Trans and the Everyday: The Practice of Everyday Freedom

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"I'm Not Moving," Chloe Dzubilo

Visual AIDS is thrilled about Aging Fiercely While Trans, an upcoming event with Kate Bornstein, Sheila Cunningham, Miss Major and Jay Toole, moderated by Reina Gossett and co-presented with the New York Trans Oral History Project. In anticipation of the program, Ted Kerr, one of the show coordinators, frames his ideas that inspired the program.

Aging Fiercely While Trans takes place on Saturday, July 11, at Streetwise and Safe on the fourth floor of the Miss Major & Jay Toole Building at 147 West 24th Street. Presentations and community discussion from 2 to 4 p.m.; intergenerational reception from 4 to 5 p.m.

Stories about trans people often focus on young trans people and tragic death, or young trans people and amazing achievements. These stories are important and too few people hear them. At the same time I know there are other stories out there. As a cis person in community with trans and gender queer people, I want to hear them. I am curious about everyday experiences and about older folks. I am a big believer that our power and struggle lies in the mundane, in our everydayness. How do you get out the door in the morning? Do you get out of the door in the morning? These are big questions.

These thoughts started coming to me around the time I was working at Visual AIDS, specifically on the publication DUETS: Che Gossett & Alice O'Malley in Conversation on Chloe Dzubilo about the art and activism and life and legacy of Chloe Dzubilo. I helped them with their conversation, urging them on, sometimes providing prompts. I wanted to know more about Chloe's everyday life. Even though Chloe may seem--and in many ways was--a larger-than-life figure, she was also a woman who had pain, dreams, strategies and hunger. I think in many ways her drawings are about her everyday life, the thoughts in her head that she had to get out and share with the world. If I am remembering correctly, the majority of the drawings she left the world were done in a short amount of time. At other moments in her life Chloe expressed herself through music, design, facilitating or friendships. But when she was in a lot of pain, spending time in bed, she took up the

pen. It was a generous gesture that now generations of people can view.

I am not alone in finding power in the mundane. Alice and Che are proof of that, as is Aging Fiercely While Trans moderator Reina Gossett, through her work and amazing tumblr, The Spirit Was, and the ongoing work for Visual AIDS, the Philly Trans Oral History Project, the New York Trans Oral History project and the work of other individuals and organizations. It seems like whole disciplines are also leaning in this director. Many within Archive Studies, History, Linguistics, and Oral History have left behind the Great Man or Great Moment model of making sense of the world and have instead begun to take "a people's" approach that values the quotidian. They lead us to ask what factors had to be in place for an uprising to occur? What ideas were floating around in the community that made a positive reception of some speeches possible over others?

There is so much value in the tinniest of details. Growing up I had a thumbnail sketch idea of HIV and the early response in the United States. I had some understanding of what went into pulling off the St. Patrick's Cathedral action, or the amazing community support that made Treatment Action Campaign's "HIV Positive" T-shirt campaign a breakthrough in South Africa. But in the last few years, smaller moments will stay with me. I am not alone. Many friends say the most vivid scene in Sarah Schulman's Gentrification of the Mind is the image of the Playbills being left on the corner and how she understood that a person living with HIV had most likely just died and their stuff had been tossed away. The Chloe story I hear most repeated is how she used lipstick to cover up her KS legions when going on stage. These stories remind us that behind labels like "HIV positive" or "trans" are real people, living real lives, in real time.

I think small details also attempt to chip away at the idea that we need heroes--or even role models. What I think we need is each other, and an opportunity to witness how we all get by. A friend recently joked that my life is their practice run. It's funny, but isn't it true of all of us? We learn how to be in this world from watching each other, be it through the media or closer contact. This is a historic moment for trans visibility, but if we have learned anything from the gay movement it is that visibility will not always align with life-saving wins for those most at risk. Hope is not enough. We need each other. We need tangible strategies from a variety of perspectives for getting out the door, day after day. And we need to hear how we can help each other, be it through sisterhood, brotherhood, kinshiphood, allyship or other.

One way we can continue this work of learning from each other is by hearing from trans folks who have been around longer than we have, who have lived more life than we have, and who have stories big and small that, if not helpful to us get out the door, might help us at least get out of bed.

This Saturday, July 11, when you listen to the stories, don't be afraid to revel in the mundane, or ask questions about the tiniest of things. Sometimes it is the tiniest of spots we focus on in front of us that helps us get through the worst moments.

Theodore Kerr is a Canadian-born, Brooklyn-based writer and organizer. He was the programs manager at Visual AIDS and is currently doing his graduate work at Union Theological Seminary.

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