Kyle Bella: ’I know that dialogue and discussion can often be difficult or nonexistent.’

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Created by writer Kyle Bella, Our Viral Lives is a new ongoing educational project and online digital archive whose frank discussions of sexual practices and intimacy within the men who have sex with men (MSM) community is a welcome addition to online forums around HIV/AIDS. The website “focuses on using everyday narratives, created art, and interviews by prominent non-profit activists in the queer male community to help stop the spread of HIV/AIDS through education.” Our Viral Lives will host a launch event at the Bureau of General Services Queer Division on March 7. The launch event, “We Are Here: Young Activists Talk HIV/AIDS,” will feature Visual AIDS Artist Member Kia Labeija, Mathew Rodriguez, Charlie Ferrusi, Martez Smith and Bella discussing their work as activists in the ongoing HIV/AIDS pandemic. Below, Visual AIDS discusses the Our Viral Lives platform and upcoming launch event with Bella.

Describe Our Viral Lives as a platform and what inspired the project? Who are your primary audiences? And what range of perspectives are you most interested in featuring on the website? Our Viral Lives emerged over the course of my travels throughout Europe last summer, where I was conducting research into contemporary artistic legacies in Berlin and Barcelona while having conversations with other men who were around my age (I’m 25). I started to recognize that despite all of the advances we’ve made as queer people in so many respects, so many of these conversations were dominated by feelings of loss, shame, and at least some moments of self-erasure, even among younger men who did not experience the initial onset of the AIDS crisis. So, I started to think about what I could do and what I felt wasn’t being done, which led me to this idea of a digital archive targeted toward a younger audience.

When you hear the word archive you probably think of a stuffy room in an academic institution or space like the New York Public Library. And these spaces are no doubt valuable, housing rare works of art, other ephemera, and written texts. But they all share one fundamental problem: they’re limited by geography. If you have to be in a particular city and have a particular set of credentials to be a legitimate historian or cultural consumer, so many people are going to be shut out. So a digital archive is open geographically, allowing for more individuals to contribute in a

conversation to represent the global spread of HIV/AIDS.

Within the archive, it's also important to note that I'm not interested, necessarily, in collecting historical facts or other things perceived as "truth." Instead, the idea of this digital HIV/AIDS represents a new way of constructing an emotionally-sensitive, personal repository of how people are having sex, how they feel about sex, and how HIV/AIDS comes into play. It'll be an educational resource because I also hope to interview clinicians who work at organizations like APICHA, GMHC, or in more community-based settings, but education can also happen in less tangible and well-defined ways, which opens up an opportunity for people who are not academics, clinical experts or otherwise involved in HIV/AIDS to speak about their own sexuality in a language that makes sense to them.

Producing a strong logo was important for Our Viral Lives. I wanted to reference the history of the HIV/AIDS activist movements, but also create a new, contemporary perspective, so I worked with Chris Desrosiers on a design. The reference to the inverted pink triangle provides a link to history while the tear drop and purple, not red, color scheme sets it apart from the more conventional HIV/AIDS imagery. The unique typography was also a way to mix a more traditional typeface with a 21st century sensibility.

Your upcoming "We Are Here" launch event for Our Viral Lives at the Bureau features five HIV/AIDS youth activists, including yourself. What will be the format for the event, and what are you most looking forward to about it? How did you go about selecting the participants and what sort of perspectives will be incorporated?
The format of the event is pretty simple, which was a deliberate move. I will provide a short introduction with some prepared remarks and then each of the other four speakers will be given 10 to 15 minutes to talk about how they're involved in HIV/AIDS activism. At the end, we can open up questions to the audience and afterward allow a chance for more intimate discussion, which will provide a forum for those less willing to share their stories or questions in a larger group setting. I'm really excited to bring together so many different voices in one setting and to see how the larger LGBTQ community responds to these stories.

I knew one of the speakers, Charlie Ferrusi, so I reached out to him because he had previous speaking experience and has worked a lot in college settings around LGBTQ issues and HIV/AIDS. He suggested Mathew Rodriguez, whose work at TheBody.com I had been familiar with. From there, Martez and Kia were both suggested to me. I feel there is a strong mix of work in more established settings (like Charlie's work in universities or Martez's work in CHEST) and less institutional settings (like Mateo's website or Kia's art-based HIV/AIDS interventions). What these individuals share is a deeply personal commitment to talking about HIV/AIDS and a willingness to understand just how nuanced this on-going crisis is. This passion is something I hope will help inspire others.

You've researched artists such as Keith Haring and David Wojnarowicz. What are some of the most interesting take-aways you've had from these experiences? Do any other artists from the Visual AIDS Artist Registry stand out as perhaps under-known but worth highlighting?

Art, particularly queer art, is about challenging ways of seeing the world and everyday lived experience. And I think Keith Haring and David Wojnarowicz fall into that category. I remember seeing Keith Haring's Unfinished Painting for the first time at the Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture exhibit at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. and five years later, I'm still so moved by that image that I want it made into a tattoo. It was also in that exhibit that Wojnarowicz's video "A Fire In My Belly" became infamous after lawmakers attempted to censor it, so he also maintained a place in my mind, even if his forceful artistic style was so different from Haring's less confrontational methods.

But these artists were only jumping-off points into lesser known (or at least lesser appreciated works as queer artistic canon). There is, of course, Félix González-Torres, who is well-known in the art world but I don't suspect outside of it. When I was in Barcelona, I had the pleasure of viewing an original booklet he produced, untitled as most of his pieces were, that features black and white sky scenes with gulls that move across the pages. It was a bit haunting to touch this tiny booklet that was so expansive in its scope, but also haunted by the memory of the artist himself. There was a sense of impermanence there that I continually try to capture in my own work.

All of this is to say that absence is the theme dominating understanding of so many of those earlier artists who died from AIDS-related complications. Back in 2012, when I was working in an MFA program, one of my advisors shared the writing of French artist Hervé Guibert with me. His work on photographic absence once again resonated me with, and I found myself using the confrontation with photography to look at the relationship to my great uncle, who died from AIDS-related complications unexpectedly in 2013. The unspoken emotional connections and the legacy of grief I now hold on to became clear.

How do you understand the internet as a forum for dialogue and discussion about charged topics such as HIV/AIDS, PrEP, sexual health, and art?
Back in March 2013, I wrote a piece on a bareback experience over at BuzzFeed and remember being mortified at the hateful, mean-spirited language directed toward me. So I know that "dialogue" and "discussion" can often be difficult or nonexistent. At the same time, however, there were a lot of affirmative responses. Others who I didn't know shared their stories with me, which was also made me realize that the positive connections that are formed outweigh the more negative responses. Resisting the temptation to engage negativity and instead focusing on stories as ways of building community is what I'm interested in. If I share my stories about using PrEP or the steps it takes to gain access to this prevention strategy, it allows others to ask questions and find ways to make more informed decisions on an individual level.

At the same time, younger queer men obviously meet a lot of sexual partners, lovers, and/or boyfriends through the Internet, so it only makes sense that would be the medium through which this new way of talking sex would develop. Because the Internet is a place of fast connections and can help to remove some fear of talking openly about sexuality, it seems there is more potential to engage in meaningful ways around these charged and interrelated issues.

Why an emphasis on youth under 30? And how does this imperative inform the range of

submissions and materials you envision incorporating into the website?
Why a younger audience? Younger people are baring the brunt of the epidemic now. They have higher infection rates and lower treatment rates, meaning they have a higher risk of both transmitting and acquiring HIV. But they're also living a different world than the world in which many older gay men first experienced HIV/AIDS. But often these experiences aren't the ones told in mainstream media, particularly those stories from men of color or who are otherwise not financially well-off. Yet these are the stories that shape how these young men have sex and are, as I see it, the key to better tailoring prevention and treatment programs to these populations.

This includes a lot of people, so the the call is always open for people to submit what they want. But the thing I am particularly concerned about is having the stories being driven by the people telling them. I am, of course, responsible for curating materials and trying to incorporate diverse racial and geographic perspectives, but ultimately I want people to talk about what matters most to them. They could be intimate sexual stories. They could be more focused on specific activist or artistic legacies. They could be driven by policy. Whatever the case, I care most that respect and vulnerability is shared by all those participants in this experiment.

Kyle Bella serves as the Office Manager at Open mHealth, an organization devoted to pursuing mobile healthcare solutions that improve patient and clinician outcomes. He is also pursuing an M.A. in social innovation and sustainability through Goddard College, where he has launched the Our Viral Lives project. Previous writing on HIV/AIDS has been published in Colorlines magazine, POZ, the Huffington Post, Buzzfeed LGBT, nomorepotlucks, and Jacket2. He spent last summer in Europe researching contemporary artists including Keith Haring, David Wojnarowicz, Félix González-Torres and Isaac Julien.

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