THE *NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt:*

VISIBILITY, SEXUALITY, MOURNING

By

Katharine Denise Loevy

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Professor Leonard Folgarait

Professor Gregg Horowitz

To my parents,

Constance Inez Belcher Loevy

and

Robert Dickinson Loevy

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INTRODUCTION

How can we understand the idea of an artistic medium differently from the notion that it consists in the materials of art-making? What if we were to consider artistic media instead as the conditions of the possibility of certain modes of expression? To do so would entail that we can only identify the medium of a work by looking at how the work achieves its meaning-making. The media would be defined in and through the work by how the work accomplishes meaning, and hence there would be potentially as many media as there are works.

It is by changing the way we think about artistic media that we are able to approach the *NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt* in a new way. The *AIDS Quilt* works through its deployment, not of fabric and stitches as we might presume for any quilt, and not even of the activity of quilting. Rather the *AIDS Quilt* does its meaning-making through the medium of the independently created and individually submitted panel. The mode of artistic production coupled with this medium is the process by which panels are contributed by self-selecting participants and then stitched into the *AIDS Quilt* by the *NAMES PROJECT* organizers. The panel as a reproducible structure is thus the condition of the possibility of the production of the individual panels, and hence of the incorporation into the *AIDS Quilt* of the diverse media and artistic techniques that individual panels contribute. The *AIDS Quilt* panel as such is the medium of the *AIDS Quilt* as an artwork.

With the panel as the medium, the *AIDS Quilt* carries with it the promise of unfettered and fully individuated expression, and yet it is precisely through the

deployment of the uncensored panel, and hence of a highly flexible medium of expression, that the *AIDS Quilt* enables certain limits to surface. The *AIDS Quilt* consists in the mobilization of the individually submitted, independently created panel as a seemingly universally flexible medium of expression, and as such the *AIDS Quilt* is able to reveal the certain limits to the medium's implicit promise of perfect flexibility and neutrality. In this regard, the deployment of the independently created panel reveals the current limits of our ability to accommodate and properly acknowledge the ethical claims made upon us by the reality that the *AIDS Quilt* attempts to synthesize and to make meaningful. Both in what it can express and in its ability to make visible the limits of expression, the *AIDS Quilt* is thus meaningful in both its successes and its failures. The *AIDS Quilt* panel is thus an artistic medium that promises expression and that likewise reveals the limits of expression, and these limits are disclosive of the relationship between art, expression, and ethics as they have become relevant to our endeavor to achieve a more effective, more compassionate response to AIDS.

In a certain sense, then, my reading of the *AIDS Quilt* is an attempt to situate the work with regard to what Jay Bernstein puts forward as a "transcendental induction of the possibility of realism."[1] For Bernstein, realism is possible when the world in which we find ourselves is found satisfying, or when all by itself, hence immanently, it is an adequately satisfying and hence fully human world. Realist painting in this regard is only possible at a particular historical moment— hence Bernstein's compelling substitution of "induction" for the Kantian transcendental "deduction"—and this is the moment in which the world is found satisfying for human life. The content of the world is thus relevant to

[1] Bernstein, Jay, *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 38.

the possibility of a certain kind of painting, and the content of the realist painting is true as the semblance of a fully human world only when this fully human world has been realized.

How, then, is the *AIDS Quilt* true, or rather *when*? Do we live in the moment in which the *AIDS Quilt* is true? And if we do not, then are the ways in which the *AIDS Quilt* is false or fails somehow disclosive in some other way of our particular historical moment? In this latter respect, the *AIDS Quilt* is true in *this* historical moment as the deployment of a medium that promises universal flexibility and neutrality while also failing in this flexibility and neutrality. Hence, if in Greenberg's modernism the formal aspects of the art work *become* the content, what we find in the *AIDS Quilt* is that the medium of the work becomes self-conscious because the work itself contests the medium's promise of universally flexible and neutral expression.

The project consists of three chapters. The first considers the *AIDS Quilt* panel as a flexible and neutral medium of expression. This discussion is framed in terms of the panel's relationship to its historical roots in traditional American quilting, on the one hand, and in terms of the uses to which the panel structure has been put in relation to both non-American and non-AIDS-related memorial art projects. The purpose of this chapter is to show how the *AIDS Quilt* panel operates as a flexible and neutral medium of expression, and how this flexibility and neutrality have afforded the panel as a medium a rich legacy as the medium of subsequent works.

The second chapter analyses the *AIDS Quilt* panel in its relationship to the politics of mourning. For some, the *AIDS Quilt* orients the public response to AIDS around mourning, and for some very good political reasons, but the danger is that mourning then

displaces other subject-positions that would be grounded instead in action or defiance. This chapter considers certain key counter-works in this regard. The comparison with these counter-works and with the debates around the *AIDS Quilt* and the politics of mourning suggest that the *AIDS Quilt* panel may actually circumscribe the expressive possibilities of the artwork. We must consider whether or not the presumably flexible and neutral panel produces nevertheless a subject of mourning rather than a subject of politically embraced non-normative sexuality or a subject of political activism. By analyzing the emergent limitations of the *AIDS Quilt* panel in this regard, we are thus able to see the complex and difficult relationship between mourning and politics.

The third and final chapter compares the demographic makeup of the individuals memorialized in the *AIDS Quilt* with the demography of AIDS. If the *AIDS Quilt* panel is theoretically open to its deployment by everyone, this chapter asks why we find that the *AIDS Quilt* and hence the *AIDS Quilt* panel as its medium are taken up primarily by only a limited sub-group of those people infected and affected by AIDS. The difference between the promise of the *AIDS Quilt* panel and its actualization in this regard thus enables us to ask some very pointed questions about the specific cultural and political contours of visibility and invisibility that define our national engagement with AIDS. Once again, it is because of the medium's promise of flexibility and neutrality—what in this case translates as universal availability as a medium for expression—that the difference between the panel's promise and the *AIDS Quilt* as actualized has significance for how we understand the politics of visibility in the contemporary world with regard to AIDS.

CHAPTER I

MEDIA FLEXIBILITY

The *AIDS Quilt* Panel

The *AIDS Quilt* is the largest collective art project in the world,[2] and consists in the stitching together of individual, unique, and independently created panels. The overwhelming majority of panels are sent in by people who self-select to participate in the *AIDS Quilt* and who submit a panel in the name of a single person who has died of AIDS. The panel itself is the medium of the *AIDS Quilt*, and purports to be an all-inclusive and universally flexible site of personal memorialization, mourning, and activism. While the overwhelming number of panels conform to the stipulated size of 3' by 6', and while the organizers of the *AIDS Quilt* ask that panels be of a kind of material that can be stitched at the edges and folded as a part of 12' by 12' quilt blocks, no panel is ever censored or rejected. As well, there is a high degree of flexibility with regard to the materials used or the objects that can be built into a panel. As an ever-growing patchwork, the *AIDS Quilt* consists at this point in over forty thousand individual testaments to the impact upon people's lives of the AIDS epidemic and of individual snapshots of lives lost to AIDS (figure 1).

The original inspiration for the quilt came to Cleve Jones—founder of the *NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt*—during the annual Harvey Milk candlelight vigil in San Francisco in 1987. Jones had asked participants to make posters bearing the name of a

[2] This characterization of the *AIDS Quilt* as a collective art project was brought to my attention by Gregg Stull in his essay "The AIDS Memorial Quilt: Performing Memory, Piecing Action," *American Art,* Summer 2001, p. 84.

Figure 1: NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt on display in 1996 at the Washington Mall. Photography by Ron Edmons/Associated Press, copyright 2007, The New York Times. Image accessed online at the New York Times website, January 12, 2010.

person they had known who had died of AIDS, and at one point in the vigil these posters were hung together on the wall of the San Francisco City Hall. According to Jones, the posters appeared as if to form a giant quilt—a quilt consisting of innumerable individual voices expressing grief at the loss of innumerable individual loved ones who had succumbed to AIDS. The founding moment for the *AIDS Quilt* was thus an event that succeeded in making visible in a comprehensive way individual commemorative voices mourning individual lives lost, but such as to be brought together into a single entity that spoke to the enormity of the epidemic through the force of sheer number.

Jones had the idea of asking people to make individual 6' by 3' panels (the size of a human grave) naming someone lost to AIDS. By stitching together these panels and by laying them out before the public in the civic center of the community, Jones hoped to bring the reality of the death toll that the gay community was facing more squarely into public view. To do so seemed essential, since the general public and the government seemed to regard these deaths as not meriting their attention, or as Jones is quoted as saying, "we could all die without anyone really knowing."[3] This general disregard was coupled with the repeated reassurances given by the *New York Times* to its presumed readership that AIDS was "only" killing gay men and intravenous drug users. This and other overt refusals to identify with the victims of AIDS inspired the bumper sticker "AIDS: Killing All the Right People."[4] By laying out the corpses of the dead in the symbolic form of 6' by 3' panels containing their names, Jones hoped to fight the high degree of public indifference that in the face of this new epidemic was on the way to having nearly genocidal implications for the gay community in the United States. In this regard, the *AIDS Quilt* with its individual quilt panels and their messages of love, loss, and remembrance was originally intended as a vehicle for making visible the corpses of the dead by presenting them at symbolic sites of governance and civic identity. The *AIDS Quilt* was initiated from the beginning as a political act.

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[3] Jenson, Marvin D., "Making Contact: The NAMES Project in Comparison to the Vietnam Memorial," paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, New Orleans, Nov. 1988, p. 3. Quoted in Hawkins, Peter S., "Naming Names: The Art of Memory and the NAMES Project AIDS Quilt, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Summer 1993), p. 756.

[4] Described by Cleve Jones in the documentary "Then and Now," *Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt,* DVD, produced by Bill Couteure, Rob Epstein, and Jeffrey Friedman; directed by Rob Epstein and Friedman (San Francisco: Telling Pictures, Inc. and the NAMES Project Foundation, 2004). Quoted in Morris, Charles, E., "Introduction: The Mourning After," in *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* Vol. 10, No. 4., 2007, p. 564.

But while the idea for the *AIDS Quilt* and the initial stipulations for the individual panels and for their display were defined by Jones with specific political intention in mind, each panel is its own creation with its own creators, and each stands as a singular and unrepeatable memorial to an individual or to a specific group of individuals. As such, the *AIDS Quilt* has the breathtaking power to memorialize thousands of people, each one through a testament to his or her unique life and to his or her unique significance to someone else. The *AIDS Quilt* panel speaks to the nature of an ongoing epidemic, since panels can be ceaselessly sewn together without there being any formal limit to the size that the *AIDS Quilt* can take, although there are limits to whether it can be displayed in its entirety. At this point (January, 2010), the *AIDS Quilt* consists in over twenty years of panel additions and in over 46,000 panels that if exhibited in full would cover over six city blocks.[5] The organizers of the *AIDS Quilt* have said they will not stop accepting panels until the epidemic is over.

The visual effect of sewing together individually submitted panels into 12' by 12' blocks is often colorful and chaotic (figure 2). Each block consists in individual panels that often vary widely in purpose, materials, color, texture, content and style. Image, color, and formal structure are unique in each case. In some panels, the words are central, while in others the focus is more on images and pictures of objects.

All panels participate in some way in naming. Where a single person is memorialized, the name of the individual is set into the panel alongside images and

[5] The Quilt has only been shown in its entirety five times in its twenty + year history, each time at the Mall in Washington D.C. In 1987, only three months after its inception, the Quilt numbered 2000 panels and covered the size of two football fields. In 1988 there were 8000 panels. In 1989 there were 10,000. In 1992 there were 21,600. In 1996 there were over 40,000. Data about the Quilt can be accessed at the *Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt* website.

Figure 2: Sample block of the *NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt,* accessed from the *NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt* database, January 11, 2010.

objects whose significance is known only to the intimate circle of people for whom the death of this individual is a personal loss. This is the case, for example, in figure 2 in the panel located on the left-hand side, half-way down, where a flag, a truck, and other objects occupy the space along with the words "My Friend Michael Alblaster." These are the panels that engage politically at the level of making visible deaths to AIDS, but that are likewise expressions of individual and often very personal experiences of mourning. These kinds of panels—by far the most numerous—can be distinguished from

those in which no specific person has been named and wherein images and objects operate more generally. An example of this latter type of panel is the upper left-hand panel in figure 2. Sending out a message without private, coded significance, this panel consists in the image of a dove—a symbol for peace or the Holy Spirit—and in the words "I believe in our creator."

The Patchwork Quilt

While the decision to organize an AIDS memorial quilt was finalized in part because of the cultural associations that attach to quilting, it is also because of certain possibilities inherent in the quilt-format and anticipated by the American tradition of quilting that affords the *AIDS Quilt* its flexibility.[6] Traditional patchwork quilts consist in similarly shaped panels that nevertheless show a great deal of variability with regard to color and internal patterning.

In a 1954 wedding patchwork quilt made in Kansas, square panels of a similar shape but of several different colors are stitched together such as to create an overall pattern with internal variability (see figure 3).[7] In another patchwork quilt, this one from the late 1800's, we see similarly shaped but differently colored squares that are likewise "patched" together, this time to create a "zigzag" pattern through groupings of pastel squares, on the one hand, and dark, earth-tone browns, maroons with occasional pinks and blues, on the other (figure 4). Within each color grouping—each zigzag—there is

[6] I am grateful to Peter Hawkins for his analysis of patchwork quilts, crazy quilts and mourning quilts as important historical precursors to the *AIDS Quilt.* See Hawkins, Peter S., "Naming Names.": The Art of Memory and the NAMES Project AIDS Quilt, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Summer 1993).
[7] The "name" of this quilt and others is derived from the name of the quilt's pattern. I prefer quilts to have genuine titles. Each uniquely composed quilt, like each artwork, offers us the semblance of a unique individual, and thus deserves its own name.

Figure 3: *Flatiron Patchwork,* Hester Mae (Tuck) Hilleary, 1954, made in Stockton, Kansas, Hand Piecing, Permanent collection, Kansas State Historical Society. Image and information from The Quilt Index, online resource, accessed January 11, 2010.

Figure 4: *Log Cabin—Zigzag setting, The Log Patch; American Log Patchwork; Colonial Block*, quilter unknown, late 1800s, block pattern, Mary Barton collection, State Historic Society of Iowa. Image and information from The Quilt Index, online resource, accessed January 11, 2010.

considerable variation with regard to color and pattern. The "patchwork" quality of both these quilts gives them a high degree of internal variability that exists in dynamic tension with its achievement of overarching and unifying order.

But while these quilts effect variation within regularized patterns that ultimately produce either the repeated diamond effect or the cross and grid effect over each quilt in its entirety, the piecing together of the panels of the *AIDS Quilt* forms no overall pattern apart from the repetition of the 12' by 12' blocks that ritually unfolded side by side as a part of the performative dimensions of the *AIDS Quilt's* display. Apart from the repetition of this structural pattern, the designs, color schemes, materials and style of the panels of the *AIDS Quilt* do not coalesce into any unifying pattern.

In this regard, the *AIDS Quilt*, despite its regularly shaped panels, has more in common with the American tradition of patchwork quilts known as "crazy quilts." The American crazy quilt is notable for doing away with uniformly-sized panels. In one example of a crazy quilt from the late 1800's, the quilt consists of nine square-shaped blocks that give to it an overall geometric structure, but at the edges of the quilt and internal to these squares are pieces of fabric that differ from one another not only in color and pattern but also in their basic shape (figure 5). As we move from the center outward, the quilt panels are less and less uniform in their shape. As we move from the edges inward, this chaotic stitching together of various colors, shapes, and patterns becomes ever more constricted into regularized squares and triangles.

In an even more dramatic example, the crazy quilt made by Amelia Trowbridge in 1885 does away with all regularized structuring (figure 6). This quilt consists in nothing but irregularly shaped pieces of fabric that are matched with one another and stitched

together without producing any larger order, pattern, or organizational scheme. The overall effect is one of delightful incoherence.

Figure 5: *Crazy Quilt,* 1880-1890; quilter unknown, made in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; hand piecing, machine piecing, foundation piecing, hand applique, embroidery, painting; Cotton, Silk, Satin, Velvet, Sateen, Print, Solid/plain; Permanent Collection, Daughters of the American Revolution Museum. Image and information from The Quilt Index, online resource, accessed January 11, 2010.

Like many quilts, Trowbridges's quilt incorporates wildly differing shapes, colors, patterns, but also textures and materials insofar as it makes use of velvet, silk and sateen. It incorporates objects that are not fabric at all—buttons, charms, beads—and hence in

this sense as well it is interestingly like the *AIDS Quilt* and the *AIDS Quilt's* incorporation of not only all kinds of fabric, but non-fabric materials such as metals, plastics, wire, and thousands of different objects. At certain points in Trowbridge's quilt

Figure 6: *Crazy Quilt*; Amilia Trowbridge; 1885; made in Melrose, Massachusetts; Silk, Velvet, Sateen, Print, Solid/plain; Foundation Piecing, Embroidery, Attachments (beading, charms, buttons, etc); not quilted; Permanent Collection, Daughters of the American Revolution Museum. Image and information from The Quilt Index, online resource, accessed January 11, 2010.

recognizable figures are discernable. There are, for example, two hand-held fans in close proximity to the quilt's center. Nevertheless, these legible objects are local, haphazard,

and irregularly placed. Order emerges in a limited way in the quilt, only so as to then recede back into the quilt's chaos.

Figure 7: *Contained Crazy*; Julia Ann Eastman Hosford; 1880-1890; made in Concord, New Hampshire; Other, Satin, Velvet, Print, Solid/plain; Hand Piecing, Machine Piecing, Foundation Piecing, Machine Applique, Embroidery, Ink drawing, Attachments (beading, charms, buttons, etc), Couching; Permanent Collection, The Daughters of the American Revolution Museum. Image and information from The Quilt Index, online resource, accessed January 11, 2010.

The traditional quilt pattern that is closest to the AIDS Quilt is what is called "contained crazy." In an example from the late 1800's made by Julia Ann Eastman Hosford, regularly sized bocks arranged in a regular manner nevertheless contain within

them a high degree of variety in terms of color, pattern, style and cut (figure 7). The central blocks on each of the four sides of the quilt look especially like the majority of bocks in the AIDS Quilt. The blocks of the "contained crazy quilt" consist in pieces of a semi-standard rectangular shape that are nevertheless stitched together in a disorderly arrangement of colors and designs such that these blocks share a similar look with the 12' by 12' blocks of the *AIDS Quilt* and its rectangular panels of all kinds of unrelated colors and designs (figure 8).

Figure 8: Four 12' by 12' blocks. Photograph taken for the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt display at the University of West Virginia at Wise. Image accessed from the University of West Virginia at Wise website, January 12, 2010.

The quilt-format as developed out of patchwork quilts and crazy quilts is thus what the American tradition of quilting has to give the *AIDS Quilt* over and above the associations with American folk-art. The format of stitching together diverse and seemingly unrelated panels is what grants the *AIDS Quilt* the quality of being perpetually open to expansion and redetermination.

Expansions of the Medium Beyond America

Hence it is the quilt format's ability to gather multiple independently created parts into a patchwork—like an American patchwork quilt—that gives the *AIDS Quilt* its flexibility with regard to expression. Yet part of the original idea behind a memorial quilt according to Jones was that quilting has a strong association with American folk-art. The quilt-format was chosen in part in an effort to assert that the AIDS epidemic is an American problem, since quilting in the style of the patchwork quilt or the crazy quilt is something Jones saw as quintessentially *American.* As Jones states with regard to the brochure that accompanied the first exhibition of the Quilt:

> In the first brochure we wrote, we deliberately used the word "American" in every paragraph. We wanted to apply a uniquely American concept of this disease that everyone wanted to see as foreign.[8]

The quilt format was thus chosen in part because of the rhetorical force that the idea of a quilt has within the context of American culture. According to Peter Hawkins, "The NAMES Project has been astute in claiming some measure of this American heritage; it has used the homey associations of the patchwork quilt to domesticate AIDS, to

[8] Quoted in Hawkins, Peter, p. 757, ftnt. 12.

neutralized hostility toward "high-risk" populations by appealing to a national legacy."[9] Memorialization in the form of a quilt unites victims of AIDS with a symbol of American-ness, and specifically with an American symbol that disarms a hostile public. Quilts *mean* family, care, commitment, and a conservative Midwestern lifestyle. As such, the quilt-format rhetorically counteracts dismissals of victims of AIDS that see these victims through the condemning lenses of an association with reckless gay urban lifestyles, with infiltrating foreigners, and/or with criminal IV drug use. The quilt as an historically meaningful symbol figures the mourning of lives lost to AIDS within the symbolic terrain of vintage American-ness, Midwestern-wholesomeness, and middle-class family morality.

But while the quilt-format was chosen as a way of insisting upon the American-ness of AIDS, it is estimated that thirty six countries are represented in the *AIDS Quilt,* several of which are represented in the *AIDS Quilt* panel shown above (figure 10). The quilt-format has thus facilitated not only individuation with regard to American victims of AIDS but arguably also the *AIDS Quilt's* internationalization.[10]

In this regard, we can say that the patchwork/crazy quilt format of the *AIDS Quilt* thus engenders its own diversification in a variety of ways. While the quilt-format was chosen for its Americanness, the nature of patchwork has enabled the participation of international contributors. The *AIDS Quilt* itself, like a crazy quilt, is an image of disorderly unity, and in this way it communicates the diversity and the contingency of

[9] Hawkins, Peter, p. 765.
[10] As of January 7, 2010, the Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt lists the following countries as contributing panels: Argentina, Aruba, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Cambodia, Canada, Chile, Dominican Republic, England, France, Germany, Guatemala, Hong Kong, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, The Netherlands, New Zealand, North Ireland, Norway, Philippines, Poland, Romania, Russia, South Africa, Spain, Suriname, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, Uganda, United States (All 50 states, Guam & Puerto Rico), Zambia. See http://www.aidsquilt.org/quiltfacts.htm, accessed Jan 7, 2010, 11:30 p.m. CT.

Figure 10: Sample block from the *NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt*. International panels submitted by *Proyecto de los Nombres*, Argentina; *Het NAMEN Project,* Vlaanderen, Belgium; Hong Kong; *Les Projet des NOMS*, Canada; *"No Glove, No Love", NAMES Project Nigeria,*Nigeria; *Asociación Solidaridad*, Guatamala; *Quilt Project Sydney*, Australia; *Remember Their Names—The NAMES Project*, UK; *Chile Unido Az Quilt,* Chile; *Keep the Love Alive,* Northern Ireland; *Le Patchwork des NOMS*, France; *South Africa Promises to Remember the NAMES,* South Africa; *Zambia Fights AIDS,* Zambia; *Projecte dels NOMS,* Catalunya, Spain; *Aotearoa*, New Zealand; *Memorial Quilt Japan,* Japan; *The NAMES Project Israel*; and *Projeto NOMES Brasil,* Brazil. This block also includes panels from Mexico, Romania, and Surinam. Image accessed from the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt database, January 12, 2010.

the community it constitutes—the community of people who have chosen to participate in the *AIDS Quilt* because they have somehow been touched by AIDS.

Not only the *AIDS Quilt* itself, but also the *idea* of a memorial quilt has proven to be highly flexible in terms of how well it admits of redetermination and novel articulation.

Figure 11: Sample panel from the *The Australian AIDS Memorial Quilt,* accessed online at the *Australian AIDS Memorial Quilt* website, January 12, 2010.

The memorial quilt-format imagined by Jones for the *AIDS Quilt* has engendered many other quilt projects. Australia has a quilt project of its own that is nearly an exact replication of the American *AIDS Quilt*—right down to the independently created and individually submitted 6' by 3' panels and the stitching of these panels together into square blocks (figure 11).[11] The American-born *AIDS Quilt* thus consists in a quilt format that is flexible enough to be useful to other countries in their encounter with the problem of AIDS. Both at the level of international participation in the American *AIDS Quilt*, and in terms of the internationalization of the *AIDS Quilt* format, the *AIDS Quilt* with its artistic medium of individually-submitted panels appears in this

[11] For a discussion of an African AIDS Quilt in its relationship to the *NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt,* see McLaughlin, Elizabeth, "Quiltmaking as Living Metaphor: A Study of the African AIDS Quilt as a Visual Parable of the Peaceable Kingdom," in *The Journal of Communication and Religion,* vol. 27, (2004), p. 162.

regard to be flexible enough to accommodate the human confrontation with AIDS as a global epidemic.

Expansions of the Medium Beyond AIDS

The flexibility and neutrality of the individually submitted panel is what allows the *AIDS Quilt* to be a community art project open to redetermination. As we have seen, it is likewise that which is taken up into other *AIDS Quilt* projects as further evidence of its possibilities for redetermination. Lastly, the idea of the stitching together of individually-submitted panels demonstrates its flexibility as a medium of artistic expression insofar as the *AIDS Quilt* has been reproduced in a variety of modified ways by non-AIDS related causes.

One particularly powerful example in this regard is the project entitled *Breast Cancer Awareness Quilt—Quilting for a Cure.* Rather than making individual panels to be stitched into a larger quilt, this quilting project consists in individually submitted quilts that are then given away to people fighting breast cancer or else auctioned to raise money for breast cancer research. As a participant in this project, Debbie Rolek made the quilt entitled *They Are Just Boobs Till You Lose Them* in 2006 as a memorial to all women who have died of breast cancer (figure 12).[12] The quilt includes repeated images of the breast cancer ribbon, of women's bathing suits, of the American Sign Language symbol for "I Love You," and of the statements "Breast Cancer Awareness," "Mammograms," "Self Breast Exam," "Doctor Checks," and "Get them checked—Get them checked often." The parameter is lined with pairs of breasts of all shapes and sizes, and

[12] All information about this quilt and the following breast cancer quilt is taken from the *Breast Cancer Awareness Quilt—Quilting for a Cure* website, accessed January 12, 2010.

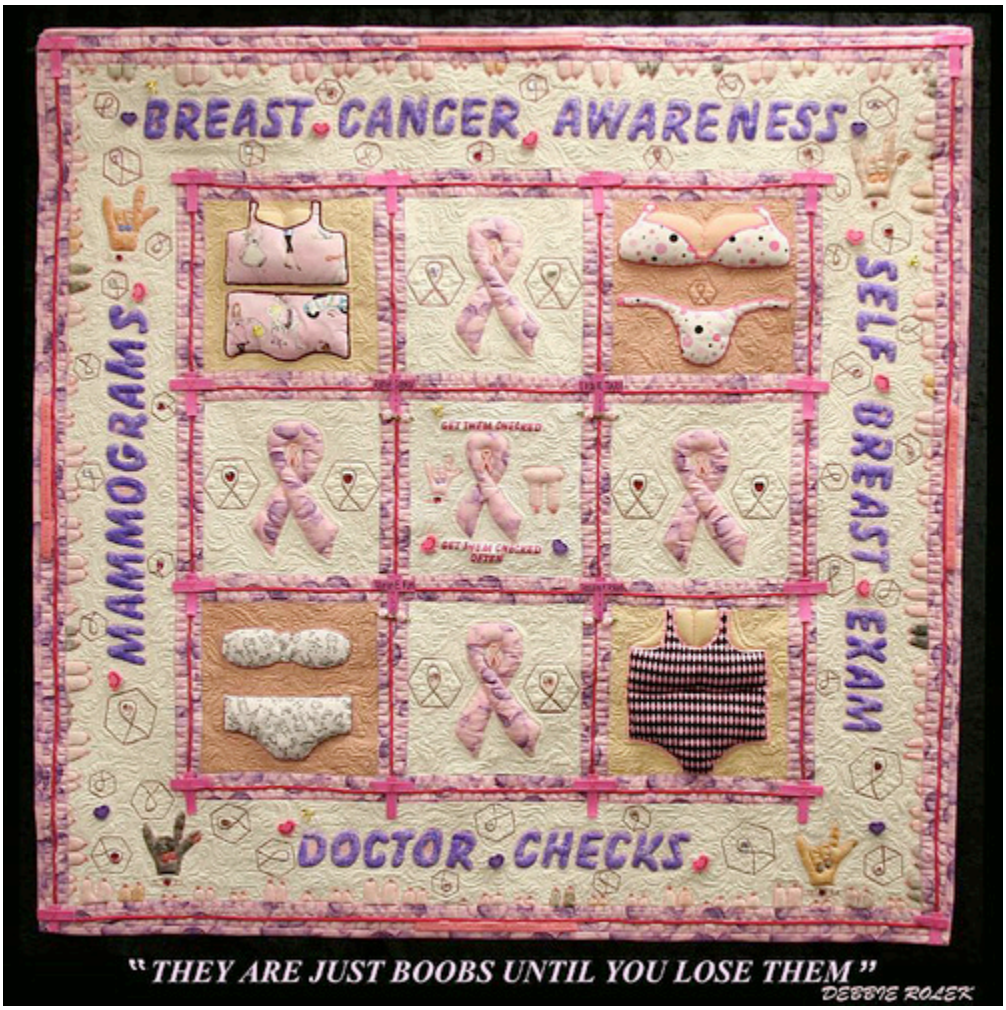

Figure 12: *They are Just Boobs Until You Lose Them*, Debbie Rolek, 2006, sample quilt from the *Breast Cancer Awareness Quilt—Quilting for a Cure.* Image accessed online at the *Breast Cancer Awareness Quilt—Quilting for a Cure* website, January 12, 2010.

representing women of all races, some with dove-shaped pasties to honor sex-worker women, and some with mastectomies.

In another very powerful quilt in this series, a patchwork-pattern is achieved through the incorporation of family photographs (figure 13). According to the mother of quilter Katie Weaver:

> My mother, Katie's grandmother, had cancer for 4-1/2 years. Mom's love in this world was her family. When we no longer

knew what to do we decided to make a quilt with a picture of every member of her family, living and passed, to wrap around her at her lowest point. Katie gathered pictures of family past and present, and conformed them to fit the chosen fabric size. It took days. My sister sewed all the pieces together in one day. Surrounded by everyone, we presented it to Mom. She left us a week later. Now my father finds comfort in the quilt, *Mary's Legacy*.[13]

Figure 13: *Mary's Legacy Quilt*, Katie Weaver, sample quilt from the *Breast Cancer Awareness Quilt—Quilting for a Cure*. Image accessed online at the *Breast Cancer Awareness Quilt—Quilting for a Cure* website, January 12, 2010.

[13] Quote taken from the *Breast Cancer Awareness Quilt—Quilting for a Cure* website, accessed January 12, 2010.

Mary's Legacy Quilt creates an image of this woman's life by gathering together pictures of her family. She comes to be represented in this way through photographs that stand as images of the intersubjective and affective attachments that constituted her life. This quilt is thus very similar to the vast majority of panels submitted to the *AIDS Quilt*, since it is a unique testament of love and mourning that also function as a form of consciousness-raising.

They Are Just Boobs Until You Lose Them and *Mary's Legacy Quilt* are thus important correlates to the *AIDS Quilt* insofar as they constitute the *Breast Cancer Awareness Quilt* project as another example of a memorial quilt project that consists in the expression of multiple experiences of human grief and of political engagement in a single collective art project. The *AIDS Quilt* has thus become a recognized format for individual mourning and memorialization as forms of political action.

CHAPTER II

THE *AIDS Quilt* AND MOURNING

Quilting and Mourning

Like *Mary's Legacy Quilt*, at least one dimension of the *AIDS Quilt* is that it functions in part as an activity in the work of mourning. Indeed, if there is any aspect of the individually submitted panel as the artistic medium of the *AIDS Quilt* that is overdetermined in a way that limits the flexibility of expression, it is the panel's seemingly inescapable association with mourning.

The *AIDS Quilt's* relationship can be tracked historically insofar as the American tradition of quilting includes the genre of mourning quilts. A tradition dating from 1800's, American mourning quilts were passed down in families to memorialize family members who have died. Mourning quilts sometimes memorialized a single person and sometimes all the dead in a single family. In one example of a mourning quilt dating from 1839, we find a patchwork pattern that is interrupted by images of a church and graveyard at the quilt's center (figure 14).

Entry into the church grounds is provided by a path lined by a picket fence that then surrounds the entire quilt. The path into the quilt's center serves to separate the purely decorative patchwork patterning in the quilt from the quilt's representational elements. Along the outer fence and at the bottom edge of the quilt we see several coffins and a few spaces shaped like coffins where coffin-shaped panels were once

stitched into the quilt. Inside the churchyard there is space for 13 coffins, four of which are stitched in already. Each coffin bears the name of someone in the family.

The patterning of coffins and spaces for coffins suggests that this quilt is meant to function as an ongoing project that records at any given time the history in the family of who has passed away. The event of death is the occasion for making an adjustment to the quilt wherein the coffin bearing this persons name would be moved from the periphery of the mourning quilt to the center when he or she dies. The unstitching and restitching of a family member's coffin is an activity that thus marks the passage from life to death. In

Figure 14: *Mourning Quilt*; Elizabeth Roseberry Mitchell; 1839; Permanent Collection, Kentucky Historical Society. Image and information from Practicallynecessary.blogspot.com, online resource, accessed January 11, 2010.

this quilt as it has been received by posterity, two coffins have been moved from the periphery to the center as made evident by the blank spaces in the shape of coffins where the coffins were once stitched to the quilt (see the two blank spaces in the periphery at the bottom edge on the left). The family history tells us that these coffin-panels were moved after the death of Elizabeth's two young sons, and that this was also the event that provoked the creation of the quilt itself.[14]

The quilt incorporates a purely decorative field of patchwork patterning in the space between the outer fence and the inner church yard. As a result, the quilt integrates patchwork itself as a symbol of the familial space of warmth, intimacy and care. This symbol is then made proximate to the representational content of the quilt—content that simultaneously tells and enacts a narrative about the movement from life to death and that does the work of holding the family together across the abyss of human mortality. This work of holding together is done through correlated physical processes; burying the dead, both within the quilt and without the quilt, on the one hand, and also holding on to the dead through the stitching of the name, on the other.

As a mourning quilt, *AIDS Quilt* is importantly different from the tradition of American mourning quilts for memorializing not just a single person or the dead of a single family but a large number people who are mostly strangers to one another and who share only in having died of complications arising from AIDS. Most panels will have a single name and the dates when the person lived. Panels thus function as surrogate gravestones for the dead. This is significant, given that according to Jones most people

[14] For a discussion of this quilt, see Duke, Dennis and Harding, Deborah (eds.), *America's Glorious Quilts* (New York: Hugh Lauter Levin Associates: Distributed by Macmillan, 1987).

memorialized in the *AIDS Quilt* were cremated and their ashes scattered. For them, the *AIDS Quilt* is the only physical marker of their lives. [15]

What the *AIDS Quilt* and traditional mourning quilts tend to have in common is the repetition of names. To say or to write a name after someone has died is in a way to

Figure 15: Sample block of the *NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt,* accessed from the *NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt* database, January 11, 2010.

reassert his or her existence or presence, even if only in the mode of constituting memory. This is the case, for example, in the massive lists of names in the Homeric Epics. Born

[15] As reported by Marita Sturken in "Conversations with the Dead: Bearing Witness in the AIDS Memorial Quilt," *Socialist Review,* Vol. 92 (April-June 1992), p. 74.

within an oral culture, this poetry reflects the need to repeat the names of the dead and to specify their relation to the living in order to hold together the history of certain families.[16] To write names on a gravestone or to stitch a name into a quilt is a way of counteracting death's power of erasure.

We see a particularly poignant example of this in one of the *AIDS Quilt* panels. Memorializing Jac Wall, the panel consists of a silhouette of a figure, where this silhouette is drawn by sentences that one after another repeat the name "Jac Wall" (figure 15, lower right). The sentences are as follows:

> Jac Wall is my lover. Jac Wall had AIDS. Jac Wall died. I love Jac Wall. Jac Wall is a good guy. Jac Wall made me a better person. Jac Wall could beat me in wrestling. Jac Wall loves me. Jac Wall is thoughtful. Jac Wall is great in bed. Jac Wall is intelligent. I love Jac Wall. Jac Wall is with me. Jac Wall turns me on. I miss Jac Wall. Jac Wall is faithful. Jac Wall is a natural Indian. Jac Wall is young at heart. Jac Wall looks good naked. I love Jac Wall. Jac Wall improved my life. Jac Wall is my lover. Jac Wall loves me. I miss Jac Wall. I will be with you soon.[17]

In this panel in particular, the repetition of the name operates almost like an incantation bringing the individual back to life. As Peter Hawkins writes: "Predication all but constitutes the text, as if by the repeated assertion of verbs the dead man might be made alive, brought back through the "wall" of mortality that separates the living from the dead."[18] Each sentence identifies a different aspect of the way in which Jac Wall was experienced by his lover, and in this way each one draws out more and different

[16] For the historical account of the Homeric Epics as written sedimentations of what was originally a strictly oral tradition, see Nagy, Gregory, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).
[17] Quoted from Hawkins, Peter, p. 774.
[18] Hawkins, Peter, p. 776.

dimensions of Jac Wall's humanity for the person who loved him. The panel invites us to encounter the depth and complexity of an intimate human relationship at the same time that it seeks to memorialize an individual.

With regard to the issue of the quilt panel's expressive flexibility, the relationship between the *AIDS Quilt* and mourning leads us to consider the following: If there is anything that the panel format projects as a limit to its versatility, it is that the panel is about mourning and memorialization. This is not to say that all panels are sad. Indeed, many of the panels incorporate humor and kitsch as alternative expressions of sadness and loss. Nevertheless, a certain criticism of the *AIDS Quilt* has emerged out of the gay community according to which it is by projecting a subject-position of mourning that the *AIDS Quilt* can become a site for the gathering of diverse peoples and relationships. However flexible the individually submitted panel may be, it cannot revise itself out of the way in which it projects this subject of mourning.

What is the problem with mourning? According to some AIDS activists, the *AIDS Quilt* brings a certain visibility to the lives of gay men, but without confronting the wider public with its own homophobia in relation to gay sex. Douglas Crimp raises this concern when speaking about his own ambivalence in relation to the *AIDS Quilt.* As Crimp writes:

> In seeing and being moved by the representations of what I called ordinariness in the Names Project quilt, it is partially the representation of sodomy that I saw. Not directly. There aren't a whole lot of cock rings, dildos, or Crisco labels, for example, although there are plenty of color-coded handkerchiefs. But in a myriad different details, I saw my culture, my sexual culture. I felt I knew many of these people, knew them from the bars and bath houses, from the streets and parks. But I wonder how true this is for others. I wonder what kind of ordinariness other

> people see. And that's one reason for my ambivalence. Does the quilt sanitize or sentimentalize gay life? Does it render invisible what makes people hate us? Does it make their continuing disavowal possible?[19]

Crimp speaks of "ordinariness," the ordinariness of a gay lifestyle, and particularly of gay promiscuity that for a homophobic public serves to confirm the negative stereotype of a reckless and immoral homosexuality. It is reference to the issue of gay sex that has been muted by the *AIDS Quilt* insofar as the *AIDS Quilt* is very often more explicitly about death and love and mourning rather than about gay sex and/or a gay sexual culture. What remains, then, is a de-sexed gayness that is disarming to a homophobic public precisely because it creates a false separation between a person and his or her sexuality.

In this regard, then, we must remember that the *AIDS Quilt* is a medium through which lives lost to AIDS are recognized, where mourning itself in relation to stigmatized deaths such as deaths to AIDS is meant in its own way to be a form of protest. AIDS as a disease that is associated with sexual transmission makes this protest relevant, since it is on the basis of the stereotypical nature of the transmission of the disease that deaths by gay men could be so easily ignored. According to Peter Manning:

> The combination of biomedical focus and moral metaphors made it possible for large cities like New York to withhold investment of human resources from research and care options and for insurance companies to eschew responsibility or cancel coverage. The victims of AIDS were morally differentiated. Ironically, those who were medical victims—as a result of familial transmission, mismanagement of blood supplies or failed screening of transfusions, or as a result of accidents at work

[19] Crimp, Douglas, "The Spectacle of Mourning," (first presented, 1991) in *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (London, New York: MIT Press, 2002), p. 200.

> (surgeons for example), were made martyrs. Those whose disease was sexually transmitted were stigmatized."[20]

For this reason, Manning compellingly argues that "AIDS is a disease and an illness and a moral construct,"[21] and it is in this regard that assertion of the grievability of stigmatized persons is always a political gesture. And yet if the political issue at hand is confronting homophobia, then it would seem that the political intervention called for will confront directly homophobic responses to gay sexuality.

The issue of taming gay sex by the *AIDS Quilt* and its projection of a subject of mourning thus stand as genuine concerns in relation to the *AIDS Quilt's* effectiveness. This is not to say that sex is removed entirely from the *AIDS Quilt*. As Crimp's comment suggests, many panels incorporate a variety of objects and items that are identifiers of gay sex and a gay lifestyle, although many may operate as coded identifiers that serve to constitute a community of knowing initiates rather than making gay sex visible more generally. And yet the perception of the de-sexing of gay lives by the *AIDS Quilt's* orientation to mourning and by the way mourning may actually function as a way of humanizing gay men precisely by putting aside the issue of sex has led some to question the efficacy of public mourning for gay rights activism. If this is the case, then the presumed flexibility of the individually-submitted *AIDS Quilt* panel has been radically

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[20] Manning, Peter, Forward in Hallett, Michael A., *Activism and Marginalization in the AIDS Crisis* (New York, London: Haworth Press, 1997), p. xi.

[21] Manning, Peter, p. xxii. Importantly, discourse on AIDS has been characterized both by AIDS activists and by the resistance to such activism by a distinction between guilt and innocence with regard to HIV infection. As Mark Donovan writes, "But even as well-meaning public service messages proclaim that "AIDS does not discriminate," debate over AIDS policy continues to be animated, often subtly, sometimes quite explicitly, by claims about the deservedness and culpability of people with AIDS. The public struggle over political language, in its crudest form a competition between images of "guilty HIV carriers" and "innocent victims of AIDS," has important real world effects that must be investigated and considered if one hopes to understand and influence the politics and policy of HIV/AIDS." See Donovan, Mark, "The Problem with Making AIDS Comfortable: Federal Policy Making and the Rhetoric of Innocence," in Hallett, *Activism and Marginalization in the AIDS Crisis* (New York, London: Haworth Press, 1997), p, 116.

called into question. It is not just that the panel cannot express *everything* (this would be an absurd criticism of any medium of expression), but rather that *the most important thing to be addressed and expressed—the defense of gay men as gay—is hamstrung by the* Quilt's *insistent projection of the gay subject as a subject of mourning.*

This issue can be understood as follows: If the terms of gay dehumanization are precisely homophobic reactions to the idea of gay sex, then it is not clear that we can address this homophobia without directly confronting gay sex as the terms of this dehumanization. Hannah Arendt made this point in her famous interview on German television in 1964 in relation to anti-Semitism when she said: "If one is attacked as Jew, one must defend oneself as a Jew. Not as a German, not as a world-citizen, not as an upholder of the Rights of Man, or whatever."[22] In her essay "On Humanity in Dark Times," she writes: "One can resist only in terms of the identity that is under attack."[23] What does this mean for us? It means that if you are attacked as a gay man, and if you are dehumanized for having gay sex, then you have to defend yourself as gay and your life being one in which you engage in gay sex. To defend yourself as a human being, as teacher or an athlete, as a son of America, as a son, dad, brother, or friend, or as a person who has died from a disease, is to fail to defend yourself as gay, and hence to risk not defending yourself at all.[24]

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[22] Arendt, Hannah, "What is Existential Philosophy?" *Essays in Understanding*, Jerome Kohn (Ed.) (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993), p. 177. Quoted in Bernasconi, Robert, "An Existential Issue Short" (Book Review), in *Continental Philosophy Review,* Vol. 32, No. 4 (October 1999), p. 477.

[23] Arendt, Hannah, "On Humanity in Dark Times," *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1968), p. 18. Quoted in Bernasconi, Robert, p. 477.

[24] This is not to say that there is a "what" corresponding to homosexuality or to gay life or even to gay sex, since to propose this would be to lock people within a rigid ideological framework completely inappropriate to anything like human beings and human life. As Robert Bernasconi writes, "all identities exist for their owners as a question and can be alive in the form of a question only by constant grappling." See Bernasconi, Robert, p. 477. But if the *AIDS Quilt* as at least in part a political intervention that seeks address homophobia and the homophobic response to the victimization of gay men by AIDS, then on

Mourning and Ambivalence

The relative lack of gay sex in the *AIDS Quilt*, or rather the displacement, according to some, of a sexual subject with a subject-to-be-mourned, is a criticism of the *AIDS Quilt* that we must consider in relation to the nature of mourning itself if we are to understand its full political implications.[25] Crimp's full analysis of the *AIDS Quilt* makes clear that we must begin by separating two forms of ambivalence that may be at work in the suspicion towards the *AIDS Quilt* that we see from many members of the gay community. On the one hand, there is the ambivalence *of mourning itself*, along with the promise of its resolution through the work of mourning. On the other, there is ambivalence as a result of the degree to which the *AIDS Quilt,* by projecting a subject-of-mourning, may ironically obstruct this mourning process through its occlusion of gay sex. In order to properly evaluate the *AIDS Quilt* panel as a flexible medium of expression in relation to the question of mourning, then, we need to get clear on what is at stake in

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Arendt's terms it *must* defend the lives and the dignity of gay men in and through a defense of gay sex and gay lifestyles. This is the case, then, even while what we use to represent gay men as sexual will need to be semblances of dynamic and intersubjective "whos" rather than static "whats." My sense is that the panel for Jac Wall is just such a representation of a "who" rather than a "what," not simply in terms of the individual person memorialized there, but also as a narrative about gay sex, gay life, and homosexuality more generally. I see this precisely in terms of the way in which gay sex is figured dynamically alongside other aspects of how Jac Wall was experienced as a multifaceted person-in-relation.

[25] The notion that the *AIDS Quilt* constitutes a subject position for gay men as the "subject-to-be-mourned," and suspicion that such a subject position is potentially limiting, is the thesis of Erin Rand. The notion itself is broadly Foucaultian. As Foucault writes in "What is and Author?," the questions to be posed to any discourse are, "What are the modes of existence of this discourse?" "Where does it come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?" "What placements are determined for possible subjects?" "Who can fulfill these diverse functions of the subject?" (See Foucault, Michel, "What is an Author?" *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews,* Donald Bouchard (ed.) (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 138.) Transposing these questions to the *AIDS Quilt*, Rand is asking us to consider how the *AIDS Quilt* itself determines subject positions for both viewers and the persons memorialized within it, and the extent to which these subject positions are available to some and not others and also limiting to everyone. See Rand, Erin J., "Repeated Remembrance: Commemorating the AIDS Quilt and Resuscitating the Mourned Subject," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs,* vol. 10, no. 4, (2007), pp. 655-680.

drawing this distinction between these two sources for ambivalence toward the *AIDS Quilt.*

One form of ambivalence is the ambivalence that accompanies any mourning in just the way Freud described it. For one thing, the love relation is already a relationship of ambivalence even before the experience of loss, and in fact the loss of the love-object itself, according to Freud in "Mourning and Melancholia," "is an excellent opportunity for the ambivalence in love-relationships to make itself effective and come into the open."[26] This ambivalence is provoked by nothing other than the little departures and disappointments that play a part in any relationship, and that we see managed psychologically through a kind of staging of loss by the child described by Freud in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." As Freud postulates within this context, the *Fort-Da* game in which the child repeatedly makes an object under his control disappear may be a way of satisfying an impulse of the child's to "revenge himself on his mother for going away from him."[27] Freud understands coping behaviors of this type to enact the movement from the "passivity of the experience to the activity of the game," and to entail aggression toward the love-object that is then managed through taking the control of episodic abandonment through a game/substitute.[28]

There is aggression in love, in other words, and this is because love involves the experience of loss. What is the effect, then, when the loss is total? What happens when what we have to manage is not the periodic loss of the love-object, but the disappearance through death of the love-object all together? The work of mourning that must be

[26] Freud, Sigmund, "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Freud Reader*, Peter Gay (ed.) (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), p. 587.
[27] Freud, Sigmund, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," *The Freud Reader*, Peter Gay (ed.) (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), p. 600.
[28] Freud, Sigmund, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," p. 601.

undertaken is one in which a substitute love-object is asserted in place of the love-object that has been definitively lost. As Freud explains, the libidinal attachments to the love-object are not immediately unhinged in the face of the loss, or "the love for the object" as Freud explains, must be understood as "a love which cannot be given up though the object itself is given up"[29] Hence a substitute love-object is put forward, and the presence of the love-object is thereby reasserted despite the loss. The work of mourning can then get underway. And what is this work of mourning? As Gregg Horowitz explains, it is the work of making the libidinal attachments to the lost object explicit—making them memories. Attachment and the body of the dead are separated. According to Horowitz: "The lost object is permitted to go its way, the decathected memory traces theirs, and thus the joy in having suffered love is sustained."[30]

The ambivalence inherent in healthy mourning has two important aspects. On the one hand, mourning bears in full force the aggression that accompanies the experience of love, since in love we are always living through what are experienced psychologically as periods of temporary loss or of partial abandonment. On the other hand (and this is the dimension that Crimp analyzes), the work of mourning involves the reassertion of the presence of the grieved love-object though the projection of ego attachments into substitute objects—objects, for example, that may find their way into a mourning quilt panel or into the *AIDS Quilt*. Mourning thus consists in gradually detaching these ego attachments from the lost person through their gradual detachment from the objects that are serving as substitutes.

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[29] Freud, Sigmund, "Mourning and Melancholia," p. 587.
[30] See Horowitz, Gregg M., *Sustaining Loss: Art and Mournful Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 153.

The activity of making a quilt-panel, therefore, can be a vehicle through which to gather love-object substitutes together and to form them into a memorial that makes the grieved person present and that also acknowledges the loss. Thinking along Horowitz's lines, the *AIDS Quilt* becomes the site of making-memories, of making explicit in particular ways attachments that through mourning become detached from the lost love object and therefore explicit for the first time. Making these attachments explicit in the wake of the loss, and hence making memory, is a way of retaining the intimacy with the one we have lost.

Memory-making through reattachment to object-substitutes takes different forms in the quilt. For one thing, the *AIDS Quilt* is similar to American mourning quilts in that the panels often incorporates actual objects that symbolized or in some way represent to the maker of the panel or quilt the loved one being remembered. Mourning quilts will thus often include objects such as buttons, a lock of hair, a piece of fabric cut from a familiar piece of clothing, or a photograph. The *AIDS Quilt* represents a kind of hyperbolic amplification of this kind of object-incorporation. The *NAMES Project* gives a long list of the kinds of objects built into the *AIDS Quilt*. It includes Barbie dolls, car keys, condoms, cookies, cowboy boots, cremation ashes, feather boas, first-place ribbons, flip-flops, jeans, jock-straps, love letters, photographs, police uniforms, rhinestones, stuffed animals, wedding rings, and a bowling ball.[31]

Memory-making in the quilt also happens through the incorporation of images of objects. We see this at work, for example, in a panel memorializing Timothy Monet Moore (see figure 16, center). His name and the dates of his life are stitched alongside

[31] This is an abridged version of the list that is also provided by Carole Blair and Neil Michel in Blair, Carole and Michel, Neil, "The AIDS Memorial Quilt and the Contemporary Culture of Public Commemoration, *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* Vol. 10, No. 4, 2007, pp. 600-601.

images of a variety of recognizable objects—a train, ducks, several buildings, trees, a picture of Dumbo—with the words "A Few Of His Favorite Things" written along the top.

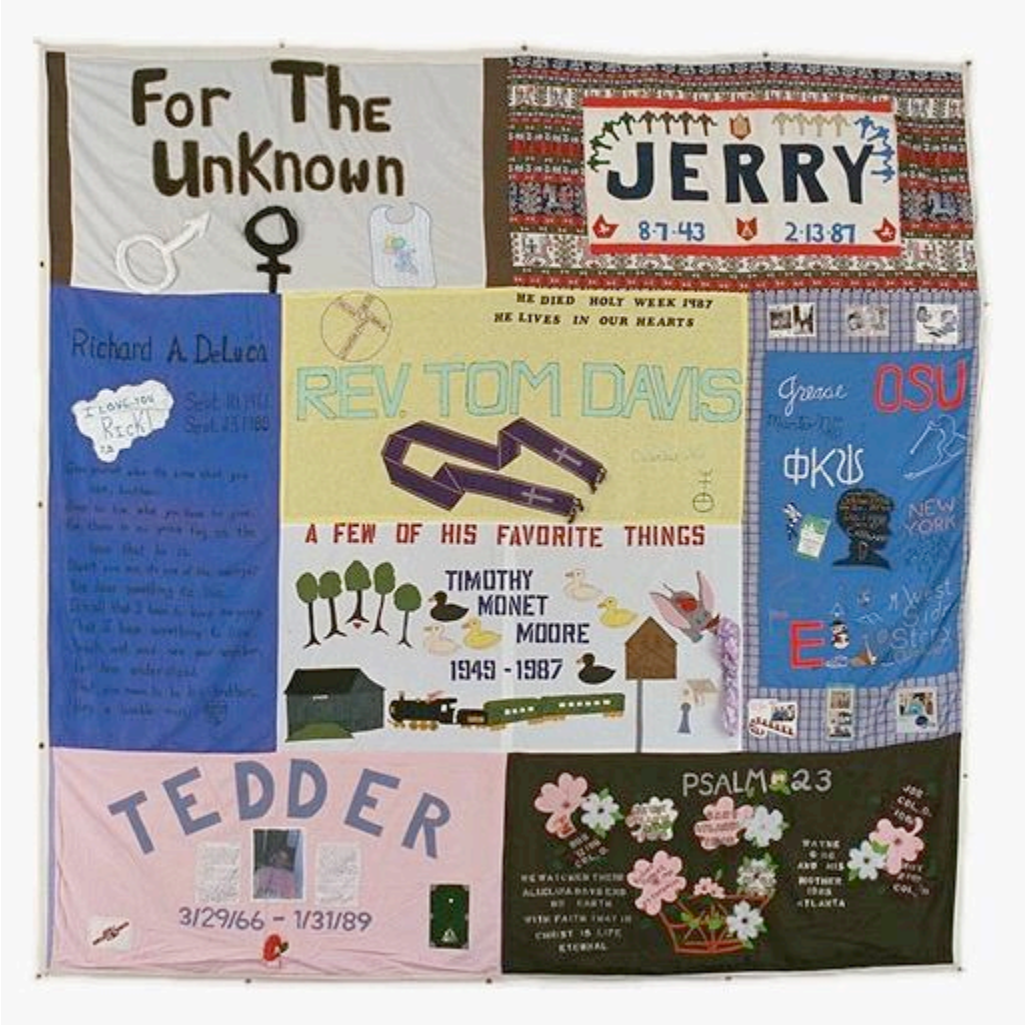

Figure 16: Sample block of the *NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt,* accessed from the *NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt* database, January 11, 2010.

If we read this panel as a memorial, then it represents the life of a person by including images of things associated with him that made him unique. If we read it instead as a work or labor of mourning, then this panel reasserts the presence of the lost person through a gathering of objects that serve as substitutes for the person mourning, or that

these objects are functioning as stand-ins that enable the survivor's experience of the love-relationship to continue. Insofar as an *AIDS Quilt* panel is implicated in this way in the work of mourning, it could very well become the target for the aggression toward the lost love-object that is part of the mourning process. Certain forms of aggression and/or ambivalence toward the *AIDS Quilt* are no doubt expressions of love, loss and mourning, and this is because love accompanied (inevitably) by loss provokes aggression, on the one hand, and because the work of mourning incorporates as much resistance to the loss as it does the labor of acceptance.

The ambivalence of mourning may figure in to reactions to the *AIDS Quilt* in another way. The *AIDS Quilt* in an important respect acknowledges loss, and the resistance in mourning is precisely resistance to accepting loss. In this regard, ambivalence about the *AIDS Quilt* can be understood as ambivalence about AIDS, and that is to say about accepting or even acknowledging all the AIDS related deaths that the *AIDS Quilt* is in the business of making explicit. This resistance dovetails with precisely the political commitments that are behind the *AIDS Quilt* insofar as the *AIDS Quilt* exists *in order that* it cease to exist, or it exists in order to oppose the epidemic that is its very condition of possibility. We can hear resistance to the *AIDS Quilt* as resistance—psychological and also political—to the ravaging of the gay community by AIDS in David Feinberg's statement that "eventually all will be reduced to nothing but a litany of names chanted at the Quilt, panels of cloth the size of a coffin."[32] We hear it also in the statement by *Breast Cancer Awareness* quilter Debbie Rolek in relation to *They Are Just*

[32] Quoted in Morris, Charles, p. 559.

Boobs Till You Lose Them when she says: "Remember, get them checked, and do it often, so your name will never end up on my quilt."[33]

This resistance becomes a form of ambivalence insofar as it is set alongside the insistence that the lives lost be acknowledged and treated as grievable. Judith Butler's work on the political relevance of grievability is relevant in this regard. In *Precarious Life,* Butler analyzes the way in which victims whose status as gay or lesbian made them undesirable for the official and highly publicized grieving in the wake of 9-11 that served as so many acts of nation-building.[34] Public grievability becomes a kind of litmus test with regard to whose lives and whose deaths receive public legitimacy, and hence with regard to whose lives are granted their full humanity. When we insist on the grievability of transsexual, transgendered and gay lives, for example, we are asserting that these persons are *us*, or that they are full members of the community and of humanity, and that the community and, indeed, humanity include these lives as legible and as legitimate.[35] As Butler writes (this time with reference to those who as a consequence of war are constituted as ungrievable):

> The public sphere is constituted in part by what can appear, and the regulation of the sphere of appearance is one way to establish what will count as reality, and what will not. It is also a way of

[33] Cited from the *Breast Cancer Awareness Quilt—Quilting For a Cure* website, accessed January 14, 2010.

[34] Likewise, Butler speaks about gay and lesbian victims whose family survivors received compensation late, or not at all, as a result of continued failure on the part of the public and its institutions to recognize homosexual marriage.

[35] The consequence of such exclusion can also entail the social death that Orlando Patterson theorizes in his work on slavery (see in this regard Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982). There is affinity here as well with Agamben's notion of *homo sacer*—the human being who has been reduced to "bare life," and hence who can be killed without such killing being recognized as either murder or sacrifice. Such a life is also "ungrievable." Within this context, we can include Butler's consideration of being forced to live a life that is faced with what Butler identifies as normative categories that constitute "unlivable constraint." It is for precisely this reason, then, that critiques of gender norms need to be oriented toward maximizing the "possibilities for a livable life." See Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 8.

> establishing whose lives can be marked as lives, and whose deaths will count as deaths. Our capacity to feel and to apprehend hangs in the balance. But so, too, does the fate of the reality of certain lives and deaths . . . [36]

For Butler, to be ungrievable is in part a question of appearing as real—as real "humanness"—and hence derealization through non-greivability is a counterpart to dehumanization.[37] A dehumanized human life is an unreal human life, and the death of the dehumanized can manifest this dehumanization in being an unreal death. Dehumanization, or the exclusion of certain humans from the category of the "human," can result moreover in desensitization with regard to another's vulnerability to violence and to death, and such desensitization can sometimes lead to more violence. Whether with regard to the otherwise gendered, with regard to the persons of a nation with whom we are at war, or with regard to any other humans that are denied their full humanity, part of what is at stake is the ethical relevance of the corporeal vulnerability of individual living bodies, and the status of these bodies as human beings. Asserting the grievability of these lives through the insistence upon public mourning is thus a political act that re-humanizes those among us who have been dehumanized.[38] Hence the *AIDS Quilt* with its highly flexible medium of the individually-created panel may serve to forge a more

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[36] Butler, Judith, *Precarious Life* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), pp. XX-XXI.

[37] As such, we can read Butler's association in her later work between dehumanization and derealization in relation to the drag category of "realness" that she analyzes in her earlier work.

[38] Indeed, even in the face of a moralizing homophobia such assertions of grievability can have positive political effects, or as Richard D. Mohr states, "The moral point of the NAMES Project is the valorizing of the autobiographical life, not necessarily because such a life issues in the honorable, but just because it is unique—the working out, even if stumblingly, of a self-conceived plan of life." See Mohr, Richard D., *Gay Ideas: Outing and Other Controversies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), pp. 110-111. Quoted in Blair, Carole and Michel, Neil, p. 601. It goes without saying that what one persons sees "stumbling" in this regard may or may not be experienced that way as the person whose life is at issue, and that such a descriptive statement is much more of a value judgment that is here being deployed within a field in which value judgments are precisely what are being contested politically.

deeply humanized response to the disease in its rhetorical power to display and to humanized lives lost to AIDS for a wider public.

But the issue of publicly acknowledged or legitimated mourning for Butler does not only concern the constitution of the identity of the community and of inclusion within the category of the "human." There are psychological affects, understood through the framework offered originally by Freud, for the delegitimation of mourning on those who have suffered a loss, and hence for the non-acknowledgement of certain deaths as grievable deaths. Butler states:

> Insofar as the grief remains unspeakable, the rage over the loss can redouble by virtue of remaining unavowed. And if that rage is publicly proscribed, the melancholic effects of such a proscription can achieve suicidal proportions. The emergence of collective institutions for grieving are thus crucial to survival, to reassembling community, to rearticulating kinship, to reweaving sustaining relations. Insofar as they involve the publicization and dramatization of death—as in the case of "die-ins" by Queer Nation—they call for being read as life-affirming rejoinders to the dire psychic consequences of a grieving process culturally thwarted and proscribed.[39]

Insistence upon grievability is essential for psychic health for all the ways in which the grieving process makes possible living with loss through the work of reestablishing relationships in the face of the disruption of the social life that death brings, or as anthropologist Beth Conklin explains: "Durkheimian perspectives that focus on social solidarity have emphasized the idea that death creates a rupture in the social fabric that

[39] Butler, Judith, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 148. In this context, Butler writes of the Quilt, "The Names Project Quilt is exemplary, ritualizing and repeating the name itself as a way of publicly avowing limitless loss." For Butler, then, the issue is not so much that the Quilt projects a subject of mourning, but that mourning is essential lest the lost object become a source of melancholia. See Butler, Judith, *The Psychic Life of Power*, p. 148.

must be repaired."[40] In *this* regard, the *AIDS Quilt* is an important vehicle for the public legitimation of mourning lives lost to AIDS, and hence it serves an important psychological function for the gay community, on the one hand, and for friends and family more generally.

But there is a third form of ambivalence that we can track in relation to the *AIDS Quilt*, and this ambivalence is about a concern over whether or not the *AIDS Quilt* actually *fails* in the memorializing process insofar as it fails to memorialize the gay sexual culture that the AIDS epidemic seemed to make impossible. To understand how this works, we need to return to Freud for precisely an account of what happens when the love-object that has been lost is also under prohibition. Indeed, for Freud, and as Crimp points out, the work of mourning must not be interfered with, and yet prohibition *against the love relation itself* is precisely an obstruction to healthy mourning. The confrontation with loss is complicated by the way in which the value of the lost object itself is called into question or outright denied. Hence if Crimp is right that part of what needs to be mourned is the loss of a certain gay sexual culture, and if mourning this sexual cultural is part of what it means to affirm the gayness of many gay men, then the fact that this love object is under prohibition within the wider cultural context becomes just such an obstacle to the work of mourning itself.

Of concern, therefore, is that the prohibition against gayness and gay sex by a homophobic society results in a derailing of the mourning process with an ambivalence that cannot properly or fully assert the lost love-object as something grievable. If the *AIDS Quilt* "de-gays" or "de-sexes" gay men and/or erases rather than affirms the

[40] Conklin, Beth, *Consuming Grief: Compassionate Cannibalism in an Amazonian Society* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), p. 223.

Figure 16: Sample block of the *NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt,* accessed from the *NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt* database, January 11, 2010.

grievability of a certain gay sexual culture, then the *AIDS Quilt* itself is complicit with this latter ambivalence. The negative reactions emerging from out of the gay community toward the *AIDS Quilt* are at least to some degree reactions to the *AIDS Quilt's* failure for the most part to facilitate *this* mourning. Worse, they are reactions to the possibility that the *AIDS Quilt* may stand in the way of this mourning by keeping gay sex securely at

bay.[41] If the work of humanization that is intended by the *AIDS Quilt* functions by virtue of its displacement of a gay sexual subject with a de-sexed subject position, then the *AIDS Quilt* may be perpetuating rather than counteracting the homophobia that is the source of the dehumanization in the first place.

One block of the *AIDS Quilt* is interesting in this regard for the way in which it offers two strategies for presenting the image of sodomy without doing so explicitly (figure 16). In one panel (center left), we see an image of gay domesticity. The panel memorializing Ted Gilligan and David Hauser shows two men together in a living room in front of a Christmas tree with their two dogs. It is thus an intimate picture of a conjugality in which the space of the living room and semblance of a holiday portrait of a modified nuclear family implies, discretely, the bedroom as the space of the sexual intimacy of the two men, coded hereby as monogamous. Gay sex is implied, in other words, but only as enacted on the model of marriage and family.

In the same block, we find another panel (center right) with the name "Roger Puta" as the principle visual element. We know that "puta" in Spanish means "female prostitute," hence we can guess that "Roger Puta" is a nickname. By having written this nickname into the *AIDS Quilt*, the maker of the panel lovingly celebrates an individual in a way that acknowledges his sexuality more or less discretely.

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[41] The *AIDS Quilt* is actually positioned in a kind of strange intermediate position with regard to the issue of domesticating AIDS for the sake of an activism that seeks to gain broad-based support for people living with AIDS. "Sympathetic" victims of AIDS such as Ryan White, for example, were mobilized in order to change the face of AIDS for the sake of gaining government support and to combat mainstream social indifference. As Mark Donovan explains, "the continued failure of U.S. AIDS policy to address the needs of citizens who are gay men or injection drug users is, in part, the ironic result of efforts to generate support for PWAs by promoting a vision of the epidemic which emphasized sympathetic sufferers. This effort to make AIDS a publicly comfortable issue results in a policy debate where important stakeholders are silenced and policies are too often governed by symbols rather than by logic or deliberation." See Donovan, Mark, p. 116. The *AIDS Quilt* is interesting in this regard because it is principally a monument to gay men, and hence its work of domesticating AIDS, if this is indeed what it does, is a matter of domesticating the image of gay men for a homophobic public rather than shifting the focus onto already more palatable victims of AIDS such as children, hemophiliacs, or people who acquired HIV on the job (surgeons, etc.).

My intention is not to say that the panel that presents an image of gay domesticity is inappropriate to the men memorialized there, nor that it does not present us with a legitimate version of gay life. Likewise, I am also not intending to imply that explicit representations of gay sex and/or gay promiscuity are better or worse than allusion. My point is merely that these are the kinds of images of gay sex that *do* end up on the *AIDS Quilt*, and that other more explicit images are far less common. If the reason is because an explicit acknowledgement of gay sex itself is inappropriate as a subject for a work of mourning, then we would need to ask whether a civic mourning project is the appropriate political intervention.

Indeed, how can sodomy and a promiscuous gay lifestyle *not* be the explicit focus of a stand against the homophobia that sustains the neglect of people dying from AIDS when this homophobia consists precisely of the association between gay men, sodomy, and a promiscuous gay lifestyle? If there is no way to do *that* appropriately within a work of mourning, and moreover if the very fact that something is a work of mourning makes figurations of sodomy and gay promiscuity *inappropriate,* then how is this not simply repeating the homophobic prohibition that is so deeply implicated in the social neglect of gay men with AIDS?

The failure of the *AIDS Quilt* to strongly figure the grievability of the gay lifestyle that puts gay men under attack—whether they participate in this lifestyle or not—is thus a limitation of the *AIDS Quilt* panel itself. The panel, as projecting a subject of mourning, may thus tend toward the domestication or obfuscation of sodomy and/or promiscuity, and fail thereby to be adequately expressive vis-à-vis its political function. We have thus encountered a limitation of the *AIDS Quilt* panel as a flexible medium of expression

precisely in terms of what the *AIDS Quilt* panel, as inextricably tied to mourning, tends to show as a result on the one hand, and by what it tends to elide, occlude, or disguise on the other.

ACT UP Versus the *AIDS Quilt*

The limitation in question, therefore, is that the *AIDS Quilt* is inevitably a site of mourning, and hence that the flexibility of the individually submitted panel as a medium of expression is delimited by its inability to evade the projection of a subject to be mourned. One of the issues that is raised in relation to the *AIDS Quilt* is whether it is an effective mode of political action in relation to the problem of AIDS, where this is the precisely the question of the efficacy of public mourning as politics. We have seen above that mourning may be ineffective unless it can assert as explicitly grievable gay sex and gay promiscuity. A related concern is whether in the context of constituting a de-sexed and hence disarming subject position for gay men, the *AIDS Quilt* does not threatens to give people the impression that crying at the *AIDS Quilt* is a substitute for "real" political action and for bringing about real political change. There is a concern, in other words, about political *action.* As stated by AIDS activist Roger McFarland:

> I never want to forget my pain, or what my friends endured. I embraced that pain, I took it to heart, and I use it to feed the bilious rage that has taken root in my soul. I know I would lose my mind, if not my life, if all these people we love so much ended up dying for nothing by the ineptitude of a racist, sexist, classist, homophobic political regime and an apathetic public. That's why I fight instead of cry.[42]

[42] Quoted in Rand, Erin, p. 661.

We can read McFarlane's statement as reflecting ambivalence toward accepting losses to AIDS in the way that we have analyzed above. On the other hand, we can also see at stake in his statement the terms of a critical debate over the specific form effective political action should take in relation to AIDS and social and governmental neglect of people facing AIDS. In 1987 Roger McFarlane was one of the founding members of the New York branch of ACT UP—the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. The explicit orientation of this organization was to fight an apathetic public with anger and confrontational action rather than with either public mourning or the family-friendly coalition-building that is often associated with the *AIDS Quilt.* "*Real* queers don't quilt;" as Peter Hawkins characterizes the criticism, "they act up."[43] And as David Feinberg writes in *Queer and Loathing,* "The textile responses to the AIDS crisis leave me cold," and "I prefer my ACT UP button that says 'ACT UP, FIGHT BACK, FIGHT AIDS' and have people on the subway cringe when the read the last word on it."[44]

It is action, then, that is the appropriate response to the malignant neglect of gay men that we have seen from the American public and the American government in relation to AIDS, and ACT UP is known for its compelling imagery in this regard. The famous image *SILENCE = DEATH* is precisely the call to action that ACT UP has come to represent (figure 17), and its counterpart is the image *ACTION = LIFE*. To act is to affirm life in the face of death. It is to have dignity in the face of derision and humiliation. ACT UP thus self-differentiates from the *Names Project AIDS Memorial*

[43] Hawkins, Peter, p. 772.
[44] Feinberg, David, *Queer and Loathing: Rants and Raves of a Raging AIDS Clone* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), pp. 37-38; 184. Quoted in Morris, p. 561.

Figure 17: *SILENCE = DEATH,* ACT UP insignia. Image accessed at crazyzombiecult.wordpress.com on January 12, 2010.

Quilt through shifting the emotional tenor of the response. As Erin Rand explains, this means "to be enraged rather than saddened, to fight instead of grieve."[45] Part of the effort on the part of ACT UP is thus to counteract fear and despair by transforming them into courage and action.

Recall, however, that the *AIDS Quilt* was specifically designed to force the public to acknowledge the rising death toll due to AIDS in the gay community of San Francisco. Moreover, displays of the *AIDS Quilt* are always accompanied by the reading of the names of the dead as a form of protest. Finally, the 6' by 3' panels designed to represent human graves were conceived of as a way to force the public to reckon with the huge number of corpses being generated by the AIDS epidemic. The *AIDS Quilt* was itself a

[45] Rand, Erin, p. 660.

Figure 18: "Zap" demonstration by ACT UP Paris, November 10, 2007. Image accessed online at www.flickr.com/photos/william-hamon/19564619, January 12, 2010.

confrontational political act from its origins. Its focus on the dead was meant to bring shame to the government and the public for turning its back on gay men dying of AIDS. Nevertheless, ACT UP has preferred confrontational "zaps" to events of public mourning. This is not to say that ACT UP has shied away from images of death. But if the *AIDS Quilt* was originally designed to be in a very real sense accusatory, ACT UP mobilizes the political gesture of accusation in a way that amplifies the confrontational aspect well beyond what we see in the *AIDS Quilt.* To give just one example, a "zap" from

November 10, 2007, consisted in protesters from *ACT UP Paris* pouring fake blood on the ministry of health in response to a new health tax supported by French Minister of Health Roselyne Bachelot-Narquin. Protesters laid out as corpses, some holding posters shaped like gravestones stating "FRANCHISES: MORTE D'UN SIDA SURTAXÉ" (DEDUCTIBLES: DEAD FROM AN OVERTAXED AIDS) (figure 18). The *AIDS Quilt* has thus been under scrutiny by those AIDS activists who see greater possibility for agency and effectiveness in direct confrontation and militant opposition as we find in ACT UP.

In this regard, we should not forget that the *AIDS Quilt* has indeed been very successful at gaining critical monetary support for outreach, education and support services for people and their families infected and/or affected by AIDS. The *AIDS Quilt* has proven itself to be a highly effective response to the threat to gay men of death-by-neglect that resolves out of social indifference to members of stigmatized groups. However, we should also not forget that at stake is also an emotional comportment toward the issue of AIDS and likewise the constitution of gay subjectivity through militant action versus through public mourning. While the *AIDS Quilt* may be highly effective politics by one measure, it may also exact a cost for such effectiveness that calls its successes seriously into question.

CHAPTER III

VISIBILITY AND INVISIBILITY

What the *AIDS Quilt* Shows by Not Showing

The *AIDS Quilt* format of independently-created panels that I am identifying as a highly flexible medium of expression is theoretically flexible in part because participation in the *AIDS Quilt* through the contribution of a panel is a matter of self-selection. As stated above, no panel is ever censored or rejected on the basis of content or style, and every effort is made to incorporate all kinds of panels and their diverse materials into the *AIDS Quilt.* It should be noted, moreover, that self-selection is at work also in relation to when and where *AIDS Quilt* panels are on display. Pieces of the *AIDS Quilt* travel all over the country to universities, churches, and other sponsoring institutions, but they only goes to those places that request them and that can raise the money to sponsor the event. As Hawkins states, "The quilt's display and creation are both grassroots-defined; the quilt only travels to those communities that can raise the money to sponsor it."[46] Part of what the panels show, therefore, is who is or is not represented in the *AIDS Quilt* and who is or is not participating in its production.

This raises a further series of questions about the degree to which the quilt-panel's flexibility is more theoretical than actual, or that such flexibility can only be understood properly only if understood historically, and that is to say in terms of not the expressive possibilities of the *AIDS Quilt* but in terms of what the *AIDS Quilt* has actually become. These dimensions of self-selection, then, are one more way in which we can track the

[46] Hawkins, Peter, p.778.

limits of the medium's flexibility in an historical, situated, "inductive" sense. By being open to everyone, the *AIDS Quilt* makes evident other limiting factors that result in the uneven distribution of the visibility that the *AIDS Quilt* offers.

Is the *AIDS Quilt* Gay?

AIDS from the beginning has been figured as a "gay disease," and hence anyone who becomes infected with HIV, whether gay or straight, faces in a variety of ways the stigma that attaches to homophobia. The *AIDS Quilt* in this regard is no exception. As Crimp writes:

> In everything I have written about AIDS, which has concentrated mostly on gay men, I have insisted on the determining fact of homophobia, which I believe is still the single most powerful determinant of everything everyone has suffered during this epidemic.[47]

In this regard, we also know that some conscientious acts of non-participation have to do with the fear of being "outed,"[48] and we know it, actually, through the panels themselves. One panel in particular is very poignant in this regard. It reads:

> I have decorated this banner to honor my brother. Our parents did not want his name used publicly. The omission of his name represents the fear of oppression that AIDS victims and their families feel.[49]

For reasons that will become at somewhat more clear in what follows, the association between AIDS and male homosexuality is so strong that to be memorialized

[47] See Crimp, Douglas, p. 199.
[48] Sometimes, it is the panels themselves that tell us about the "outing" that comes with association with the Quilt. Many panels use only first names or fake names to commemorate the lost loved one.
[49] As reported by Marita Sturken, pp. 70-71.

in the AIDS Quilt is essentially a mode of coming out as gay, and this is the case regardless of the extent to which you were out of the closet while alive (and almost no one is completely out of the closet with everyone in their lives), and it is also the case regardless of how you contracted AIDS and whether or not you are gay. The exception to this will be panels that make clear that they memorialize women or that make it clear that they memorialize children. Any adult male who ends up on the *AIDS Quilt* is thereby suspected of being gay, and as a result many names on the *AIDS Quilt*—particularly in the early years—are first names, nicknames, or fake names. Finally, in the letters that are received and archived by the *NAMES Project*, we see that families battle over whether or not to make a panel for a family member, since the families also face a form of homophobic stigmatization through the *AIDS Quilt's* outing of their loved one.

Is the *AIDS Quilt* White Middle Class?

The association of the *AIDS Quilt* with homosexuality has been cited as the reason for the notable non-participation in the *AIDS Quilt* from the Black church and from Latino community organizations in the U.S., and furthermore the *AIDS Quilt's* association with whiteness. As Marita Sturken explains, "Coded as a white, gay project, the quilt has attracted minimal participation from communities of color for many of these reasons."[50] Hence while Cleve Jones reports that "black and Hispanic peoples and families have been involved from the very beginning," he also notes that "black and Hispanic organizations have been sort of skeptical of us."[51]

[50] Quoted in Sturken, Marita, pp. 87-88.
[51] Quoted in Sturken, Marita, p. 88.

A further point to note in this regard is that response to the epidemic has followed the concentration of resources. The majority of people who still die of AIDS despite the existence since 1996 of effective retro-virus therapies are the most socially and economically disenfranchised.[52] Brett Stockdill's 2003 study *Activism Against AIDS* shows makes clear that this is particularly the case for people who occupy intersecting sites of disempowerment. People who face both racism and homophobia, for example, or homophobia and poverty, or sexism and racism, are less likely to access resources, are less likely to have control over their visibility or over the management of their health, and are more likely to succumb to AIDS.[53] In an important respect, visibility in the *AIDS Quilt* that extends to those victims that are not gay men can still be limited insofar as it fails to track important lines of intersectionality. As Gust Yep points out in his analysis of the film *Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt*, this critical document about the *AIDS Quilt* reinforces the notion that gay men are white, that black men who die of AIDS are straight, poor and addicted to intravenous drugs, and that the only other group of people dying from AIDS are young, white, straight hemophiliacs. The film's choice of

[52] I am referring in this regard to the introduction of protease inhibitor drugs. As Erin Rand reminds us, 1996 was the first year of fifteen that the annual number of AIDS related deaths was actually lower than the year before. As Rand states, "For the first time, it was possible to image AIDS as an illness with which one could live relatively normally, rather than as an inevitable death sentence." See Rand, Erin, p. 668. To imagine AIDS along these lines as manageable in a way not unlike diabetes is only possible if one has access to the drugs, and this means access to health care, money or insurance, anonymity in some cases, and information. As Cindy Patton points out, "By the late 1970s, these providers were aware that gay men were among the subgroups who experienced sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and they understood that many gay men avoided treatment out of fear that their sexuality would be revealed to hostile employers, landlords, or family members," and further on, "The historic lack of STD care and especially the denial of information about prevention for gay men were caused by a homophobic medical system. In this late 1970s analysis by gay-health activists, STDs were not a fact of promiscuity but a means through which the state controlled sexuality." See Patton, Cindy, *Globalizing AIDS* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), pp. 65 and 66.

[53] Stockdill, Brett, *Activism Against AIDS: At the Intersections of Sexuality, Race, Gender, and Class* (London, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003).

representative victims of AIDS and of the *AIDS Quilt* matches these stereotypical high-risk profiles. Hence according to Yep:

> By keeping these "risk groups" separate and independent, gay men of color, white injecting drug users, white women, and women of color, among others, become unseen, obscured, and unintelligible in terms of funding, educational, medical, and social services, and in the popular imagination.[54]

The *AIDS Quilt* in it own way may thus actually function as a document of which sectors of society are best able to access society's resources.

That the *AIDS Quilt* is principally a document that represents the lives of gay men lost to AIDS is significant in this regard when we note that media attention that focused initially only on gay deaths to AIDS was also focusing on that population affected by AIDS that more than any other could be characterized as middle class and white. Indeed, Cindy Patton argues that it is actually incorrect to assume that the first AIDS-related deaths were restricted to the gay community. In a decidedly strange turn with regard to the issue of visibility, it is the middle and upper class gay men that got the media attention first, even though their status as homosexual was a source of stigmatization. As Patton writes:

> Remember, the first to die were men and women of many countries and colors who suffered many routes of infection: It is not *their* fault that science and the media mainly presented the most privileged among them, white gay sons of middle America.[55]

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[54] See Yep, Gust A., "The Politics of Loss and Its Remains in *Common Threads: Stories From the Quilt,* in *Rhetoric and Public Affairs,* Vol. 10, No. 4, 2007, p. 687.
[55] Patton, Cindy, pp. 5-6.

Figure 19: "For All the Women," lower left panel. Sample block of the *NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt,* accessed from the *NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt* database, January 11, 2010.

There is no doubt that the *AIDS Quilt* is overwhelmingly a monument to gay men as a population hit hard by AIDS that is also of the middle or upper class. And as with non-participation as manifested by the panel above with regard to the issue of being "outed" by the *AIDS Quilt*, we see here as well that the panels themselves tell us about the degree to which the subject position of white, middle/upper class, gay man is the default position with regard to who is being memorized. We see this insofar there are

Figure 20: "For All Unknown and Unnamed St. Louis African Americans, We Remember," center panel. Sample block of the *NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt,* accessed from the *NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt* database, January 11, 2010.

panels that explicitly memorialize people who do not fit this profile, and that is to say those people who do not enjoy the visibility of the white, gay middle and upper class. Panels designed to acknowledge the women who have died of AIDS are interesting in this regard, as are panels designed to acknowledge non-white and/or non-gay victims of AIDS (see figures 19 and 20). It would make no sense, in other words, to make a panel for "all the white gay men who have died of AIDS," since this class of victim is

represented in almost all of the panels of the quilt. Hence in whom the *AIDS Quilt* memorializes, and in whom it does not memorialize, the *AIDS Quilt* reveals its class-status as a middle/upper class phenomenon and as a middle/upper class monument. As such, the *AIDS Quilt* tells in its ellipses whose deaths to AIDS continue to remain invisible to the wider public.

CONCLUSION

What my analysis of the work has sought to show is that the *AIDS Quilt* is constituted as a promise through the medium of the *AIDS Quilt* panel, and that this promise is fulfilled in the work in only limited and circumscribed ways. On the other hand, it is important not to forget that it is precisely in being successful as a flexible and neutral medium of expression that the *AIDS Quilt* panel can act as the condition of the possibility of the revelation of those limits that we would not have seen otherwise or have seen so clearly. The *AIDS Quilt* panel's origins in the patchwork quilt and the crazy quilt enables it to have flexibility and internal variety that allows the *AIDS Quilt* to memorialize tens of thousands of persons such that each of them as unique individuals. Likewise, the medium as panel has enabled the internationalization of the *AIDS Quilt* itself and of the *AIDS Quilt* idea despite the strong association of patchwork quilts and crazy quilts with American folk art. Finally, the panel as the mechanism of self-selecting remote production of the work has engendered a variety of other kinds of quilt-like projects, and in relation to a variety of other causes such as breast cancer, 9-11, the Iraq war, and so on. When considered in light of all this, the *AIDS Quilt* panel proves itself to indeed be the highly flexible and neutral medium of expression that it promises.

It is not until we take stock of the relationship between the *AIDS Quilt* panel and mourning that certain limitations of the panel as a medium of expression begin to show. The panel most often functions as a surrogate grave, serving both as a site for the intimate memorialization of a loved one, and as a political gesture by which one makes the dead publicly visible. Yet as a document of loss and mourning, the *AIDS Quilt* panel also

raises questions with regard to whether it serves to substitute gay death for gay sex, whether it projects a subject of mourning rather than a subject of resistance, and whether it cultivates a sentimentalist quietism rather than real political activism.

Likewise there is a disjunction between the current demography of AIDS and the demography of the *AIDS Quilt* with regard to which groups of people are in fact memorialized in large numbers in the *AIDS Quilt* and which groups of people are largely absent. There are ellipses and omissions in the *AIDS* Quilt despite the *AIDS Quilt* panel's promise of flexibility and neutrality, and hence despite the fact that the *AIDS Quilt* is theoretically open to its determination by any group of people contending with AIDS. Through these ellipses and omissions, the *AIDS Quilt* forces us to ask about the conditions of racism, sexism, and classism in which both the *AIDS Quilt* and AIDS are forever situated. The *AIDS Quilt* makes us take stock of the sound political, social, and personal reasons why individuals and groups may opt out of participation in the *AIDS Quilt,* and also of where there may be lines of difference that prevent us from vanquishing both the epidemic and the isolation and abandonment of certain individuals and groups who are living with AIDS.

The work as an exercise in media flexibility is thus the scene for the discovery of limits, and this scene of discovery makes concrete and explicit those demands that we have yet to address adequately. In this regard, the meaning of the *AIDS Quilt* is thus found between the artistic medium and its execution at precisely those moments when the movement from the promise of the medium to its fulfillment has been blocked. As a work that promises *and achieves* such a high degree of flexibility and neutrality with regard to what it can incorporate, the *AIDS Quilt* displays the limits of its flexibility,

where such limits are nothing other than the broken enunciations of those ethical claims that the work has failed to accommodate. The *AIDS Quilt* then becomes the site of un-accommodated and unabsorbed ethical claims that are clarified through their contestation of the medium's claim to comprehensiveness and to adequacy.

The *AIDS Quilt* as a work thus demands that the analysis of its expressive medium be historical rather than formal, and that the historical analysis be one of making explicit precisely whom the expressive medium has betrayed. To interrogate the medium of artistic expression of the *AIDS Quilt*, therefore, is to interrogate an essential site of our becoming self-conscious as a community, and precisely with regard to our contemporary failures to ethically address AIDS and to live together with one another in a world with AIDS.

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