Liss LaFleur: ’ONE WAY HOME is a documentary project intended to inspire change and activism in a new generation.’

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ONE WAY HOME installation view

Liss LaFleur is a new media artist whose work blends documentary, digital, and experimental modes of representation to explore issues of gender+sexuality, identity, loss, and community. At the core of her practice is a concern with mortality and materiality. Her work ONE WAY HOME is a transmedia project about HIV/AIDS in Texas that incorporates vast amounts of archival material in various ways. Whether through digitizing VHS tapes, paper applications from travelers who have gone home, or working directly with archives to sift through the State of Texas LGBT Archives, Liss’ interest in historic parallelism has allowed her to physically integrate past and present into the work. Visual AIDS interviews Liss here about ONE WAY HOME, and further information can be viewed on the ONE WAY HOME Vimeo or project page.

ONE WAY HOME consists of a three-channel HD projection, a digital audio booth with a custom program developed at the Center for Social Intervention, and a series of public interactives created with pop artist Steven Hamilton. Can you describe each element and how they relate to each other?
Originally conceived of in 2010 as a feature length documentary film, ONE WAY HOME has evolved into a community based transmedia documentary project that blurs the line between art and activism. Transmedia storytelling is the practice of telling a single narrative or story experience across multiple platforms and formats using digital technologies. ONE WAY HOME tells the stories of Texas Charity Queens through a series of installations, builds narrative of PWAs (Persons with AIDS) who have gone home through the design of a custom digital audio booth, and takes the content from the bars and into the streets through a series of public interactives.

While ONE WAY HOME is a documentary project at its core, it is intended to ignite change and inspire activism in a new generation. This framing and design developed out of my participation in

various hackathons, including one at the Center for Social Intervention in NY with Radish Lab and POV Digital.

When exhibited, viewers will first experience the installation, a large three-channel projection and soundscape that allows visitors to sit with this community of charity queens and cowboys. The three projections are divided by the historic, performative, and testimonial, and have been edited to allow viewers to watch one, or ideally move between all three, of the projections. A soundscape flows between the three projections, from left to right, allowing viewers to be submerged in the story at differing times.

Accompanying the projections, the ONE WAY HOME audio booth invites viewers to interact directly with the narratives of travelers and families who have gone home. The audio booth is a converted photo booth that runs a custom digital program, allowing users to watch short films, record their own voice reading a "reason for request" from a traveler's application, and take a snapshot, all using a touch screen. Note: the "reason for request" on applications was written by either a traveler or caseworker, and reflects the need for going home. I've been granted access to the boxes and boxes of these paper applications, and the traveler whose statement is used is kept anonymous. Some travelers' get home and some do not, but this exchange allows viewers to engage one to one with this need. The booth will print two photo strips, and the viewer is asked to leave one behind with the booth. All recordings are uploaded to a digital app, where viewers can see the booth's travel on a map, and continue conversations about HIV and AIDS. The audio booth is a beautifully crafted art-object; playful and unique. It is designed to travel and provide story collecting and digital archiving support for diverse communities.

Donna Day, Patti Le Plae Safe, Sable Alexander, Donna Dumae, Sister Lawna Jocqui, Whitney Paige, Edna Jean Robinson and the names of dozens of other performers have become community superheroes and have both witnessed and survived a ravaged community all while doing what needs to be done. In collaboration with Dallas-based artist Steven Hamilton a series of portraits of the charity queens will accompany each installation of the work. These public interactives will incorporate quotes and details from the project, for example, "No two sons are the same," "Everything is bigger in Texas," and "This disease does not discriminate." Each will have the handles associated with the project, @ONEWAYHOME and #ONEWAYHOME, and will be temporarily installed with wheat-paste on exteriors surrounding each exhibition. In a very public manner, this places the queens as guardian angels among cities, and takes their work from the bars and into the streets allowing playful encounters that encourage participation in a direct way.

Each component of ONE WAY HOME seeks to cultivate a revitalized understanding of what HIV/AIDS is, how one community has nurtured awareness through support, and the ways in which this disease still affects us all.

What is the story of the Charity Queens that you detail in the work and how does focusing on this community and their stories allow you to provoke dialogue around HIV/AIDS in the way that you were hoping?
In the early 1980s when the AIDS epidemic slammed into the LGBT community and started killing,

some gay men and trans women shook off the shock and went into action. In almost every gay club in Texas, performers stepped on stage in drag and raised money to fight AIDS. One dollar became 10, that 10 dollars became a thousand, and that thousand became millions. The sick and the dying had a place to get medical help and food; a place to live; and a place to rest.

Patti Le Plae Safe, also known as Rodd Gray, moved to Dallas in 1988 as a member of the US Air Force. AIDS Services of Dallas (ASD) had just established the first independent housing facility for individuals living with and dying from AIDS, and in the 1990s, Rodd adopted an apartment to renovate. ASD is now the longest running AIDS services and housing facility in the country. In an effort to maintain his cheery and positive disposition, Rodd painted and furnished the entire apartment with the color bubble gum pink. Throughout this process he made friends with a man who lived next door, and as Rodd watched him get sicker and sicker from the AIDS virus he asked him one day, "If you could have anything in the world, and didn't have to worry about dying, what would you have?" The resident responded, "I'd like to go home, I haven't seen my family in nine years, and I need to go home." In an effort to send this individual home, Rodd immediately coordinated a benefit show with drag queens and singers, and it was at this event that Home for the Holidays, TX was born.

Although they were not able to raise the funds quickly enough to send this individual home before passing away, enough money was raised to send five other individuals home. For over 25 years now, Home for the Holidays, TX has reunited families by plane, train, and bus, as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, with Rodd as their leader.

ONE WAY HOME as a project allows me to explore questions of support, chosen family, loss, and sexuality. The charity queens and Patti, among others, are rare narrators who weave a rich tale that both pre-dates the early AIDS crisis and survives it. These activists are celebrated in TX as icons and safe sex advocates, both as male and female performers. Now more than ever, it is essential to connect these stories with media-rich millennials who have the potential to drastically stop the spread of HIV and AIDS. I hope that by encouraging digital play, ONE WAY HOME opens a door that allows a new generation to explore a serious and often somber history, while building communal empathy and inspiring action.

In what ways does ONE WAY HOME foster intergenerational dialogue?
When I met Rodd in 2008, I was a 21-year-old in Dallas, and we immediately became queerkin. In a way, ONE WAY HOME mirrors the relationship we have built with one another by attempting to educate millennials and younger individuals who did not grow up during the onset of the AIDS epidemic. It is my goal with ONE WAY HOME to build engagement and social trust so that the communities will feel empowered and act together, as well as to create a safe space using multimedia to explore a complex social issue.

This project is intended to bridge the generational gap that exists between the original generation affected by HIV + AIDS, and a younger generation who thinks the disease has an easy fix or is no longer a problem. Designed to facilitate intergenerational storytelling, ONE WAY HOME has a broad reach, and will first be exhibited and screened at a selected number of college and university

galleries around the US, then move onto international installations. These events will become an active way to build physical community support, create secondary content for the digital platform, and extend the project far beyond the Lone Star State.

What are some of the more touching or heartbreaking stories that you have come across during your archival research for ONE WAY HOME?
When I first started working on ONE WAY HOME, I began traveling with and filming some of Home for the Holidays, TX recipients. I also spent a lot of time speaking with some of the previous recipients who traveled home and returned to ASD in Dallas. While this was very emotional, I've found that the most heartbreaking stories are written into the paper applications of individuals who have gone home over time. For some individuals, this paper trail is all that remains of their story. Rodd, with other volunteers, has worked to send individuals home as far as Kenya, and to far away remote places in Peru. This has included working with consulates, delegates, and state representatives for international travel assistance--and yet this strong and small group in Texas remains the only resource for funeral and travel costs in the US.

When I realized how moving and powerful these written testaments were, I began returning to Dallas to digitize their archives. During my last two trips to Dallas, I would sit by myself to read through them and sob. While we may or may not have biological family with which we call "home," everyone has a place that they hope to return to in an effort to not feel alone, and this is the simple goal of this community. There is not a single story that I think of as the most heartbreaking, but I feel a cumulative amount of hurt and loss for my own community and for these individual's families.

How does Texas and the South as a setting play into the narrative of the work?
There is a tremendous need to tell stories like these around HIV and AIDS, moving away from the traditional nostalgia of the past, and into the present. Like most in the U.S., Texans diagnosed with HIV are living longer, but there is a growing number of teens and young adults testing positive. Dallas county has remained the highest in the state with it's percentage of newly diagnosed between 13-25, and yet the state refuses to teach anything except abstinence only education. Texans in general are very proud individuals, and they will be able to engage with a history that's been under-represented throughout the south.

Although I am a Texan, and this work is derived from a strong Texan community, my intended audience includes students, caregivers, activists, researchers, friends and lovers of those afflicted by terminal disease, Texans and others in the south, digital journalists, educators, and other individuals living with HIV and AIDS. In opposition to safe sex, talking about HIV/AIDS and homosexuality, participants will be interested based on their curiosity, objection with the subject matter, their moral hesitations and fear.

ONE WAY HOME has been a project described as "exploring HIV/AIDS through the eyes and voices of those most affected by the disease." In what ways is this the case, and why was that a priority for you as you developed the project?
This has remained a priority for me throughout this project, and has in a lot of ways been one of

the most difficult parts as well. While I do have this community that I am a part of to record, interview, and document, many of the travelers whose stories I am telling no longer remain living. There has always been a disconnect between the community raising these funds and purchasing these tickets, and the individuals whom they help. For example, tickets are given to travelers through their caseworkers--and travelers rarely meet the members of Home for the Holidays, TX who are making it happen. I feel like I've worked somewhere between the two communities to make this project, and witnessing these distinctions has strengthened the project but also made it difficult for me to tell.

HIV and AIDS do not discriminate on whom they infect, and with that same notion Home for the Holidays, TX does not discriminate on whom they help get home. HIV and AIDS has killed more than 25 million people worldwide and in Texas it kills roughly 1,300 every year. When someone tested positive 15 or 20 years ago, there was a loving LGBT community that took on this epidemic as a shared responsibility, that put their arms around you and said, 'We will get through this together.' This project speaks volumes to the isolation and disassociation that most LGBT individuals, including myself, feel from their biological families. All of the experiences and challenges within this project are directly built from the collected stories of the charity queens, and reflect the need for many LGBT community members to forge their own communities for support.

Where has ONE WAY HOME been exhibited and what was the response? How do you envision the project growing over time?
Excerpts of ONE WAY HOME have been screened and have won awards in Texas, Boston, Florida, New York, and California--but the project is still being created. I'm to the point now where I have to have funding to complete ONE WAY HOME, and am applying to a number of sources to make it happen. I've located the photo booth I plan to purchase and build from, and have continuously worked with a number of individuals to plan for completion. I'm hoping to begin exhibiting ONE WAY HOME as a completed project in the summer and fall of 2015, beginning in Texas. It will be interesting to see how the project evolves based on its location, and how the un-telling of stories continue to build new experiences among its viewers.

Liss LaFleur is a New Media artist whose work blends documentary, digital, and experimental modes of representation to explore issues of gender+sexuality, identity, loss, and community. At the core of her practice is a concern with mortality and materiality. By investigating historic parallelism, she creates projects that challenge the interaction and participation of subject, viewer and maker.

LaFleur was named one of "10 to Watch" in 2014 by Independent Magazine, and her work has been featured internationally in solo and juried exhibitions, film festivals, and on the web including: the TATE Modern, Cannes Court Métrage; online with PBS and POV Digital; the Boston LGBT Film Festival; the Reykjavik Art Museum; Makeshift Boston, and at many colleges and universities nationwide. Her interdisciplinary projects include: linear films, photography/sound/video installations, web based and transmedia experiences, and neon

narratives.

LaFleur is the visiting artist and assistant professor of digital and new media at Davidson College. She earned her MFA in media art as a digital fellow at Emerson College, and received a BFA in photography and a BA in art history with honors from the University of North Texas. She is the founder of the New England Graduate Media Symposium, and in 2013 she was a researcher exploring transmedia activism in LGBT + Queer grassroots initiatives as part of a Ford Foundation funded initiative called OUT FOR CHANGE at the MIT Media Lab.

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