An Interview With “I SURVIVED AIDS” Artist John Hanning

Hanning’s “Unfortunate Male” book and performances document his AIDS diagnosis through actual medical records and photos.

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For this installment of interviews, artist Lucas Michael speaks with author and artist John Hanning, creator of the I SURVIVED AIDS poster project, and Unfortunate Male, a book and related performance that documents his AIDS diagnosis using his actual medical records, photos and writings. The interview has been lightly edited.

Lucus: Can you tell me about the I SURVIVED AIDS poster/project? What triggered it, and why did it come about at that specific junction in your life?

John: Back in 2012 I was considering including a few old photographs in my book, Unfortunate Male, and at the same time I was thinking a lot about Robbie Conal’s work. I made the first I SURVIVED AIDS collage for the book, but changed my mind and the work took on a life of its own. The poster project started in 2015 when the image was printed on posters for exhibition Powerful Babies: Keith Haring’s Impact on Artist Today at Spritmuseum, Stockholm. Twenty-one artists were brought together to celebrate the legacy of Keith Haring on the 25th anniversary of his death; the museum is home to the Absolut Art Collection.

Lucas: Being a visual artist, when did you realize that the visual work you were making needed to become an actual written book, Unfortunate Male? And can you talk about your writing process and how it differs from your art-making process?

John: After attending the 2008 Visual AIDS workshop, “aids/art/work,” I started going to other VA events and got to know a group of kids who were all interns there. In 2010, I hired one of them to write something for me, and in the process of working together, they—Aldrin Valdez—asked if I still had my medical records and if I did I should make work about that subject. I started looking into the records, and memories started to surface, and things started to get really heavy. I tossed and turned for several nights because I was a bit overwhelmed by it all. It’s interesting because when writing I get so involved in the character of who I was or am when I am writing that at times work can be almost too much, but I do enjoy it. It’s like when I was a little kid and I knew I was going to

the haunted house I would almost dread it, but couldn’t wait to go inside and see what would happen.

Essentially the process for both are the same—I do what I have to do to get into character in my head for the work, and I feel that character in my body and it moves through another space to make the work. Being able to walk into a space and share time with my work is the most wonderful feeling. I can really feel this work—this installation in the empty apartment—and I cannot wait to share it with everyone. It’s the best feeling—it really is.

Artist and author John HanningCourtesy of @seisslerphotos

Lucas: You referred to the nine wood panels from 2010 as being chapters. Does this mean there will be additional works down the line relating to each panel? Also I know that you've been exploring performative forms and immersive environments in relation to, or rather as an extension of, the Unfortunate Male book. Do you envision eventually stringing all the "chapters" together to create a comprehensive unified piece based on all the wood panels as a larger book, or even a full-on performance? If so, can you tell us some of the ways you would go about it?

John: I've not projected that far yet. I'm always going back to work and taking a component of an existing piece and using it somewhere else. It's all part of a puzzle, of a code. Chapters, panels, they're all the same thing—like pixels of who we are, like pieces of glitter existing together inside of a space. Sometimes that space is IG, FB [Instagram, Facebook] or somewhere so that we're connected even if it is only on our phones—digital memories—being in touch but not being in touch. I like making work that is memory-based—not to hold on to things from the past, but mostly to let go of something that I made the work about. The things I feel like I never want to let go of are all stored in a secret place; that place is a color that speaks about feelings and memories, of people and things I want to keep around.

The performance began when I shared my work during Brooklyn Museum's GO: a community-curated open studio project (2012). When someone visited the studio I walked them through the work, sharing the meaning of each chapter. From there a panel became a book, Unfortunate Male, and the performance of the book started to develop in my head after attending the Queer Art Mentorship Awards last year. It is now in development as an installation that I have staged in an empty apartment where you walk through rooms that are lit in different color LED bulbs. Each color light speaks about what is happening in the space, and I share with the viewer the story of each chapter in the different rooms. I made a curtain out of five different colors of flagging tape—the colors are remarkable under the bulbs and the light bouncing off the curtain creates the perfect glow of light that I remember beaming from the machine when I played Pac-Man back in 1983. Walking through the curtain in the space speaks about letting go and being present.

Artist and author John HanningCourtesy of @seisslerphotos

Lucas: How does revisiting so closely your past affect your present? Has it triggered any new responses, both emotional and physical, to your surroundings and the people in your life?

John: Memories I've stored away in a mental file cabinet are constantly resurfacing, and it's a lot to process. Back in June [2017] I was up early writing, and out of nowhere I could see myself standing on the cornice of a building in the 1980s. I was doing a lot of coke back then, friends were dying, and I was going through a breakup. I was standing on the cornice because I wanted to jump and end it all—I was a mess. It was tough dealing with this memory and trying to figure out how to write about it. I walked away from the project for a few months until I was ready to get back into it. I took the time I needed away from actually writing, but I did not stop thinking about the project. The more I thought about it, the more memories flooded my mind until I knew it was time to start writing again. I'm always thinking, and often I have to remind myself that it's really, really late and I need to sleep. On average I sleep about five hours each night, and no matter how tired I am I make myself go to the gym. If I have time, I take long walks and often I find myself on the Lower East Side visiting the galleries. If I really need to get away, I get on a plane and go somewhere. It's strange because I go away to relax, but I end up thinking about work and cannot wait to get back home.

Lucas: You are working on a new book that is in a way a prequel to Unfortunate Male. Was this always part of the plan?

John: There wasn't a plan when all of this started. I made a series of wood panels back in 2010 that pictorially tells the story of my life. Each panel is a chapter; nine panels speak about AIDS. The panels serve as the visual outline for the new book and I haven't decided yet if pictures of the panels will be included in the book or not.

I haven't told you, but I'm also working on another book— it's a photography book. Since putting the I SURVIVED AIDS work out there, people have shared stories of survival with me, and most of those stories I've kept to myself. I've heard it all, and sometimes I get home and at night I start to think about the stories. This used to feel like a burden, processing all of these beautiful stories. The book will consist of photographs of people holding one of the I SURVIVED posters accompanied with the story of what they survived.

Work by artist and author John HanningCourtesy of @seisslerphotos

Lucas: I had the privilege to read some chapters, and I am totally captivated by your story and also still digesting some of the intense details you provide about your past experience. It makes for a very powerful read. What do you find are your personal and the technical challenges to writing objectively about oneself, especially when reliving and revealing such intimate and rarely discussed aspects of your life, and how do you feel about sharing so frankly with the public your past?

John: I feel so many things. There's a sense of worry or vulnerability, sometimes doubt—but overall there's a feeling of relief. It's a bit strange because revisiting those places and going back to the memories, it's been a lot to deal with and it's been scary, but I'm excited about this work. In this process I discovered that there is actually a sense of fear about letting go of things that I've held onto for years, stuff that I'm finally ready to let go of.

Lucas: What have the reactions been so far to Unfortunate Male? What do you feel are some of the most rewarding aspects of writing about your past in relation to your public?

John: The most rewarding aspect is being able to participate in this form of public engagement. Most people are supportive and often someone will share a story, like one reader told how he too got rid of almost everything, packed his car and moved back home to his parents house to die. Occasionally I'll hear something negative, but I've learned to not focus on thinking about that.

When I first shared the performance, back in November, I was really into the character of who I was back in 1995. It was so strange, the feeling of going back to who I was when I was dying of AIDS. I had to revisit those feelings when I wrote the book, so it was not all that difficult this time. About 45 minutes before the performance began I was checking my phone and got the news that Shannon died, and I started to pace around BGSQD [The Bureau of General Services—Queer Division, an art and culture space inside the LGBT Center of Manhattan]. I knew I needed to get out of there and go for a walk. Put on my jacket and walked out into the night to listen to music.

As I walked around the Village I told myself not to think about Shannon, not to think about walking back into BGSQD, taking my clothes off and putting on a hospital gown. I kept telling myself to just stay in character—to walk into the space and perform like I was reading from my book to everyone. But, as I walked I was reminded along the way of so many people and memories related to the book.

Once [I was] back inside, the performance began and when I started to speak I felt really weak. I felt like I did when I was in the emergency room, and I was naked underneath the hospital gown and I was cold. As I spoke I could hear how frail my voice sounded and my body began to feel like it did back in '95 and I'm standing there reading and in my head I'm freaking out, but I kept it together as I read slowly in the darkness. As people sitting a few feet from me watching this began to cry I could feel my body trembling. It was really tough getting through it.

Lucas: In the new book, you show us a pre-Internet hook-up culture that was enabled through the personal ads in magazines, actual phone lines, and real-life cruising. Have you or are you currently

engaged in online hook-up apps and/or web sites? And if so, how do you feel about them and how would you say they differ from the more analogue ways described in your book?

John: I think I liked personal ads, phone lines and real-life cruising better. There are so many men out there, and scrolling through every one was a bit much. Right now my head is just not into all of that.

A few years ago I was active on Scruff, Grindr, Manhunt and POZ Personals because I was looking for people to participate in a project. I wanted to meet people to share intimate moments in bed together and to be photographed together doing whatever. I was thinking of David Wojnarowicz's Rimbaud series and intended to Photoshop an image over my face. I got a lot of responses and met only one guy in person, but I decided not to do the project after all— we grabbed a coffee and went on a long walk. I deleted Scruff from my phone. I held on to it and would look every once in a while, but I stopped enjoying it. It would be nice to have someone in my life to share intimate moments with, but not right now.

Last week, I saw my doctor and after giving me the lab results he mentioned that I've been negative for syphilis, gonorrhea and chlamydia consistently for over a decade. When he asked if I was sexually active, I told him that I made a decision a while ago not to be. He asked if I needed Cialis or Viagra, and I let him know it's not my libido—that I just need to stay focused on work. We talked a bit about the work, and he asked how I'm processing not only the physical, but also the emotional demands of this.

Pac-Man-inspired work by John HanningCourtesy of @seisslerphotos

Lucas: Finally, let's circle back to your experiences in Stockholm. What was the reaction to the posters there, and did you perceive any significant socio-cultural differences in attitude toward HIV/AIDS over there? Were there any impactful interactions in relation to the project that happened outside the exhibition space?

John: I fell in love there, with the people and the place. Their understanding of our role as guest on this planet and our responsibility to not only this place, but we how treat ourselves and others while we're here. What a lovely place, inhabited by such warm people, to be able to experience sharing my work about a subject that connects me not only to Keith Haring, but also to us all. For the opening, I took a bunch of Sharpies and signed posters for everybody—even the security guards, kitchen staff, waiters and bartenders.

My itinerary was tight, and the team at Spritmuseum made me feel like I was at home, but it was my time with Mia Sundberg that was most impactful. I spent my last day with Mia; we met at the museum and from there walked around the city putting up posters. I was a little worried about getting arrested because we were putting them up in some really public places, like on the sign of the Vasa Museum. She just laughed and told me if I went to jail she would go with me.

Along the way we stopped for lunch—pickled herring and root vegetables—and our conversation was all about work and process. Mia asked the most interesting questions, and she understood the meaning of my work— especially the meaning of Pac-Man—and her questions let me know I should make work on this subject. Mia is the curator of the Absolut Art Collection, and to have shared time with her and to converse about a subject that I have always not spoken about, but have made work about and how it relates to AIDS was like a forecast for what is happening now with the work. I'm presenting it not only in my new book, but in an installation—a space that you physically walk inside of to feel what I felt when I was imagining in my mind, back in 1983, that I was living inside of a video game. I thought no one would ever figure out the meaning of this work until I was ready to discuss it. A code that speaks about how HIV/AIDS moves through the maze of veins in my body (our bodies)—like the way Pac-Man moves through the maze of dots. But Mia knew, and to spend the afternoon with someone with a mind like that—well, it was beyond magical. She even walked me all the way back to my apartment in Hornstull.

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