’Goodluck... Miss You, too’

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“Goodluck...Miss You, too” ground level, across the street from the San Francisco Art Institute, with beams being fired simultaneously to the east.Photo by Scott Welsh

A distinct pair of lights shown in San Francisco from the San Francisco Art Institute’s historic tower on December 1 this year. The amber and red beacons were part of the artwork “Goodluck... Miss You, too” by Visual AIDS Artist Member Aaron Kissman. The lights flashed at regular intervals, symbolizing the rate of new HIV infection (every 15 seconds) and the rate of lives lost to AIDS-related complications (every 20 seconds). Through this large-scale public work, Kissman hoped to challenge the broader San Francisco community to reengage and re-substantialize HIV/AIDS awareness, with a particular emphasis on the current generation of young people who did not live through the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. Visual AIDS interviewed Aaron about the project, his intended audiences and his vision for the project’s development.

Visual AIDS: Can you describe the different elements of “Goodluck... Miss You, too” and the concept behind each?

Aaron Kissman: Physically, “Goodluck...Miss You, too” is two searchlights, one amber and one red, powered by 1,000-watt Xenon lights that were blasted into the San Francisco night sky. In a performance element, I manually fired each light in regular intervals for 6 hours. The amber light, which symbolized the 2.1 million new HIV infections, flashed every 15 seconds; while the red light flashed every 20 seconds symbolizing the 1.6 million lives lost to AIDS in 2013. The title of the installation/performance pays homage to Gran Fury and their essay entitled "Goodluck...Miss you.“ The essay was particularly impressionable on me because it read like a goodbye love letter from a mother. Every time I read it, I feel a great sense of absence and longing for groups like Gran Fury that made such an impact during the height of the AIDS crisis, so my installation and performance is a sort of ”miss you, too" back.

What audience(s) did you have in mind for the project? How was the project received by these audience(s), and others?

When I learned about my own HIV-positive diagnosis, I found that my own generation and (sometimes) community was the most judgmental, and that shocked me. It was often other males in their 20s that were the harshest critics. Responses of slut-shaming, to overall apathy or an inability to relate, were common. Often I was met with silence or confusion in those cases, which mostly revealed an uneducated youth who largely believe that HIV is not a huge modern day risk. And to be honest, I suppose I felt the same at one point, so I can’t blame them. But all that says is that the overall message about the state of HIV/AIDS today falls on deaf ears, which is why I believe infection rate still rises in the demographic of which I am a part. So while “Goodluck...Miss You, too” is for everyone, my hope is that it reached millennials, and I believe it did. Since the installation was in the historic bell tower at The San Francisco Art Institute, it naturally met a student population of 500+ and surely beyond as it was widely visible in San Francisco. Since the performance’s completion, I have had many people come to me with “applause” for the performance for its beauty and message, and I’d like to believe it has made me more

approachable to discuss the tough issues that the piece was about. If it opened a line of communication that didn't exist before, then I feel like it was successful.

What were some of the highlights of the introductory speech that you made for "Goodnight... Miss You, too" on December 1 2014, the 25th anniversary of Day With(out) Art?

Prior to my performance, I made a speech from a top the tower that was amped to be audible from below, and it gave this "Tower of London" feel of being trapped in the tower with the strength of a message. My speech was largely an updated rendition on Mary Fisher's "Whisper of AIDS" speech, which she gave back in 1992 at the Republican National Convention. The speech made me weep when I saw it the first couple of times in its eloquent language that transcended racial and stereotypical boundaries. So it was of great gratitude and importance to recite large parts of Fisher's speech again to an audience who may have never heard it otherwise. If you haven't seen the speech, it is easily accessible online and I recommend that everyone watch it.

How does the project relate to your previous work in installation, film and photography, or how is it a departure? (A selection of Aaron's work can be viewed on his Visual AIDS Artist Member page.)

I have never done something on this scale or that could be consider as a public piece, so in that way, it is a departure. A lot of my work is immersive or multi-faceted, in the sense that I incorporate different mediums within one piece. "Goodluck...Miss You, too" functions in that way in that it incorporated a light installation as well as a performance.

In what ways have you found art can most successfully provoke dialogue around HIV/AIDS?

That's a good question, and something I am still personally trying to answer. I always felt text-based work does that job well for obvious reasons, such as Fierce Pussy's "For The Record." But I want to be mindful that my work isn't always blatantly didactic or literal, so that's a balance I am still trying to negotiate in my own practice. I believe Felix Gonzales-Torres did that exceptionally well with subtlety and power, while transcending the HIV/AIDS topic to even broader topics such as longing and isolation that can tap into a broader audience. I think that's the model I'm most drawn towards.

How do you envision "Goodluck... Miss You too" developing over time?

My hope for "Goodluck...Miss You, too" is for it to become a San Francisco World AIDS Day mainstay. While San Francisco was and is such a center for people living with HIV in America (one in four gay men in San Francisco are HIV positive) it is surprising to me that there isn't a larger public works piece in the city. When I lived in downtown Chicago, I was always so inspired to see the CNA building pattern their windows at night with the AIDS ribbon and "FIGHT AIDS" blasting like the biggest billboard you've ever seen. San Francisco needs that, and perhaps "Goodluck... Miss You, too" can be that. Now that i have decent documentation of the project, I hope to take this to the San Francisco Art Commission at City Hall and propose it for the Coit Tower atop of Telegraph Hill. I think that is the ultimate home for "Goodluck...Miss You, too" and will reach

audiences far and beyond.

Aaron David Kissman is an artist based in San Francisco, California primarily working with photography and video. Aaron was awarded a BFA at the Savannah College of Art and Design and is seeking his MFA at the San Francisco Art Institute. Aaron Kissman is also the co-director of exhibitions at the Diego Rivera Gallery in San Francisco.

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