In Conversation: Vika Kirchenbauer and Ted Kerr

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"I installed this territory for you," is a line from artist Vika Kirchenbauer's video, "PLEASE RELAX NOW," in which she uses performance, light and darkness to create a liminal space where pleasure, joy, imagination and release are promised. Inspired by Kirchenbauer's cheeky use of direct address, granting of permission, and renegotiation of collectively expressed desire, writer and organizer Theodore (ted) Kerr used the line in an opening slide of a presentation he gave at Silver Future in Berlin, Germany earlier this year that was hosted by Kirchenbauer on the topics of HIV and history. The two met the year before at a Brooklyn screening of Kirchenbauer's video work hosted by Union Docs and Dirty Looks. They had a chance to get to know each other better when Kerr was in Germany as a researcher-in-residence for the exhibition AIDS: Based on a True Story, curated by Vladimir Cajkovac for the German Hygiene Museum Dresden. Over late night talks where Kirchenbauer would watch Kerr eat candy he had meant to share, the two spoke about pop culture, art and activism, gender, sexuality, community, and the ongoing representations of HIV/AIDS in the media. In the conversation between the two below, Kirchenbauer once again installs a territory for you, for us, by inviting Kerr to revisit those discussions.

Vika Kirchenbauer: You spent a month at the German Hygiene Museum in Dresden as researcher-in-residence for their AIDS: Based on a True Story exhibition. What did you focus on during your time there?

Theodore (ted) Kerr: I saw the experience as an opportunity for the curator Vladimir Cajkovac and I to continue the conversation we had been having over the last three years. He was the curator in residence in 2013 at Visual AIDS, where / when I worked as the Programs Manager. Around that time he was beginning to explore the German Hygiene museum's AIDS poster collection. The posters served as the foundation from which he created public and counter public discourse in the ongoing response to HIV. As I explore in my essay for Dandelion, he used the posters to frame arguments he wanted to make about how communities made sense and responded to HIV around the world using science, and culture. My role was to put the exhibition into conversation with my own work, specifically looking at the way narratives around AIDS have been constructed and the impact of those narratives. We both have an interest in listening to the stories that get retold about the history of AIDS and putting them in conversation with the stories that seldom, if ever, get told. The posters are a type of archive in and of themselves and illustrate the intersectional approaches that have always been part of the response to AIDS, but that have gotten lost in recent mainstream attempts at exploring history. After a period I call the Second Silence, in which

there was a reduced public conversation about HIV/AIDS, we entered into the AIDS Crisis Revisitation, a period in which we started to look back at how we first responded to HIV. Before I went to Germany I saw the Second Silence and the Revisitation primarily though the lens of the US. After, I realized that on a different scale, we can see it as a world wide phenomenon.

VK: What were your specific findings when researching the German history of AIDS activism and cultural responses? I recognized a few references in your recent image production.

TK: When I go to a new place I am interested in what is iconic, what circulates, and holds meaning. I like to play with those icons and bend them towards the present or the underground. In Germany it did not take me long to identify two images within Vlad's exhibition that were iconic to folks in Germany when it came to HIV/AIDS. 1. The slogan Gib AIDS keine Chance (Don't Give AIDS A Chance) was on many of the posters and a few videos within the exhibition, and remains in use to this day. It was used since the beginning of the AIDS crisis in both West and East Germany. In fact, before the Wall came down, the Hygiene Museum hosted the East's first and only exhibition about AIDS in which they used the Chance slogan, which came from the West. In a subtle way, AIDS was a moment of pre-unification, which is interesting.

In thinking about the slogan, I wondered how it could be modernized. I didn't like it is as is. In the age of AIDS phobia on Planet Romeo and Scruff, Don't Give AIDS a Chance sounds like common practice. So I started to think about what actually shouldn't be given a chance, and what could have a positive impact on the lives of people living with HIV. If someone has good medical care, and access to meds, the biggest problem is stigma, so that was it: Gib Stigma keine Chance (Don't Give Stigma a Chance).

2. Often during my residency I would walk around the exhibition. Almost without fail there would be a crowd around a monitor screening a commercial from 1990 in which a young man goes to the grocery store to buy condoms in hopes of not drawing attention to himself. He is in the check-out line when the cashier, who would go on to become a famous comedian, asks her co-worker over the loud speaker, "Tina, how much are the condoms?" The young man is mortified but everyone around him does not care. The message being: buying condoms is normal, or at least it should be. The commercial was such a phenomenon that there is even a dance remix for Tina. The commercial hit a nerve and is lodged in the national psyche the same way Chance is. I asked people how it could be modernized. At first I thought maybe she could ask, "Tina, What is PrEP?" but since PrEP is not even approved in Germany it seemed like a different project. Then talking to a friend living in Berlin, he said the hardest thing to explain to sex partners was that he was undetectable, meaning as a person living with HIV he has a suppressed viral load, which means he cannot transmit the virus to others. So working with him, and you, and my friend Heiner we came up with: "Tina, What does it mean to be undetectable?" I hope that as commonplace as talking about condoms became, so too can talk of the health of people living with HIV, including but not limited to their viral load.

VK: As you mention heaven and angels in a sticker series you made, what role do you think Christianity plays in the Western world's response to HIV/AIDS?

TK: Ha! I did graduate from a seminary, with a focus on HIV/AIDS and Christian ethics, but the “No Angels” stickers are 100% inspired by Nadja, and Charlie Sheen, both of whom I think are worthy of folk hero status for being ‘no angels’ and the circumstances of their forced HIV disclosure. Nadja was a member of a German girl group called No Angels, and she was charged under Germany’s criminalization laws. Sheen, who had a huge career reboot by famously acting the horrible fool for American tabloid culture, came out about his status after past sex partners threatened to sue. On a basic level the stickers are a mash up of their public personas (no angels), and the injustice they experienced (HIV criminalization). I guess where theology may come into play is with the smaller text at the top, that roughly translates to “the sky is out of reach for our earthly body” which is basically a shout out to the fact that none of us are angels, so to create divisions, as HIV criminalization does, is terrible and tears communities apart. Obviously while making the stickers I was thinking a lot about the Gran Fury poster, “All people with AIDS are innocent.” It is a similar message but from another point of view: none of us are innocent, regardless of our status or deeds.

VK: Several years ago there was a very bizarre “AIDS awareness” campaign in Germany under the title “AIDS is a mass murderer.” It featured posters of Hitler, Hussein and Stalin having sex with stereotypically attractive white women. In its grossness it almost radically exposed the stigmatizing nature of most campaigns that focus on prevention and seem to care little about those actually living with HIV. Is it campaigns like this that best justify the “read/write” approach you apply in your practice?

TK: While in Germany I gave a few talks in which I would begin with this idea that scholar Lawrence Lessing writes about in his book, Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy, in which he suggests culture can be understood through the metaphor of a shared computer file. Sometimes they are read / write, meaning the viewer has editing privileges, and sometimes they are read only, meaning the receiver is passive in their intake. He suggests that culture is this way too. There is read only: like seeing a play or an opera, reading a book, or watching TV; and there is read / write: like the internet or video games. I thought about how this could be used as a way to both disrupt history (reframe history as being read / write instead of read only) and to suggest we can use this to understand examples of AIDS culture. For example I see prevention posters as read only, where as the red ribbon or a protest is read / write. When I look at the mass murderer campaign I think about ways people and organizations attempting to be helpful often add stigma to people living with HIV, sometimes in subtle ways and often in very damaging ways. Most of the time this could be prevented if the campaign creation process and end result were more read / write and less read only, and meaningfully included a variety of people living with HIV and deeply impacted by the epidemic. The more community involved, and the more nimble something is, the less closed and hurtful it tends to be. I guess my last thought about the campaign is, through culture we can sometimes capture a mood. The fact that a bunch of people signed off on such a horrible campaign sheds light onto how people could think that HIV criminalization was a good thing. It is the same horrible stigmatizing ignorance that makes both possible. With this in mind, it is interesting to think about how “No Angels” and “Mass Murderer” play against each other. One is an acceptance of human nature, the other is a denial of humanity.

VK: You look at HIV/AIDS through the lens of pop culture and you look at culture through the lens of HIV/AIDS. What do you think can be exposed about the way we deal with HIV/AIDS by looking at pop culture's underlying psychology; or what can society's dealing with HIV/AIDS tell us about larger societal mentalities?

TK: When Beyonce released her first visual album she said she wanted to create something that everyone gathered around like people had with Michael Jackson's Thriller. What I think about is how AIDS was a pop cultural moment like Beyonce or Thriller. I wonder how we can still harness the cultural power of HIV for progressive cultural change that first benefits people living with HIV and those most impacted, and then of course everyone else. How is AIDS, as a cultural assemblage, a means for liberation?

VK: The shape your visual production takes focuses strongly on formats that avoid forms of alienation stemming from notions of distinction and cultural refinement. How far do you think the meaning inscribed in AIDS related cultural production shifts once it is institutionalized?

TK: No matter how post-modern we get there is still a cultural agreement that books and movies matter more than online articles and youtube videos for example, even though articles and videos actually make up the bulk of what we consume and share. So I guess with my work I like to make things that are about the everyday that seemingly have little cultural value so they can sneak in without any pretense. A few years ago I started making postcards where I would mash together pop song lyrics and AIDS related imagery or text. I made a postcard that read LANA DEL AIDS at the height of her popularity. This was not to make a statement about her or AIDS per se but rather to create AIDS culture rooted in the present. I wanted to take the notions of AIDS out of the past, out of the archive and into tumblr and the public's imagination in the present. In this vein, while I was in Germany, Valentine's Day and LOVE POSITIVE WOMEN was approaching. It was also around this time that Adele's Hello and Justin Bieber's Where Are U Now were playing everywhere. I came up with Valentines for women living with HIV that use the pop song lyrics as a form of affirmation and support for women who disclose. A month later Kanye's team made an app where you could recreate his album cover. I used the opportunity to make something about HIV. To go back to Read / Write or Read Only: a book or a movie feels like read only culture so we take it as fact, whereas a zine, a postcard or a meme, while not always Read / Write, feels less sure of itself, more up for debate. The scale of such things are small, more approachable - those are also good qualities when having a conversation about AIDS: a kind of DIY intimacy.

VK: A lot of your work is about challenging the image of AIDS/HIV as a singularly queer condition. Would you want to talk about that a bit?

TK: In the US, HIV/AIDS has been trapped in what Cindy Patton long ago called the queer paradigm where anyone living with HIV - regardless of who they are - is considered queer. But when she coined the term queer had not yet been reclaimed, it was just a way to describe abnormality, or strangeness or weariness, or maybe most specifically - otherness. And in the US, otherness is based on, among other things: gender, sexuality, race, and class. And the HIV movement from the beginning and still on the grassroots level is about all those things. But when it gets into

mainstream territory, almost all the otherness falls away and only gayness sticks. And this is a shame because people learn about HIV a bit in school but mostly though culture. So I am interested in opening up space for makers to create culture about HIV not trapped in a narrow idea of queer, but rather a full notion of folks impacted by the virus. If you talk to most hard core AIDS activists they will be able to talk to you not only about the science of the virus, but also about housing laws, poverty rates, make a connections between the life chances of Dalits in India and Two-Spirit people in the Northwest, and quote bell hooks. If you are seeing culture about HIV/AIDS only rooted in white gay men you have to ask yourself why? It is not always a bad thing, but the white gay experience of HIV can't be the only one shared.

VK: How much influence does the availability of images have on the writing and constant re-writing of AIDS history? Or does the term "availability" itself perhaps miss the mark?

TK: I like your questions. They make me think of one: Is there re-writing of AIDS history or is there selective memory resulting in bad communication? The first wave of the AIDS Crisis Revisitation was criticized for its whiteness. In response many of the directors and curators involved stated that they were just using the materials available, a suggestion that if there had been more art work, video or artifacts of / by people of color or trans and gender non conforming folks, the films, exhibitions and books would have looked different. But we know that this is not true. We know that since the beginning HIV/AIDS impacted a diversity of folks, and that they responded with activism, art making, and self representation. The attempt to erase all of this, what may get called "re-writing of history" is actually white supremacy, patriarchy and gay exceptionalism. Artifacts, stories, and footage of people of color and trans and gender non confirming people exist, the question is of will and access. Do those with the power to make films, and mount exhibitions have a commitment to telling the full story or at least being clear as to the limits of the story they are telling? And do those within communities that have been minortized and under-resouced within the response to AIDS have access to the archives, and tools of dissemination? If not, why? To directly answer your question, yes, the availability of images (and other sources) have a huge influence on how AIDS history gets told. And so, sometimes we have to make our own images to make conversations more possible. For example, for presentations I did while in Germany I made two digital images that show the year of the oldest HIV+ human tissue we have, and photos of the place they came from (Democratic Republic of Congo / Zaire).

VK: I'm very interested in discussing forms of discrimination in relation to intimacy as well as their psychological and affective consequences. What are your thoughts on HIV and the violence of transparency – that constant focus on having to disclose or having to explain?

TK: You have taught me so much about this. I think we both know there is a danger in the minortized person having to disclosure in intimate settings. Having to share information about your identity or health at a moment of connection can be scary since there are so many stories of violence and rejection. A few years ago Visual AIDS hosted a panel at which Sean Strub talked about HIV criminalization. It was the first time many people had ever heard of how people living with HIV can be criminalized for their HIV status: charged, and imprisoned if they can't prove that they disclosed their status (even if there was no risk or transmission of HIV). My friend, the artist

Julie Blair, came up to me after and said that there were so many parallels between what Strub was saying for people living with HIV and trans women. And it was not just about disclosure with people you may be intimate with but in every moment of everyday: the workplace, with landlords, on the street, while traveling. In the US, to be different is to always be walking a fine line between having to be transparent and not being obvious.

VK: Do you think there is space for stronger alliances between people who learn to read love and affection towards them as “I love you in spite of your HIV status” or “I love you in spite of your transness etc” (apart from them not being mutually exclusive obviously)?

TK: Remember during the Silver Future event I got ahead of myself and ended up saying “people living with trans.” There was this moment where the audience did not know if they could laugh. But you did. You laughed hard, maybe even into the mic, and then the audience joined you. I loved that moment because it was revealing of anxiety inside of me around wanting to be thoughtful or careful in my language, and the anxiety that lives within the culture around HIV and trans lives. That moment of levity at the experience of no one (except maybe me), but connecting everyone, is what we need more of. We need to unearth the anxiety in loving situations. The thing is, the disconnects we may see between communities dealing openly with HIV and gender keep their distance for the most part because of social norms and safety. I will never forget another Visual AIDS event, Life Chances: HIV Criminalization and Trans Politics. Laverne Cox, in her opening remarks, spoke about how as a black trans woman she was not sure she wanted to host the event because even as an HIV- woman she was not sure she wanted to take on the stigma that would come with the event. I don’t think there was a person in the room that night that didn’t understand what she was saying. People can only afford so much difference in their lives. I think it would be good if things in the world changed so that both people living with HIV and the trans community could feel in charge of those things. That would lead to more community and more connections.

Vika Kirchenbauer is an artist, writer and music producer currently working and residing in Berlin. In her work she explores opacity in relation to representation of the ‘othered’ through ostensibly contradictory methods like exaggerated explicitness, oversharing and perversions of participatory culture. She examines the troublesome nature of “looking” and “being looked at” in larger contexts including labour within post-fordism and the experience economy, modern drone warfare and its insistence on unilateral staring, the power relationships of psychiatry, performer/spectator relations, participatory culture, contemporary art display and queer representational politics as well as the everyday life experience of ambiguously gendered individuals. Her work has been exhibited in a wide range of contexts in about forty countries and has won prizes at festivals in the United States, South Korea, Brazil, Germany, Spain, Norway, Slovakia, Poland, Bosnia and Italy.

Theodore (ted) Kerr is a Canadian-born, Brooklyn-based writer and organizer whose work focuses on HIV/AIDS. He was the Programs Manager at Visual AIDS.