Lust for Life: NYC Street Artists Raise HIV/AIDS Awareness

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By Casey Halter



On Friday, February 6, POZ checked out the opening of Lust for Life, a new HIV/AIDS prevention and awareness campaign celebrating NYC street artists.

Put together by ONE Condoms, Urban Outfitters and renowned graffiti artist Billi Kid, the exhibit features 22 artists who have been working hard over the last few weeks to transform replica stop signs into powerful messages about HIV prevention and safer sex.

The striking works of one-of-a-kind art are being auctioned off online to benefit Lifebeat, a national nonprofit organization that provides HIV outreach and support to young people in urban communities. ONE Condoms is also using the designs to launch a new condom line that will be sold across the country to benefit HIV outreach.

Lust for Life's kickoff party took place in the heart of Manhattan's Herald Square and featured live graffiti art, turntable beats, and free beer from local distillery Brooklyn Brewery. While navigating the crowds at the very hip, very crowded event, we caught up with the exhibit's main artist, curator, and idea man, Billi Kid, to talk about the campaign:

POZ: How did you get involved in HIV/AIDS awareness and this project with ONE Condoms?

Kid: It goes back to my years in school here in New York. I went to Parsons and I was good friends with Ali Gertz. She was a wonderful designer, very smart, very affluent girl and she was one of the first women activists to talk about HIV/AIDS. At the time it was a gay disease, and she was one of the first activists to kind of promote the idea that HIV/AIDS does not discriminate. That was kind of my first introduction to this terrible disease. And then throughout the years in New York and my career in advertising post-Parsons, I've had many friends and colleagues who have succumbed to HIV/AIDS.

I've done my part wherever I can, contributing either at work or with money, but I've never done something where I took initiative. This project came out when I met ONE Condoms and decided that there was still one pocket that needed awareness, which is the urban community. I'm a curator, I'm a street artist and I work with a lot of other street artists. Our concept was that if we created a peer-to-peer program, we might cut through the clutter of communication and actually make a difference.

POZ: How did you curate the group of artists who are contributing to the show today?

Kid: Most of them are based in New York. These are the artists that I come to time and time again: great friends, super-talented people that can take a concept and actually run with it.

[The line-up of artists who contributed to the Lust for Life campaign include Shiro, Skewville, Street Grapes, URNY, Veng RWK, Cope2, ChrisRWK, Col Wallnuts, The Dude Company, Chris Stain, Joe Lurato, Gumshoe, El Sol 25, Chris Uphues, Fumero, Raquel Echanique, Peat Wallaeger, Cake, Cern, David Cooper, and Elle]

POZ: What types of messages are you guys trying to put out with these stop signs?

Kid: In a lot of the work that I do as a curator, I like to provide the same canvas to the artists: I love to see what the outcome is when everyone is given the same assignment, the same blank paper. In this case it's a stop sign, and I think that symbolism, in itself, already has a message. So I didn't want them to focus on a particular "Stop AIDS" message, but instead, really focus on their art and then use social media and their social networking skills to get it out to their peers. I think the main goal of it is that if you succeed in reaching these people, then maybe the stop sign will take a different symbol. Next time, perhaps when you see a stop sign, you'll think of this program.

POZ: Why street art? What's the benefit of using this medium to help raise AIDS awareness?

Kid: In terms of urban communities, this is one area that really hasn't been well-marketed to in terms of safe sex and sex messaging. There's still a stigma around the use of condoms and I think our use of creative talent in the urban communities creates a new peer-to-peer program, so it's basically talking to our younger brothers and sisters.

POZ: How can people, both in NYC and elsewhere, get involved with Lust for Life?

Kid: One of the great things that our partner, ONE Condoms, is doing is that it took some of the artwork and created condom packaging with it. Those will be distributed across the nation at urban clinics, along with safe-sex messaging. Our hope is that if the campaign grows--and it's already getting a lot of buzz on social media--that other partners will come into the fold and we can follow suit in other cities, San Francisco perhaps, or Chicago, and then to go beyond Life Beats and reach out to other organizations that cater to HIV/AIDS awareness in the urban communities.

The Lust for Life stop signs will be on display at the Urban Outfitters store in NYC's Herald Square through Friday, February 20. The online auction for the signs ends that day at 5 p.m. Visitors to the store are encouraged to post photos of the artwork on social media using #LustforLife #DonateOne and @onecondoms. For every post, one condom will be donated to an urban HIV outreach program.

For more information about the HIV/AIDS awareness initiative, check out ONE Condoms' Lust for Life campaign on the web.

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