Ampler Than Loneliness: Documenting Collective Resilience Through HIV/AIDS and COVID-19

Visual AIDS showcases art produced in response to the ongoing pandemic in its September web gallery.

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“What’s it like being HIV positive during multiple pandemics? My internalized stigma makes me feel infectious and afraid of getting others sick. Social interactions trigger how I’ve been demonized and treated like a weapon for being poz… I often hear ‘none of us have lived through a pandemic before,’ ignoring how HIV is a pandemic we’ve been living with for almost 40 years.”

—Glammy, San Francisco, CA

A tree stump is shown amid a forest of trees, and surrounded by small leaves. The entire scene is painted with the same hue of faded blood red against off-white paper.Glammy, Forest painted with my blood the night before my COVID test, 2020, blood drawing

An Exercise in Healing

In early May 2020, Visual AIDS artist members were invited to submit work produced in response to the conditions of the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic and stay-at-home social distancing measures. As an intern this summer, I, like many of our artist members, have only been able to engage with the Visual AIDS community via virtual means. Amidst it all, I have been privileged to witness the restorative potential of community engagement, and to contribute to the important connective work made possible through art. These opportunities have provided space for artists from around the world to share their work with each other, mourn the great losses we face as a society, and process familiar feelings of isolation and uncertainty as stigma and systemic inequities become further highlighted in the compounded wake of COVID-19 and the ongoing AIDS epidemic.

As a seronegative college student based in Los Angeles, I have come to understand this state of self-isolation through the experiences of Visual AIDS artists members, sensing the reverberations of upheaval that come with surviving the onset of one pandemic, only to be faced with another. I'm thankful to have shared (digital) space with my forebearers, artists who must contend with this "new normal" with weary hearts. Gleaning wisdoms, grievances, and moments of joy with our artist members remind me that collective vigilance is crucial to sustaining one another.

As a result, this gallery is a product of individual and collective efforts toward healing. With over 50 artists participating, this convergence of artworks provides space for understanding the nuance of distinct experiences and the impact COVID-19 has had on the Visual AIDS community at large.

This gallery's title was inspired by the words of artist member Wayne Bennett. With his submitted work, Wayne noted that his artistic practice has been "shaded by an 'aloneness' ampler than loneliness." In that aloneness, many artists have found sites of possibility, and alternative modes of connection beyond their solitude. The meditative portrait work of Richard Sawdon Smith, Bryan Hoffman and Tret Tierney begin to explore the vast inner worlds we inhabit in quarantine, while pieces such as Carmine Santaniello's "Horizon A" point to the vanishing point of uncertainty we continue to contend with as time pushes onward. In these new linkages between artist members around the world visions of alternative futures are being forged as we continue to hold space for those we have lost.

"The recent pandemic has rekindled memories of fear, stigma, and isolation that I thought were put to rest long ago. The current fight to end violence against individuals and violations of civil rights reminds me that

struggles must continually be grappled with to uphold basic human dignity. The calamity of making art keeps me calm in this world of turmoil.”

—Curtis Carman, NYC

A mixed media collage against a flat black background. Three objects have been arranged to give the suggestion of a face, a bejeweled red and silver broach at the crown of the head, a pair of reflective green tinted sunglasses, and a red modeled mouth. ThCurtis Carman, TRADEMARK: Kissing in the Dark (green), 2020, mixed media on canvas

Quarantine has brought with it varied and specific challenges for all of us, and has deeply affected our artist members and their loved ones. Artists were asked to provide a short written narrative with the work they submitted, illuminating how COVID-19 has distinctly impacted their lived experiences and art-making practices. For some, isolation has pushed artists to experiment with new media as access to resources or studio space became more limited under quarantine. For others, the conditions of quarantine inspired more time in the studio in order to quell anxieties and morbid thoughts. What has held true despite these adaptations is that artmaking continues to open pathways to solace. The works displayed here were informed by specific conditions of upheaval and displacement, in honor of the legacies that drive us forward, and in remembrance of loved ones lost to this recent pandemic.

“I live alone on a mountaintop in a trailer… In May of 2020 right before everything started shutting down, I was asked to move. I had been living on my uncle’s land and when he died I had to leave my large art studio and home that my uncle built me. I loved it there. I loved him more than anyone in my life. He was the only person in my life that believed in me as an artist. He was my patron, my friend, my uncle. He did everything to make sure I was loved, supported and had a place for me to create wild, large pieces of work. As things were closing down because of the pandemic, I found an old trailer and some friends let me put it on their land for one year. They gave me some space to create what I call art camp. It is two tents, one for storage and one for painting. I also paint outside. It was hard to get going. I

found I started doing these collages. They were healing to me. I feel alone and sad and I am grieving. These works kept me busy,”

—River Huston, Bay Area, CA

A vibrant painting of splattered orange, turquoise, and deep blue, fuschia, and gold tones with abstracted faces and bodies.River Huston,The Fall, 2020, combined medium, pencil, acrylic and collage

Compounded Trauma in Uncertain Times

This recent pandemic has brought memories of fear and prejudice back to the surface for many long-term survivors. To many artist members, the conditions of alienation and precaution against the specter of contagion is nothing new. Only now, survivors must carry the weight of the HIV and AIDS pandemic into this new period of physical and emotional precarity. Isolation, fear, and uncertainty have compounded the trauma of survivors as similar societal and political conditions persist into this new pandemic. Once again, the willful ignorance promoted by the American

federal government perpetuates the spreading of a deadly disease, putting our most vulnerable communities at greater risk of infection.

“Durante estos meses de confinamiento he reflexionado a través de la performance y la creación de ilustraciones sobre diversas problemáticas del ejercicio del poder biopolítico en torno a nuestros cuerpos que se encuentran vulnerables, a la deriva y olvidados por los gobiernos. Imaginarios fragmentados en territorios al borde del colapso cuyo cuerpo político es diseccionado como zonas de sacrificio por el capital.”

—Guillermo Moscoso, Concepción, Chile

A painting of two baby pink lungs with orange and yellow bronchial tubes with three roses. There is a black, red and blue glow radiating from the lungs.Guillermo Moscoso, La cantera del dolor, 2020, synthetic paint, xylographic ink, acrylic and collage on canson paper

COVID-19’s continuous impact on the world, and a lack of adequate care from governments and local communities alike reiterate the idea that some bodies are disposable. Biopolitical power structures during this recent pandemic, as Guillermo discusses, puts further constraints on populations already at-risk or disregarded in normative understandings of health and access. In this sense, folks living with HIV become subject to a new relationship with their bodies as it relates to public health. However, as Kurt Weston points out, the impact is very familiar.

“The corona virus outbreak reminds me of the early years of the AIDS pandemic when there was still a lot of fear, misunderstanding, prejudice, and ignorance regarding HIV/AIDS. Just as now with the COVID-19 virus, the 1980’s AIDS pandemic was a frightening time,

there were no effective medications to treat HIV and a positive diagnosis was an almost certain death sentence. Many of those diagnosed positive retreated from the social scene and began anticipating their eventual demise. Perhaps those who survived AIDS know all too well the effect a virus can have on the body and the loneliness of separation.”

—Kurt Weston, Mission Viejo, CA

A neon red and green self-portrait image of a masculine person with a viewing glass held onto its left eye and a plastic coffee lid onto its right eye with both hands held upward.Kurt Weston, Affected, 2020, new media

As immunocompromised individuals, practicing quarantine and social distancing has become an imperative constraint on the daily lives of many impacted by HIV. Though the physical isolation we face now is mitigated somewhat by technology, the bodily experience of solitude continues to impact our everyday, and influence the work of artists in quarantine. We seek alternatives to fulfilling our need for touch, for connection.

“Our human need for intimacy and closeness are never mentioned in post-pandemic necessities.”

—Phillipp Spiegel, Based in Barcelona, Spain & Vienna, Austria

A photographic image of a light-skinned bodied hand caresses their bare chest.Philipp Spiegel, Sanctioned Intimacy, 2020, photograph

Community Endurance in Digital Spaces

As an intern this summer, I have witnessed the power and beauty of the digital community spaces that have been fostered over the last several months. Regularly scheduled online office hours, workshops, and digital programming have been opportunities to connect for artist members looking to check in around care and mental health, discuss their creative practice, or be a part of a larger discussion surrounding the multiple crises we have witnessed this summer. I have been able to mourn and reflect on the political uprising for Black lives with Black and Indigenous artist members. The collective pain of the moment became a wellspring of support and catharsis, as artist members shared their experiences with racial violence, and its impact on their life and artistic practice. For artist members, as well as for myself, these community gatherings have been

a site of solidarity, therapeutic in an otherwise isolatory and uncertain daily existence. Digital connections have proven vital in accessing community during this time, providing emotional and expressive outlets for artists otherwise separated from fellow creators and collaborators.

“It took me by surprise; all of a sudden I was locked in my apartment… My associate lives in San Francisco and I live in Puerto Rico. We’ve been working together for six years, even though we only know each other through the internet. We work on Skype utilizing the share screen option… We work at any given time for long hours, which was my Saving Grace. My Borderline Personality Disorder would have gone out of control if it wasn’t for this ability. I kept doing Facebook Live feeds where I would talk about my art and untold stories about my life.”
—Jose Luis Cortes, Puerto Rico

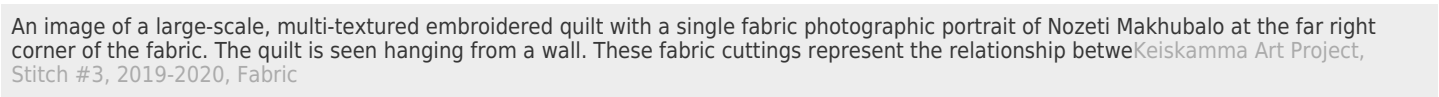
For many artists technology has opened new creative gateways for collaboration and kinship. For Shirlene Cooper, founder of the Women’s Empowerment Art Therapy Workshops group, Zoom has allowed her to connect with the group of women she supports on a monthly basis. The women are able check in with one another and share affirmations over video chat, engaging with a selection of artworks for discussion. Despite Shirlene’s fear of contraction as someone who is immunocompromised, she used funds from the group to purchase and hand-deliver bags of non-perishable goods and essential supplies to local artist members in New York City. “All our members were very surprised and humbled to see that someone cared about their well-being as I dropped off care packages directly to their doors.” Shirlene assured us that she is healthy and safe after the fact, adding “So far, all our members are doing well.”

A zoom screen capture of the Women’s Empowerment Art Therapy Group participants. A grid of rectangles is shown, each rectangle including either a person’s smiling face or a gray background to acknowledge that the participant has their camera turned off.Shirlene Cooper, The Women Empowerment Art Therapy Group, 2020, screen capture

While digital spaces have provided some consolation during these challenging times, the cancellation of in-person opportunities to collaborate has had a distinct impact on communities facing internet insecurity and inequities in accessibility to technology. The Keiskamma Art Project faced such barriers as COVID-19 derailed their latest exhibition. Their collective effort to archive the history of Eastern Cape, South Africa through textile and beadwork was derailed by these conditions, but intentional and adaptive collaboration methods allowed the Project's work to reach its audiences despite these unprecedented circumstances.

"Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the [Cuttings 1820-2020] show was initially postponed much to the disappointment of the artists, however, through resiliently working from home and with the support of GFI Art Gallery in Port Elizabeth, South Africa who could convert the exhibition into an online experience. The process of making work during lockdown was challenging given the typically physical collaborative working environment of the Keiskamma Art Project as well as compromised internet connectivity, but through determination the conversation was kept alive and in artist Nozeti Makhubalo's words, the art is now there "for the world to see."

—Michaela Howse, Keiskamma Art Project


An image of a large-scale, multi-textured embroidered quilt with a single fabric photographic portrait of Nozeti Makhubalo at the far right corner of the fabric. The quilt is seen hanging from a wall. These fabric cuttings represent the relationship betweKeiskamma Art Project, Stitch #3, 2019-2020, Fabric

Common themes of physical and mental health, intimacy, and resistance converge with distinct perspectives in this assemblage to highlight the nuance of the quarantine experience for many of our artist members. The pieces presented in this web gallery are sites where artists are coping and contending with the familiar relationship between state power and public health, constraints on intimate and social possibilities, and the vast structural injustices we continue to grapple with in our healthcare and justice systems. Through these new forms of digital community engagement, artists have found new relationships with their own work and other artists around the world. Together these pieces and their accompanying narratives form a tapestry through which we can glimpse the impact of these pandemics on our community. These artist members continue to inspire hope, demonstrating that we can begin to envision alternative forms of care-taking as life in quarantine continues to present new and familiar challenges to the Visual AIDS community.

“...And yet I feel strong. I pray to my poz ancestors as I take my meds and I feel their love and guidance. I create art to heal myself, turn my demons into superpowers, and pay respects to our poz elders and ancestors, conveying how much support they give to new generations of people fighting to survive.”

—Glammy

Click here to view the entire September web gallery on the Visual AIDS website.

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/ampler-loneliness-documenting-collective-resilience-hivaids-covid19