How Do You Spell Adze?: Alternate Endings, Multiple Realities and the Ongoingness of HIV/AIDS

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AIDS graffiti in Oakland

To honor the 25th year of Day With(out) Art on December 1, 2014, Visual AIDS commissioned seven artists/collectives--Rhys Ernst, Glen Fogel, Lyle Ashton Harris, Hi Tiger, Tom Kalin, My Barbarian, and Julie Tolentino/Abigail Severance--to create provocative new short videos that reflect and respond to the ongoing AIDS pandemic for a program titled ALTERNATE ENDINGS.

Here, writer and curator Ted Kerr considers and contextualizes themes from the ALTERNATE ENDINGS video program, which he played a central part in conceiving and commissioning in his former role as Programs Manager at Visual AIDS.

I was walking in the Lower East Side when I first came across a graffiti tag that read ADZE. I saw it again when I was in New Orleans a few months later. I assumed the work was referring to the ongoing AIDS crisis. It reminded me of General Idea's "AIDS"and Gran Fury's "RIOT" responses. I thought maybe we were seeing a return to street art AIDS activism. The epidemic has been resurfacing lately in films, books, and exhibitions, so why not on the street? Yet the epidemic which went largely under-discussed from the mid-nineties and for most of the first decade of the 21st century. I call this period the Second Silence. I understand the First Silence as the Reagan Administration's neglect during the early AIDS crisis in the United States, when the president did not utter the word AIDS publicly until 1987, at which point over 40,849 people had already died of AIDS-related complications in the United States. I am suggesting that the Second Silence is the twelve year period starting in 1996 with the introduction of life saving medication where there was a severe decline in the space AIDS took up in the public sphere--even while there were scientific and political breakthroughs, ongoing artistic and cultural production around the epidemic, and new cases of HIV. It ends around 2008 with the release of the Swiss Statement, which shed light on the relationship between antiretroviral therapy and HIV transmission. It was then that we began to see the emergence of media looking back at early responses to the crisis, which I call the AIDS Crisis Revisitation, which I get into later.

But ADZE was something different. Excited by the re-spelling, the visual felt referential yet forward looking. Like an up-and-coming singer covering a song from yesteryear, making it their own for a new generation, the graffiti suggested a reclaiming of an epidemic: ADZE now, different--yet related--to AIDS then. Sadly, research did not support my claim. It turned up information about a carpentry tool, African folklore, and more images of the tag across the United States. I wanted ADZE to be about AIDS because it would echo a movement happening within culture. People living with HIV, those who lived through the Second Silence, and others are moving beyond the trusted, sometimes played out, important visual troupes of AIDS: red ribbons, pink triangles, condoms, Gill Sans Bold Extra Condensed typeface, and archival video footage of direct action. This changing imagery of AIDS is on full view in ALTERNATE ENDINGS, a suite of 7 short films commissioned by Visual AIDS in 2014 to mark 25 years of Day With(out) Art.

In the ALTERNATE ENDINGS short films, we find nary a hint of the aforementioned visuals; instead we see gay trans men and hook-up app screen shots; reclaimed new wave pop songs; portrayals of beloved reality TV show stars; Lez-bro tender yet restrained post break-up processing; intimate archival photographs of leading artists and intellectuals of color and their circles; Asian medicine cups affixed to an ever-arriving body in reverse; as well as books, bodies and buildings as witness to multiple generations of activism and loss. The films and their lack of reliance on canonical AIDS imagery are an assertion that there are as many stories, texts and visuals as there are many people living with and impacted by HIV/AIDS. ALTERNATE ENDINGS artist/filmmakers Tom Kalin, Rhys Ernst, My Barbarian, Julie Tolentino/Abigail Severance, Hi Tiger, Lyle Ashton Harris and Glen Fogel introduce and use (seemingly) unrelated and under-engaged archival images and texts; new visuals; and personal narratives, adding to the always in-flux visual vocabulary of HIV/AIDS.

All this being said, it would be remiss to think the tried and true AIDS visuals are not still in circulation--they are in many ways experiencing a renaissance in their own right. Emerging from

the Second Silence, the recent AIDS Crisis Revisitation explores early responses to the AIDS crisis within a U.S. urban context, making use of historic, neglected--yet familiar and iconic--AIDS visuals and texts: ACT UP demonstration footage from James Wentzy and others circulating widely in How to Survive a Plague (2012, dir. David France) and United in Anger (2012, dir. Jim Hubbard);the work of General Idea, Gran Fury, Keith Haring and others viewable on gallery walls and via tumblr feeds; and via memoirs, collections and biograophies, the stories of David Wojnarowicz (Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz, Cynthia Carr), Sean Strub (Body Counts: A Memoir of Politics, Sex, AIDS, and Survival), Steve Abbott (Fairyland: A Memoir of My Father, Alysia Abbott), Cookie Muller (Edgewise: A Picture of Cookie Mueller, Chloé Griffin) and others. Theses films, exhibitions and books provide a foundation for those who were there to revisit and share their experiences. In part the revisitation can be viewed as a response to the Second Silence by and for long term survivors, and/or those who fought hard and lost friends in the earliest days of the crisis in the United States. What is it to survive two silences? When it comes to current AIDS representations in the mainstream, and even some queer publics and counter publics, images emerging from the revisitation are the most dominant.

This AIDS Crisis Revisitation is both helpful and fraught for those who were “not there.” It is an opportunity to glean information about the activism and community care that happened, while at the same time that the AIDS Crisis Revisitation is using iconic images to memorialize and historicize particular moments and communities, this iconography is also being quoted by artists attempting to establish distance from the past (see: “Your Nostalgia Is Killing Me”) and/or to provide context to updated messages (see: “Silence = Sex”). In these images, we see a desire to move away from revisitation as these images point to ways a story about AIDS is being told, often at the expense of all other narratives. This often is at no fault to the artists involved, but more so due to the One Story culture in which we live. In her TED TALK, “The Danger of a Single Story,” Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie states, “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” A problem with the revisitation is not the stories being told, it’s that these become the only stories being told.

ALTERNATE ENDINGS in this respect is powerful and refreshing. While all the films look back in their own ways, none of them are part of the recent revisitation. This was not something that Visual AIDS planned; minimal direction was given to the commissioned artists. The invitation to the filmmakers / artist participants read: “Visual AIDS is looking to commission new short video works that reflect on one’s feelings, ideas, and experiences around HIV/AIDS.” And yet, all the stories within ALTERNATE Endings excavate stories untold, thereby fighting against the one story culture by adding stories to the AIDS movement. It seems to me that they look back to look forward; picking up on stories not from the early days of the crisis associated with the revisitation, but rather from the stories and the experiences of the under probed, both within the Second Silence, before and after. It is here we witness what Alexandra Juhaz calls the media ecology of AIDS, a wealth of cultural production that exists beyond the binary of “mainstream”and “alternative” media, defying simple categorization that explores the crisis from various times, communities, point of views and urgencies.

In Kalin's "Ashes," titles of past actions, slogans and demos--along with the names of lost loves, and activists--appear with newer iterations. For example, ACT-UP's 1989 "Stop The Church" is in conversation with the recent PrEP fueled term "Truvada Whore," all against a backdrop of beautiful shots of modern hotel rooms, Kalin's long-time partner, and library book ledgers.

Ashton-Harris's "Selections from the Ektachrome Archive, 1986-1996" allows the viewer to luxuriate in accumulation, imagination and legacy. His archive--populated by intimate photos of luminaries such as bell hooks, Cornel West, Marlon Riggs, and Nan Goldin--is a world of power, intelligence and beauty, leaving the audience with questions: Where is that world now? Who is documenting them? The call to answer these questions is a gift of the film.

Hi Tiger revisits "The Village," a song by New Order, drawing the viewer in to make a connection between the lyrics, the delivery, the present / unrepresented bodies, and the gulf in time between the original 1983 release and now. What is lost? What has been retained? "The Village," much like Julie Tolentino / Abigail Severance's "Evidence," is about HIV/AIDS yet refuses to be obvious about it, or just about it. For both films, this is a strength. Much of Tolentino's work is about her body and what it can / has absorbed from others. The past is an embodied practice on screen, always fleeing the present. In the film, Tolentino is always coming closer yet her body is never nearer than when the film begins. This feeling of frustration may be familiar to Glen Fogel and his past boyfriend, with whom Fogel is in dialogue about their breakup in the film "7 Years Later." The sometimes stomach-dropping maneuvering of the robotic camera reminds viewers that trying to go home again may cause discomfort, which may be what is needed to heal--or at least make peace with a lack of closure.

My Barbarian embodies the past by putting on 1990's drag to illustrate José Esteban Muñoz's essay highlighting Pedro Zamora, called "Counterpublicity" (also the name of the film). The uncanny valley quality of their performance and production values is productive--a sliver of space and time between then and now leaves an ache for both Pedro and José.

In "Dear Lou Sullivan," Rhys Ernst conjures the dead using technology. While some trans folks have already absorbed Lou Sullivan's story of being a gay trans man with HIV, for the many others who haven't, his story is a revelation. The use of grainy glitched out video testimonial of Sullivan culled from YouTube collaged with more recent grindr messages is a remix towards collectivity, and--as I would love to suggest in another essay--towards healing. Can the past and the present ever really be in conversation? Or is the present just quoting what came before?

Together the films of ALTERNATE ENDINGS don't have to mean anything, yet given the time, place and reason for their existence, meaning is accrued through context. The films are part of the quarter century tradition of Visual AIDS' Day With(out) Art (DWA), which urges art and cultural organizations to bring conversations around HIV/AIDS to their communities by working with artists living with and deeply impacted by the ongoing crisis. According to Visual AIDS, DWA began with a "call for 'mourning and action in response to the AIDS crisis' that would celebrate the lives and achievements of lost colleagues and friends; encourage caring for all people with AIDS; educate diverse publics about HIV infection; and find a cure." DWA was one of the few stalwart instances of

AIDS related culture during the Second Silence. Additionally, in many ways, continuing DWA with the screening of Ira Sach's film "Last Address" (2010) in 2010, which is a short film that revisits the exteriors of the last homes of artists in NYC who died of AIDS, also anticipated the AIDS Crisis Revisitation. The films and the act of Day With(out) Art itself are reminders that the cultural work of the epidemic is ongoing and requires looking at the past--without getting stuck there--to understand the present and the future; and that there will never be a single story about HIV/AIDS, so our representation has to be as varied as the crisis' impacts.

A few months after I saw the graffiti in NYC and NOLA I saw it in a skate park in Oakland. But this time something was different. I didn't see ADZE. But I saw AIDZ, nearby where someone tagged HOPE, and across from that someone tagged AIDS. It was beautiful. It reminded me of my misgivings over the title of the DWA film program. As someone involved in the creation of ALTERNATE Endings I was part of the many conversations about what to call it. Seeing AIDS, ADZE, AIDZ popping up on the streets over the last few months made me realize that while not as catchy, a better title may have been MULTIPLE REALITIES.

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To learn more about the Second Silence, the AIDS Crisis Revisitation, and the Media Ecology of AIDS, please enjoy the following conversations between Theodore Kerr and Alexandra Juhasz:
Home Video Returns: Media Ecologies of the Past of HIV/AIDS
AIDS Reruns: Becoming Normal? A Conversation on The Normal Heart and the Media Ecology of HIV/AIDS

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