ART IS NOT ENOUGH*

The Artist’s Body as Protest

Hannah Calkins

Abstract

Distinguishing between imagerial and material media, this paper will examine specific works by the artists David Wojnarowicz, Robert Mapplethorpe, Ray Navarro, and Barton Lidice Benes that exemplify the powerful, political duality of the HIV-infected artist’s body. I argue that the HIV-positive artists I discuss here reclaimed their political and artistic autonomy by turning their bodies into art and protest simultaneously.

In her 1988 book AIDS and its Metaphors, Susan Sontag challenged prevailing discourse that made AIDS into what she argued it was not: a war, a plague, moral retribution. She articulated the ways these powerful metaphors were used for ideological mobilization against deviance and sharply criticized the “mythologists” and “fulminators” who perpetuated them. “With this illness, one that elicits so much guilt and shame, the effort to detach it from these meanings, these metaphors, seems particularly liberating,” she wrote. “But the metaphors cannot just be distanced by abstaining from them. They have to be exposed, criticized, belabored, used up.”

For Sontag, conferring meaning onto the disease was unhelpful at best and evil at worst. But by detaching the disease from meaning, and by stripping away our modes of understanding and speaking about it, we are left with the stark and frightening reality of the disease itself—irrational, indiscriminate, no longer contained by language meant to distance, alienate, explain. How, then, are we to respond to or make sense of it? Even Sontag admitted “saying a thing is or is like something it is not is mental operation as old as philosophy and poetry, and the spawning ground of most kinds of understanding…and expressiveness.”

Understanding and expressiveness—metaphors—are the domain of artists. And artists’ communities, often populated by the “deviants” that ideologues fear and despise, were ravaged by AIDS in the first decade and a half of the epidemic. Held hostage by a criminally unresponsive government, artists were thus positioned to resist the oppressive discursive metaphors that Sontag identified by making art that exposed, witnessed, and protested the crisis. “If silence had equaled repression and oppression before, now it equaled death,” Lucy Lippard writes, referencing activist group ACT UP’s powerful SILENCE=DEATH campaign in her essay “Too Political? Forget It.” Fueled by rage and fear, artists and activists met that silence—death—with art and protest.

2Sontag, AIDS, 5.
3Lippard, Lucy. “Too Political? Forget It,” in Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America. eds. Brian Wallis,
that were often one and the same, taking on even greater urgency and fury when the government began a censorship campaign against artists such as David Wojnarowicz and Robert Mapplethorpe in the late 1980s. In this context, art – “saying a thing is or is like something it is not” – is both metaphor and concrete, literal action.

For Wojnarowicz, Mapplethorpe, and the other artists I will discuss here, the body became both the vehicle for action and the action itself: medium and message. Their bodies—their homosexual, HIV-infected, stigmatized bodies—became the site of this tension between metaphor and action, art and protest, the personal and the political. With varying degrees of literality, they made their flesh into art, simultaneously occupying physical and figurative space and demanding that their spectators witness the calamity of AIDS. I argue that this work is undeniably political, though these artists may have been uncomfortable with or resistant to labeling it as such. (Wojnarowicz, for one, certainly was.) There is no doubt that the intention behind the work was to affect change, and as homosexuals, their bodies were politicized before they began making art and before AIDS.

Sontag, rightly, condemned dangerous and stigmatizing metaphors used to “explain” AIDS and even to justify the suffering and death of those with the disease. There is no doubt that most of these metaphors were conjured by people who sought to misrepresent and distort the truth that AIDS is a threat to all people, not only “faggots and junkies”; to suppress and criminalize homosexuality and other “deviant” behaviors; and to construct damning barriers between the (supposedly responsible and deserving) “deviants” and the (supposedly innocent) “general public.” However, I find great power and truth in repurposing the military metaphors of which she was so critical, those that liken disease to enemy, treatment to battle, the sick to victims. “We are not being invaded. The body is not a battlefield,” she wrote. But for the censored, stigmatized, brutalized, and sick, the body was a battlefield upon which political forces waged war—and for Wojnarowicz, Mapplethorpe, Navarro, and Benes, it was also a weapon.

Imagerial. DAVID WOJNAROWICZ


In his article “What Does Silence Equal Now?”, David Deitcher writes that while by the late 1980s there was a definite correlation between artists’ responses to AIDS and activist coalition, not all the artists’ responses were overtly political, nor were they “always encountered outside or on the margins of the art world, or in...the ‘public’ space.” He cites Wojnarowicz as an example of an artist who made art for the “private” interior of the gallery.

---


Sontag, AIDS, 64.

Sontag, AIDS, 5.
and the museum, but whose work also conveyed the “political stakes in the AIDS crisis while...attending to the epidemic’s psychic dimensions and emotional burdens.”

That is one way to put it. Another would be to say that Wojnarowicz—a distinctive and incendiary art-world figure well before the onset of the AIDS crisis—made searing, raw, raging protest of a society that tried to erase him and a government that revoked his right to privacy, silenced and censored his work, and used AIDS as a “weapon to enforce a conservative agenda.” From the onset of the crisis until his death, Wojnarowicz protested this kind of oppression in his art, in his writing, and through activism. His work, already significantly focused on the body and gay sexuality, became even more political—and politicized—with the advent of AIDS.

Somewhat paradoxically, the self-portrait I have chosen here does not overtly reflect this. It is also far from the most political work that he made, and many other examples in his oeuvre are better demonstrations of how incendiary and even brutal his work could be. But if much of Wojnarowicz’s work howls, this portrait speaks—more quietly, though no less powerfully—to his experience as an artist, witness, protestor and sufferer of AIDS.

Untitled (Silence=Death) is also perhaps the most famous and recognizable image of Wojnarowicz. It is still from the film Silence=Death, a documentary by Rosa van Prauheim about artists confronting AIDS. The film was van Prauheim’s, but Wojnarowicz “became the moral and political center of the film,” Cynthia Carr writes in her epic biography of him. He also had a great deal of control over the film, to the point that he and van Prauheim “agreed that [Wojnarowicz’s] sequences were really [his] film, and that he could do what he wanted.” On that basis, Untitled (Silence=Death) belongs to Wojnarowicz.

In the image, Wojnarowicz faces outward with a bald, searching, confrontational gaze that is perhaps initially even more jolting than the realization that his mouth has been sewn shut with a needle and thread. Blood falls like shadow down his chin. Just beyond the frame, a hand—his own? Someone else’s?—is poised to return to the flesh with the needle. The claustrophobic black background, contrasted with the starkness and size of his face, conveys a feeling of isolation, imprisonment, and doom. His eyes speak where his voice cannot. His gaze is a challenge and a plea.

Situated in Silence=Death, another reference to ACT UP’s slogan, the intention behind the portrait is clear. By “making noise,” the activist campaign and the documentary indict the government for its refusal to respond (adequately, or at all) to AIDS, and make the charge that this inaction is tantamount to mass-murder. “Silence=Death” seems to “[say] something is or is like something it is not,” but it is not really a metaphor: its message and effect are brutally literal. And for Wojnarowicz—who was diagnosed with AIDS two years before the film was made, and who was in the midst of witnessing the horrifying disintegration of his community of artists, friends, and lovers due to the disease—death was imminent and ubiquitous. Presented here, his body dually symbolizes and contains this threat of death-by-silence, boldly underscored by the crude wounding of his flesh by the needle. Untitled (Silence=Death) both viscerally represents its title and resists it.

The “silencing,” additionally, takes on a dual meaning for Wojnarowicz. At the time Untitled (Silence=Death) was shot, right-wing politicians and conservative groups were leading a relentless censorship campaign against Wojnarowicz and his artistic contemporaries, who were furiously responding to AIDS with art meant to expose, witness, and condemn—

---


11Carr, Fire, 422-423.
or to simply depict homosexuality. In 1989, Senator Jesse Helms, who was the figurehead for this crusade (particularly with respect to his relentless, homophobic attacks on Robert Mapplethorpe), successfully proposed a constitutional amendment mandating that government funding for the National Endowment for the Arts could not be used to:

“...promote, disseminate, or produce materials...which may be considered obscene, including depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the sexual exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts and which...do not have serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value.”

Absurd pairing of “the sexual exploitation of children” with homoeroticism aside, a great deal of the art produced in response to AIDS was thus rendered “obscene”—and many of the artists and curators who produced and exhibited that art relied on funding from the NEA. (Significantly, as Cynthia Carr points out, the politicians who opposed arts funding were often the ones who opposed funding for AIDS research. Wojnarowicz was drawn into this drama when the NEA pulled a $10,000 grant for “Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing,” an AIDS exhibition curated by the photographer (and Wojnarowicz’s friend) Nan Goldin; the grant was pulled because it included a blistering attack by Wojnarowicz on “New York’s immensely homophobic and powerful” Cardinal John O’Connor. After a front-page controversy ensued, the grant was reinstated, but homophobic leaders’ attempts to silence Wojnarowicz continued.

In 1990 (when Silence=Death was released), Wojnarowicz initiated a defamation lawsuit against Reverend Donald Wildmon, director of American Family Association (AFA), who had produced and distributed nearly 6,000 copies of a pamphlet titled Your Tax Dollars Helped Pay for These “Works of Art” in order to “provoke public outrage regarding funding of the arts by the NEA,” which now had warped justification in the Helms amendment. The pamphlet presented photographs of partial works from Wojnarowicz’s retrospective exhibition “Tongues of Flame,” which—to put it mildly—“addressed[ed] the artist’s belief that the United States government acted irresponsibly during the initial stages of the epidemic” and alleged that “homophobia, religion, and racism were the primary causes of the government’s failure to distribute information about prevention and to coordinate an effective effort for the treatment of those infected with the [HIV] virus.” However, Wildmon’s inflammatory pamphlet contained only small portions of larger multi-image pieces, all of them images depicting homosexual activity and sexual imagery. The works, Vilis Inde writes, “were stripped of their meaning and were provided a new meaning, creating the impression that Wojnarowicz’s art amounted to pornography.” Wojnarowicz won the lawsuit, and was awarded one dollar. He considered it a moral victory.

Situated within the film and contextualized by the concurrent arts funding controversies, Untitled (Silence=Death) challenges the viewer to behold the extreme bodily and spiritual violence inflicted by a society governed by homophobic zealots. Wojnarowicz displays the literal harm done to his body representing it

---

13Meyer, “Helms.”
15Carr, Fire, 442.
17Baker, “Camera,” 139.
so viscerally here.

ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE


“Certainly [Wojnarowicz’s] work—political, emotional—was quite a contrast to Mapplethorpe’s formal, depersonalized studies. But both insisted on homoeroticism as a valid subject for art,” Carr writes regarding the artists’ embroilment in the NEA funding controversies. That insistence on homoeroticism as valid propelled both of them into the heart of the “culture wars” (to bring back another military metaphor) of the late 1980s and early ’90s. Though different in artistic sensibility, temperament, and political method, both Wojnarowicz and Mapplethorpe subsequently became symbols of free expression and anti-homophobia.

Mapplethorpe was cool and detached where Wojnarowicz was hot and angry. Wojnarowicz didn’t identify as a “political artist,” but he is often called one, and there is no doubt that his work had overtly political intentions. Conversely, Mapplethorpe is not typically referred to as a “political artist,” but his art is politicized by virtue of both its subject—often homoerotic male nudes and BDSM scenes—and by the controversy that surrounded him at the end of his life (and after his death). That controversy does not define his work, but it lends his work a highly charged, and permanent, political context.

1988’s Self-Portrait relies upon context as well. The portrait was taken one year before Mapplethorpe died of AIDS, and the skull cane announces his impending death. Just as significant in understanding the portrait’s gravity, however, is Mapplethorpe’s appearance: while a viewer unaware of his illness would not necessarily read him as “dying,” when viewed in sequence with the many self-portraits he took throughout his career, Mapplethorpe is dramatically diminished here. Self-Portrait is also a departure from more familiar portrait photography of people with AIDS, often shown shockingly gaunt and weak in hospital beds. Rob Baker writes of the portrait:

“...This is hardly a snapshot of a person with AIDS. It is a premeditated statement, clearly calculated to elicit certain responses (as are all Mapplethorpe’s self-portraits) including shock (as are most of Mapplethorpe’s best known works). Here is this once handsome, sexy man, grown ‘old’ and pale and emaciated (though rather artily so), walking with Death. His body, his limbs–other than the hand clutching the stick–have already disappeared. His head floats in space in the upper right-hand corner of the all black space, without even a walking stick to ground it.

Though more stylized and less raw than Untitled (Silence=Death), Mapplethorpe’s portrait also demands, with an unflinching gaze, that the viewer face death. And not only Mapplethorpe’s: by thrusting the skull cane outward, into the foreground, he forces the viewer to confront his or her own. There is also, in that thrust of the cane, an implication that the viewer is complicit. The portrait makes its statement—“I will die”—and then, silently, burdens the viewer with asking him or herself why.

The propulsion to those questions forms the protest embedded in the portrait. This

[Baker, “Camera,” 151.]
protest is far less explicit than Wojnarowicz’s, and many viewers may not even recognize it; its quiet drama likely slipped past the likes of Senator Helms. But like Wojnarowicz in Untitled (Silence=Death), Mapplethorpe presents the image of his HIV-infected body, demands his illness and impending death be recognized, and charges the viewer with responding. Self-Portrait is, of course, a powerful image on its own. But to remove it from the context of AIDS—that is, to de-politicize it—is to lose an important part of its intention and its history.

Just as the political implications of Self-Portrait arise from the viewer’s response rather than from the portrait itself, the social and political power of Mapplethorpe’s work was greatly enhanced and even supplied by Helms’ efforts to suppress it. “As part of his successful effort to impose content restrictions on federally funded art, Helms exploited public fears and fantasies about male homosexuality,” Richard Meyer writes. “The name to which he most frequently assigned those fears and fantasies was Mapplethorpe.”

Helms proposed his amendment restricting NEA funding to art that met “the standards of decency” one month after the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., canceled Mapplethorpe’s retrospective The Perfect Moment (The Gallery cited an “overheated political environment” as the cause for the cancellation). During Senate hearings for his amendment and in the press, Helms repeatedly denounced Mapplethorpe’s work as “sick” and conflated his homosexuality with AIDS. Rhetorically, Meyer argues, Helms displaced HIV infection “from Mapplethorpe’s body on to the body of his work, as his photographs are said to contaminate an otherwise clean” American culture. Helms’ hysterical campaign against Mapplethorpe also shut down another exhibition of The Perfect Moment at the Cincinnati Art Museum (which, outrageously, resulted in a ten-day obscenity trial against the museum and its director), but it had another effect as well: provoking a “counter-discourse” that held up Mapplethorpe’s work as a symbol of freedom of speech and self-expression.

The portrait also depends on context in another critical way, and that is the fact that Mapplethorpe was an artist whose work relished the beauty of the body—and especially the beauty of the male, homoerotic body. His works, then, “raise a deep question of concern in exploring AIDS,” Baker writes. “What happens when beauty itself—form, fitness, sensuality—begins to dissolve, uncontrollably?”

---


Michael Kimmelman stated the fact rather mildly in a 1989 New York Times article on AIDS and the arts: “This crisis has not always brought forth the best from our artists and cultural leaders,” he wrote. “AIDS is increasingly an affliction of poor people and minorities, but artists still treat it principally in terms of white middle-class men.”

Kimmelman’s criticism is certainly valid, but not all artists working at the time were white middle class men, either. One standout figure is Ray Navarro, a “dazzling, outspoken, proudly queer, twenty-five-year-old Chicano AIDS activist” and artist whose photographic triptych *Equipped* exemplifies the artist’s body as protest, though in some unexpected ways.

Navarro is perhaps better known for his activism than his art. He was a prominent member of ACT UP and helped found DIVA TV, a related video activist group that staged and documented theatrical protests. But, with the help of friends, Navarro made art and wrote until his death from AIDS in 1990. In her article “Another Kind of Love: A Performance of Prosthetic Politics,” Debra Levine demonstrates that *Equipped*, his final work, “embodies the ethos of care for oneself and others produced by this political community.”

Considering *Equipped*, which Levine’s article focuses on, the word “embodies” may seem to be a discordant choice. After all, these three photographs are striking for the absence of a body, and for the subjects’ stark and alienating difference from the body. But that absence, that difference, is precisely what gives the photographs their power and animates them politically.

The collaborative production of *Equipped* is a large part of why the photos are meaningful, but the triptych does political work even before that nuance is considered. It consists of three black-and-white photographs of prosthetic devices, all upturned and abandoned.

---


30 Levine, Debra. “Another Kind of Love: A Performance of Prosthetic Politics.” E-misterica

31 Levine, “Another,” 1.
Their captions—“STUD WALK,” “HOT BUTT,” and “THIRD LEG”—link objects associated with disability to “notions of fetishized queer desire.” While Navarro, who was immobile and blind when Equipped was made, is not visible in the photos, I would agree with Levine that they are in a sense self-portraits. She argues that Navarro represents himself here with three intermediary objects on which he was dependent for movement in the world, and thus evades “the political problems associated with the photographic portrayal of the body with AIDS.”

Navarro did, however, specify that the frames be painted a warm pink to evoke the standard “flesh-colored” (i.e., Caucasian) tone of most prosthetics, which emphasizes—and protests—their difference from Navarro’s brown body.

There is another “invisible body” in these three photos. Navarro’s friend, the artist Zoe Leonard, is the one who composed the photographs on his behalf. Here Levine quotes Leonard speaking about her role in the piece:

“...This [was] not about my ideas meeting somebody else’s ideas. This [was] about becoming a conduit for someone else’s ideas. Becoming an extension of their body. Because I could see, I could operate the camera. I could choose the color. It was not going to be a collaborative thing or a collective project. It was about becoming his hands.”

Appropriately, and poignantly, Leonard functioned as another prosthetic device for Navarro in the production of Equipped. In this, and with his other activism at the end of his life, Navarro engaged friends in ACT UP and DIVA TV as his agents to enable him to continue functioning politically and artistically. Through them, “he inserted his body back into the realm of the body politic,” Levine writes. This kind of community effort is characteristic of the best, most effective facets of the grassroots activism of ACT UP and its affinity groups (such as DIVA TV).

Unlike Wojnarowicz and Mapplethorpe’s works, Equipped did not provoke a national controversy, and it does not explicitly incite a political response. However, Navarro’s deep involvement in AIDS activism, and his own critique of the racial and class politics within the movement, profoundly inform his art. The absence in Equipped is actually a full-bodied, abled, protesting presence.
The works I have discussed to this point have all been photographs. Though I argue that their displays of the body are meant to be tangibly literal, they are images and, thus, essentially representational. The work of Barton Lidice Benes, however, takes the idea of artist’s-body-as-protest to a truly literal, and quite beautiful, extreme: he made art from his own HIV-infected blood.

He called the project Lethal Weapons. Benes, a successful New York artist, had already been diagnosed as HIV-positive when he cut his finger and had a panicked reaction at the sight of his own blood. Speaking about the moment in an interview that was later featured on a Radiolab podcast, Benes said, “I thought, this is nuts—this is my blood . . . and I’m having this craziness. And then I thought, if I have this fear, you can imagine the fear other people have.”

This was the genesis of Lethal Weapons. Benes was correct about tapping into people’s fears: the artwork sparked an international controversy and earned Benes the label “terrorist.”

As you can see from the figures above, these
weapons don’t look especially lethal. Other works in the series were made from a toy gun, a plastic model plane, a pacifier, and similarly innocuous items, but they all carry a visceral threat.

The series was first shown at the North Dakota Museum of Art in 1993, and surprisingly, no one protested *Lethal Weapons* there. It was when the exhibition arrived in Lund, Sweden later that year—progressive, humanistic Sweden—that controversy erupted. Police came to the opening of the exhibition and demanded it be shut down, declaring the works a public health hazard. Inger Tornberg, the director of the museum where *Lethal Weapons* was being shown, was able to keep the gallery open, but several days later flyers appeared falsely advertising that the museum was selling HIV-infected blood by the liter. “It was on TV, radio, in newspapers, then CNN, Reuters, you name it. And I freaked out. I wasn’t prepared for all the hullaballoo,” Benes wrote in POZ Magazine 1997.

Many people in Lund were horrified and protested the exhibition. To appease the health authorities, Tornberg agreed to stick each *Lethal Weapons* piece in the oven to “cook” off the virus. The plastic and wax components of the art melted, but each work was then given a certificate that declared it safe. “They called it the AIDS horror show,” Benes said of the media response.

On the Radiolab podcast from which the Benes interview is taken, hosts Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich muse that most political art loses its “punch” when it’s taken out of its moment. But, Abumrad says, twenty-plus years after *Lethal Weapons* was shown, it still shocks: “It’s a man’s viscera, not just art. That guy [Benes] is gone, so it’s kind of ghostly, in a way” (Benes died of kidney failure in 2012). Tornberg, also interviewed in the podcast, framed it a bit differently: “Barton made himself skinless in some way,” she says. “It’s a very generous offer to anybody who is receptive enough to take it.”

Art, viscera, an offer—and, critically, a protest. The series does not have Wojnarowicz’s rage, or Mapplethorpe’s noble aesthetic, or a basis in activism like Navarro’s piece. But, like the other artists discussed here, Benes was giving the public the opportunity to face the body-with-AIDS and, in so doing, to confront their own fears and complicity. Benes, who later made art from the cremated remains of friends who died of AIDS, was absolutely doing political work when he turned flesh to art. But we must not forget he was, first and foremost, a working artist: “I have held back on selling pieces made from human cremation ashes. I have ethical problems with that,” he wrote. “I sell the blood pieces, though. That’s my own blood. And I’ve got to make a living somehow.”

I. Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have implicitly made the assumption that the art I discuss here is political largely because it is politicized. Objections to that assumption, particularly objections by artists, are understandable (and anticipated). However, as I have shown, the art of AIDS—particularly when that art consists of a body-with-AIDS—relies profoundly on its political context, and to decontextualize it would be to strip away its unique and important power.

In 1988, radical activist group Gran Fury distributed a famously inflammatory poster proclaiming that “ART IS NOT ENOUGH.” And, of course, it wasn’t (although, as the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres quipped, “whoever said art was enough”). The poster charges its

---


40Blood,”


42Benes, “Cremation.”

viewer to “take collective direct action” to end the crisis, implying that an artistic response is not a direct or organized one. I would counter that Wojnarowicz, Mapplethorpe, Navarro, and Benes did take the most direct action available to them, to remarkable effect. They transformed their own, earthly, literal bodies into living (and dying) metaphors that not only functioned politically and artistically, but also simultaneously collapsed the boundary between politics and art. No, art was not enough, but for these artist-activists, art was all—and everything—that they had.

References


