

Laura Stamm

# Becoming the Virus: Queer Art that Infects

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## Abstract

During the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, queer artists and activists were confronted with the question of how to redefine and implement queer politics. As the pandemic progressed, American artists such as Jenny Holzer and Félix González-Torres began to use the virus itself as a way to talk about a queer politics that infects public spaces and penetrates ideological barriers. Queer artists developed an awareness of the power of specific modes of representation and visual codes. In this essay, I explore how they infiltrated mainstream systems of representation by employing such codes. Codes of representation and institutional structures can, according to these artists, be used as the host body for a queer political virus, with this host, then, unwittingly attacking itself. Moreover, I return to queer rhetorical and artistic practices of the 1980s and 1990s AIDS crisis in order to not only chart an important queer history, but also to ask what these strategies might teach us now, or in the case of New York-based visual artist and AIDS activist Kia LaBeija, how these strategies appear now. These queer modes of representation do not necessarily belong to the AIDS crisis past; they persist in the present.

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Like dreams traversing the conscious and the unconscious, the parasite is opportunistic, searching for holes, openings. Politically speaking, to become the virus is to become the agent—the agency for change.

— Simon Leung (1991)<sup>1</sup>

During the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, queer artists and activists were confronted with the question of how to redefine and implement queer politics. As the pandemic progressed, American artists such as Jenny Holzer and Félix González-Torres began to use the virus itself as a way to talk about a queer politics that infects public spaces, infiltrates mainstream systems of representation, and penetrates ideological barriers. *Gran Fury*, ACT UP's graphic art faction, utilized pictorial conventions from advertising for posters that covered public spaces and buses with phrases like "Kissing Doesn't Kill: Greed and Indifference Do."<sup>2</sup> These often billboard-sized pieces utilized marketing parlance while also engaging with much of the hateful and homophobic discourse circulating during the AIDS crisis. *Gran Fury*, in other words, took advantage of a recognizable media form to spin accepted AIDS-crisis knowledge and to critique negligent institutions, echoing artist Jenny

Holzer's advice: "Use what is dominant in a culture to change it quickly."<sup>3</sup> Codes of representation and institutional structures can, according to these artists, be used as the host body for a queer political virus, with this host, then, unwittingly attacking itself. I return to queer rhetorical and artistic practices of the 1980s and 1990s AIDS crisis in order to not only chart an important queer history, but also to ask what these strategies might teach us now, or in the case of New York-based visual artist and AIDS activist Kia LaBeija, how these strategies appear now. LaBeija's *24* was first exhibited as part of Visual AIDS' gallery show "Ephemera as Evidence" (2014), placing her in a milieu of queer artists who use ephemera or mundane remains as the source material for representing queer life and history. Her work, however, is also tied to another queer history, that of Harlem's ballroom culture, with LaBeija serving as the current Mother of House of LaBeija. LaBeija's work reminds us that AIDS remains in our present, that bodies still live with the virus and need our political attention. Her photographs and videos follow a lineage of queer artists who embrace the parasitic nature of the HIV virus to become agents for change.

In 1993, years of queers' organizing against AIDS, González-Torres described his desire to infect the system as a sort of ideological guerilla

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warfare. He states:

Well, my first reaction was a very predictable leftist reaction which more and more I am questioning and finding very static and self-defeating. At this point I do not want to be outside the structure of power, [sic] I do not want to be the opposition, the alternative. Alternative to what? To power? No. I want to have power. It's effective in terms of change. I want to be like a virus that belongs to the institution. All the ideological apparatuses are, in other words, replicating themselves, because that's the way culture works. So if I function as a virus, an imposter, an infiltrator, I will always replicate myself together with those institutions.<sup>4</sup>

González-Torres begins with this image of being outside of the structure—outside of dominant culture—as a mainstay of leftist critique. He points to post-structuralist criticism's tendency to argue that making the mechanisms of ideological state apparatuses visible, and articulating a politics in opposition to power, is the only way to dismantle dominant structures. But González-Torres contends that creating art and political critique outside of power, in essence, makes one powerless. He argues that, instead, one should use their presumed outsider status to dismantle structures in power from within. The queer activist becomes an imposter through reverse transcription, an agent who slips inside ideological apparatuses' bodies and begins to replicate and transform the DNA codes. These notions of a virus entering a body and enacting change as an antibody might remind one of the Frankfurt School's hypodermic needle model of ideology, in which the passive masses are inoculated with ideology. Members of the public, instead of simply being hailed discursively, to paraphrase Louis Althusser, are injected with ideology and thus become a body of the state. In this model of ideology, the media-saturated culture industry permeates the body's surface and makes changes from the inside. Queer artists such as González-Torres, however, see a different possibility. Instead of being a prophylaxis, individuals can also act as a virus that slips inside the host body of the state.

For González-Torres and many other artists, their way into the body of the state was through the art museum. The museum is an established cultural institution, one that often receives government funding and one that people enter with respect and admiration. Michael Cohen, the assistant director and curator for 80 Washington Square East Gallery, discusses his battle to get Gran Fury's art into a museum. He explains: "It took quite a bit of convincing to get [Gran Fury] in an institutional gallery. They were like we've never had our work historicized or institutionalized[,] we don't want it. But I came up with the educational idea. It's an educational place where there is continuity between the past and the present."<sup>5</sup> Cohen convinced the art collective to "institutionalize" their work in 2012 with the promise that it will educate the public and tie together the political past, present, and future. But while it may have taken some coaxing to get Gran Fury's work into a museum, other artists have actively used the museum as a space for queer organization and strategizing. The "Homo Video: Where are We Now" exhibition (1986) at the New Museum in New York City, one of the earliest of its kind, sought to use film and video to "challenge the various ideological apparatuses which continue to harass, contain, and suppress the condition of homosexuality."<sup>6</sup> The museum's gallery space and contents are conventionally deemed culturally important, a space filled with art that speaks to the human experience. The museum, to paraphrase Cohen, uses material culture and cultural artifacts to reify the beliefs and social practices that all too frequently suppress queerness. Yet, by inhabiting the museum space, queer artists harness its power for alternative purposes. By invading the gallery, queer artists invite viewers witness human experiences that dominant culture had rendered unimportant or unworthy of view.

### Curating Community, Exhibiting History

The museum and/or gallery space holds a unique, even privileged position in queer and AIDS art history. The museum was the space where queer activists protested Nicholas Nixon's *People with AIDS* (PWA) portraits (1988), and it was the

space where artists such as David Wojnarowicz, Peter Hujar, and Nan Goldin exhibited their personal experiences of the AIDS crisis.<sup>7</sup> Museum exhibitions, broadly speaking, require curators to make decisions about the history they want to tell: whose histories to include, whose stories to tell, whose experiences stand in for a particular history, and which experiences can be said to represent a community or even an entire nation. The museum, in these terms, becomes a vehicle for historical encounter and an institution that reinscribes traditions and cultural heritage. It reifies dominant historical narratives, highlighting already-esteemed individuals, stories, and ways of depicting personhood. The pieces of artwork that adorn museum walls typically reinforce dominant aesthetic movements and construct a shared public understanding of culture. Thought in these terms, a queer infiltration of the museum is then also an infiltration of a shared cultural identity. By inhabiting a space that serves as a national marker of culture, queer artists intervene in the museum's process of cultural identity formation.

However, the museum is also available for queer transcription and replication, as in the case of a museum like the Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art. New York's Leslie Lohman Museum has a long history of exhibiting emerging queer artists along with established, sexually dissident artists of the past, amassing an extensive collection of gay, lesbian, trans, and queer experiences that are brought to life in a variety of media. 2017's "Expanded Visions: Fifty Years of Collecting" united the different generations of artists in the museum's collection. Museum director Gonzalo Casals comments: "The typical approach to [representing] our community is usually by identity; so the gays here, the lesbians there. For this exhibition, the curators organized it by themes. This allows you to see queer culture as a whole. You can see three centuries of work in just one wall."<sup>8</sup> The exhibition was emphatically structured by a pre-AIDS, AIDS crisis, post-crisis chronology, but through its look at "queer culture as a whole," it also inscribed an extended temporality of the AIDS crisis and the virus itself. Cassidy Dawn Graves describes the rooms:

Some parts of the two-room exhibition are more categorized, like a sizable back wall portion containing predominantly works related to the AIDS epidemic, placed next to a corner of pieces that deal in the sexual and sordid, cleverly located behind an installation of Trojan condom boxes. Visible are works that recreate hospital restraints used in early treatment days and mix HIV antiviral medication Zerit (now considered excessively toxic) into a traditional still life. Edward A. Hochschild's sizable cross studded with vials of blood, pills, and sand makes quite an impression even before considering its painful context. A closer look at some of the vials reveals a staggering amount of detail, including a poignant typewritten message inside one: "safer sex is for everyone."<sup>9</sup>

In a queer present when safer sex practices seem less urgent, less crucial to survival, Hochschild's piece hanging adjacent to contemporary black and white portraits of queer bodies reminds viewers that safer sex is for every body. This re-insertion of the virus into the present moments asserts historical continuity for a queer identity borne by the AIDS crisis.

And yet, this notion of "Expanded Visions" further takes root in the exhibition's reminder that current queer art is indebted to a history of AIDS art and activism, as well as the art of 1970s cultural feminists like Barbara Hammer. The exhibition includes Hammer's *Lesbian Wedding Dewar's Style* (1977/2004), in which Hammer reproduces a 1977 advertisement image of a bride, duplicating the image, placing the two brides side-by-side in a lesbian union; the two images slightly overlap, suggesting a lovers' embrace. Through this replication, Hammer's doctored image produces a queer transformation of a 1977 image of heterosexual femininity and marital union. In exhibiting an artist like Hammer's work alongside those of the pre-AIDS past and post-crisis present, the Museum positions these artists and their works in such a way that they can talk to one another, and thereby collectively address the viewer. The collection's expansiveness and the

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exhibition's desire to show "queer culture as a whole" ultimately provide a look at innumerable ways one can be queer or express queerness. "Expanded Visions" further represents fifty (plus) years of changing discourses within queer communities, including trans portraiture, BDSM photography, and AIDS activist art. The museum space becomes a host body for queer viruses, of different strains, ready to infect their viewer.

The queer artist's drive to invade, to visualize queerness within public spaces, is driven by a dual desire for visibility, for proving one's existence, and by a desire to catalyze social change. In order for a virus to change and ultimately take over its host body, it must first invade that body, adapt to its environment, and learn to feed off its resources. While their approaches and subject material are seemingly disparate, Wojnarowicz's and Robert Mapplethorpe's respective works, which frequently hang together on the walls of exhibitions such as "Expanded Visions," are united by their desire to challenge viewers to look at, to deeply observe, aspects of queer life that make them uncomfortable or repulsed. These works confront their audience with sights they likely have not seen, experienced, or even imagined, whether depictions of bodily exposures and sexual acts, or presentations of the effects of public abjection and government negligence. Moreover, both artists used government funding for the arts to levy an explicit critique of the government, particularly in the case of Wojnarowicz, who represented aspects of queer life that so terribly discomfited homophobic viewers.<sup>10</sup>

Wojnarowicz's film, photography, painting, and performance art recorded what he deemed to be an authentic history, one that gave a voice to individuals stigmatized, and thus marginalized, by state-supported society.<sup>11</sup> With the advent of the AIDS crisis and his own HIV-positive diagnosis, his art became increasingly politicized and unafraid to directly indict the US government's and the medical community's response to the crisis. His work made viewers feel the difficulty and impossibility of existing in the world as a queer, seropositive person—the impossibility of being seen as a person worthy of love and possessing a life worth living. The image most commonly used to represent Wojnarowicz is an untitled self-portrait

created with Rosa von Praunheim and Phil Zwickler for the film *Silence = Death* (Rosa von Praunheim, 1990). In the film still, Wojnarowicz's lips are sewn shut—the string still threaded through the needle that sits in the right side of the frame—with blood dripping from his lips down his chin. Wojnarowicz confronted his viewers with a face that refused victimhood and taunted them with what state-supported institutions would have preferred: his silence.<sup>12</sup>

Instead of inspiring simple pity or even understanding, Wojnarowicz's work challenged viewers with his anger. Images like his self-portrait acknowledged and tapped into their viewer's desire to see the queer, HIV-infected body shown on TV and newspapers, confirming some of their worst fears about deviants only to refuse the voyeuristic look they craved. Jennifer Doyle elaborates, "We can see...most powerfully in the work of artists like Wojnarowicz, for if art and politics are so incompatible, then we must wonder what would motivate an artist to make so much work in the middle of something as terrifying as the AIDS crisis in the late 1980s and 1990s, when, for an overwhelming majority of people, a diagnosis was a death sentence all but gleefully issued by a homophobic and racist public."<sup>13</sup> Doyle stresses that Wojnarowicz's work cannot be thought outside of the AIDS crisis moment, and not only can politics inform or intersect with art, but it can be the basis of inspiration for the artist to create in the first place. I push this point further to thoroughly assert that the discourses of the AIDS crisis—the ideological framework of that historical moment—compelled artists to construct art in particular *ways*, with particular codes. Queer artists remain aware of the power of specific modes of representation and visual codes, and continue employ them in order to infiltrate mainstream systems of representation. In other words, these modes of representation do not necessarily belong to the AIDS crisis past, and instead, they persist in the present.

### Kia LaBeija: The #Undetectable Body

Queer artists' stealthy takeover through infecting recognizable art forms takes on particular saliency in the PWA portrait. By engaging with the

representational codes established in Nixon's (and others') work and adapting those visual cues, photographers like Nan Goldin, David Wojnarowicz, and Peter Hugar sought to dismantle the AIDS crisis assumptions and stigmas associated with the queer body. In many ways, it is only by playing the aesthetic rules established in someone like Nixon's art that queer artists' work can be legible to the public and be read as art by an art critic audience. Put another way, by taking up the PWA portrait form, artists are able to show what it means to live with AIDS through a different photographic lens. Drawing from this lineage of PWA representation and queer infiltration, I turn to Kia LaBeija's portraiture to demonstrate how she translates the Harlem voguing culture's queer politics out of the ballroom and into the museum to represent a new generation living with HIV.

Kia LaBeija's name alone calls forth a history of searching for identity, belonging, and self-fashioning. Her name pays homage to the Iconic House of LaBeija, one of the most prominent homes of Harlem's queer ball culture, made famous in Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1990).<sup>14</sup> LaBeija's body and her art are marked by this history: from her voguing movements and gestures to the way she is styled, her body already signals her as part of queer black milieu. Kia LaBeija is a face for HIV/AIDS; her work insists that a viewer read her in that way. But unlike Nixon's passive PWA subjects, LaBeija is in control of the type of face she becomes, and of what that face tells her viewer. She makes herself the face of what it means to live with HIV now, while channeling the history of those who paved the way for her to live her life as an out, openly HIV-positive person. Through self-representation, she decides how she wants to look, what she wants to say about her images, and how the image is framed, edited, and printed. LaBeija controls her representation in the context of an AIDS-crisis media history in which queers often had little say in the way their bodies appeared. Her face is a face that also "gives face," a term coined in ballroom culture. One observer of Harlem's ball culture comments, "Through giving face and refusing to flinch, they embody that timeless, unspoken command of ballroom walkers throughout history, expressed by those who've been

ignored everywhere else but on the runway: *Look. At. Me.*"<sup>15</sup> Her images court the viewer's gaze and dare them to look at a face that unflinchingly looks back.

Much of LaBeija's work centers on how to portray the body that is infected with but not defined by the HIV virus, and that focus becomes most explicit in *Eleven* (2015). The photograph's title marks the 11<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her mother's passing and photographed in the hospital room of the doctor who has been treating LaBeija since she was four years old. In the photograph, LaBeija sits on a hospital bed wearing her red prom dress, as her doctor draws her blood. The vibrancy of her dress and scarlet lipstick stand out against the sterile hospital backdrop, but they cannot fully distract from the reason Kia's life is marked by doctor appointments: her HIV-positive status. Kia's doctor is, after all, drawing her blood, examining her body's health. The virus becomes a sort of given and her stare back into the camera invites the viewer to see her reality. However, while the virus is there in the room, it does not define her body; the virus does not limit the ways in which she can imagine herself and create herself in the world in front of (and outside of) her camera. The virus exists alongside of, and in many ways outside of, her adorned body: her powerful red dress at the center of the frame draws the viewer into LaBeija's stare back into the camera, with the doctor's office and medical equipment fading into the shadowed edges of the frame. They are a part of her story, but they are not her only story to tell. LaBeija's photography brings viewers into her home, her doctor's office, into the spaces that have defined her life. "Showing the private in public changes the narrative of what things mean,' Kia explains," affirming the power in representing one's own story.<sup>16</sup>

In 2016, the year of House of LaBeija's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Kia LaBeija took over as House Mother. The language of mother connotes a caretaking that involves the gendered labor of taking care of the house's "children," but there is also a caretaking of the house's legacy that falls in LaBeija's capable hands. She is the first cisgender woman to act as the House's Mother, but this is not the only "first" the artist represents. As the face

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of #undetectable, she represents a new era of living with HIV, an era of AIDS that defies the temporality of a crisis. LaBeija has lived with the virus for 28 years, representing a new viral temporality. As such, she is both a vessel of history, a holder of House of LaBeija memories, and the face of the future. She acts as an ambassador for contemporary ballroom culture, traveling to cities like Paris to spread the history of voguing culture. Her role as Mother not only involves teaching the new generation of queers how to dance and pose, but also includes teaching them where voguing came from: the history of its founding community.<sup>17</sup> Instead of her body as a transmitter of the HIV virus, her work demonstrates that she is a transmitter of something else: history and knowledge.

The image of her body calls forth a particular queer history as she moves and poses; her body calls forth a history of those who came before her to take their identity and representation into their own hands. Following ballroom culture's history of self-fashioning, Kia LaBeija's photography and video work take on the task of *self-preservation*; her self-produced images archive her body in the vision of her own creation. Kia LaBeija engages with a history

of PWA representation and ballroom culture's survival strategies to create an iconography of the HIV-positive body living now. HIV is no longer a death sentence for a person infected with the virus, and certainly not for their potential partners. As Kia LaBeija's #undetectable poster evidences, medicine now has the ability to treat the infected body to the point that it is no longer an *infectious* body. But given current (continued) efforts to fight HIV criminalization, the US government has made clear that the infected body is still a deviant and criminal one. LaBeija's deployment of and working as the virus demands that both the histories of and present conditions of seropositive bodies be spoken and reconsidered in our fight against AIDS. In closing, I return to the Simon Leung epigraph that begins this paper: "to become the virus is to become the agent—the agency for change." Queer invasions of museum galleries suggest just one cultural institution open to queer habitation, but it is not the only one available. In order to change the systems of power that structure all of our lives, queer politics must similarly become parasitic and opportunistic, attaching to structures that contain the necessary

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### Notes

1 1991 NYLGEFF program notes for *Transcripts: Some Notes Between Pricks*, Box 3, Folder 233, The Mix Collection, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University.

2 ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) is a direct action activist group that works to create legislation, treatment options, medical research, and other means of support for people living with AIDS. The group was formed in March 1987 in New York, following Larry Kramer's speech on the Gay Men's Health Crisis's political inefficacy. After the formation of the New York ACT UP group, chapters began to form in cities across the US and internationally. Many of these chapters still exist today.

3 Jenny Holzer, *Survival* series, 1983-85.

4 Jonathan David Katz and Rock Hushka, *Art AIDS America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015), 24.

5 Emily Colucci, "Is Art Enough? Gran Fury in Perspective," *Hyperallergic*, February 21, 2012, <https://hyperallergic.com/46881/gran-fury-read-my-lips-80-wse-nyu/>

6 "Homo Video: Where are We Now," New Museum, accessed August 9, 2018, [http://archive.newmuseum.org/index.php/Detail/Occurrence/Show/occurrence\\_id/141](http://archive.newmuseum.org/index.php/Detail/Occurrence/Show/occurrence_id/141)

7 Examples of such exhibitions include: "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing" (1989), "AIDS Timeline" (1989), and "Arts' Communities/AIDS' Communities" (1996).

- 8 Michael Valinsky, "New York's Leslie-Lohman Museum Celebrates 50 Years of Collecting LGBTQ Art," *Out*, March 17, 2017, <https://www.out.com/art-books/2017/3/17/new-yorks-leslie-lohman-museum-celebrating-50-years-lgbtq-art>
- 9 Cassidy Dawn Graves, "This Museum Has 'Expanded Visions' For Queering and Preserving Art," *Bedford + Bowery*, March 21, 2017, <http://bedfordandbowery.com/2017/03/this-museum-has-expanded-visions-for-queering-and-preserving-art/>.
- 10 The Leslie Lohman Museum holds Mapplethorpe's *X Portfolio* photographs that sparked the iconic case over censorship, decency, and use of National Endowment for the Arts funds.
- 11 "David Wojnarowicz," Visual AIDS, accessed August, 30, 2017, <https://www.visualaids.org/artists/detail/david-wojnarowicz>
- 12 See my discussion of the NEA's funding repeal in the next section.
- 13 Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 129.
- 14 Harlem's 1980s ball culture was more recently portrayed in FX's *Pose*, created by showrunner Ryan Murphy.
- 15 Steven Thrasher, "Paris is 'Still' Burning," *Out*, May 22, 2011, <https://www.out.com/entertainment/2011/11/15/bronx-drag-ball-scene-continues-thrive>.
- 16 Theodore Kerr, "A Families Affair," *The Village Voice*, June 21, 2017, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2017/06/21/a-families-affair/>.
- 17 She describes the experience of going over to Paris in her Art AIDS America Chicago exhibition interview. She discusses how voguing made it to Paris, as Pepper LaBeija's wished (as is expressed in *Paris is Burning*), but that their understanding of voguing was entirely divorced from the political and emotional history that shaped the movement. "Art AIDS America Chicago: Artist Kia LaBeija in Conversation with Zach Stafford (17 Feb 2017)," Alphawood Gallery, Vimeo, <https://vimeo.com/206321006>.