’I’ve been thinking about how urban narratives shape sexual health programs, education, and access.’

July 29, 2015 By Visual AIDS

Documentation of Collage Workshop with Valley AIDS Network clients, 2015

Xon Henry and Hermelinda Cortes are two Southern queers from rural Virginia who collaborate on building cultural, spiritual and political resiliency for LGBTQ people in the small town they live in. Visual AIDS publishes here a conversation between them.

Hermelinda: Xon and I met in Richmond around 2011 when I was organizing a listening campaign in Virginia with Southerners On New Ground (SONG). As an organization we were doing these listening campaigns in four Southern states to help inform the future of our work. This was right before our 20th anniversary and on the tail end of strategizing about how to work in the South post-Hurricane Katrina. SONG is a grassroots, membership based organization for southern LGBTQ people and our membership is multi-racial, multi-generational, and multi-classed. So, obviously, a lot of our people, and ourselves as organizers deeply connected in our communities, were facing some huge questions and had big needs for our region. Katrina affected us as an organization drastically. We were getting calls from folks saying everything was underwater. People were dealing with day-to-day survival--trying to find food, their meds, etc.--and Katrina just amplified how much the state and both public and private infrastructure was failing us.

Xon: When we met, I was the president of the Student Alliance for Sexual Diversity at the University of Richmond. We were a new group interested in pushing an activist agenda at the university; our main focus was getting the university to add gender identity and gender expression to its non-discrimination policy, which would make us the first in the state. At the same time, we are also hoping to break the campus bubble at our school. I was coming into my own politic and art praxis and hadn't learned that I could actually combine my politics and art together.

Hermelinda: I don't think either of us realized how important our brief overlap in Richmond was or how much we would collaborate until a couple of years later when we were both living where we are now in Harrisonburg, Virginia. We are both people who had significant access to LGBTQ life and networks through our work in both art and activism, but I think we both found living in a small southern atmosphere again to be isolating in a number of ways. Growing up in Augusta County on a small family farm, I was somewhat used to this experience as a young queer person before the time of social media and Ellen. Even so, it always felt important for me to come back here and I think the collaborations that Xon and I have engaged in around arts and culture and politics has been about breaking that isolation for ourselves and for other LGBTQ people here.

Xon: I grew up in Rappahannock County in Virginia, which is arguably one of the most rural counties in the commonwealth as it doesn't have a single stoplight and only recently got cell towers. Our graduating classes for the county never really exceeded 100. I didn't really know any queer people or culture as a kid. Did I mention we didn't really get any TV reception? I really connect to Hermelinda's feelings of isolation and misunderstanding. My only real exposure to HIV/AIDS was through narratives that cast it as a punishment for sin and consequently as a death sentence.

In retrospect, I was probably pretty lucky to have had a radical sex ed teacher during my senior year of high school who actually went against abstinence only education and taught us about putting condoms on bananas, albeit nothing about anal sex. It wasn't until late in my undergrad career that I learned about (free) HIV testing, and actually had my first test with Fan Free Clinic in Richmond. While in Richmond, one of my long-term boyfriends was the main caregiver to a relative living with AIDS/HIV; it became a regular conversation in our relationship, which proved to be very illuminating. When I moved to New York City for grad school at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, I was astounded to learn about all the various resources, organizations, histories, exhibitions, and groups dealing with the issue of HIV/AIDS. I was actually a little nervous about moving back to Virginia because I had grown a bit accustomed to all these resources.

Hermelinda: Where we live, like many places in the South, there is only one AIDS organization that serves a very large geographic area and we just found out that a clinic over the mountain that provides crucial resources to HIV+/AIDS people is about to close. So, there is this element to our collaborative work that has to deal with the reality that as an entity we don't have the resources to provide direct services to the LGBTQ community that can seem really overwhelming. I think though that we are hopeful that engaging our people in a way around organizing and activism and art can be our contribution to lifting up people's spirits and building the relationships we need that directly contributes to our survival.

Xon: I am always excited by the potentials of collaboration; it's one reason I initiated the Old Furnace Artist Residency (OFAR) project, because I wanted to create a platform for collaboration around social justice. OFAR recently collaborated with our local HIV/AIDS service organization, Valley AIDS Network, on a collage making workshop; the collages will be released in the next edition of SLAG Mag.

One of the region's largest organization, THRIVE, just announced they will be closing down, as Hermelinda mentioned. I was recently as a conference presentation on PrEP that encouraged folks to go onto it. When I got home, I called a few local doctors in my area. Most didn't even know of the drug or didn't feel comfortable prescribing it. I ended up getting a referral to the University of Virginia's Infectious Disease and International Health Department, which would equate to about a three-hour round trip commute.

As of late, I've been really thinking about how urban narratives shape sexual health programs, education, and access. This was some of the framing question behind Hermelinda's and my first official collaboration in Harrisonburg, the Southern Homo edition of SLAG Mag. That edition uplifted artists who identified as queer and Southern. It proved to be a very interesting and inspiring project because I got exposed to artists I didn't know about and whose work touched upon issues and concepts that inspire, influence and intersect within my practice.

Hermelinda: That collaboration was really great for me, because it brought me back to thinking about the cultural part of organizing which feels like it can get subsumed by the sometimes rapid pace of campaign organizing. Doing cultural work and building cultural resiliency has always been such a huge part of our movement. I think about the role that drag queens have played on our

journey to get free. I think about the AIDS quilt. I think about the writing of James Baldwin and Audre Lorde. I think about my friend in North Carolina who is working on a collaborative illustrated Southern queer tarot deck called Slow Holler. All of these pieces of culture are absolutely necessary and SLAG Mag was a place for me to reinsert and re-imagine my own participation in that part of liberation.

Xon: I think the idea of re-imagining and cultural citizenship is something that is coming back to general activism. The U.S. Department of Arts and Culture is a prime example of the new entanglement between activism, art, culture and politics. After we collaborated on SLAG Mag, we wanted to further our entanglement, which launched We Are Here. We Are Here, is exploring how culture and community might shape queer activism. So far, we've organized queer skate nights, brunches, postering campaigns and movie nights.

Hermelinda: We think this is why the work of Visual Aids is so important, necessary, and helpful in all kinds of different contexts, like the recent interview with Luna Luis Ortiz. Those parts of our history are lost without work from people like Visual Aids.

Xon: I learned first about Visual AIDS during this time through the first condom giveaway campaign, "Play SmART." I was a campus organizer at the University of Richmond, and we are always on the lookout for engaging (and free) opportunities. After receiving some condoms from Visual AIDS, I just got onto the listserv and have stayed attuned to your work. I finally had a better understanding of the organization when I lived in New York City via my advisor at NYU, Pato Hebert; It was very inspiring to learn about the deep and continued impact of the work.

After organizing Harrisonburg's open call unJURIED exhibition, it's hard for me to create hierarchies of favorites, but I do find the work of Sunil Gupta and Robert Getso in the Visual Aids online Artist Registry+. Their work has expansive impact in relationship to the viewer through its expansive connections, histories, and feelings.

Hermelinda: I'm always prone to photography. I love the work of W. Benjamin Incerti and Kia Labeija.

Xon: We are currently gearing up for the relaunch of Pride in Shenandoah Valley and we are hoping to incorporate elements of visual arts into this year's Pride.

Jon/Xon grew up in Virginia's Blue Ridge mountains and xe is now pursuing an MFA in Studio Art from James Madison University. Along this journey, xe has received fellowships and grants from xer respective universities, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Mildred's Lanes, and Arts Council of the Valley. They currently organize/create/manage/live the Old Furnace Artist Residency in Harrisonburg, Virginia.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.