

The Infected Body: The Unexpected Catalyst in the HIV/AIDS Epidemic

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History now shows evidence of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and the Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) infecting people prior to the epidemic¹ that began in the 1980s. Though the first documented case in the United States was in Missouri in 1968, it was not until 1981 that the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) officially published a report identifying a cluster of similar and overlapping cases of five otherwise healthy young, gay men in Los Angeles.^{2 3} While this report may have created awareness amongst medical professionals, nobody could have imagined how the HIV/AIDS epidemic would disrupt United States culture. When the CDC published the report, facts were limited and the only overlapping evidence was that the patients were young men, living in Los Angeles, and active homosexuals. While these facts were all true, this seemingly benign medical statement in the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* would be the first step in a long line of misinformation, fear, panic, and a fanning of the cultural flames of homophobia. First reported nationally on May 11, 1982, *The New York Times* called it “Gay-related Immunodeficiency” (GRID); the term AIDS was not officially accepted until the CDC released their definition in September of 1982.⁴ While GRID did not remain the official term for long, in its short tenure, the wider public continued to define the illness as something that primarily targeted gay men, largely ignoring the increasing number of newly diagnosed outliers. including infants and heterosexuals.⁵ This narrative arguably

¹ When I use the term epidemic or reference “the epidemic” or “the crisis” I am describing the time between 1981, the beginning of the epidemic, and 1996, when according to the National Center for Health Statistics shows the annual death rate of deaths from AIDS related illness in the United States began to decrease. This is not to imply that the epidemic is over or that people are no longer dying from AIDS and AIDS related illness.

² Garry, Robert F. "Documentation of an AIDS Virus Infection in the United States in 1968." *JAMA Internal Medicine*. October 14, 1988. Accessed August 28, 2018. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/374422>.

³ Gottlieb, MS, MD, HM Schanker, MD, PT Fan, MD, A. Saxon, MD, and JD Weisman, DO. *Pneumocystis Pneumonia --- Los Angeles*. Report. Centers for Disease Control - Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. 21st ed. Vol. 30. Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control, 1981. 1-3.

⁴ Altman, Lawrence K. "New Homosexual Disorder Worries Health Officials." *The New York Times*. May 11, 1982. Accessed August 28, 2018. <http://www.nytimes.com/1982/05/11/science/new-homosexual-disorder-worries-health-officials.html?pagewanted=all>.

⁵ "A Timeline of HIV and AIDS." HIV.gov. March 27, 2018. <http://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/history/hiv-and-aids-timeline>.

remains in the subconscious of public opinion today even though we now know, unquestionably, that HIV/AIDS does not discriminate based on the sex of one's sexual partner(s).

With the medical professionals and media emphasizing the epidemic as one that came out of gay bathhouses and other "lascivious" corners of U.S. culture, it proved to be a difficult narrative to change. The HIV/AIDS stigma, as a gay disease spread through sexual promiscuity, exploded out of the news media during the 1980s and '90s.⁶ This media frenzy further perpetuated the myth that gay men were sexually indiscriminate and dangerous, which in turn led to increased cultural anxiety and turmoil. Beyond that, the gay male body, seen as a repository of contaminated fluids, sweat, blood, urine, semen, and saliva became even further distanced from the heteronormative family structure that was deemed safe, respectable, and natural.

If the gay male body was the most dangerous site during the HIV/AIDS epidemic, could the dance studio be considered ground zero? In this country, dance has long been a space that many gay men inhabit both as a stereotype and as a reality. A study from 1997 anecdotally showed that about 57.8% of the men in the field were believed to be gay by the people working in the dance industry.⁷ While this statistic is dated and anecdotal, it gives us a sense of the perception within the community, not just the dominant narrative that stills holds true today outside of the field. It is difficult to acquire an accurate account of the percentage of gay male dancers, especially today, as sexuality and gender have become increasingly more fluid.

Why is dance considered a space for the gay male? We can hypothesize that this stereotype can be attributed to numerous factors. Unlike in Russia and some other parts of the world, where the male dancer is universally well respected, male dancers in the U.S. are

⁶ "A Timeline of HIV and AIDS." 2018.

⁷ Carman, Joseph. "Gay Men & Dance." *Dance Magazine*. July 23, 2018. http://www.dancemagazine.com/gay_men__dance-2306861099.html.

considered graceful, feminine, and delicate, and therefore labeled as gay.⁸ The reality of dance is that it is an incredibly physical career, one that takes a significant toll on the body. In addition, the dance community has long been seen as a more welcoming environment for gay men: “Gay men are usually invited into the dance world without question, easily gain friends and peers, and are seldom judged for their sexual preference, as they might be elsewhere.”⁹ Perhaps the idea that the dance community has larger numbers of gay men is just that: an idea.

If the gay male dancer is always perceived as homosexual, one could contend that dance is always political. Dance is a physical art form of the body. The body is the location for sexuality and sexual expression. When a man dons a suit and walks into his office, he is nearly able to remove his entire physical form from his work. In dance, regardless of the form, the work is always of the body, and all that is attached to the body on stage. The color of their skin, their height, their build, their hair length, are all cultural indicators our society uses to classify and understand who a person is. While they may not know anything personal about the dancer, the audience is making judgements about the choreography. The physical form on the stage has a lot to do with the work. Certain companies have specific aesthetics they seek when selecting their dancers to best deliver the vision of the choreographer. To select a diverse cast of dancers is as much a statement as selecting only long, lean, white dancers. Every choice made, from the lighting to the costumes, cues the audience into what the work is about.

What is sometimes less often discussed, is what the audience brings into the theater with them as they view the work—their own personal fears, hopes, dreams, what they saw on the news that morning, a disagreement with a loved one; a whole range of human experiences.

Siobhan Burke states, “Dance didn’t suddenly become political [...]: Being rooted in the body,

⁸ Carman, “Gay Men & Dance.”

⁹ Carman, “Gay Men & Dance.”

dance is never abstract, try though it might to elude meaning.”¹⁰ In this context, the male bodied dancer has been labeled as homosexual and therefore, especially during the HIV/AIDS epidemic, was considered infected. Consequently, the male dancing body became a heightened political location during this crisis, no matter the choreography.

Accordingly, when a choreographer made work or placed a male-dancer, who may or may not have had AIDS, on the concert stage it became a political act. A choreographer was making a statement whether they opted to explicitly make a dance about HIV/AIDS or not.

Brian Schaefer writes,

But because the body cannot hide in dance, it became the vessel for a kind of physical truth. Those who performed with AIDS visibly wore the effects of the disease on their skin and forced audiences to look. At the same time, a dancing body, however weak, is also a body in motion. It is alive. Dancers with AIDS, for as long as they were able, faced impending death with an insistence on demonstrating life, offering a portrait of stubborn dignity.¹¹

When HIV progresses to AIDS, the disease attacks the body. It manifests itself in various ways – rapid weight loss, extreme tiredness, red, brown, pink, or purplish blotches on the skin, memory loss, to name a few.¹² The symptoms become not only external indicators that a person may be infected, but also make it nearly impossible to perform the highly physically demanding work of a dancer. In an interview by Joanna Simon for the Public Broadcasting Service *MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour* titled “AIDS and the Arts,” Bill T. Jones, co-director of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, shares, “I’m more than aware of the stigma attached to this illness. A lot of my identity is attached to my physical prowess. In the way I look, in my sexuality. This disease we assume attacks all of those things and in some ways it does. [...] I

¹⁰ Burke, Siobhan. "Making (and Seeing) Dance in the Politicized World." *The New York Times*. November 23, 2017. Accessed August 28, 2018. <http://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/17/arts/dance/making-and-seeing-dance-in-the-politicized-world.html>.

¹¹ Schaefer, Brian. "The Body Cannot Hide: How Dance Has Been a Vital Response to AIDS." *OUT*. June 29, 2017. Accessed August 28, 2018. <https://www.out.com/positive-voices/2017/6/29/body-cannot-hide-how-dance-has-been-vital-response-aids>.

¹² "Symptoms of HIV." *HIV.gov*. August 31, 2017. Accessed August 28, 2018. <http://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/about-hiv-and-aids/symptoms-of-hiv>.

didn't really want to come out and identify myself with the people who get AIDS."¹³ During the epidemic, for a person openly living with AIDS or openly homosexual for that matter, performing on the concert stage was inherently political. The *NewsHour* segment, "AIDS and the Arts," was somewhat controversial at the time, as many artists were trying to distance themselves from the stigma that AIDS held, the stereotype that the arts is dominated by homosexuals, and fear of public backlash and loss of funding.¹⁴ Richard Goldstein, senior editor of the *Village Voice* from 1966 to 2004 explains, "There is a certain tendency in a lot of the arts to be discrete. While within the arts, within the community, everyone is very open and accepting, to the outside world another veneer is projected."¹⁵ Joanna Simon continues the segment with Arnie Zane, the late co-director of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company and life partner of Jones:

SIMON: [...] [I]nsiders say the reluctance to acknowledge AIDS is also due to fear. Fear of a backlash that would hurt ticket sales and funding. But individuals like Arnie Zane aren't afraid to speak out. Do you think that the arts are particularly hit by AIDS?
 ZANE: That's the controversial question this month, right? Of course I do. I am in the center of this world, the art world. My people on a daily basis [...] I am losing my colleagues.¹⁶

Jones describes his hesitancy in participating:

I am more than aware of the stigma attached to this illness. [...] I was concerned about a backlash [...] not concerned enough that I would not have done it. [...] I was wondering if people would be less willing to invest in the company. Or they wouldn't think we were going to survive, they might withdraw funding.¹⁷

An entire generation of dancers and choreographers either watched themselves, their friends, colleagues, or lovers die of a disease that attacked the very thing that makes a dancer a dancer:

¹³ "AIDS and the Arts"

¹⁴ "AIDS and the Arts"; Gere, David. *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic: Tracking Choreography in the Age of AIDS*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004.

¹⁵ "AIDS and the Arts"

¹⁶ "AIDS and the Arts"

¹⁷ "AIDS and the Arts"

the body. Bill T. Jones said, “Try to imagine what it is like to lose some of your most promising, most inspirational energy sources at a time when they are just beginning their potential. Try to imagine if Balanchine was cut down in his thirties.”¹⁸ These artists were expressing the frustration and fear of losing an entire generation of creative talent to AIDS.

If the dance community was the meeting point of all of these cultural assumptions during the HIV/AIDS epidemic, how did they respond? In *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic: Tracking Choreography in the Age of AIDS*, David Gere explores choreography as a response to and a result of the AIDS epidemic.¹⁹ Gere applies a more generous definition to the word choreography than described above. He uses the term to describe multiple forms of movement during the AIDS epidemic and explores work created for the concert stage, the street, activist art, performance art, etc., under the umbrella term, “choreography.”

For this essay, we will consider two different forms of choreography/movement: dance created for the concert stage and street performance by specifically investigating the work of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company and that of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). While both of these forms of movement/choreography may be considered dance, for this paper, the intention is to make the differences between these forms distinct in order to highlight the importance of each and the intentions as they relate to dance during the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Moreover, to apply the term “activist art” to all of the selected works as the intended purposes of all the work was to engage in a public conversation regarding the AIDS epidemic.

D-Man in the Waters was choreographed in 1989 by Bill T. Jones, less than a year after Arnie Zane died, and at the height of the epidemic.²⁰ This piece, set to Felix Mendelssohn’s

¹⁸ “AIDS and the Arts”

¹⁹ “How to Make Dances”

²⁰ “D-Man in the Waters.” YouTube. October 31, 2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgXiwkaqJnE>.

Octet for Strings in E-flat Major, Op. 20, begins with a flurry of dancers entering stage left, one by one joining a line, replacing the person in front. This movement could be viewed as a metaphor for the exaggerated feeling of dancers entering and exiting companies due to illness and death at the time. The movement throughout the piece is strong, fast, precise, joyous, exuberant and incredibly physically demanding. Jumping and diving fearlessly into the metaphorical waters, it is a true celebration of what a human life is capable of, even in the face of unbelievable odds. Dancers dressed in Army fatigues, fighting the tidal wave that is the AIDS epidemic, display an unbelievable strength, not only physically, but mentally and spiritually as well. This work is an ode to the technicality and facility of the human body and spirit.

This piece intentionally takes a stand against the victim narrative that so many portrayed during the crisis. Jones encourages the viewer, with intense urgency, to see beyond the war that is being waged, and acknowledge there is still life, valuable life, being lived. Up to the very final moment in the piece when a dancer is thrown into the air, swan diving into the arms of the company, Jones demands the viewer to see beyond the illness, these were vital bodies in motion. With every supported lift, free fall, and synchronized moment, he allows us to see the amount of care and support the dance community was providing during the epidemic. Dance critic Brian Seibert of *The New York Times* describes the work, “Mutual assistance is a theme [...]. The sense of play could be delicious [...]. [T]heir delight was contagious.”²¹ He speaks to a 2013 staging of *D-Man in the Waters* for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, “The work celebrates the buoyant spirit of the dancer Demian Acquavella, who had AIDS and died the following year, but swimming in its waters are many others, including Mr. Jones’s partner, Arnie Zane, who had

²¹ Seibert, Brian. "D-Man in the Waters,' From Ailey Company, at City Center." *The New York Times*. December 12, 2013. Accessed September 01, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/13/arts/dance/d-man-in-the-waters-from-ailey-company-at-city-center.html>.

died the previous year. At City Center on Wednesday, when Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performed “D-Man” for the first time, there was inevitably one more spirit present: Alvin Ailey, whose AIDS-related death came the year the dance was made.”²²

This 2013 restaging for the Ailey company was significant beyond the lasting poignancy and power of the work itself; it speaks to the fact that the Ailey company was now willing to perform a piece that openly addressed AIDS. Alvin Ailey, who in life or death did not acknowledge he was living with AIDS. It was not until years later that his friends and family acknowledged he died from AIDS related complications. Ailey was but one of many choreographers unwilling to confront the epidemic openly in his work. As discussed previously, the art and dance community were conflicted and took very different positions on how to respond to whether they, or members of their companies, were living with AIDS.

Bill T. Jones took what everyone was already thinking and put it on the concert stage. *D-Man in the Waters* premiered at the Joyce Theater, New York, NY, in March 1989. Jones decided that, rather than shying away from this illness, he would put Damien Acquavella onstage. Acquavella, a formerly strong able-bodied professional dancer was carried on stage by Jones, in the final stages of his life. “I did appreciate the courage it took for Bill to take the risk of offending people,” says former company member Heidi Latsky. “It was a very important moment. It was a big moment that I didn’t know for years how big it had been. [...] People were absolutely mesmerized and shocked,” says Jones. Was the decision to bring Acquavella on stage a way for Jones to disrupt and create discomfort amongst the audience or was he simply furthering his dialogue with the audience and creating a level of humanity that he felt was lacking during the epidemic? Regardless of his intentions, this work, and the choice to bring a

²² "D-Man in the Waters,' From Ailey Company, at City Center."

dying man on stage, forced the audience to see the world from his perspective. For even the briefest moment, the audience was witness to something truly humane.

Dance for the concert stage was limited due to the relatively narrow audience. A person had to opt to attend a dance performance, whereas the public work made during the epidemic had a much broader reach, in large part due to the media.

[Jurgen] Habermas's concept of the public sphere is especially revelatory when applied to the performing AIDS project: Why perform AIDS? Why protest? Why mourn in a visible communal space as part of a public spectacle? Why make dances about AIDS that will be seen in national theaters? In other words, how do these activities embody the activity of a public that demands government response?²³

The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt was dreamed up by San Francisco based gay rights activist Cleve Jones in 1985. Every year since the assassination of Harvey Milk and Mayor George Moscone, on November 27th, 1978, Jones has organized a candlelight vigil in their memory. In 1985, when preparing for the vigil, Jones read a newspaper clipping that 1,000 people in San Francisco had died from AIDS. He decided to ask people at the vigil to write down the names of loved ones who had died up to that point. They took the sheets of paper filled with names of the dead and shrouded the Federal Building in San Francisco. Jones remarks that the façade of the building looked like a patchwork resembling a quilt.²⁴ Reminded of a quilt his grandmother had made him, a classic middle-American symbol of family values and care, the seed was planted for what became the AIDS Memorial Quilt.²⁵ Jones was adamant to see this idea take shape and worked tirelessly to make it a reality.

The quilt was first unveiled on October 11, 1987 on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. The process of unfurling the quilt was far more than a simple pedestrian act of unfolding a

²³ *How to Make Dances*. Page 181

²⁴ Lateef, Yasir. "The AIDS Memorial Quilt." The Names Project. Accessed September 01, 2018. <http://www.aidsquilt.org/about/the-aids-memorial-quilt>.

²⁵ Cleve Jones on Harvey Milk & AIDS Memorial Quilt YouTube. November 29, 2011. Accessed September 01, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEObIgSXtBY>.

piece of cloth. This unfurling became a sacred performance and the repetition from one quilt square to the next created a ritualistic and ceremonial act. The eight participants, rather performers, begin in a circle holding hands, heads bent looking at the folded quilt. A prayer circle of sorts, waiting for the voice over the loudspeaker to begin reading the names who are memorialized in their section of quilt. Gere states:

The choreography involves alternate members of the group kneeling in to unfurl 'petals' of the quilt-four layers of petals in all. They reach down to pull back a corner of the fabric [...]. When the entire twenty-four-foot-square section is laid open, in a large diamond pattern, the unfurlers standup and billow the fabric upward [...]. Simultaneously, they rotate the entire expanse a quarter turn so that the diamond shape fits the square in the grid pattern that is waiting to receive it.

The choreography is unabashedly pedestrian. [...] The simple choreography consists of a combination of unfolding, billowing, and walking along curving pathways from one space in the grid to another. The pattern repeats eight times.

While Jones could have simply asked for volunteers to unfold the fabric and walk away, he created a performative space on the National Mall. The calling of the names of the dead on a loudspeaker, echoing in the distance, helped create a performance space. The choreographed unfurling added to this performance. The quilt became the lead performer, and the viewer was not simply a visitor, but an audience member participating in the performance.

In a similar way that the choreographers were divided against openly discussing the impact AIDS had on the dance community or if the choreographers themselves were living with AIDS, the AIDS Memorial Quilt also had an air of ignoring the massive losses the gay community specifically had experienced. This was the *Catch-22* of the time: if you openly discussed the numbers of homosexuals who were impacted by the disease, it would further perpetuate the idea that it was a gay disease. Gere describes a teacher who brought his students

to participate in the choreography of unfolding the quilt, the teacher shares, “[...] I know better than to mention the word *homosexuality*.”²⁶ Gere continues,

[T]he majority of the panels that these teenagers will be unfurling today are indeed those of gay men, [...] and that on the Mall gay men and lesbians are milling about on all sides. [...] [I]t is a cruel travesty that the word *homosexuality* cannot be spoken in relation to the quilt, which was founded by gay men and memorializes so many gay men. Is gayness a secret that we must keep from their parents in order to invite children’s participation.

This quote sums up the irony that in order for heterosexuals at the time to engage with the discussion and memorialization of those who died from AIDS, the idea of homosexuality had to be stripped from the performance.

While Jones was interested in finding a device that would help mourners feel like their loved one, who had been taken so young, was memorialized in some capacity, he was not naïve to the fact that the quilt was a very specific, targeted political act. Jones states, “I could see how it could work as therapy for people who were grieving, as a tool for the media to understand the lives behind the media, and as a weapon to shame the government for its inaction.”²⁷ David Gere, a member of the media committee for the NAMES Project explains, “[t]he idea was to produce a warm fuzzy symbol of grieving, a kind of political graveyard for people who had died of AIDS, made out of three-by-six-foot pieces of cloth [...]. (The size of the panels was designed to approximate the dimensions of a grave).”²⁸ He believed that the project would be able to shift the focus from the news media portrayal of the AIDS victim and the stigma associated with the disease, and would reconstruct a new narrative that the people living with AIDS were not a blight on society, but rather “nice boys, mother-loving boys [...] who were getting sick.”²⁹ Cleve Jones shares, “It was never intended to be a passive memorial. It was created to be a

²⁶ “How to Make Dances” page 170

²⁷ “Cleve Jones on Harvey”

²⁸ “How to Make Dances” page 5

²⁹ “How to Make Dances” page 6

weapon in our war against not only a disease but the cruelty and bigotry that the disease exposed.”³⁰ Unfortunately, the somber mass funeral only furthered the media’s narrative of an AIDS patient as a victim, and a homosexual one at that.³¹ The performance of the AIDS Memorial Quilt did not incite anger and frustration amongst the population at large. People felt good about participating in the creation of the quilt because it did not pose a threat. There was no fear of becoming infected in the cemetery of fabric. The quilt covered up the dead rather than exposed the atrocities and lack of progress that the governmental agencies were making to support and abolish AIDS altogether. While the quilt was incredibly effective in raising money and creating a visual aid to see the “graves” and hear the names of the dead, it also was one of the first large scale political acts in an attempt to bring the nation together to fight the epidemic.

ACT UP, an AIDS advocacy group, was born out of a meeting at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center in downtown New York City in March 1987, just a few months prior to the unveiling of the first AIDS Memorial Quilt.³² At the time, over 10,000 New Yorkers had been infected and over half were already dead.³³ ACT UP adopted an incredibly effective model; they utilized affinity groups, with the understanding that this grassroots activist organization needed to appeal to anyone who was being impacted by AIDS. The affinity groups were able to focus on specific aspects of activism, allowing them to remain focused on something that they were passionate about or were directly impacted by. Gregg Bordowitz, an active member and leader of ACT UP, states in a 2002 oral history, “In the end, we kind of adopted the kind of brilliant strategy of the decentralized model, the affinity group model. So

³⁰ *The Last One: Unfolding the AIDS Memorial Quilt*. Directed by Nadine Licostie. The Last One: Unfolding the AIDS Memorial Quilt. 2014.

³¹ “How to Make Dances” page 7

³² Why We Fight by Vito Russo. Accessed September 01, 2018. <http://www.actupny.org/documents/capsule-home.html>.

³³ France, David. "Pictures from a Battlefield." New York Magazine. March 25, 2012. Accessed September 01, 2018. <http://nymag.com/news/features/act-up-2012-4/>.

affinity groups could do anything they wanted, within parameters. That cellular model worked for ACT UP New York and it worked for all the other ACT UPs. There was a lot of difference within the groups and among the groups.”³⁴ These affinity groups worked together, disagreed, brought in many different perspectives and ultimately attracted a wide swath of the city, and later the country, to get involved and participate at whatever level of civil disobedience they felt suited them.

ACT UP differed from the AIDS Memorial Quilt in the sense that their mourning became anger, and their anger became action. ACT UP was successful because they were able to harness the angry mob mentality and militarize the people to fight the government and their inaction. While not all of the members of ACT UP were artists or performers, some of their most effective protests and statements were created by artists. The most famous symbol of ACT UP was by far the black poster with a pink triangle with the words SILENCE = DEATH. These posters were created by artist collective, Gran Fury, many of whom were or had been working in advertising. These artists knew how to make a simple statement that would forever be a representation of AIDS protests. Beyond this image, many artists were finding ways to use their anger and their bodies, the very thing being attacked, to create a militarized public spectacle. A group of people, many of whom were becoming increasingly physically powerless, gathered to “act up, fight back, fight AIDS”: the battle cry of the movement.

One of the early and arguably most important actions was ACT UP’s seizure of the Food and Drug Administration’s headquarters in Rockville, Maryland on October 11, 1988.³⁵ Known as *Seize Control of the FDA*, over 1,000 protesters arrived at the headquarters along with the

³⁴ "ACT UP Oral History Project Interview of Gregg Bordowitz." Interview by Sarah Schulman. December 17, 2002.

³⁵ Crimp, Douglas. "Before Occupy: How AIDS Activists Seized Control of the FDA in 1988." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 10 Dec. 2011, www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2011/12/before-occupy-how-aids-activists-seized-control-of-the-fda-in-1988/249302/.

national press. ACT UP utilized the media to help get themselves on television screens and in newspapers. They would alert the media prior to any of their actions with carefully produced press kits and talking points for the media outlets that might change the narrative. For this action, the use of the body was an essential tool, incredibly well orchestrated and choreographed to gain control of the “performance” space, i.e. the protest sites. Gere explains how the event “evolved into a stunning daylong marathon choreography, extending from seven in the morning until five at night.”³⁶

A series of performative actions occurred throughout the day fueled by anger and rage. Endless chants, whistles, shouts, and media helicopters create a cacophony of noise throughout the entirety of the day.³⁷ One of the chants “business as usual, no more,” clearly the members of ACT UP were looking to disrupt and make it impossible for the members of the FDA to go about business as usual. Many of the protestors were dressed in doctors’ coats with red-paint handprints on the back with words like “The government has blood on its hands.” Some people were costumed in t-shirts with many of the iconic Gran Fury images printed on them. Numerous die-ins occurring throughout the day with cardboard tombstones with epitaphs that read, “killed by the system,” “I got the placebo,” and “I died for the sins of the FDA,” to name a few. The entire event was a spectacle, from the score to the props, to the costumes; a live performance with a cast of over 1,000, and thanks to the media, was highly visible beyond those in attendance at the event. “But even more important, through the theatricality of this nontheatrical event, the demonstrators refashioned their semiotically AIDS-infected bodies as exuberant, impassioned, audacious, even glamorous, just the way the camera wanted them.”³⁸ This was but one of many

³⁶ *How to Make Dances*, page 68

³⁷ “ACT UP & ACT NOW Seize Control of the FDA.” YouTube. June 18, 2014. Accessed September 01, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s70aCOflRgY>.

³⁸ *How to Make Dances*, page 75.

of the ACT UP actions that occurred during the AIDS epidemic. The organization was incredibly effective and saw many quick results after they performed their various protests.

While Bill T. Jones made work for the concert stage, ACT UP and the NAMES Project public corporeal performances were held hostage to the cultural perception and the media who controlled the prevailing narrative, try though they might to curate it. These activists, who were also artists, used their work to influence and shift the media and critical review away from the stigma and victim story that kept the media outlets busy. “As these individual instances of cultural production interfaced with each other, informing a mutual investigation, a deeper sense of what the gay AIDS body means in contemporary culture began to come to the fore. At the same time these productions shattered the boundary between the stage and real life.”³⁹

Bill T. Jones’ work, the AIDS Memorial Quilt, and ACT UP performances as protests all contributed to public awareness, attempted to redirect media narratives, and celebrated the strength of humanity. By raising awareness about HIV/AIDS and politicizing the epidemic, stereotypes about the disease were dismantled, and politicians and health professionals were forced to acknowledge that HIV/AIDS was a malady that did not discriminate but plagued all sectors of society—female and male, homosexual and heterosexual, white and non-white, and everywhere in between. The artistic movements and organizations that brought these issues to the fore were integral contributors to de-stigmatizing the disease and getting those who were afflicted with it the necessary medical attention they needed and deserved. Today, the disease is no longer a death sentence; those with access, education, and resources can manage it with the proper medications. More importantly, they are able to live long, rewarding lives, lives filled with song and dance. And dance and sing they will.

³⁹ *How to Make Dances*, page 8.

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