Pavel Zoubok: ’Visual AIDS is the only organization in the AIDS community that is specific to contemporary art.’

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Eric Rhein, “Lovers (Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Ross Laycock)” (2015), from Leaves, an AIDS Memorial, conceived in 1996. Wire and paper. Available for purchase on Paddle8.

The 10th annual Visual AIDS Vanguard Awards (VAVA VOOM) recognize the contributions of individuals who, through their work, talent and dedication, strengthen our communities and reinforce the mission of Visual AIDS. In celebration of the 10th anniversary of the benefit, Visual AIDS intern Kyle Croft spoke with Pavel Zoubok, former vice president of the board of directors at Visual AIDS, about the founding of the first VAVA and his support of HIV-positive artists. Pavel is also the owner of Pavel Zoubok Gallery, which exhibits a range of work in the fields of collage, assemblage, and mixed media installation.

I thought you could start by telling us a little bit about how you got involved with Visual AIDS.
I must have gotten involved with Visual AIDS in 2005, as this is the 10th anniversary of the spring benefit. I went to the tail end of Postcards From the Edge with Sur Rodney Sur, who is a longtime friend and colleague. I started asking him about the organization--its mission and activities were already known to me, but one of the things I asked him was how many gallery owners were involved with the organization and supporting it. At the time the number was about three...and this is out of an enormous community of gallery people. What I realized right away was, here’s this established, important organization doing important work, and the artists--who are by and large the most economically vulnerable--are doing all the work, and supporting it financially, when really all of us have a stake in not only preserving the legacies of the incredible people that we lost, but also in supporting people who are living with HIV and making art.

Frankly, it just shocked me that the number of gallery owners involved was so small. So before I officially joined the board I decided to organize a fundraiser in my gallery, which at the time was a much smaller space on West 23rd Street, and we started it in this modest way. I borrowed the space next door so that we’d have a little extra room and I put together a group of co-chairs, which included Jamie Drake, longtime chairman of the Alpha Workshops and a renowned interior designer; John Lyons, a very well-known movie producer; and Liz O’Brien, who’s a marvelous antiques dealer with an impeccable eye. I was thinking that here are three people from related but different worlds, and that we could probably put together a nice evening and raise some money. Christopher Tanner and his merry band of fabulously talented people: Armen Ra on the theramin, countertenor Benjamin Marcantoni and pianist Lance Cruce.

We had about 100 or so people and raised about $15,000 after expenses.

The event did what it was setting out to do, which was introduce more of the dealers to the conversation around Visual AIDS. The second one we did was out at the Frying Pan on the river. We had Rosie Perez as a presenter and honored Barton Lidice Benes, and John Kelly performed. And that became the beginning of this spring benefit. As I got onto the board, the benefit evolved into an annual event and we did the bowling version of it for a few years.

Over the years it's changed, it's evolved. The composition of the board started to change as well. It marked the beginning of our expanding the community of support. It's kind of extraordinary now that this little benefit has evolved into what it is today, 10 years on!

Could you tell us a bit more about how VAVA has evolved?
Besides just being bigger and better, I think that the change in the benefit mirrored the change in the organization itself. When I was on the board there was a whole process of strategic planning and redefining of the mission and identity of Visual AIDS. Part of it had to do with the change in the AIDS landscape--who are we targeting and why, and which aspects of our activities are really going to be our focus? It's a different world now, and we're always battling this perception that somehow AIDS is no longer an issue. In the realm of non-profits raising money for programs, that means that you're competing with all these other equally worthy causes and organizations.

The biggest change with VAVA is the diversity of who gets involved. That's the part that makes me particularly happy, that more and more dealers got involved, more and more collectors got involved, and some of the artists who have been fortunate enough to achieve great success recognized the importance of getting involved. Visual AIDS is a really unique organization. It's the only organization in the AIDS community that is really specific to our world, the contemporary art world. And so to my mind, because this pandemic played such a vital role in our story, it's our responsibility to get behind it and to make sure that the facts and, more importantly, the images of that story are preserved, are told, are shared, and that the lessons are passed on.

The art world is primarily about the artists, but that means all the rest of us who are involved--curators, collectors, art dealers, so on--we have a responsibility to be a part of this conversation and to be a part of the support structure more than anything. Certainly as a gay man living in New York City for 25 years, I know that my story is possible because of lots of other people's stories that either continue or were cut short. These friends and colleagues taught me, they kept me safe, they inspired me, they opened all kinds of doors and windows, and I'm definitely a believer in paying that forward.

Can you talk a little about how you've worked to preserve and share those stories as a gallerist? I know you had a close relationship with Barton Benes, who was a Visual AIDS board member and artist member.
I started my business in 1997 and in a way, the 19 years that I've been doing this have coincided with the explosion of the internet. There are people that were an important part of my formation as a New Yorker, as an art person, who died in the '90s. And when you Google some of them, they don't show up at all. Some of them weren't art world people per se, but they were friends of mine who were always really supportive of my work in the art world, and of my interest in art when I was younger. It strikes me as such a funny thing that to people on the outside it's like they were never here because they don't show up on some stupid search engine.

Artists have this really unique circumstance when it comes to this question because they have the work, and the work continues to exist and to sort of embody something about who they were in the world. So I've always been a big believer in documenting, publications, all of that.

I think I probably met Barton (Benes) in the mid-'90s when I lived across from Westbeth [Artists Community]. I met him through an artist, Joan Hall, who I showed and was his next-door neighbor. He was such an incredible person, and somebody who I'd always wanted to work with. He was with another gallery that I admire and like personally very much, so I would always include him in group shows whenever I could. And when he came to me and said he wanted to show with me, it was a no-brainer. I was delighted.

Are you still showing his work?
Absolutely. We're have two related exhibitions opening in September, Benes and Eric Rhein, who is also a long time VA archive member. The exhibitions have more to do with other themes in their work, but in our Cabinet, which is the small gallery, we're going to do a conversation focusing on the AIDS-related works by those two artists. I think it's an important conversation to have, bringing the two of them together, but the whole point of the two shows individually and collectively is to talk about their work outside of that context as well. I'm very excited about that, because both of them were voracious collectors of objects and organizers of visual information; each making his own Wunderkammer.

Kyle Croft is a graduate of the University of Washington and is interning at Visual AIDS. He has also worked with MIX NYC and Reteaching Gender & Sexuality in Seattle.

For more on Eric Rhein, see the June 2015 POZ feature "The Course of His Life."

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