AIDS–Based on A True Story

April 15, 2016 By Visual AIDS



Visual AIDS' Curatorial Residency has become a vital part of our ongoing programming. Launched in 2012, Visual AIDS and Residency Unlimited (RU) join efforts to host a one-month residency program for a curator, art historian, or arts writer interested in the intersection of visual art and HIV/AIDS. The curatorial residency encourages the development of exhibitions, programs, and scholarship about HIV/AIDS and contemporary art. The resident curator conducts research in Visual AIDS' archives with access to slides, digital images, publications and other resources. The archives hold over 17,000 digital and slide images by 643 artists living with HIV and the estates of artists who have passed away.

Visual AIDS has been deeply encouraged that our four past Curatorial Residents have begun to form a community amongst themselves, connecting over their shared experience and access to the Visual AIDS archive and community. Here, our 2015 Curatorial Resident Angela Bailey interviews our inaugural 2013 Curatorial Resident Vladimir Cajkovac about his exhibition "AIDS–Based on A True Story."

Angela reflects, "In March 2015 I was in New York doing a curatorial residency at Visual AIDS and

met Vladimir Cajkovac, who was on a whirlwind return trip to NY from Germany. Vlad had been the first curatorial resident at Visual AIDS in 2013 and was now curating an exhibition of AIDS posters from the extensive collection of the Deutsches Hygiene-Museum in Dresden. Later that year I visited Vlad at the museum in Dresden in the first week of installing his exhibition – 'AIDS – Based on a True Story' and later we discussed the project and exhibition he created."

Angela Bailey: Could you give me some background about the exhibition "AIDS – Based on A True Story" - and when and how the project began?

Vladimir Cajkovac: It was a great opportunity for me to start this project in April 2013 in Dresden and to also have the experience of the curatorial residency at Visual AIDS in February of that same year. It helped me focus. Visual AIDS set a high benchmark of quality with their programs, their collection, and their approach to what they do.

They were two totally different environments—Visual AIDS and their artist registry and archive and researching the Deutsches Hygiene-Museum's vast collection of around 10,000 AIDS posters to create the exhibition for essentially a very different audience as the majority of visitors to the Hygiene-Museum are under 18. The museum also has Marketing, Exhibition, Collections and Education Departments who all have their own needs and agendas that have to be satisfied. The exhibition is a team effort, not possible without generous help from a lot of the museum colleagues. We have had to struggle to find the fine balance to adapt my ideas to their needs and vice versa, learn from each other and sometimes even fight in these negotiations. This subject is still loaded with sentiments.

We all tried to satisfy these different personal and institutional interests and avoid censoring, moralizing or whitewashing this story. Have I succeeded? That we shall see. Ted Kerr, former Programs Manager at Visual AIDS, spent January 2016 as artist/researcher in residence here at the Museum in Dresden, researching the narratives of the exhibitions, and he had the opportunity to review the exhibition itself. Although it lasted only a month, my curatorial residency at Visual Aids is for me still continuing...

AB: What were some of your ideas for the direction you wanted the exhibition and project to take?

VC: Before answering this question it would be important to explain one important part of the exhibition—its title. "Based on a True Story" or "Based on true events" is a term from the film industry; used often, and abused even more. Mere mention of this idiom should provide credibility to the stories and promise authenticity to the audience. However, it's well known this phrase is very easy to stretch and misuse. One may ask, why use such an unreliable title in relation to the serious character of the illness. The reality of the disease itself is not to be denied, but how do we perceive and how we create this phenomenon AIDS?

I observed AIDS posters and the (hi)story of AIDS as a phenomenon, sort of as a reality show, and I gave myself the task to try to find out who is directing and editing this show; who are the producers deciding the roles of the villains and heroes, establishing character arcs and fulfilling obligations to the sponsors. That is why the first concepts of the exhibition were established

around the idea of control rooms, like film editing rooms where the stories are created and observed. Control rooms are also the rooms of military and government surveillance.

Therefore, the backbone of my research and the basis of the exhibition was this idea of the constant struggle of individuals, institutions and society to establish control over the narratives and images of this disease and this is how I started to fill 900m2 of exhibition space with posters, objects, videos, art and documents.

AB: In your approach to curating the posters into the exhibition you initially looked at posters that had some controversy around them.

VC: On display are posters which have led to confrontation, misunderstandings and controversies between social, religious and scientific notions of morality, sexuality and intimacy. I asked questions such as: Why were there posters of the classical male torso in the early posters rather than posters with faces? Why were seemingly “harmless” subjects like an unmade bed, a pair of jeans or a condom censored? Who are the people in the photo: AIDS activists or professional models, “real” people, or the personification of social and political constructs and statistical surveys? How is the virus itself reimagined in science and tradition?

These controversies are like Freudian slips, they reveal to us the things we rather wanted to keep hidden—the poster images and poster campaigns are the result of a negotiation between various stakeholders and can thus be understood sometimes contradicting social, political and economic interests: Who produced the campaign; who financed the campaign and what was the aim; and how do the interests of the financiers of the respective campaigns determine the content of the posters? How much marketing and product sales may occur in a health campaign?

Most importantly, how this flood of images created our knowledge and perception of AIDS. Rather than being mere neutral seismographs simply recording the societal earthquake triggered by the disease, the posters were seen as tantamount to visual snapshots of the state of society within a field of tension defined by language, science, economics and politics. These images are part of the process that is creating the reality of AIDS, not just merely documenting and reflecting it.

AB: You curated this exhibition considering the rooms that people move through and I walked through the gallery with you on your first day of install—each room had a particular story to tell and thread that connected to the next room. Can you walk us through the exhibition in relation to the themes explored.

VC: The exhibition extends over 6 rooms, each of them focusing on different aspects of the “epidemics of signification.” The rooms follow the chronological development of the epidemic and also tie in events of the 1980s and 1990s with the universal and omnipresent themes of anonymity and fear, morality and obscenity; authenticity. It is a history of AIDS epidemics (based on a true story) and the media/activist/public response, while balanced with motives that became symbols of the epidemic and a lot of more recent material. The motives such as SILENCE=DEATH, the Red ribbon, Philadelphia and Benetton Pieta are here to give an anchor to our memories. But the exhibition doesn’t end with these symbols.

In the exhibition, these posters are indistinguishably interwoven into the media universe that also includes films (based on true stories), documentary footages (based on films), talk shows (based on the documentaries), radio jingles, newspaper advertisements, testimonies, collective images and personal mythologies, as well as works of contemporary artists.

AB: The exhibition combines more than 200 posters with contemporary art, objects and documents. How did you form these links? Were there always artists you wanted to feature, or were you interested in the dialogue between the poster message/imagery and a particular artist? What combination and engagement between the posters and the artwork have you been most pleased with?

VC: There have already been several well established types of AIDS exhibitions, each with their own mostly established rules and conventions: AIDS and activism; Art and AIDS; AIDS poster exhibitions; AIDS Timeline exhibitions; AIDS health education exhibitions. If I have to choose one exhibition that this owes something to it would be Group Material.

Gran Fury, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and General Idea are the artists/collectives I love and respect and that is maybe the reason I tried to free myself and this theme from the already established "AIDS and Art" connection. My colleague Kristina Kramer-Tunçludemir and I made a selection of artworks that were not dealing directly with AIDS but the themes of image politics and image production. It was interesting to use these artists to open up a discussion about how AIDS is part of the broader political discussion—and to also keep it simple so the audience can get it. It puts another question up for the younger generation.

The artist Allen Grubesic's work Conspiracy Theory looks at concealment and deciphering. In the beautiful work of Ignas Krunglevicius, the confessions of criminals are erased to just leave you with the crime itself —which is touched on in the exhibition—the idea being the criminalization of AIDS. Aleksandra Domanovic's video work Anhedonia is a mash up of Woody Allen's Annie Hall and millions of images from the Getty Archive that reference the viral spread of information and images today. The artist Mariusz Tarkawian shows a selection of small drawings In Anticipation of Art, which considers the idea of the future of the epidemic and potential future works—"next year the epidemic will kill us all, next year we will have a cure"— that touches on those lost generations and what is lost and not lost.

AB: When we were both in New York, you showed me some incredible 'mapping'/NETWORKING of images on a global scale in relation to the poster collection — can you explain the idea of the 'constellation' and the Iconclass/tag codes that you used in the classification of the posters and how this was represented in the exhibition?

VC: Tagging and classification is usually the first step in approaching a collection. It was a way to try and keep an order in my head and to consider how this disease is being re-imagined in the museums and in the galleries.

I had to first create the structure and the hierarchy in order to destroy it. By applying these tags to the posters—these keywords are giving us structure but also defining what we see. It's a work in

progress that also pinpoints some of the changes in perception of the gender roles, sexuality, identity or race. Sometimes with political correctness, the language and images change but the underlying structures of homophobia, misogyny or racism stay the same.

I used the already established Iconclass classification system—which allowed me to record the imagery and classify the material, and allowed me a systemic way to both research and also be creative. A beta search engine for the AIDS poster collection was created in co-operation with and with generous help from Hans Brandhorst and Etienne Posthumus of Leiden University, who developed the Iconclass browser and are managing a great online database arkyves.org. As a result the posters can now be searched for, and retrieved, using more than 300 different keywords. The search is possible in German, English, French, and Italian. All the posters are also linked with the data record of the DHMD online collection. Access to this browser is available on request and as part of inquiries and research work.

Thanks to Hans and Etienne and their browser, I was able to browse efficiently through the motives and images of the collection. This allowed me the freedom to experiment—so I was playing and experimenting with different tools of network and data analysis.

AB: Posters were one of the first mediums for communicating the safe sex message and response to the AIDS epidemic and the imagery used reflects this cultural response – what were some of the global similarities and differences in relation to this iconography and imagery? What motif did you find was the most recurring across the range of posters you researched and exhibited?

VC: There is really no one code or image – that's what I wanted the audience to be left with. There is really no red ribbon to be seen in this exhibition. It was not the united global battle against AIDS. It was and it is struggle.

The exhibition ends with a poster landscape. It was important to my colleagues from the Museum and for me to present AIDS as a contemporary issue – not an issue that has concluded or been archived. The selection organized according to the Iconclass classification addresses the different categories of the research project challenging the ideas of the adequate symbols of the AIDS crisis in the present time. Within these categories—death, condom, syringe, intercourse, family, medication, touch—questions are posed, establishing the connection between the symbolic language of the posters and contemporary issues regarding the AIDS crisis.

Future researchers interested in this topic are invited to continue this research. For more detailed information on individual posters and the AIDS poster collection of the Deutsches Hygiene-Museum please visit the online database on the Museum's website
at: www.dhmd.de/emuseum/eMuseumPlus

To use all the collected material. The bibliography I collected is also available:

https://www.zotero.org/groups/dhmd_aids-plakatsamm...

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.