

Grief Is Just Love With Nowhere to Go: An Analysis on How Art Helped Humanise Victims of the AIDS Epidemic.

Until 1996, AIDS was the leading cause of death amongst young American adults. Stigma and rampant homophobia caused a sweeping plague that killed 42.3 million people since it was discovered in 1981. (World Health Organization (2024). *HIV/AIDS*. [online] [www.who.int](https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/hiv-aids). Available at: <https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/hiv-aids>.) [Accessed 6 Dec. 2024]. Modern art allowed for a space that gave families a chance to grieve openly when AIDS stigma and misinformation made it almost impossible. From famous American artists to memorial quilts, art has allowed for a safe mourning space and educational content that helped fight back against fear-mongering. Art from the AIDS movement was typically angling for a socio-political statement that stressed the importance of action over inaction, especially since so many lives were at risk. As well as this, art from this time also expressed the profound sense of loss and grief that was prevalent during the 1980s.

By the mid 1980s, Haring was already at the forefront of AIDS activism, and had decided that creating art in public spaces was in itself a form of activism. Haring believed in making art accessible, removing the socio-economic barriers that prevented the working class from understanding and creating art; by making art in public, there were no gallery fees to prevent people from looking at his works. (Ushrayinee (2024). *Keith Haring Makes Art Accessible for All*. [online] TERAVARNA. Available at: https://www.teravarna.com/post/keith-haring-makes-art-accessible-for-all?gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCOiAgdC6BhCgARIsAPWNWH3hpkjnXZ8_M_3Z4hz2xsVstLBSZfa12f4pwhnwitObVttddwryjMQaAtjSEALw_wcB [Accessed 7 Dec. 2024].) Haring's dedication to creating educational, socially aware, and accessible art meant that art could be seen as a valid and achievable career as well as a hobby worth spending time on. Additionally, his art brought awareness and educated the public on current stigmatised events; his stance against the apartheid in South Africa, the crack epidemic, as well as AIDS. Haring was diagnosed with HIV in 1987, and AIDS the year after. This diagnosis sparked a turn in Haring's art that would mark a change in how the public viewed AIDS. Haring's art created a space for open conversations about AIDS and his lasting legacy forces us as an audience to continue talking about AIDS, even in a time where it is no longer considered a crisis. One of Haring's most famous and poignant pieces, *Silence = Death*, created a positive connotation from negative imagery. He used the pink triangle used previously to identify gay men during the holocaust as the focal point in an otherwise monochrome piece. Haring's devotion to creating positive connotations to previously derogatory symbols meant for a time in which these dehumanising terms or images could be reclaimed by those it was intended to hurt.

The pink triangle appears again in Haring's 1989 piece *Ignorance = Fear*, a piece that encouraged people to open their eyes to what was happening around them instead of looking away. Paired with Haring's bright, optimistic style, it gave the public a new outlook on AIDS, one largely of hope instead of fear. Even when diagnosed with HIV and then AIDS, Haring was undeniably driven to create; his work around this time consisted largely of safe sex campaigns, as well as other works that had 'a great deal of darkness in them.' (Fields, L.

(2020). *Facing death from AIDS, Keith Haring kept creating* | *American Masters* | PBS. [online] American Masters. Available at: [https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/facing-death-from-aids-keith-haring-kept-creating/16169/.](https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/facing-death-from-aids-keith-haring-kept-creating/16169/))

The San Francisco 110,000 AIDS quilt represents an estimated number of people, all who were represented through various panels of the quilt. Totalling 50,000 twelve-by-twelve foot panels, the UK AIDS memorial quilt serves to humanise and shed light on the families and lives of those affected by or living with HIV. Started in 1985, the quilt aimed to help others understand the impact of losing a loved one to such a stigmatised disease. AIDS was so stigmatised in the 80s that the original acronym read 'GRID'; Gay-Related Immune Deficiency. It was changed in 1982 to AIDS, (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome.)

The quilt was displayed for the first time on October 11th 1987 during the National Washington March for gay rights. (National AIDS Memorial (2021). *The History of the Quilt*. [online] www.aidsmemorial.org. Available at: <https://www.aidsmemorial.org/quilt-history/>.) and provided a personal connection to the victims as a group of six volunteers read out the almost two thousand-strong list of names. Not only did the quilt mean that people unaffected by AIDS could glimpse into the grief held by those who were affected, but it also meant that bereaved loved ones could have a tailor-made space to share information about their loved ones in a time where the cause of their death dictated the dignity they had in death. As well as this, the AIDS memorial quilt has raised over \$3 million in the past 20 years. (Fee, E. (2006). The AIDS Memorial Quilt. *American Journal of Public Health*, 96(6), pp.979–979. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.2006.088575>.) All of this money is donated constantly to AIDS service organisations and shows how the art created during and after this period battled stigma and provided families with relief from their bereaved states. The AIDS memorial quilt is another example of how art was used during and after the crisis to bring relief to families as well as humanise victims of AIDS in a time where dehumanisation was at an all time high for gay men.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres was an American visual artist who worked primarily in sculpture. His most famous work, *A Portrait of Ross in LA*, represents Torres' relationship with his boyfriend, who had died of AIDS. Viewers are encouraged to take a sweet off of the pile, and as the pile decreases, it connotes Ross' rapid weight loss during his final months. Ross is famous for these works made of sweets, all representing the deterioration of his boyfriend as well as suggesting the spread of the HIV virus through semiotics. The act of somebody taking a sweet away with them echoes how a simple interaction between people can spread a life-changing virus. This harmless but poignant representation of how easy HIV is and was to spread shows the public that there is no 'degeneracy' involved in the spreading of the virus, but instead HIV is easily and unknowingly transmittable. (Conway, A. (2022). *Félix González-Torres: Conceptualising the HIV Epidemic*. [online] Felix. Available at: <https://felixonline.co.uk/articles/felix-gonzalez-torres-conceptualising-the-hiv-epidemic/>.) Another popular Torres piece is *Untitled: (Perfect Lovers)*, consisting of two identical clocks mounted on a wall. If one or both clocks stop ticking, they are removed from the wall and repaired, allowing the piece to theoretically last forever. The clocks being allowed to tick

forever denoted a future Torres wanted with his boyfriend that he could never have, instead allowing them to live on through art.

To conclude, each of these artists helped show the human side of a demonised time in queer history, showing how loved ones grieved, loved, and lost through deeply moving pieces and exhibitions. As well as this, artists like Keith Haring allowed for the general public to be educated about AIDS, instead of being frightened by adverts run on the TV or articles in newspapers. Education helped remove the fear and stigma surrounding HIV and AIDS, while allowing gay men to understand how to avoid it and be safe. The AIDS quilt allowed a space for loved ones to grieve openly, as well as giving insight into the individuals killed by the virus. This serves to free them from just being a statistic, and demonstrates the lack of difference between victims of AIDS and healthy people.

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