

# UNITED BY AIDS – AN EXHIBITION ABOUT LOSS, REMEMBRANCE, ACTIVISM AND ART IN RESPONSE TO HIV/AIDS

31.08.–10.11.2019

Absalon, Lyle Ashton Harris, Charles Atlas, Marc Bauer, Judith Bernstein, Nayland Blake, Gregg Bordowitz, Andrea Bowers, fierce pussy, Avram Finkelstein, Rafael França, General Idea, Nan Goldin, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Gran Fury, Group Material, Anna Halprin, Keith Haring, Hudinilson Jr., Jochen Klein, Peter Kunz Opfersei, Stéphan Landry, Zoe Leonard, Donald Moffett, Carlos Motta, Rosa von Praunheim, Real Madrid, Lili Reynaud-Dewar, Hunter Reynolds, Prem Sahib, Chéri Samba, Vittorio Scarpati & Cookie Mueller, Ellen Spiro & Cheryl Dunye, Edward Thomasson, Wolfgang Tillmans, Sue Williamson, David Wojnarowicz & Ben Neill, Martin Wong

The extensive group show *United by AIDS—An Exhibition about Loss, Remembrance, Activism and Art in Response to HIV/AIDS* sheds light on the multifaceted and complex interrelation between art and HIV/AIDS from the 1980s to the present. It examines the blurring of the boundary between art production and HIV/AIDS activism and spotlights artists who have been leading voices in this creative discourse, which remains vital today. The presentation gathers positions that illustrate the diversity of the (artistic) response to the HI virus and AIDS, with an explicit focus on works that address themes such as isolation, transformation, and the inexorable passing of time and mortality in relation to the politics of the body and representation. Since the introduction of highly active antiretroviral therapy in the second half of the 1990s, AIDS has widely come to be seen as a phenomenon of the past, with little significance for the life of our societies today. On the global scale, however, deaths due to complications from AIDS still number almost one million per year. Divided into four chapters, the exhibition seeks to untangle the complex and diverse narratives around HIV/AIDS and discuss their fragility in a contemporary perspective.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic in the 1980s, over 76 million people have been infected with the HI virus. Approximately 35 million have people died of the effects of the syndrome that became a chronic, albeit treatable illness with the development and introduction of the highly active antiretroviral therapy “HAART” in the mid-1990s. However, to proclaim the end of HIV/AIDS would be not only premature but also irresponsible. As figures provided by organisations such as UNAIDS (the United Nations’ communal HIV/AIDS programme) show, millions of people around the world are still affected by the disease. In the 1980s and 1990s its concentrated manifestation within socially marginalised groups subjected to prejudices (male homosexuals, users of intravenously administered drugs, sex workers) reinforced stigmatisations, which further impeded the fight against the AIDS crisis beyond medical treatment and still define the social prejudices surrounding AIDS. Especially in non-Western countries medical care continues to pose a challenge – on the one hand, there is not enough money for medication, on the other hand, the existence of the HI virus is still denied in some areas so that those infected are not treated according to the actual diagnosis and develop AIDS despite treatment options.

In the 1980s the denial of the disease and politicians’ reluctance to look for solutions, let alone concern themselves with the subject, inspired many artists to become politically involved. Often personally affected, they portrayed the new threatening reality and the feeling of powerlessness in the face of the “silence” surrounding the disease as well as the personal and socio-political repercussions of this catastrophe which is hard to grasp in all its dimensions today. Starting in the basement, the first three chapters of the exhibition are dedicated to the multifaceted and complex connections between art and HIV/AIDS, while

Curator:  
Dr. Raphael Gyga

Assistant Curator:  
Elsa Himmer

The exhibition will be accompanied by the publication of the anthology *United by AIDS – An Anthology on Art in Response to HIV/AIDS*.

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the more recent works on the upper floor explore the role of HIV/AIDS in the 21st century against the backdrop of the historical perspectives. A lot of the art created during the 1980s and 1990s was devoted to processing and informing about the virus and the concomitant disease which often ended in death. After 1996 the treatability of the illness led to a “second silence” and public attention shifted to more “pressing” problems. The contemporary positions thus approach HIV/AIDS from the perspective of the treatability of the infection and the prejudices and ignorance spurred by the “second silence”.

### “Erasure, Void, Remembrance”

**Absalon, Rafael França, General Idea, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Keith Haring, Hudinilson Jr., Jochen Klein, and Stéphan Landry**

The first chapter of the show deals with the (in)visibility, the social stigmatisation, and the isolation of HIV/AIDS patients in the 1980s and 1990s as well as the void created in society by the rapidly rising number of casualties. The artistic positions compiled here address the helplessness in the face of an illness which, initially labelled as a “gay disease”, was studiously ignored by politics and the public alike. The political invisibility that forced the victims into (social) isolation raises compelling questions: Which people and which bodies are deemed presentable under which circumstances?

Felix Gonzalez-Torres's (1957-1996) iconic work “*Untitled*” (*Go-Go Dancing Platform*) (1991) deals with the presence and absence of the human body. An empty, abandoned dancing platform alludes to the changes brought about by the AIDS crisis: The sudden eradication of bodies and the omnipresent sense of loss is represented as an empty space. Once a place of artistic expression, eroticism, dance, and vitality, the empty platform bears witness to the catastrophe that put an abrupt end to the liberated spirit of the 1970s.

The approach to a radically life-shortening illness is also the topic of Stéphan Landry's (1960-2009) drawings. The series *Pour Daniel et Rémy* (1998) is dedicated to friends of the artist, a couple who responded to their ailment with a joint suicide. The Israeli artist Absalon (1964-1994) also explored the question of absence, withdrawal, and the relation between the public and the private sphere. His entirely white, ascetic living cell *Cellule no. 2* (*habitable*) (1992-93) symbolises the retreat into isolation chosen by many people infected with HIV.

The works by the artists's group General Idea also play with the colour white as a symbol of purity and innocence. In their work *White AIDS* (*Wallpaper*) (1991) they altered the iconic logo “LOVE” (1967) by the American artist Robert Indiana to read “AIDS”. White on white, the letters all but vanish and allude to the secrecy and silence that initially surrounded the disease. This fatal indifference towards the illness still prevails in large parts of contemporary society. AIDS has largely lost its (public) visibility although the virus is still very much alive, and its victims continue to experience discrimination.

### “New York – The Aids Crisis”

**Charles Atlas, Judith Bernstein, Nan Goldin, Peter Kunz Opfersei, Cookie Mueller & Vittorio Scarpatti, David Wojnarowicz & Ben Neill, and Martin Wong**

The second chapter of the exhibition focuses on New York of the late 1980s and 1990s as a place where the effects were probably most noticeable. Although medical history specifies different epicentres all over the world, the city is collectively remembered as the hot-spot of the crisis, much like San Francisco. Of course, European metropolises and the African continent were also affected by the AIDS pandemic.

This chapter attempts to outline a phenomenon that is hard to comprehend and only partly representable today: The erosion, or even erasure, of the social fabric of individual communities through the outbreak of the AIDS crisis. This development is portrayed by the protagonists of the New York art and creative scene who, as members of a close network of friends, lovers, and companions, were united in the fight against the disease.

Photographer and activist Nan Goldin is regarded as one of the most prominent chroniclers of this time. On display in the exhibition, her series *The Cookie Mueller Portfolio* (1976-89) is dedicated to the American actress Cookie Mueller (1949-1989) and captures the sudden change in the atmosphere during this decade. One of the last photographs shows Mueller next to the coffin of another AIDS victim, her husband Vittorio Scarpatti (1955-1989). Presented in Switzerland for the first time, his drawings are also part of the show.

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The city's architecture is closely linked to the memories of the epidemic, as is shown in Martin Wong's (1946-1999) paintings, but also in Charles Atlas's video *Son of Sam and Delilah* (1991) in which a serial killer hunts down and kills the visitors of a legendary underground party against the backdrop of New York. These works manifest the vague, but omnipresent feeling of menace and helplessness that defined life in New York during this time.

Furthermore, entire artistic legacies were in danger of being swallowed up by the AIDS crisis. The revisualisation of Peter Kunz Opfersei's (1944-1989) works, a Swiss artist who immigrated to New York, allude to this development. A selection of drawings and the sketch-book *Das Buch der Verwandlungen / The book of transformations* (1989), which he created under the influence of his ailment, are on display in the exhibition.

### **“Stand Up, Fight Back – AIDS, Activism and Art”**

**Gregg Bordowitz, fierce pussy, Avram Finkelstein / “Silence = Death Project” Collective, Gran Fury, Group Material, Anna Halprin, Keith Haring, Zoe Leonard, Donald Moffett, and Rosa von Praunheim**

The third chapter of the show is dedicated to the unique intersection between artistic and activist strategies in the context of HIV/AIDS. In response to politicians' inability to deal with the pandemic, many artists took a political stance and came together in different constellations to raise public awareness with collective projects. Their works aimed at exposing wrongs, spreading information, and educating. Founded in the USA in 1987, ACT UP, the “AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power”, became one of the most powerful associations in the fight against AIDS. Under the slogan “Stand Up, Fight Back” effective public action brought momentum and a political dimension to the thematization of AIDS, while the establishment of overdue lobby work strengthened victims' rights. Today it seems obvious that the ignorance displayed by the US government for many years led to an escalation of the crisis. Donald Moffett's poster *He Kills Me* (1987), for example, is an unveiled criticism of the fatal silence, not least Ronald Reagan's, who used the word “AIDS” in public for the first time in 1987.

One and a half years before ACT UP came together, Avram Finkelstein, Brian Howard, Oliver Johnston, Charles Krelloff, Chris Lione, and Jorge Soccaras founded the project “Silence = Death”. Together they developed the probably most powerful symbol of the AIDS movement: the upturned pink triangle against a black backdrop with the equation “Silence = Death” which is also included in the exhibition.

Gran Fury, one of the best-known artists' collectives, was active from 1988 to the early 1990s. For their iconic video *Kissing Doesn't Kill* (1989) the group appropriated the imagery of a contemporary advertisement campaign by the Italian clothing brand Benetton in order to clarify misconceptions regarding the contagiousness of the HI virus. Another association of artists with a strong impact is the collective fierce pussy. Since the 1990s they have been staging sensational interventions in public spaces to campaign women's and especially lesbians' rights. Composed of found images and simple computer typography, they print their messages onto flyers, t-shirts, postcards, and stickers to achieve maximum circulation in minimum time.

From an art historical perspective these temporary unions of artists are especially interesting. By applying the techniques of pop and appropriation art they effectively intervened in everyday life and enabled those to be heard who had gone unheard. In the sphere of ACT UP, the appropriation of media and communication strategies led to the development of distinctive aesthetics of protest that defined the artistic approach to AIDS/HIV conceptually as well as visually and had a strong impact on socially involved art in general.

### **“Recently”**

**Lyle Ashton Harris, Marc Bauer, Nayland Blake, Andrea Bowers, Avram Finkelstein / “HIV Criminalization” Flash Collective, Avram Finkelstein / “Queer Crisis” Flash Collective, Carlos Motta, Real Madrid, Lili Reynaud-Dewar, Hunter Reynolds, Prem Sahib, Chéri Samba, Ellen Spiro & Cheryl Dunye, Edward Thomasson, Wolfgang Tillmans, and Sue Williamson**

The fourth chapter of the presentation centres on artistic positions dedicated to the contemporary approach to the HI virus and AIDS. How do people talk about AIDS/HIV today? What are the current problems, perspectives, and challenges in dealing with the disease? What is the position on the past?

Over the past years, a series of documentaries and feature films have led to the formu-

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lation of a distinctive narrative of the AIDS crisis composed in the manner of a classic drama that frequently historicises AIDS as a thing of the past. The accounts depict the introduction of the highly active antiretroviral therapy as a *deus ex machina*, thereby depriving HIV/AIDS as a chronic, albeit treatable illness of its urgency, and consequently, of public attention. The ensuing “second silence” and the concomitant lack of education have led to a rise of prejudices surrounding the HI virus and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Composed in the manner of a still-life, Wolfgang Tillmans's photograph *17 Years' Supply* (2014) shows that the temporal distance to the crisis of the 1980s and 1990s and the treatability of the infection – which does not alter the fact that AIDS is still classified as chronic and to date incurable – has also had an impact on its visual representation. A carton filled with boxes of medicines illustrates the number of pharmaceuticals needed to keep the viral load permanently low enough to avoid an outbreak of AIDS and to ensure that the patient is no longer infectious. The sculptures *Undetectable* and *Two Dots* (2013) by Prem Sahib epitomise how abstract the “horror” of the infection has become. They allude to the rapid HIV tests that indicate a positive result with two blue dots and a negative result or the condition of an undetectable viral load after successful therapy with two white dots. In their film *DiAna's Hair Ego REMIX* (2017) Ellen Spiros and Cheryl Dunye show that education is more important than ever despite the new therapeutic possibilities. In 1989 the filmmaker Dunye visited the hairdressing salon DiAna where she not only cut hair but also provided sex-positive education. About 30 years later, DiAna is still engaged in these efforts. Thus, the second film for which Dunye collaborated with Spiro, not only pays homage to DiAna's tireless commitment but also draws attention to the fact that AIDS is by no means obsolete.

The aim of the exhibition is to portray the ongoing function of art as an activist strategy, a reservoir of memories, an accusation as well as a means of reflection in the context of HIV/AIDS. However, this should not deflect from the enormous effort required, especially on a political level, to keep the virus from spreading and to provide those infected with vitally important medication, regardless of their nationality, place of residence, or income. Besides educational campaigns, this includes extensive, equal access to PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis), which HIV negative people can take to prevent infection, as well as PEP (post-exposure prophylaxis), which can prevent infection after a risk situation.

At a time when many social achievements such as sexual self-determination, equality, and ethical and moral values beyond principles determined by nationalism and racism seem to be under threat or in danger of being reversed by ultra conservative circles, *United by AIDS – An Exhibition about Loss, Remembrance, Activism and Art in Response to HIV/AIDS* seeks to provide information and food for thought and to recall the transformative potential of art.

Booklets with short texts providing detailed information on the different artistic positions can be found at the reception desk.

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## Events

Symposium "Joint Ventures. Artistic Appropriations of Art Collections and Exhibition History", in cooperation with Universität Zürich, Kunsthistorisches Institut, Lehrstuhl Moderne und zeitgenössische Kunst

Wednesday, 04.09.2019, 10 am–8 pm

Long Night of the Museums, Performance Felix Gonzalez-Torres: "*Untitled*" (*Go-Go Dancing Platform*) (repeating from 7:30 pm), Workshops (6-10 pm), guided tours, food, drinks and music

Saturday, 07.09.2019, 6 pm–2 am

Book launch "Artistic Education, Nummer 9" in cooperation with Hochschule Luzern, Design & Kunst

Tuesday, 24.09.2019, 5–7 pm

Video@Löwenbräu, in cooperation with F+F Schule für Kunst und Design, with Irene Müller and Hans-Michael Herzog

Thursday, 03.10.2019, 7–8:30 pm

Thursday, 07.11.2019, 7–8:30 pm

Talk with Stefan and Adrian Silvestri "Engagement und visuelle Sprache in Zeiten von HIV/AIDS", moderated by Rayelle Niemann, in cooperation with the exhibition project "Problem gelöst? Geschichte(n) eines Virus" at the Shedhalle Zürich

Thursday, 17.10.2019, 6:30–8 pm

Open House at Löwenbräukunst, Performance Felix Gonzalez-Torres: "*Untitled*" (*Go-Go Dancing Platform*)

Saturday, 26.10.2019, 10 am–7 pm

Presentaion of the project "Deconceptual Voicings" by Stefan Römer and Marc Matter

Friday, 01.11.2019, 6:30–8 pm

## Performances

### ***Felix Gonzalez-Torres: "Untitled" (Go-Go Dancing Platform)***

The works by the American artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957-1996), who was born on Cuba, are defined by his experience with AIDS and deal with homosexuality, love, loss, absence, and dying. His sculpture "*Untitled*" (*Go-Go Dancing Platform*) is part of the exhibition. Created in 1991, it explores physicality in the context of HIV/AIDS, also against the backdrop of the homophobic climate of the 1980s and 1990s which provided a challenge for homosexual men, irrespective of the HI virus. On five days the work will serve as the venue of a corresponding performance occurring without prior announcement.

Friday, 30.08.2019

Saturday, 07.09.2019

Thursday, 10.10.2019

Saturday, 26.10.2019

Sunday, 03.11.2019

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### **Edward Thomasson: Find A Problem to Solve**

The film and performance projects by the British artist Edward Thomasson (\*1985 in Stoke-on-Trent, Great Britain) oscillate between theatre and performance art, documented reality and dramatic fiction, and intimacy and isolation. In the context of the exhibition at the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Thomasson will introduce a new version of *Find A Problem to Solve* (since 2009), an ongoing performance project about physical and mental wellbeing during which four artists sing and move together. The group action is interrupted by monologues Thomasson constantly rewrites as a means of reflection on his own experiences, problems, and solutions.

Saturday, 09.11.2019

Sunday, 10.11.2019

Showing at 1 pm, 2 pm, 3 pm, 4 pm

### **Art Education**

Public tours

Thursday, 12.09.2019, 6 pm

Sunday, 13.10.2019, 2 pm

Curator's guided tours

Guided tour with Dr. Raphael Gygax (Curator)

Wednesday, 16.10.2019, 5–6 pm

Guided tour with Elsa Himmer (Assistant Curator)

Sunday, 10.11. 2019, 2–3 pm

Family afternoons

Sunday, 29.09.2019, 2–5 pm

Sunday, 03.11.2019, 2–5 pm

Workshop "Early Birds: Sterblich – unsterblich, Tanzen gegen das Schweigen" for adults, in cooperation with Tanzhaus Zürich and Verein Kulturvermittlung-ZH

Friday, 20.09.2019, 9–11 am

Cool-Tur-Herbstferienworkshop for children "Farbenpracht im Museumslabyrinth" in cooperation with Verein Kulturvermittlung-ZH and Kunsthalle Zürich

Monday, 07.10.2019 – Thursday, 10.10.2019, 9 am–4 pm

Workshop and ritual after Anna and Daria Halprin "Tamalpa Life/Art Process & Earth Run" on the subject of "Loslassen und Neufinden" with Petra Eischeid, Frank Hediger and Billy Cauley (please register at [kunstvermittlung@migrosmuseum.ch](mailto:kunstvermittlung@migrosmuseum.ch))

Saturday, 02.11.2019, 2–6 pm

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