’The collective is indeed a flash: it is a sudden rush of energy that occurs when all points touch.’

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Artist and activist Avram Finkelstein is collaborating with Visual AIDS on a public intervention for the New Museum’s IDEAS CITY Festival, centered on engaging the public in dialogue around the question “What is undetectable?” Full May 30 event information for What Is Undetectable? can be found here.

Finkelstein describes his thoughts around his Flash Collective model this way:

The Flash Collective is a new paradigm I have developed for rethinking the public sphere, an experiment in political art-making in which I assemble a collective of limited duration to produce a single intervention in a public space. It is a social practice that focuses the skills drawn on in collective decision-making with a surgical and fast-paced format intended to cut directly to the point of the work, content. The flash collective is a result-oriented exercise aimed at the very core of social engagement, collective action. After decades of lecturing on the topic, I have come to realize that the answer to the question of how to re-engage a public with the issues surrounding HIV/AIDS in the present doesn't lie in looking at the canon of cultural production from those early days, such as Silence=Death. It's in looking through these works, to the resistance strategies that brought them into being in the first place. That's how we might imagine alternative models for the activation of our social spaces.

Learn more about projects created by many of Finkelstein's flash collectives here.

Here, members of the recent New York Public Library Flash Collective talk about the process and message of their project.

Jano Cortijo: Working with the flash collective was a fruitful and challenging experience. It was great to have everyone openly contribute and respectfully discuss each others' ideas to arrive at an agreement about what our message would be. I personally valued how eloquently and passionately everyone spoke not only from personal but professional experience until we agreed on what the best approach and message about undetectability was.

Nick Kleist: With flash collectivization, there is an instantaneous community that emerges, focused around the intersection of art and activism. During the Undetactability flash collective, a group of individuals, from varying backgrounds, met to discuss the current stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS. As the youngest member of the group I found this an open platform not only for my knowledge, but also a resource for information and stories I could not have gotten anywhere else. The flash collective provides support for one another because it brings varied persons together in physical space; however, when we needed to separate and perform tasks for the collective outside of our time at the New York Public Library, there was not necessarily the same level of community. The collective is indeed a flash, it is a sudden rush of energy that occurs when all points touch. It was at this point that our discussion was at its most kinetic. Our final product describes our process, as an artifact of our discussions. It describes how we came together and took notation of how we came to understand the stigma surrounding not only the term 'undetectable' but also our understanding of the stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS.

Alina Oswald: Being kind of a lone wolf, especially when working on projects, meant that becoming part of a collective--an artistic collective for that matter--was quite an experience.

I really didn't know what to expect, but the process of getting to the Undetectable...artwork was an eye-opening one for me. It also made so much sense, choosing undetectable as a topic for the collective.

It's timely, and I guess it will be for a while, in more ways than one. Like HIV/AIDS, undetectable (the HIV status) is not only a medical term, but it involves every aspect of one's life. It represents a status of our health, and also our ability to maintain and pay for that health status. It crosses boundaries from personal (one's body or health/disease) into public spheres, defining a socio-economic and/or class status. Also like HIV/AIDS, maybe the face of undetectability will be a fluid one, always changing. It defines a status some people can afford only for finite periods of time. But, with advances in technology and medicine, what defines undetectability can change too.

Also, I think that undetectable (the HIV status) represents an important milestone in the ongoing process of finding a cure for AIDS. In many ways, undetectable is the closest we've come to a cure so far, and yet, it is not a cure.

Could an undetectable status or even the possibility, in rare instances so far, of a functional cure, add to the already rising AIDS complacency? And how would that affect the fight for an actual,

affordable cure for all individuals living with the virus? Maybe that’s a completely different question, for another time.... Or maybe the question is: Can we afford not to want it all (a cure) and to want it now? Does a functional cure or an undetectable status keep us from having it all and from reaching the goal, or are they only stepping-stones on our way to a cure?

Avram Finkelstein is a founding member of the collective responsible for Silence=Death and AIDSGATE, which was recently included in Regarding Warhol: Sixty Artists, Fifty Years at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. He is also a founding member of the art collective Gran Fury, with whom he collaborated on public art projects for international institutions including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Venice Biennale, ArtForum, MOCA LA, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, Creative Time, and the Public Art Fund. The collective had its first retrospective at 80 WSE in 2012, and has work in the permanent collections of the Whitney, MoMA, the New Museum and The New York Public Library. His recent workshops and lectures focus on the Flash Collective, and he has already conducted Flash Collectives for New York University, the HIV Is Not a Crime Conference, Concordia University, the New York Public Library, the Helix Queer Performance Network, and the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics, has spoken about them at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Yale, the New School, SUNY, and for Visual AIDS, and has upcoming workshops at several major museums and universities in 2015.

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