Global Fictions, Local Struggles

December 16, 2014 By Visual AIDS

Aimar Arriola, Visual AIDS curatorial resident 2014

The HIV/AIDS pandemic continues to be a global phenomenon of unprecedented dimensions and yet, besides the outstanding intellectual and artistic achievements of the last three decades in the fields of cultural analysis and art and curatorial work to make sense of the crisis' impact, the focus has predominantly been on North American and Central-European artists and cultural practitioners.

But what of the visuals, aurals, actions, ideas, lives, which have often been obscured by the hegemony of the North? How could the study of the aesthetic and performative production around AIDS in the "global South" expand our visual and political cultures?

Aimar Arriola was the 2014 Visual AIDS Curator in Residence, and his recent collaborative research and curatorial projects address these issues with a focus on selected case studies from Spain and Latin America. Arriola considers these questions in his recent essay "Global Fictions, Local Struggles (or the distribution of three documents from an AIDS counter-archive in progress)" for internationale online. Read an excerpt from the essay's introduction below.

This text looks at some of the aesthetic practices, representations, collective experiences and performative tactics that emerged in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis in various contexts in the so-called "South," in order to critically revise the widely accepted notion that the 1980s introduced a new global order, one that was stripped of borders and accessible to all. As Chilean writer Lina Meruane wrote in her recent survey of AIDS-related literature in Latin America--the 2012 book Viral Voyages--this fiction of increasing freedom "gradually proved to be an affliction."

In Viral Voyages, Meruane connects two previously unrelated spheres: Latin American literature and the disciplinary discourse of illness. Based on literary narratives of AIDS, the book traces the representations and the demand for signification that the pandemic unleashed from the 1980s onwards. Drawing on the work of early cultural critics of AIDS such as Susan Sontag, John O'Neill, Cindy Patton and Paula Treichler, as well as theorists like Richard Sennett who analyse financial or globalised capitalism, Meruane devotes the first part of the book to examining the cultural, social and political context that is inseparable from the discursive production around the pandemic. The second part of the book uses literary texts as evidence, based on works of fiction by authors such as Reinaldo Arenas, Severo Sarduy, Mario Bellatin and Pedro Lemebel, and taking them as a means to reflect on themes such as journeys, political repression and exile that recur in the representation of AIDS in Latin America.

Adhering to Meruane's reasoning, we propose to consider AIDS as both a co-narrative and a counter to globalisation. On one hand, we acknowledge AIDS as the subject that best connotes the new globalised reality that appeared in the 1980s. The geographical scope of the virus, its synchronous emergence around the world, and the rhetoric of flows and communication typical of the period, reinforced the idea of the world as a network of interconnected short distances. On the other hand, we also propose to think of AIDS as the great fault in the globalisation paradigm: the fault that can point out the promises of democratic equality that the global world-system failed to live up to.

The text is based on an archival logic; by means of description and commentary, it seeks to distribute and provide access to "AIDS documents" drawn from an archive under construction. These documents are part of the Equipo re AIDS Anarchive, an ongoing research project and program of activities that revolve around the process of producing a "counter-archive" or "anarchive" of AIDS politics that, for the first time, take into account practices that played out outside of the English-speaking and Northern European contexts, and that have so far focused on cases from Chile and Spain. Our aim is to challenge the stability of the dominant Anglo- and Euro-centric narratives around the historiography and visual culture of HIV/AIDS through the description, commentary and distribution of a limited selection of "local" responses to AIDS that confront the hegemony of the North.

AIDS as a Global Design

In our approach to AIDS, we freely apply the now-classic model developed by Walter Mignolo to analyse the links between coloniality and globalisation, considering AIDS as a "global design" that originated from a whole range of "local histories" (Mignolo 2000). In most of the academic and curatorial work produced between the late 1980s and early 1990s around the aesthetic practices, representations and performative tactics that grew around the pandemic, the analysis of the visual culture of HIV/AIDS has almost exclusively focused on the English-speaking/ Eurocentric world. As a result, a few "local histories" have become the norm while many others have been pushed into the background.

The expansion of the neoliberal model lies at the heart of the "global design" of AIDS. The changes resulting from new technological and communications developments led to a transformation of the forms of expansion inherent to financial capitalism, which demanded the liberalisation of the functions of the State for the benefit of private interests. This dismantling of the welfare state took place gradually in the 1970s and 1980s, in collusion with authoritarian regimes (as in the case of Chile, for example, which is now considered the main laboratory for the implementation of neoliberalism), and at the same time as the emergence of the first known cases of AIDS.

The convergence of the expansion of globalised capital, the various democratic transition processes in dictatorial contexts such as Spain and Chile, and the emergence of the AIDS crisis provoked a double dynamic, a simultaneous opening up and restricting of freedoms. As dictatorships waned in favour of a democratic future and new omens raised "feathers and skirts," the arrival of AIDS was a step backwards in the certainty of freedom, setting new limits for an entire sector of the population. As Lina Meruane says, "these changes in the culture of capitalism and its new technologies of communication and travel would allow dissident sexualities to articulate a utopian notion of freedom beyond the borders of the repressive, homophobic nation" (Meruane 2014). It was a libertarian fiction or conjecture that thrived in the post-dictatorial contexts of transition in countries such as Chile and Spain, and that, as the Chilean artist and writer Pedro Lemebel said--this time drawing on cinematic fiction--was precisely what was "gone with the wind of AIDS."

Transition as Disruption

We first noticed the precise intersection of the visual and performative production around HIV/AIDS with the policies of the dictatorship in Spain, by way of omission rather than attention. This occurred during the project Social Dangerousness, co-directed by Beatriz Preciado as part of the 2008-2009 edition of the MACBA Independent Studies Programme (PEI), which addressed the dissident cultural production of the last stage of Franco's regime and the early years of democracy, coinciding with the first cases of HIV/AIDS in Spain (the first case was diagnosed in Catalonia in 1981 by Doctor Caterina Mieras). Our contribution was a collective research project on a group of activists and cultural producers in Andalusia who had been active in the anti-Francoist struggle and the early gay liberation movement. The research did not really manage to come to terms with the impact of the emergence of AIDS in post-dictatorial Spain, and in some sense it reproduced a historical inertia: it failed to examine the initial indifference of the traditional left towards the crisis and the early gay movement.

This oversight came to light unexpectedly, and somewhat sadly, during a filmed conversation with three of the subjects of our research: feminist researcher and activist María José Belbel, and activists and cultural producers Joaquín Vázquez and Miguel Benlloch, co-founders of the cultural production company BNV Producciones. The discussion revolved around how the construction of the official narrative of the transition to democracy had overshadowed other possible narratives, defending civil society's active resistance against the repression of Franco's regime. Suddenly, as they reminisced about the early activities of feminist and gay liberation movements, all three interviewees wistfully acknowledged that they had "not been equal to the task" (the expression is ours) of responding to the early days of the AIDS crisis.

When news of a "gay cancer" started reaching Spain in the early 1980s and the first cases began to be diagnosed, the gay movement was going to "look the other way," fearing further social stigmatisation and the loss of brand new freedoms (Llamas and Vila 1997). The participants of our conversation recognised this, and one of them summed it up in a subsequent e-mail as follows: "Politically, one of my greatest regrets is not having fought during the time when the AIDS pandemic began. I think it was because we had already done a lot of fighting and we had built up a lot of grief." This reference to the political and emotional fatigue involved in living in a dictatorship as a way of explaining the difficulty of organising early responses to AIDS is not exclusive to Spain, and also came up repeatedly in interviews and conversations we had in Chile. The particular forms that AIDS politics took in post-dictatorial contexts should be understood as disruptions--breaks and interruptions--in the standardised and seemingly irrefutable design of globalisation.

The intersection between post-dictatorial politics and the emergence of AIDS also raises certain questions that have not yet been dealt with in the analysis of the visual culture of HIV/AIDS, and that are key to our research: What specific performative and visual production strategies emerged in post-dictatorial Chile and Spain, to mention two examples, when they collided with AIDS? What forms of somatic resistance emerged from the collision between dictatorship and AIDS politics? How are they linked to notions of trauma, memory and affect?

Read the rest of Aimar's essay here, where he uses three case studies to unpack these questions.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.