How to Have AIDS Activism Over Time: One Approach

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Gay Retaliation for Inexcusable Negligence and Criminal Homophobia (G.R.I.N.CH.)

In the last few years we have seen an increase in the amount of intergenerational, cross cultural dialogue around the ongoing epidemic of HIV/AIDS. Visual AIDS proudly works to continue to carry on this tradition.

In the early 1980s, with mass death and confusion all around them, Richard Berkowitz and Michael Callen, both patients of the influential doctor Joseph Sonnabend, MD collaborated on a series of writing projects including How to Have Sex in an Epidemic: One Approach. The importance of this text cannot be overstated. It was among the earliest of harm reduction measures taken in the face of a deadly virus; a brave and bold move on the part of the authors.

Three decades later, inspired by How to Have Sex in an Epidemic: One Approach, an anonomouys Canadian AIDS activist collective created and released How to Have Sex in a Police State: One Approach, both as an homage and an update to Callen and Berkowitz's work.

Below is an essay by former VA Programs Manager Theodore Kerr putting the collective's text in context both historically in terms of culture, and in the present moment.

When It Comes to the Hows of Having Sex, Context Is I**mportant**

By Theodore (Ted) Kerr

In 1989, on the second annual World AIDS Day, a group of activists called for "maximum disruption" of the holiday season through "non-violent disruption, sabotage, protest, and civil disobedience." Their suggested targets included shopping malls, theaters, subways, bridges, TV stations and computer networks. Ideas included: not shopping, donating to AIDS research; dumping red dye in public fountains; buying junk cars and stalling them on bridges; stink bombing theaters; and for people to "screw up computer systems." They called themselves GRINCH: Gay Retaliation for Inexcusable Negligence and Criminal Homophobia. They printed posters with their ideas and images from Dr. Seuss's holiday classic, How the Grinch Stole Christmas.

This brand of pointed and poignant activism and cultural production with its use of provocation, rage, humor, and camp is part of an AIDS activism with a history. Looking back, we see it being deployed in issues of "Disease Pariah News," the writings of underground star Cookie Mueller and ACT UP member David Feinberg. And we see it now in the work of writer and performer Brontez Purnell, and in projects like AIDS Action Now's PosterVIRUS campaign. This activism is attuned to the micro and the macro, aiming to instigate immediate action to improve the lives of people living with HIV while also satirizing the culture which is promulgating injustice. This type of activist sensibility can get lost over time, flattened via the internet and the archive.

Often able to grasp this sensibility are those for whom the AIDS crisis is ongoing. An example is the anonymous group of Canadian AIDS activists who earlier this year released How to Have Sex in a Police State: One Approach. It is a pamphlet that raises awareness around ways people living with HIV and those at risk are criminalized. Criminalization occurs through specific laws, high court

decisions, and the ongoing criminalization of sex workers, users of drugs, and immigrants; all often further exasperated by issues of race, class, gender and sexual orientation. The collective chose to remain anonymous because as they explain, “Some of the tactics suggested in this document are within a gray area of the law.” They did not want to make themselves the target of state suppression more than they are already. Many of the collective’s members are living with HIV.

An important influence on How to Have Sex in a Police State: One Approach was How to Have Sex in an Epidemic: One Approach, the landmark pamphlet penned by Richard Berkowitz and Michael Callen, with the scientific endorsement of their doctor, Joseph Sonnabend, MD. Their text is one of the earliest calls for gay men to use condoms (along with the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence’s “Play Fair” campaign), and urges people to factor love into the equation. They wrote, “maybe affection is our best protection.” Their argument could be taken as slut shaming, but it’s not. As self-proclaimed sluts, Berkowitz and Callen were arguing for interconnectivity to be recognized within sexual networks, and that love—no matter how one defined it—can be present in every sexual encounter, be it one night only, or ongoing.

Talking about the pamphlet, the Canadian activists wondered what an updated version would include, which they attempted to answer in the introduction of the pamphlet:

> Thirty-years after the publication of How to Have Sex in an Epidemic: One Approach, we face a new type of emergency here in Canada. State neglect in the response supporting people with HIV is now coupled with intensified forms of state control, surveillance and criminalization. Canada is among the most punitive countries in the world for HIV-positive people, where the state is turning towards criminalization instead of public education and support.

While it was written from a Canadian perspective, it includes feedback provided by people within the AIDS movement from the United States and Canada and can be applied to the idea of HIV related criminalization around the world. It is not intended to be prescriptive, although there are

suggested strategies for living with HIV in a police state, such as freezing used condoms. Rather it is descriptive, capturing the current moment and connecting it to the past, drawing attention to what has changed and not changed in the 30-plus years bridging How to Have Sex in an Epidemic: One Approach and How to Have Sex in a Police State: One Approach. The title play is intentional. It drives home a message that as destructive as the human immunodeficiency virus it, the epidemic is not just the virus, it is also the police state.

By coming together to create a document speaking to people now, using strategies from the past, the anonymous AIDS collective brought together the tender and powerful "confrontational activism" as employed by Berkowitz, Callen, Sonnabend and many others from the early days of AIDS activism, and infused it with their own concerns and tactics. For people living with HIV, functioning in a police state can be a daily, crushing blow to an already threatened existence. There is nothing funny about it, and yet sometimes to retain a shred of sanity, to make it clear you are still alive, one must let out a cackle. As Gregg Bordowitz put it, "The AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous."

Theodore (Ted) Kerr is a Canadian-born, Brooklyn-based writer and organizer. He was the programs manager at Visual AIDS and is currently doing his graduate work at Union Theological Seminary.

View and download How to Have Sex in a Police State: One Approach here.

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