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## What Is Lost and What Remains at 'Not Over: 25 Years of Visual AIDS'

Posted on June 15, 2013 by EMILY COLUCCI

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**AIDS ART IS ABOUT  
AIDS ART RAISES AWARENESS ABOUT  
AIDS I AM TALKING ABOUT  
AIDS YOU ARE THINKING ABOUT  
AIDS I HAVE  
AIDS YOU KNOW  
AIDS ART ABOUT  
AIDS ART**

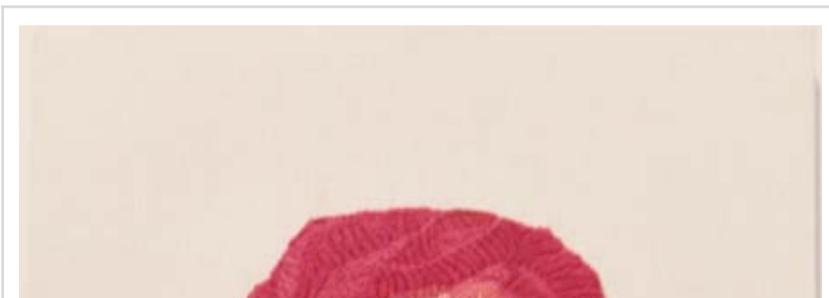
Vincent Chevalier, AIDS ART, 2013, laser print (photo by author)

In David L. Eng and David Kazanjian's introduction to their collection *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, they explain, "We might say that as soon as the question, 'what is lost?' is posed, it invariably slips into the question, 'what remains?'. That is, loss is inseparable from what remains, for what is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read and sustained." (2). Powerfully addressing both loss and its remains, Visual AIDS's 25th anniversary exhibition *Not Over: 25 Years of Visual AIDS at LaMaMa Galleria* until June 30 presents art both created in the midst of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s and from the later generation of artists who continue to deal with the losses, memories and ghosts of AIDS.

Curated by Kris Nuzzi and Sur Rodney (Sur), *Not Over: 25 Years of Visual AIDS* highlights the significance of the work Visual AIDS has done in their 25 years. Like Eng and Kazanjian's statement, Visual AIDS is dedicated to protecting and promoting the artistic remains from the ongoing AIDS crisis. This ranges from art by people who died from complications with AIDS to artists currently living with AIDS to artists who are HIV negative but continue to look back to the painful legacy of the AIDS crisis.

Linking generations of artists, *Not Over: 25 Years of Visual AIDS* allows for AIDS activism to be understood as a living, breathing contemporary issue, one that necessitates continual discussion and re-evaluation. Unlike the New-York Historical Society's current exhibition *AIDS in New York: The First 5 Years*, which despite the significance of discussing AIDS in a major historical institution, renders AIDS essentially over, a part of history rather than an ongoing crisis.

In contrast, *Not Over* features a wide range of artistic mediums to tell the story of AIDS, art and activism as a contemporary subject. From zines to flyers to books and poems to artistic installations and paintings, *Not Over* reveals the power of art to change the way AIDS is presented, understood and dealt with, as an ongoing dialogue that educates, inspires and sometimes confronts.



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LJ Roberts, Censorship Protest Mask (David Wojnarowicz), 2011,  
embroidery on cotton

### What Is Lost?

In her essay “Legacies of Trauma, Legacies of Activism” on the oral history of lesbian activists in ACT-UP, [Ann Cvetkovich](#) questions, “When is it important to move on, and when is it useful, if painful, to return to the past?” (427). For the LGBTQ community, which sustained so many losses during the AIDS crisis, and the arts community, which similarly lost an entire generation of artists, writers, musicians and more to AIDS, it is essential, if not completely necessary, to look back and attempt to understand the losses even if, like Cvetkovich describes, it is painful.

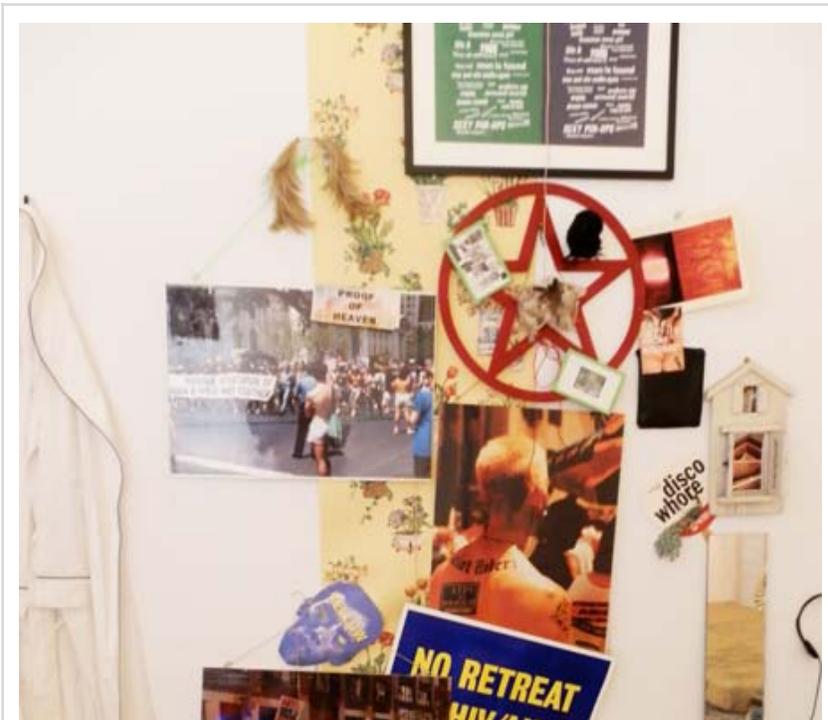
With photos and videos of deceased and wildly talented artists such as Charlie Ahearn’s documentary on painter [Martin Wong](#) featured throughout the *Not Over* exhibition, the toll on the arts and queer community is palpable. While a void remains where these artists would have been creating, their artistic voices still resonate, further illustrating the losses from AIDS.

Hung above the comic book *7 Miles A Second*, a graphic novel by [David Wojnarowicz](#) with [James Romberger](#) and [Maquerite Van Cook](#) on his life, [LJ Roberts](#)’ pink and red embroidered piece “Censorship Protest Mask (David Wojnarowicz)” indicated the loss of David Wojnarowicz even though the piece was made in 2011. Made in response to the [censorship](#) of

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Wojnarowicz's film "A Fire In My Belly," at the National Portrait Gallery during the exhibition *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*, "Censorship Protest Mask" takes its image from an iconic photograph of Wojnarowicz with his lips sewn shut with a red ribbon. Invoking the controversy surrounding *A Fire In My Belly*, "Censorship Protest Mask" reminds the viewer of the silencing of Wojnarowicz not only due to censorship but due to his death. Throughout the entire "A Fire In My Belly" controversy, activists and those against the removal of the piece felt lack of Wojnarowicz's booming, powerful and impossibly deep voice since, as an outspoken defender of free speech as well as an active member of ACT-UP, he would have undoubtedly had a lot to say.

Despite this palpable loss of Wojnarowicz's voice, which has been sewn up in Roberts' "Censorship Protest Mask," his art and his writing still remain as a significant tool for understanding this artist as well as his participation in AIDS activism. As Wojnarowicz explains in his seminal essay collection Close To The Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration, "When I was a kid I discovered that making an object, whether it was a drawing or a story, meant making something that spoke even if I was silent. As an adult, I realize if I make something and leave it in public for any period of time, I can create an environment where that object or writing acts as a magnet and draws others with a similar frame of reference out of silence or invisibility. Or that object or piece of writing can give me comfort as well as others. To place an object or writing that contains what is invisible because of legislation or social taboo into an environment outside myself makes me feel not so alone; it keeps me company by virtue of its existence" (156).

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Jack Waters and Peter Cramer, *Short Memory/No History*, 2013, mixed media installation

### What Remains?

More than the question “What is lost?”, the question of what remains is more important to the continual reinterpretation, education and conversation about AIDS. This question is dealt with most literally in *Not Over* with Barton Lidice Benes’s heart-wrenching piece “Brenda,” a series of AIDS ribbons made from the cremated remains of a woman who died from complications from AIDS.

However, the piece that perhaps best addressed the whole interconnection between loss and remains is Jack Waters and Peter Cramer’s installation “Short Memory/No History” at the back of LaMaMa Galleria. Walking through a quarantine-like curtain, the space is filled with pill bottles, AIDS activist posters, flyers, protest signs, photographs and videos related to the AIDS crisis, AIDS activism and the losses from AIDS.

Encapsulating the entire contemporary experience of how we understand and relate to the AIDS crisis whether attempting to educate others on its history or deal with personal losses, “Short Memory/No History” questions the emptiness after activism, after the height of the AIDS crisis and after many people in the general public, despite the work of organizations like Visual AIDS, think that the AIDS crisis is over.

What does remain in the memory of the LGBTQ community, the arts community and other communities affected by HIV/AIDS? Empty pill bottles? Protest signs act as signifiers from the past that can be doubly meaningful and meaningless depending on the personal history of the viewer? How do we relate to these things and how do people who never personally grappled with the losses from AIDS interact with them?

In “Short Memory/No History,” Waters and Cramer also present videos,

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including one which projected images of men speaking about the losses from AIDS. One moving quote mourned, "A generation of ghosts—would-be friends, mentors and fathers." Linking the past with the present and also questioning the future of AIDS activism and its history, Waters and Kramer's installation implicates communities affected by AIDS and their continual effort to educate and memorialize their losses.



Jack Waters and Peter Cramer, *Short Memory/No History*, 2013, mixed media installation

### **It's Not Over**

In the same essay "Legacies of Trauma, Legacies of Activism," Ann Cvetkovich asks, "What is the current meaning of the slogan, 'the AIDS crisis is not over' in the context of treatment with protease inhibitors and an ever-widening gap, of transnational proportions, between medical possibility and the political and economic reality, a gap that has significantly shifted the early associations of AIDS with gay men" (427).

Similar to Cvetkovich's point, what is the meaning of "It's Not Over" in relation to the arts and AIDS activism and how can we make sure that others don't start to believe that it is over? More and more of the younger generation do not fully comprehend the depth of the losses, the panic, the grief of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s and many in the LGBTQ community, academia, publishers and even blogs have (to their detriment) moved on.

Luckily Visual AIDS and their exhibition *Not Over: 25 Years of Visual AIDS*

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deftly and significantly embodies what the continuation of the slogan "It's Not Over" looks like: a dialogue between the AIDS activist past and the present, a continual education through art and other media as to the losses from AIDS and the current dangers, and the inspiration of those that remain.

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### 3 thoughts on "What Is Lost and What Remains at 'Not Over: 25 Years of Visual AIDS'"



CAROL ANN says:  
June 15, 2013 at 3:51 pm

Powerful exhibit and powerful message. It strikes at the heart. It's NOT over...the conversation (and art) should continue, however difficult.

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TERRY HARDY says:  
June 15, 2013 at 10:44 pm

Would LOVE to see this show. Will there be a catalogue?

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EMILY COLUCCI says:

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June 16, 2013 at 5:17 am

Visual AIDS is actually coming out with a 25th anniversary catalogue at the end of the month, which I'm sure will have some of the works in the show in it:  
<http://www.visualaids.org/blog/detail/reading-our-history#.Ub2Cwo6euHc>

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