Alex Juhasz: ’When we continue to remember ACT UP, whom do we forget and how does this feel?’

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DUETS, Visual AIDS

On Thursday, February 12, Ted Kerr, former Visual AIDS programs manager, will be hosting an event called PDF Club: Forgetting ACT UP by Alexandra Juhasz at the Bureau of General Services Queer Division. Ted previews the event and highlights relevant publications at the Bureau of General Services Queer Division here.

I will be facilitating a conversation where we discuss Alex Juhasz’s 2012 essay in which--as an early member of ACT UP--she explores the ongoing, important and warranted historicization of the activist group by tapping into her own thoughts and feelings as well as those of others who were not ACT UP members about the ACT UP revisitation. A key line of the essay is when she asks: “When we continue to remember ACT UP, whom do we forget and how does this feel?”

To be clear: Alex will not be at the event (she has a full and busy life in California where she is a filmmaker, academic and more). Yet, the essay and the event are both opportunities to ask questions: Why do histories--if told at all--often get reduced to one story? What is lost when we simplify history? Whose histories are remembered? How does our awareness of the past affect our present?

To prepare I have compiled a bookshelf of suggested titles (most of which are currently available at the Bureau of General Services Queer Division) that are worth perusing before, at or after the event:

Head, by Bill Kushner

Long Distance, by Steven Cordova

Viral, by Suzanne Parker

A few years ago I heard Bill Kushner read his poetry. It was a pleasure to hear a grown man talk about lust, pain and living. Head is a collection of poems he wrote in the early ’80s, giving a reader a sense of one man’s experience of bodies, streets and heat in New York City in the years before ACT UP. Fast

forward and you get Long Distance, of which one reviewer said, “Those who have wondered how to write about AIDS now that it is a treatable disease need only to turn to Steve Cordova’s smart, funny and haunted poems.” Existing beyond these two moments and beyond is Viral by Suzanne Parker. Dedicated to Tyler Clementi, it is a collection that explores the webbedness of tragedy. Death has a way of bringing a community together, as ACT UP illustrates, but what about those on the margins of what we may understand as community? How does the experience of tragedy move?

Hold Tight Gently: Michael Callen, Essex Hemphill and the Battlefield of AIDS, by Martin Duberman

SAFE SEX BANG: Buzz Bense Poster Collection, by Alex Fialho, Dorian Katz and Carol Queen

Check Your Vernacular, by Bradford Nordeen, Dirty Looks NYC

Shade: An Anthology of Fiction by Gay Men of African Descent, edited by Bruce Marrow and Charles H. Rowell

What does activism look like when it does not including ’acting up’? Martin Duberman’s Hold Tight Gently is a dual biography of Michael Callen and Essex Hemphill, figures that loom large in the world of art, activism and HIV and who were around at the same time as ACT UP, but were not part of the group. In the Check Your Vernacular exhibition catalog, the fine people of Dirty Looks write about the amazing short film Liberaceón, in which Liberace’s attempt at activism around HIV is imagined by filmmaker and star Chris E. Vargas. In SAFE SEX BANG, another exhibition catalog, Alex Fialho interviews Buzz Bence about his extensive HIV/AIDS related poster collection, donated to the Center for Sex & Culture for the 2013 exhibition. In reading the dialogue one gets an intimate story about the early days of the virus, especially in the Bay Area. The publication includes mention of “gay-stashing”, a term coined by Fialho that is worth the price of the publication just to learn it’s meaning. Uncovering other experiences from the time is Shade, a compilation of short works by African-American men published in 1996, just as AIDS was changing. I think, in Michael Warner’s sense, we can understand AIDS as generating publics and counterpublics, including, but not limited to, ACT UP. What these books show us are other ways in which people organized around the virus. How silly of us to try and contain AIDS as a thing of the past, through the lens of only one group.

DUETS, Visual AIDS

Memories Can’t Wait, edited by Malene Dam, Bridget de Gersigny, and Kate Levy

A few years ago I had the pleasure of interviewing writer David Deitcher about art, AIDS, and memory as part of a publication called Memories Can’t Wait. As a member of ACT UP himself Deitcher sheds light on memory, and how as we live the mind makes sense of the past in ways we need to be attentive to. Also in conversational form is DUETS, a new series from Visual AIDS. Each title is a conversation with or about an artist with HIV. In the first book, Gregg Bordowitz and Stephen Andrews discuss living long term with HIV, cosmology, and Frank O’Hara. The second is a conversation between photographer Alice O’Malley and people’s academic Che Gossett discussing the life of artist, muse and legend Chloe Dzubilo. Getting a sense of Chloe and her impact through the conversation is one thing; getting to know Chloe through her work is another. These readable pocket-sized volumes are rich with artworks and details about life from the early days of the AIDS crisis to now, and in those stories are things we don’t even know we

don’t know.

The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination, Sarah Schulman

Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence, Christina Hanhardt

Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law, Dean Spade

Anti-Black Racism and the AIDS Epidemic: State Intimacies, Adam Geary (unavailable at the Bureau; price for academic institutions: $90!)

WHAT MATTERS, WRRQSHOP

Sarah Schulman’s The Gentrification of the Mind is a must-read. She makes clear the ongoing and far reaching impacts HIV has on American life, not least of which is people choosing a narrow suburban idea of security over anything else. Dealing in similar yet divergent ideas and written in a different register is Christina Hanhardt’s Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence, which explores the relationship between race, class, gender, sexuality, activism, the government and development providing a foundation around which a reader interested in Juhasz’s Forgetting ACT UP can see how HIV is exasperated by public policy, and ideas of whose comfort matters. Safe Space is part of the conversation Dean Spade initiates in his book Normal Life, which for me includes the takeaway message that there is a thing called “administrative violence,”and when we name it and organize against it we are having a generous and productive conversation not about exclusion or equality but about liberation. Reading Spade’s book is helpful in understanding where Adam Geary is coming from in his book Anti-Black Racism and the AIDS Epidemic. Building on Cindy Patton, Geary is suggesting that instead of the AIDS movement continuing to focus on queer intimacies, in a Spadian way we should look at ways the state is responsible for the ongoing AIDS crisis. So enamored am I by Geary’s book I quote it in my contribution to WHAT MATTERS, the zine complied and created by the fine folks at WRRQSHOP.

This is a biased, non-exhaustive bookshelf. Do you have titles you want to add? Contact Visual AIDS or join Ted on February 12 and be part of the conversation.

Theodore (Ted) Kerr is a Canadian-born, Brooklyn-based writer, artist and organizer. He has been part of the ongoing HIV response in the United States and Canada for over 10 years. Recently he was the programs manager at Visual AIDS. Currently he is doing graduate work at Union Theological Seminary. His writing has appeared in Women Studies Quarterly and IndieWire, and he is a regular contributor to Lambda Literary.

For more information about the event, visit Visual AIDS.

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