museum of Arts and Downtown Arts Projects, and development director for the Alliance for the Arts. She earned a bachelor of arts in art history from New York University.

Founded in 1988, Visual AIDS is perhaps still best known as the creator of the red ribbon and the Day With(out) Art national project held each year on World AIDS Day, which is December 1. To mark its 30th anniversary, Visual AIDS has launched new programs with a revived sense of urgency in the fight against HIV.

Tell us about one of the new Visual AIDS projects.

Visual AIDS has never stopped doing the work that we do since we were founded in 1988. But as the epidemic has changed, so have we. Part of our mission is to look back, especially at the history of art and AIDS activism. However, we also look at issues that have urgency now. As a result, we adapt existing programs and create new programs that relate to contemporary issues.

For example, one of the things that we're doing for our 30th anniversary year is to look back at some of the projects that we did in the early '90s. In particular, we decided to revisit broadsides. We commissioned well-known artists back then to make them—they were 8½" x 11" black and white artworks made in that size so they could be photocopied and widely distributed for free.

Artists would create eye-catching broadsides that were designed to share information on a certain topic to galvanize people. Barbara Kruger did one for women, which was very forward-thinking at the time. Glenn Ligon did one for communities of color. John Giorno did several related to loss, relationships and caring. We wanted to create new broadsides to address today's topics.

So we worked with Avram Finkelstein, who was a part of Gran Fury and the Silence = Death collective. He worked with us to create a larger broadside that shares information about HIV criminalization, which is a topic that we are really interested in generating activism around. We're not the leaders in this field, but groups like the Sero Project inspired us to get involved.

We launched this foldout broadside at New York City Pride. We handed them out as we marched. That's an example of one of the things we're doing this year, and something I'm personally interested in as the new director, the idea of getting back to our activist roots, which is particularly important now in the current political climate.

After effective treatment arrived, our projects became more passive. We created exhibitions, published books, worked with our archive and registry, and looked at all the ways we could help HIV-positive artists through grants and other types of support, all of which remain important for us to do. But we want to supplement all of that now with projects that feel more activist in nature.

Do you have another example?

Yes, an exhibition called Cell Count that was curated by two emerging curators, Kyle Croft and Asher Mones, which was also about HIV criminalization.

To take a step back, Visual AIDS uses a proposal process to bring in outside curators to curate exhibitions for us every year, always on a different topic. We selected Cell Count because of our interest in HIV criminalization, and their interest in making it an activist moment was very appealing to us.

The exhibition included not only artwork hanging on the walls and video pieces but also moments for people to become educated. People were given resources to write to their congresspeople about various state laws.

They also published an intensive book that went beyond an exhibition catalog, which had commissioned writings from experts in the field of HIV criminalization, including people who are currently or have been incarcerated. The art was a jumping-off point to help people delve deeply into this topic. [Editor's note: Click here to read more about the HIV criminalization broadside and Cell Count.]

What's new with Day With(out) Art?

Day With(out) Art was originally a day in which museums and other institutions were asked to close their doors, or remove artwork from the wall, or in some way visually commemorate the losses of the AIDS crisis and to also encourage people who work for those institutions to engage in caregiving or activism on World AIDS Day.

As the AIDS pandemic changed, it felt more urgent to do projects that were about contemporary issues. So a few years ago, we focused on working with filmmakers to share their documentaries. Starting in 2014, we began commissioning our own short films from artists.

That year, seven artists made seven- to nine-minute films about how HIV affected them. Some were in a documentary style, others were like abstract artwork. They ranged from personal stories of disclosure to a documentation of loss. We shared the films with institutions such as museums, universities and AIDS service organizations across the country and around the world.

We then commissioned a series of short films called Alternate Endings with the help of outside curators, using imagery from our archive and registry, combined with slides of contemporary facts about HIV and AIDS. Since then, we've created sort of sequels to them.

This year, the series will be called Alternate Endings: Activist Risings. We're partnering with activist groups to learn how art intersects with their activist work. People around the world will get to know these organizations as they reflect on the impact of art on activism.

Day With(out) Art video by Thomas Allen Harris Courtesy of Visual AIDS

Tell us more about Visual AIDS.

In a sense, we have a two-part mission: to commission artists to create activist projects around HIV and AIDS and to maintain and promote our archive and registry of work by HIV-positive artists, which was started by Frank Moore, a well-known artist who died in 2001.

We don't have the actual works; instead, we have images of them. Originally, it was a slide archive, but since then, it's become digitized. It's now all online at VisualAIDS.org. The only criteria for people to be included are that they are HIV positive and make art.

One of the exciting things that has been happening in recent years, and something we're interested in continuing, is encouraging curators and researchers to discover self-taught artists in our archive and registry when they're doing their PhD or curating a show.

There are examples of artists who have recently been in museum shows who now have gallery representation because they were discovered in the Visual AIDS archive and registry.

Other projects include publications such as our Duets series, which feature two people in conversation; tote bags with activist artwork; our Postcards from the Edge annual event; the Print Positive Editions, where we commission new works; Play Smart, our condom project; and Love Positive Women, a Valentine's Day project launched by one of our artist members in Canada, Jessica Whitbread.

What keeps you so motivated?

This is my favorite job that I've ever had. It combines my interest in visual art with my background in nonprofits. But when you combine that with our mission around HIV and AIDS, it creates a feeling of value to the work that we do.

We try to create community. There's a sense of excitement and forward motion in what we do, so it keeps it enjoyable and feeling important.

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/visual-aids