To Fight Another Day: The Myth of the AIDS Queer Artist Gap

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Kia Labeija, “My Mother’s Chair”, 2013

For over 25 years, MIX NYC has a been a site for intense and necessary discussions around evolving understandings of queer identity as they relate to art-making practices. So it comes as little surprise that during the 2014 MIX Festival in November, charged conversations were had and poignant moments resulted. During the Q&A for Stéphane Gérard's film History Doesn't Have to Repeat Itself, rosza daniel lang/levitsky made an incisive comment about the "AIDS Queer Artist Gap," and Visual AIDS was listening. Rosza has since turned his comment on AIDS, art, and generation gaps into the longer piece below.

There's an idea going around in the world of North American queer culture that there's a deep generational gap somewhere between thirtyish and fortyish; that queer culture has suffered a deep interruption; that intergenerational ties have been broken; and that all of this is a direct result of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and in particular of the first, pre-antiretrovirals wave of illness and death.

It's an idea that seems to have taken particular hold among white gay and queer men (both cisgender and trans) in their early 30s and younger, but that has some exponents in older cohorts and across a wider gender range (though I've met few among lesbians and queer women, cis or trans, of any age). In my New York City context, it has been most visible in the rhetoric surrounding the production projects of Dan Fishback ("Squirts," at La MaMa, in particular), the Queer/Art/Mentorship outgrowth of Ira Sachs' Queer/Art/Film series, and a few other production efforts. Christopher Carbone's article for Slate, "The Velvet Silence: Mentoring Across the AIDS Queer Artist Gap," is an excellent sample of how it presents itself. I'm sure folks in other queer cultural hubs can fill in their own local equivalents.

In writing a critique of this idea--which I believe is untrue and has toxic consequences--I'm not accusing the folks who've taken the initiative in creating and publicizing these projects of any kind of maliciousness or calling them ill-intentioned. These are colleagues whose work I deeply appreciate, many of them also my good friends and valued artistic collaborators. I'm writing in part because I don't want to see their fantastic work tied to this unfortunate framework.

I'm also in no way disputing either the deep impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on practically every aspect of queer culture, or the importance of cultivating intergenerational connections and mutual support among queer and trans cultural workers. Having come out publicly somewhat before Andrew Sullivan notoriously claimed that "AIDS is over," and having been supported in developing my craft as a cultural worker and political organizer by many queers of previous cohorts (ACT UP veterans in particular), those are both bone-deep truths for me.

What I am going after, to be very clear, is the claim of an "AIDS queer artist gap"--the specific argument that I'm hearing circulate in my communities, and seeing used to leverage both cultural capital and monetary resources.

Chloe Dzubilo, “Untitled (Pier Queens),” 2008

Queer Artist

I need to start by saying a word about “queer culture.” This is the framing, in various versions (“queer artistic community,” “queer performance,” “a queer cultural legacy”) that the “AIDS queer artist gap” rhetoric uses.

There are two, somewhat contradictory definitions of “queer” in use right now. I think the understanding of “queer culture” at play here stands right at the point where they come closest to each other, so I won’t go too far into it, but I think the tension here is important to name.

One is as an umbrella identity term for folks who aren’t heterosexual: gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, sometimes trans and gender-nonconforming folks, and sometimes folks with other, culturally specific identities (same-gender-loving; two-spirit; AG; etc.).

The other is as a term aimed at cultivating political affinity among folks outside the enforced boundaries of “normal” sexuality and gender--gay men and lesbians who do not aspire to married normalcy; poor single mothers used as pawns in debates about public assistance; out trans and gender-nonconforming folks; publicly polyamorous heterosexual folks; folks whose culturally specific identities make them illegible to or targeted by the dominant culture; etc.

The first is an assertion of underlying similarity, leading to shared identity; the latter a commitment to difference, leading to mutual solidarity.[1]

Using either version of “queer,” queer culture is a many splendored thing. As the projects I mentioned earlier describe it--and make it visible in their groups of participating artists--it is the shared creation of a diverse group of cultural workers. Diverse in racial/ethnic terms (passively, under the “umbrella” definition; as an active commitment under the “political” one), but also diverse in gender and specific sexuality: gay men, lesbians, queer-identified folks of many genders, trans and gender non-conforming folks, and more. In this, it’s quite distinct from either specifically gay male culture or specifically lesbian culture, both of which are quite consciously single-gender[2] (though each has its cross-gender icons, understood as figures outside of the culture and its creators).

This separation between queer culture and both gay male and lesbian cultures is grounded in a long history of divergence, and in a fairly clear division of primary commitment. A fair number of individuals move back and forth as participants in queer culture and gay male or lesbian culture; very few are central figures on both sides of the line. This is especially true of gay male culture: while many areas of lesbian culture have moved into close connection with queer culture over the past 20 years, gay male culture has remained determinedly separate. [3]

Larry Mitchell and Ned Asta, for instance, in their 1977 The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions, make it very clear that what it means for “the faggots” to have ceased to be “the men who love men” is that now they learn from and live closely with “the women who love women” and “the queens,” with whom they jointly create the culture of “the dykalets and the faggatinas.” That multi-gender culture, as much as the closet, is what separates them from “the queer men,” who only associate with each other. The terminological reversal may be confusing, but the distinction being made is clear. We can see the same division now: the same men are not on the dance floor at Hey Queen and Vandam or in the audience for “Squirts” and “Arias with a Twist.”

So what does the idea of an “AIDS queer artist gap” do to how we understand queer culture?

Chloe Dzubilo, “Untitled (Pyramid Club),” 2008

Artist Gap

First of all, it erases the specific people who have been most important in carrying queer culture forward over the past two decades--the precise people who mentored the generation of gay male artists who’re now promoting the “gap” myth.

I’m going to talk here about my own cultural home: the sprawling queer performance world that emerged in the late 1960s, especially on the Lower East Side, and blossomed by the 1980s. My impression is that a similar story could be told about most other geographic centers of queer culture; I can’t offer details for other places, so I won’t try. What made that performance scene queer was the intermingling of gay men, lesbians, trans women, and other freaks (including some heterosexual ones) in companies like Charles Ludlam’s Ridiculous Theater, at performance venues like the Pyramid Club and P.S.122, in theater audiences, dance clubs, bands, political projects, and street demonstrations.

The epidemic killed many people from that world--Charles Ludlam, Ethyl Eichelberger, and Cookie Mueller being only a few of the selection memorialized in Ira Sachs' haunting film Last Address.

The survivors, however, have been notable in the amount of energy they've put into mentoring younger artists. Jennifer Miller, Jenny Romaine, Carmelita Tropicana, Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver, Deb Margolin, Jack Waters, Peter Cramer: all visible for decades as supporters of the cohorts that have come after them, and still very actively giving younger artists opportunities to present work as well as honoring them with advice and loving guidance. And, in most cases if not all, deeply involved in AIDS activism during ACT UP's crucial years and beyond.

It's not a coincidence that most of the folks I just named, who the "AIDS queer artist gap" erases, are women: because of the epidemic's demographics; because of social expectations of women as givers of support and care; because that's who's easiest (for gay men, in particular) to dismiss as not really having been there at all. This misogyny is not incidental to the myth of the "gap"--it's central to its appeal to young white gay men (cis and trans alike), and to its effectiveness at drawing funding from institutional sources.

Maybe there would be a case to be made for an absence of mentorship if we were talking about gay male culture. I don't know; it's not my world. But for queer culture, it's simply not true, and deeply insulting to the work many queer artists have done and continue to do to ensure the vitality of these artistic lineages.

Jack Waters, “Aktion” Painting #9 (August 2007) -- performance by Inbred Hybrid Collective: Peter Cramer, Jack Waters, Marc Arthur, Dominic CloutierpPhoto documentation by Patrick Maloney

Queer Gap

Second, it puts white gay men at the center of queer culture, and makes it sound legitimate to keep them there.

The projects I’ve been using as my reference points have done a pretty solid job of supporting young queer cultural workers of many genders and racial/ethnic backgrounds, though there’s still an extremely noticeable absence of trans women, and other, perhaps less glaring, gaps. That makes it all the more visible not only that the older generation of artists they present is so overwhelmingly white, but that both are initiatives founded and run by white gay men.

The contrast is even starker when these newly launched projects are compared to other efforts to provide young queer artists with places to present their work. Take, for instance, Heels on Wheels, a working-class-femme-led production company whose Opentoe Peepshow presents monthly showcases of queer and trans performance. Or Cabaret Cataplexy, a black-queer-centered variety

theater series. Or, for that matter, Circus Amok's Works in Process series, which presented several dozen queer artists in its largest six-month season.

None of these projects has received anything like the level of attention and--more importantly--material resources and institutional support that "Squirts" and "Q/A/M" have enjoyed. Each of the three has a curation team that more directly reflects the artists they present (race- and gender-mixed queer, largely femme; black gender-mixed queer; all-over-the-map queer and trans), all have been around longer, and each is helmed by artists with more extensive experience as performance producers.

The "gap" framing has been a large part of what's made these particular projects led by white gay men so high-profile, both in terms of visibility and access to resources. Why? Because the situation we see in these projects, sadly, closely reflects what typically happens around HIV/AIDS. We know the realities of the epidemic among queer and trans folks in North America: trans women of color, white trans women, gay men of color, and white gay men have been the hardest hit, in pretty much that order. But we also know that the public image of an HIV+ queer or trans person is still a white gay man.

The narratives around queer culture that are tied to the "AIDS queer artist gap" reflect that deep discontinuity between reality and image. For instance, Christopher Cardone's article in Slate mentions the ball scene in passing, and in the past tense. You'd never know that ball culture is still flourishing, and continuing into its second century[4] as a space where young queer and trans artists of color learn, thrive, and go on to mentor in their turn. Mentorship of queers of color by queers of color, of trans women by trans women--in an artistic community that's probably the one most affected by HIV/AIDS--is completely erased behind the "gap." Nothing to learn about mentorship there. No models to draw from, no master teachers to recruit. No: not while AIDS can still be thought of and rewritten as a white gay men's experience, and while cultural institutions reward those who perpetuate that myth.

And as long as that is the dominant version of who is at the center of the epidemic, defining queer culture in terms of HIV/AIDS in this way serves to legitimize continued white gay male gatekeeping at cultural institutions, which--I shouldn't need to point out--there's quite enough of already in the straight world, let alone ours.

AIDS Gap

Third, on the flip side, it obscures the actual current realities of the epidemic that is still killing our friends, comrades, lovers, artistic collaborators, colleagues, crushes, tricks, and neighbors.

Few people these days are willing to argue in a queer cultural context that "AIDS is over." There are amazing projects, both cultural and political, aimed at undoing the image of the epidemic (in the present or the past) as a white gay men's issue--a myth still believed among white queer and trans folks much more widely than it is voiced. Folks involved in both the projects that I've been

talking about are connected to that work, and are visible in support of it.

But spreading a narrative that puts HIV/AIDS at the center of queer culture and is used in aid of organizations led by white gay men does just the opposite. It doesn't contribute to changing understandings of the epidemic as it actually is and was. It only ties queer cultural work to a ship that queer cultural workers are rightly trying to capsize.

If queer cultural projects want to insist on a connection to the ongoing epidemic in the U.S. and beyond, shouldn't they support the political work that's sharpest and most clear about the realities of HIV/AIDS today? That's what has marked ACT UP as a queer organization, and what still distinguishes it from the gay organizations alongside it. And that's what's distinguished the ACT UP chapters that have maintained their vitality and effectiveness into the fourth decade of the epidemic from those that have not.

In that political lineage, too, there have been strong traditions of mentorship, both within the HIV/AIDS movement and beyond it; such strong ones that it's hard to understand how the idea of an "AIDS queer activist gap" can be taken so seriously. Take the Rude Mechanical Orchestra, for instance: the NYC radical brass band has a young queer and trans majority in its 50-person membership, some of whom may not even know that the project's consensus process, meeting structure, and flamboyant street presence are direct inheritances from ACT UP New York, by way of older queer and trans band members who worked in other projects with surviving members of the legendary Action Tours affinity group. This close interweaving of cultural work, organizing, agitation, and mentorship--in precisely the contexts where queers have focused most on AIDS--is yet another sign of how fictional the "gap" is.

AIDS Queer

What is to be done?

I don't think that's a particularly complicated or existentially troubling question here.

Let's build structures that connect queer and trans artists across generational and community lines, and help us support each other better. Let's learn how to do that from the ball houses and ACT UP veterans and others in our community who've been doing just that for years.

But let's be very clear and loud about why it's important: because queer culture is a real and living and deeply important thing; because young queer and trans folks are under attack by a straight society (both hetero- and homosexual) that does not want them to exist; because queer and trans cultural work is hideously under-supported; because older queer and trans folks have a lot to learn from those younger than us; because we've all experienced bad mentorship and can aspire to do better; because intergenerational friendships and artistic collaborations are amazing.

And, in parallel to that, let's look seriously at how HIV/AIDS affects our cultural communities, both through the legacy of the pre-antiretroviral years and in the present. Let's learn from the folks

who've been examining that for decades--starting even before the path-breaking specificity of Eric Rofes's proposals for "regenerating gay men's sexuality and culture in the ongoing epidemic." But let's build on his understanding that all queers are not gay men, and begin by being clear that there's not one single answer to that question: that a queer latinx genderqueer from Corona, a white gay cis man from Canarsie, an ex-hasidic trans dyke from Midwood, a same-gender-loving black butch queen from Harlem will all experience different effects, and that each will also be different depending on whether they're anchored in gay male, lesbian, or queer cultural worlds. And let's bring all of our craft and creativity to bear on today's struggles around HIV/AIDS. The epidemic is not over, and there's plenty of work to do.

But let's not pretend that these two are the same project. Let's let the toxic myth of an "AIDS queer artist gap" wither and fade away, and get on with our lives making amazing queer culture together. [5]

[1] The difference between the two definitions is probably best clarified with some concrete examples. Under the "umbrella" definition, Edith Windsor, a rich white lesbian committed to state-recognized marriage as a way of avoiding estate taxes, would be considered "queer," while a working-class Puerto Rican single mother targeted for nonconsensual sterilization or a heterosexual couple having a one-time-only internet hookup in a public park would be "straight." Under the "political" definition, the opposite would be true, as long as the latter two understood themselves to be under attack on the basis (among other things) of their "deviant" sexuality. Further, the "political" definition considers forced sterilization and public sex to be inherently "queer issues," while the "umbrella" definition does not.

It's also important to mention that "queer" has been much critiqued: as a term used mainly by and about white folks, as a term that subsumes lesbians under an identity category developed by gay men, as a term that implicitly denies the importance of particular identities to resistance and survival, and from several other angles as well. To me, Cathy Cohen's classic essay "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" is still probably the best critical assessment. Personally, I'm quite comfortable identifying with the "political" definition and much less so with the "umbrella" one, largely because I see the former as less subject to those critiques.

[2] And, usually, quite racially divided within themselves. The gay male cultures of, say, white Chelsea and black Bed-Stuy/Crown Heights are both quite strictly single-gender, but that's about all they have in common. By contrast, queer cultural circles tend to be gender-mixed (except for trans women) and racially mixed (except for black folks), and on occasion genuinely multi-gender and multi-racial. As far as class goes, in my experience queer scenes tend to talk a better game, and gay and lesbian scenes tend to be much more genuinely mixed-class if they have any class range at all.

[3] To my eye, that difference has a lot to do with the fading impact of the very queer culture of ACT UP on gay men in the antiretroviral age, and on the steadily rising impact of trans organizing on lesbian culture in the 1990s and 2000s. Figures like Justin Vivian Bond and Antony Hegarty, who

bridge gay and queer culture in a visible and iconic way, are signs that the difference may be ebbing over time.

[4] Yes, really. If not longer.

[5] Many thanks are due, as always, to the folks I've learned to think about these things from, and with. My teachers and mentors: Jenny Romaine, Bob Kohler, and Jennifer Miller, especially. The other folks involved in creating Between Two Worlds, or, who loved you before you were mine--Ezra Killer Sideburns Nepon, J Dellecave, Niknaz, and the whole cast and crew. All the ACT UP veterans I've had the honor, joy, and sometimes annoyance to work with over the years (Naomi Braine and Steve Quester, especially, as well as the whole Church Ladies for Choice coven), and the folks keeping that political legacy alive and vibrant (from JD Davids to Che Gossett, Suzy Subways to Mikiki, and onward). And everyone I've shared moments of saltiness with about this all--you know who you are.

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Recent and ongoing projects include: co-editing the anthology Dreaming in Public: Building the Occupy Movement with Amy Schrager Lang; devising radical purimshpils with the Aftselokhes Spectacle Committee; investigating the queer scrapbooks of Carl Van Vechten; organizing and agitating with Jews For Racial & Economic Justice, the Rude Mechanical Orchestra, and Red Umbrella Project; and experimenting with frontline choreography for street actions in Just Like That (workshops coming this spring through the iLANDing Laboratory Initiative!).

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