



## NEWS RELEASE

# Harvard exhibition of visual media in AIDS activism marks 20 year anniversary of the formation of ACT UP New York

*Premiere of the ACT UP Oral History Project*



Silence=Death Project, *Silence=Death*, 1986.  
Neon sign, 48 1/4 x 76 1/2 in. Copy of  
original from the collection of the New  
Museum, New York. Photo: Katya Kallsen.

Cambridge, MA  
July 2, 2009

The Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts and the Harvard Art Museum present *ACT UP New York: Activism, Art, and the AIDS Crisis, 1987–1993*, an exhibition of over 70 politically-charged posters, stickers, and other visual media that emerged during a pivotal moment of AIDS activism in New York City. On view at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts October 15–December 23, 2009, the exhibition chronicles New York’s AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) through an examination of compelling graphics created by various artist collectives that populated the group. The exhibition also features the premiere of the ACT UP Oral History Project, a suite of over 100 video interviews with surviving members of ACT UP New York that offer

a retrospective portal on a decisive moment in the history of the gay rights movement, 20th-century visual art, our nation’s discussion of universal healthcare, and the continuing HIV/AIDS epidemic.

The exhibition opens just over 20 years after the formation of ACT UP and also marks the 40 year anniversary of the Stonewall riots, the defining event that marked the start of the gay rights movement in the United States. The exhibition *ACT UP New York: Activism, Art, and the AIDS Crisis, 1987–1993* provides an opportunity to reinvigorate a debate around the realities of HIV/AIDS today, and about the links between visual art, political activism, health, and human rights.

*ACT UP New York: Activism, Art, and the AIDS Crisis, 1987–1993* is co-curated by Helen Molesworth, Maisie K. and James R. Houghton Curator of Contemporary Art, Harvard Art Museum/Fogg Museum; and Claire Grace, Agnes Mongan Curatorial Intern, Department of Modern and Contemporary Art, Harvard Art Museum/Fogg Museum and a graduate student in Harvard University’s History of Art and Architecture program.

“By highlighting the efficacy of political organizing and activist graphics at the height of the 1980s AIDS crisis, this exhibition opens questions about the possibilities for social and political change today,” said Helen Molesworth, Maisie K. and James R. Houghton Curator of Contemporary Art, Harvard Art Museum/Fogg Museum. “The history of the United States is a history of the struggle for civil rights; the exhibition hopes to tell part of that story.”

“We are extremely pleased to present *ACT UP New York: Activism, Art, and the AIDS Crisis, 1987–1993* at the Carpenter Center,” said Marjorie Garber, Director of the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts and William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of English and of Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard University. “The exhibition shows the critical intelligence that artists bring to bear when it comes to movements for social change.”

ACT UP’s demonstrations in the late 1980s and early 1990s reflected the group’s outrage against a governing establishment that ignored HIV/AIDS as a national health crisis; that failed to secure funding for medical research, treatment, and education; that profited from inflated costs for therapeutic drugs; and that perpetuated homophobic misrepresentations of HIV and AIDS. ACT UP’s successful campaign to achieve concrete changes in legal policy and medical practice prompted changes in clinical trials for antiretroviral drugs and prodded pharmaceutical companies to reduce the cost of these drugs. The group also transformed culturally entrenched ideas about sexuality and civil rights and is largely credited with originating and promoting safe sex education.

Working closely with ACT UP, artist collectives such as Gran Fury, Silence=Death Project, Gang, and Fierce Pussy formed to deploy guerilla marketing techniques to disseminate ACT UP’s messages to a mass audience, effectively exploiting the power of art to help put an end to the AIDS crisis. In subway cars, transit stations, taxi cabs, outdoor billboards, and bus panels, their wheatpasted posters and crack-and-peel stickers powerfully communicated ACT UP’s outrage and were ubiquitous throughout New York City. Pairing text and image with penetrating anger and searing wit, ACT UP’s art collectives targeted specific individuals and institutions at the local and national level, advocated for safer sex and gay and lesbian rights, and galvanized broadband support for the AIDS activism movement.

The Sert Gallery of the Carpenter Center features the Silence=Death Project’s iconic neon sculpture of “SILENCE=DEATH” from 1987, as well as a full-scale reproduction of Gran Fury’s famous “Kissing Doesn’t Kill” bus panel from 1989. Other works on view include posters of demonstration announcements, such as ACT UP’s “Declare War. Target An Administration That Kills Us With Neglect. Storm the N.I.H. May 21” (1990); posters that were utilized during demonstrations; and posters disseminated as street-side and print advertisements, such as several versions of Gran Fury’s “Read My Lips” series from 1988 that depicted images of same-sex couples kissing. Examples of the multiple crack-and-peel stickers that once carpeted New York City, such as Gran Fury’s “Men Use Condoms Or Beat It” (1988), and Little Elvis’s “The AIDS Crisis Is Not Over” (1988) are also included. Exhibited for the first time are mock-ups, design-tests, and sketches of some posters and stickers, such as the Gran Fury campaigns “Sexism Rears Its Unprotected Head” (1988) and “RIOT: Stonewall ‘69/AIDS Crisis ‘89.”

Projectors in the Sert Gallery display footage of past ACT UP demonstrations, a snapshot-based slide show of works by Gran Fury in situ around New York City, and various outtakes from Gran Fury’s “Kissing Doesn’t Kill” photo shoot.

The Main Gallery in the lobby of the Carpenter Center features the premiere of the ACT UP Oral History Project. Fourteen video monitors fitted with headphones provide visitors with continuous access to more than 100 interviews with surviving members of ACT UP New York from 2001 to the present. Produced by Sarah Schulman and Jim Hubbard, the project provides an extraordinarily intimate and complex record of the group’s historic moment. The interviews demonstrate the tremendous commitment, talent, and understanding that empowered ACT UP’s economically and racially diverse members to organize collectively, and to revolutionize the face of the epidemic not only in New York City but across the United States. Newly remastered and digitized for this exhibition, this is the first time these videos are collectively shown in this manner. More information about the Project, including full transcripts of the interviews, can be found at: [www.actuporalhistory.org](http://www.actuporalhistory.org).

“We are grateful to Marjorie Garber and the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts for partnering with us on this important and commemorative exhibition,” said Thomas W. Lentz, Elizabeth and John Moors Cabot Director of the Harvard Art Museum. “The exhibition, along with an extensive range of associated curricula, programming, and events, presents an opportunity to engage audiences across Harvard and beyond, as well as reinvigorate a dialogue that is relevant to our teaching and research mission.”

## **Involvement with Harvard University and beyond**

*ACT UP New York: Activism, Art, and the AIDS Crisis, 1987–1993* and the related symposium are incorporated as curricular material for a broad spectrum of undergraduate and graduate courses offered across Harvard University in the fall of 2009. In addition, the Harvard Art Museum is hosting a DIY poster-making event for Harvard undergraduates, providing access for students to artist residencies, and reaching out to on-campus student organizations, encouraging them to use the exhibition as a springboard for their own related events.

Public programming organized to coincide with the exhibition includes lectures, a symposium, film screenings, gallery talks, a performance in conjunction with the American Repertory Theatre (A.R.T.), and a poetry reading in conjunction with Harvard's Woodberry Poetry Room. More information about related student and public programming can be found at the end of this release and by visiting [www.ves.fas.harvard.edu/ccva.html](http://www.ves.fas.harvard.edu/ccva.html) and [www.harvardartmuseum.org](http://www.harvardartmuseum.org).

Coinciding with the exhibition, Harvard Art Museum's Education Department is inviting local health services organizations in the community to visit the exhibition with the guidance of a museum educator in order to stimulate reflection and discussion about sexual health, political activism, and art.

## **Artist Residency**

Four central members of the artist collective Fierce Pussy will participate in a 3-day activism and print media workshop, as well as a site-specific installation, with Harvard College undergraduate students. During their residency, Nancy Brooks Brody, Joy Episalla, Zoe Leonard, and Carrie Yamaoka will work with students to develop visual material addressing issues of gender and sexuality at Harvard and beyond. Fierce Pussy's residency will also offer an unusual opportunity for students to learn strategies for radical political organizing and collective art production from some of the most experienced and influential women artist-activists at work today.

## **Credits**

*ACT UP New York: Activism, Art, and the AIDS Crisis, 1987-1993* has been made possible by support from The Office of the Provost at Harvard University and the following endowment funds at the Harvard Art Museum: The Agnes Gund Fund for Modern and Contemporary Art; the Alexander S., Robert L., and Bruce A. Beal Exhibition Fund; the M. Victor Leventritt Lecture Fund; and the Charlotte F. and Irving W. Rabb Exhibition Fund. Gifts and grants have also been provided by The Barbara Lee Family Foundation; The Open Gate: a Fund for Gay and Lesbian Life at Harvard University; Fred P. Hochberg and Tom Healy; Kevin Jennings; the Harvard College Women's Center, the Office for the Arts at Harvard, and Harvard Technology Services with special support from Apple Inc.

## About the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts

The only building in North America designed by architect Le Corbusier, the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts (CCVA) is the home of the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies for undergraduate study in the visual arts and a graduate program in film and visual studies at Harvard University, two public art galleries, and the Harvard Film Archive. The Carpenter Center exhibits contemporary work in support of the curriculum of the department in the Main Gallery located on the ground level of the building, and in the Sert Gallery on the third floor at the top of the ramp. The Carpenter Center hosts a Thursday night lecture series that brings renowned contemporary artists to Harvard to speak about their work, as well as Visiting Faculty artist talks, BYO: Bring Your Own—Voices of the Contemporary at the Carpenter Center; the Film Theory/History Seminar, and a wide variety of exhibition-related events and film screenings.

All events and exhibitions, unless indicated, are free and open to the public. To learn more about Carpenter Center events, call 617-495-3251 or visit [www.ves.fas.harvard.edu/ccva.html](http://www.ves.fas.harvard.edu/ccva.html).

### Hours

Main Gallery (lobby): Monday–Saturday, 10:00am–11:00pm; Sunday, 1:00–11:00pm

Sert Gallery (second floor): Tuesday–Sunday, 1:00–5:00pm

The Sert Gallery is open extended hours to match the Main Gallery, 10:00am–11:00pm, for the exhibition's opening weekend on the following days: Thursday, October 15; Friday, October 16; Saturday, October 17; Monday, October 19; and Tuesday, October 20.

## About the Harvard Art Museum

The Harvard Art Museum is one of the world's leading arts institutions, comprising three museums (Fogg Museum, Busch-Reisinger Museum, Arthur M. Sackler Museum) and four research centers (Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies, Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art, Harvard Art Museum Archives, Archaeological Exploration of Sardis, Turkey). The Harvard Art Museum is distinguished by the range and depth of its collection, its groundbreaking exhibitions, and the original research of its staff. As an integral part of Harvard and the community, the three art museums and four research centers serve as resources for students, scholars, and visitors. For more than a century, the Harvard Art Museum has been the nation's premier training ground for museum professionals and scholars and is renowned for its seminal role in the development of the discipline of art history in this country. More detailed information is available at 617-495-9400 or [www.harvardartmuseum.org](http://www.harvardartmuseum.org).

For more information about this exhibition, please contact:

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# Exhibition Programming

More and updated information about related student and public programming can be found by visiting [www.ves.fas.harvard.edu/ccva.html](http://www.ves.fas.harvard.edu/ccva.html) and [www.harvardartmuseum.org](http://www.harvardartmuseum.org).

## Carpenter Center Lecture

### Collective Action: Calling All Artists

Thursday, October 15, 2009

6:00pm

Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, 24 Quincy Street, Cambridge, MA, 02138

Free admission, open to the public

Lecture with: **Robert Vazquez Pacheo**, independent artist and writer, member of Gran Fury; **Avram Finkelstein**, independent artist and writer, member of Silence=Death Project and Gran Fury; **Sarah Schulman**, co-director of the ACT UP Oral History Project, novelist, historian, playwright, professor of English at The City University of New York; **Jim Hubbard**, co-director of the ACT UP Oral History Project, independent filmmaker.

## Opening Celebration

### ACT UP New York: Activism, Art, and the AIDS Crisis, 1987–1993

Thursday, October 15, 2009

7:00pm

Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, 24 Quincy Street, Cambridge, MA, 02138

Free admission, open to the public

Viewing of the exhibition and reception with curators Helen Molesworth and Claire Grace, members of Fierce Pussy, Robert Vazquez Pacheo, Avram Finkelstein, Sarah Schulman, and Jim Hubbard.

## M. Victor Leventritt Symposium

### ACT UP 20 Years Later

October 16 & 17, 2009

Arthur M. Sackler Museum, lecture hall, 485 Broadway, Cambridge, MA, 02138

Free admission, open to the public

### **Friday, October 16, 2009**

5:00–6:30pm

#### Opening Keynote Address

**Leo Bersani**, Professor Emeritus of French, University of California, Berkeley

### **Saturday, October 17, 2009**

10:00am–noon

#### ACT UP New York

Panel discussion with three members of ACT UP: **Gregg Bordowitz**, filmmaker, associate professor of film, video, and new media at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago; **Joy Episalla**, independent artist, member of Fierce Pussy; **Kendall Thomas**, Nash Professor of Law and director of the Center for the Study of Law and Culture, Columbia University.

1:30–3:30pm

#### Storm the NIH

Roundtable discussion with: **Garance Franke-Ruta**, National Web Politics Editor, *The Washington Post* (Harvard College, Class of 1997); **Mark Harrington**, executive director, Treatment Action Group

(Harvard College, Class of 1983); **Jack Killen**, MD, deputy director for the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine at the National Institutes of Health.

4:30–6:00pm

Closing Keynote Address

**Richard Meyer**, associate professor of art history and fine arts, University of Southern California

### **Film Screenings**

AIDS Activist Shorts and the Emergence of Queer Cinema

Friday, October 16 and Saturday, October 17, 2009

8:00pm

Harvard Film Archive, 24 Quincy Street, Cambridge, MA, 02138

For more information, visit the Harvard Film Archive: <http://hcl.harvard.edu/hfa>.

### **Harvard University Center for AIDS Research Conference**

AIDS Stigma, Denialism, and Mistrust

Monday, October 19, 2009

1:00–5:30pm

Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, 24 Quincy Street, Cambridge, MA, 02138

Free admission, open to the public

### **Carr Center for Human Rights Policy Lecture Series**

ACT-ing UP: The Living Legacy of AIDS Protest

Thursdays: October 22, October 29, November 19, and December 3, 2009

4:00–5:30pm

Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, 24 Quincy Street, Cambridge, MA, 02138

Free admission, open to the public

Four-part lecture series with prominent intellectuals and activists, coordinated by Dr. Timothy Patrick McCarthy, Carr Center for Human Rights Policy, Harvard Kennedy School.

### **Gallery Talks**

ACT UP New York: Activism, Art, and the AIDS Crisis, 1987–1993

October 31 & November 12, 2009

Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, 24 Quincy Street, Cambridge

Free admission, open to the public

#### **Saturday, October 31**

11:00am

Claire Grace, exhibition co-curator and Agnes Mongan Curatorial Intern, Department of Modern and Contemporary Art, Harvard Art Museum/Fogg Museum

#### **Thursday, November 12**

1:00pm

Helen Molesworth, exhibition co-curator and Maisie K. and James R. Houghton Curator of Contemporary Art, Harvard Art Museum/Fogg Museum

**Poetry Reading**

Mark Doty and Eileen Myles

Tuesday, November 24, 2009

Time and location to be announced

Free admission, open to the public

**Mark Doty**, winner of the 2008 National Book Award for Poetry

**Eileen Myles**, independent writer

Introduction by **Christina Davis**, Curator of the Woodberry Poetry Room.

**M. Victor Leventritt Lecture**

World AIDS Day Lecture: Seeing AIDS

Tuesday, December 1, 2009

6:00pm

Arthur M. Sackler Museum, lecture hall, 485 Broadway, Cambridge, MA, 02138

Free admission, open to the public. Sackler galleries will remain open until 6:00pm.

**Philip Yenawine**, co-founding director of Visual Understanding in Education

Philip Yenawine was director of education at the Museum of Modern Art from 1983–93 and was deeply involved in the community of artists who made work in response to the AIDS crisis. Yenawine will reflect on the impact of AIDS on the cultural sector, how artists contributed to political action around the disease, how some artists chronicled the disease through their work, and the establishment of December 1 as "A Day without Art."