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The Affective Potential of Formal Play: Camp Sensibility and Dark Humor in AIDS Activist Video

Mia Lotan
Bard College, ml9782@bard.edu

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The Affective Potential of Formal Play:
Camp Sensibility and Dark Humor in AIDS Activist Video

Senior Project Submitted to
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of Bard College

by
Mia Lotan

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Introduction

Susan Sontag shows us that representations of illness are too often coded in political paranoia. Her essay *AIDS and its Metaphors* speaks to the particular pathologization of AIDS in the early 1980s as a disease of delinquency, indulgence, perversity, and addiction. She cites popular literature to showcase the metaphors of military invasion and alien takeover that sensationalize and dehumanize the person with AIDS (PWA). Sontag writes that it is “the metaphors and myths” constructed around illness that “kill,” for the meanings assigned to illness impacts political discourse, health-care and housing policy, scientific and pharmaceutical research, as well as art and activism.¹ Ideology as infectious agent. An early AIDS activist interest in “giving a face to AIDS” sought to combat the “bureaucratic abstraction” Sontag writes of, establishing a genre of portraiture of PWAs in an effort to humanize the crisis.²

Nicholas Nixon’s photographic series “Pictures of People” (1988) fits into such a category, including portraits of PWAs that he took over a period of time. One of his portrait series follows Tom Moran, whom Nixon photographed consistently between August 1987 and his death in February 1988. Some of the portraits depict a close up of Moran’s face, others display Moran’s bare, upper torso, sometimes reclined in bed or otherwise facing himself in the mirror. All of the images, however, detail dramatic effects of AIDS-related complications on the body, for natural lighting highlights Moran’s crater-like collar bones, protruding ribs, and emaciated jawline. Most often pictured alone, Moran is never in action nor in dialogue, Almost always seated, he stares wide-eyed into the lense or sometimes sleeping, but never speaking. Each of the portraits are homogenous in their one-dimensional emotional register, for the black

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and white works elicit a resounding silence that mirrors a melancholy that critics of the work understood as indicative of authenticity and intimacy.

Central to the work is an interest in capturing truthful experience. In a MoMA exhibition catalog of these works, Nixon refers to the photographs as telling “the story of AIDS: to show what this disease truly is, how it affects those who have it, their lovers, families and friends…”

Critical reception of the work demonstrates that Nixon’s portraits hold a dual interest in eliciting a particular emotional potency, for a *New York Times* review entitled “Nixon Seeks a Path to the Heart” writes that the work is so truthful that Nixon “feels no need to provide captions to tell us what we are seeing.” The author claims the “emotional resonance” provides “a precedent for the AIDS portraits.”

Against Nixon’s assumed authority in producing an honest image, art historian and AIDS activist Douglas Crimp critiques the work for reiterating mainstream depictions of PWAs as passive and alone, “debilitated by the syndrome,” “desperate, but resigned to their ‘inevitable’ deaths.” For Crimp, Nixon’s images are voyeuristic and exploitative. They function not unlike broadcast news programs which reinforce the fiction of “the general public,” a majoritarian body of the uninfected, the unimplicated, presumably innocent, white, and heterosexual. In fact, it is most often portrayals like Nixon’s that reduce the syndrome to symbols of hopelessness and helplessness, stereotypes that neglect to address the social and political conditions that make and maintain an epidemic. Crimp’s essay “Portraits of People with AIDS” recounts a protest organized by a group from ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) outside of the gallery

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3 Crimp, “Portraits of People with AIDS,” 84.
5 Crimp, “Portraits of People with AIDS,” 84.
exhibiting Nixon’s work, where ACT UP demanded an end to representations of AIDS that perpetuate misconceptions “without addressing the realities of those of us living everyday with the crisis as PWAs and people who love PWAs.” Fliers read “Stop looking at us; Start listening to us,” along with a call for visibility of PWAs as “vibrant, angry, loving, sexy, beautiful, acting up and fighting back.”6 Thus, Nixon and the ACT UP protest shed light on a false assumption that conventional realist techniques produce images of objective truth. It is through these dominant assumptions that ideological, social and moral codes are inserted and internalized by mass audiences.

For these reasons, Crimp problematizes an activist impulse to disassociate from certain stigmatized representations of PWAs, suggesting that such exclusionary judgments uphold the moral binaries on which misrepresentations of AIDS depend. He writes, “To say that it is unfair to represent a gay man or a PWA as a hustler is tacitly to collaborate in the media’s ready condemnation of hustlers, to pretend along with the media that prostitution is a moral failing rather than a choice based on economic and other factors limiting autonomy…. Do we really wish to claim that photographs by Nicholas Nixon are untrue? Do we want to find ourselves in the position of denying the horrible suffering of people with AIDS, the fact that very many PWAs become disfigured and helpless, and that they die?”7 His inquiry suggests that proper counterimages to mainstream misrepresentations must recognize all representations as constructions, for it is the conditions of these constructions to which AIDS activists should strive to articulate. Similarly, Sontag writes that “metaphors cannot be distanced just by abstaining from them. They have to be exposed, criticized, belabored, used up.”8 What is required then is an

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6 Crimp, “Portraits of People with AIDS,” 87.
7 Ibid., 100.
8 Sontag, “AIDS and Its Metaphors,” 152.
exposé of representational techniques, a disillusionment of the discursive structures and conventions that determine who speaks, how, and why. Thus, AIDS activism begs a rethinking of all culture, for to deconstruct images of AIDS is to deconstruct assumptions of truth as represented by mainstream media.

In light of these demands, the AIDS activist movement of the early 1980s witnessed an unprecedented amount of alternative video production from a diverse range of economic and cultural contexts. The broad category of “Alternative AIDS media” accounts for a variety of approaches to funding, form, and distribution, from “big-budget educational documentaries” to “camcorder recordings of activist demonstrations.” Alternative AIDS filmmaker John Greyson delineated at least nine different kinds of alternative AIDS media including cable-access talk shows, safer-sex tapes, experimental art videos, documentary portraits, protest and performance footage, etc. Unifying these works is an imperative to interrupt particular media conventions, genres, and dynamics so as to resist the authority assumed of mass and mainstream media, to enfranchise neglected perspectives and communities affected by AIDS, and/or to circulate underrepresented information. In other words, alternative AIDS video continually expanded an incomplete image of the epidemic created by mainstream media.

In part, video was so central to the struggle against AIDS because of technological advancements like cable access and VCRs that made production and distribution more accessible. Small format consumer cameras enabled portable, more affordable video-making. Additionally, alternative AIDS video responds to the pervasive influence that television and news broadcasting held over public discourse of AIDS. In light of this, video functions as a self-
reflexive medium, enabling counterrepresentations that can appropriate the very techniques video-makers wish to critique, thus decentering the authority of mainstream media while modeling alternative approach to video and representation at large. For many alternative AIDS media-makers like Gregg Bordowitz, videowork of this sort functioned as direct action against the epidemic, for he recognized video as “‘not an object, but an event’ because its production is part of a larger effort to organize increasing numbers of people to take action.”

Activist video offered depictions of AIDS-related experiences that defied and dismantled expectations and significations of the crisis and those presumed at greater risk, particularly gay men, IV drug users, people of color, and low income communities. Alternative images of PWAs could be diverse, positive, complex, and/or not reliant on preexisting prejudices that reiterate the crisis as “an epidemic is meanings.” Paula Treichler writes that these contestations model a broader analysis of “the cultural and material resource available to us,” requiring us “to acknowledge and examine the multiple ways in which our social constructions guide our visions of material reality.” The moral and social codes which legitimize the meaning or “truth” behind dominant significations are disrupted and destabilized as a result of the media-maker’s appropriation and alteration.

Dominant constructions of AIDS relied heavily on homophobic and heterosexist values that preceded them, for AIDS was widely articulated as a “gay plague,” “the price paid for anal intercourse,” and “God’s punishment for our weaknesses.” Thus, AIDS only reinforced a political climate where quarantine could be encouraged and sodomy laws enacted. Much of

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14 Ibid., 40
15 Ibid.
alternative AIDS media became a site for lesbian, gay, and queer artists and activists to contest oppressive constructions of “deviant” sexualities, a platform on which to upend, reclaim, and mock social stigma directed at them. Borrowing art world tactics of “appropriation, situationist strategies, institutional critique,” many video-makers deployed “strategies that have been used effectively by lesbians and gay men to fight invisibility.”¹⁶ Alternative AIDS media and activist protest was often imbued with a highly playful and participatory sensibility that drew from queer cultural practices that utilized guerilla theatre, humor, camp techniques like drag and hyper-stylization. In the oppressive, grim, and life-threatening context of governmental neglect and rampant homophobia, these affectively positive and celebratory practices prove radically subversive, upending hegemonic expectations of emotionality, rationality, and illness. These techniques of spectacle “exploit the mutual interdependence of the heteronormative center and the sexual margin, blurring the boundaries that distinguish them,” for as Roger Hallas writes, “from painful psychic terrain, queer practice mines pleasure.”¹⁷

This project explores aesthetic approaches of this kind, techniques of video and performance that disorganize the affective expectations surrounding AIDS and dominant American culture at large. I look specifically at camp sensibility and dark humor as they are utilized in AIDS activist video at the height of the epidemic between the mid 1980s and the early 1990s, exploring the way in which such practices engender a shared space for a complex of affective and emotional experiences of grief, empowerment, loss, humor, joy, liberation, community, celebration, fear, doubt, uncertainty, friendship, sex, etc. That camp and humor can hold these affects at once is both compelling and politically subversive, modeling alternative and

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countercultural ways of approaching AIDS, activism, and affect. I argue that such a
disorganization of convention and expectation is productive for the way that it delegitizes
seemingly fixed truths of social value and normative meaning. In these works, a dual rupture of
aesthetic and affective conventions showcases uncertainty and ambiguity as sites of opportunity,
potentiality, alternative affective, political, and social possibility. Within the AIDS epidemic,
encircled by a crisis of representation, camp effectively functions as an aesthetic toolbox with
which to contest dominant understandings of AIDS, homosexuality, activism, kinship, etc.

The videos featured in this project stand in contrast to work like Nixon’s and even other
alternative AIDS video projects for their carnival, theatrical, and often parodical approach to
activist practice. The camp and playful qualities of these works elicit a collective and life-
affirming spirit through which a community of AIDS activists is bonded and sustained. The
works I mention showcase camp and humor as activist techniques which reinforce a community
centered approach to AIDS activism.

By “camp sensibility” I call on writers such as Sontag, Gilad Padva and Richard Meyer
who illustrate camp as a postmodern aesthetic often employing low-production or DIY material,
exaggerated and hyper-stylized ornament, and irony or self aware parody, to name a few
distinguishing aspects. Camp techniques embrace an exaggeration and flamboyance that pushes
formal properties to the point of collapse, where the meaning or signification of an image is
revealed as an aesthetic construction.

By “affect,” I refer to sociologist Deborah Gould’s understanding of the term as an
internal sensation or intensity that occurs before it is translated into language and understood as a
certain “emotion” or “feeling.” Thus, the process of making sense of our affective experiences is
a culturally specific one, determined by available labels and meanings. Affect is only part-
conscious if conscious at all, our awareness of it determined by our limited linguistic tools. Nonetheless affect is a force registered and always at play. Affect is full of potential, a well of possible meanings, values, experiences untainted by restrictive and reductive social forces, linguistic, cultural, political, social. Emotions then, are “linguistic captures of a much deeper well of sensation that can be recombined, refigured, re-purposed or animate toward new ends.”

I argue that practices of camp, which illuminate, perform, and parody the constructed nature of social value, nod to a potent realm of untapped affect, suggesting that other configurations of meaning are possible and worth tending to. An attention of this sort fuels both personal and communal, political and emotional, commitments. It aids in resisting hegemony and generating counterculture.

Each chapter discusses a separate AIDS activist video, exploring its respective employment of humor and camp techniques. Motivating this project are questions like “what effect does camp and humor in AIDS activist video elicit? What does this approach do and for whom?” Some of the particular formal strategies this paper will explore are self-reflexive performance, hand-held cinematography, doubled autobiographical subjects, spectacle, and found footage. I argue that these techniques are employed through a camp sensibility which elicits particularly unique and subversive affective effects. Characteristically camp qualities like drag, character, kitsch, word play, irony, and self-parody are also investigated.

In the last chapter, I use Gregg Bordowitz’s *Fast Trip Long Drop* (1993) to discuss a historical shift in the AIDS epidemic, comparing Bordowitz’s disruption of conventional autobiographical narratives to camp disruptions of normative values. Throughout the project, I

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am interested in the parallels between an ethos of camp sensibility and an attention to affect. That the uncontainable, inexpressible complexity of human affect mirrors the inherently non-representable emotional, social, political, religious, economic entanglement of AIDS-related experiences makes tools like camp, which excavate and/or highlight affective experience, necessary weapons in the fight against AIDS.
Chapter One

Within the first minute of the music video for the 1989 hit single “Like A Prayer,” Madonna witnesses a murder, discovers an extravagant candle-lit church, serenades the emotional awakening of a caged polychrome saint, and alludes to her own heavenly ascent. Not only does all of this happen in a tight, black bustier dress but by the end of the video, Madonna has seemingly defeated the racist Ku Klux Klan, dancing in front of a line of burning crosses. Kitschy, erotic, and on the brink of absurd, this convoluted pop cultural item is drenched in referential clout both religious and sexual. The video is semiotically complex, for within a music video framework and technique, the work’s antithetical themes are able to simultaneously embrace and mock Pop traditions, all the while weaving in relevant issues of racial injustice and white supremacy. A year later in the spring of 1990, DIVA TV (Damned Interfering Video Activist Television), an affinity group of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), released a videotape by the same name, Like A Prayer, perhaps reinforcing Madonna’s status as a queer icon. DIVA TV’s Like A Prayer traverses a similar terrain to Madonna’s. While subscribing to conventional methods of video technique and address, the dynamic tape taps into theatrics of humor, camp, and play, all within the ultimate agenda of direct action against AIDS.

Appropriating both video technique and footage from mainstream news sources, Like A Prayer offers documentation of the ACT UP/WHAM! (Women’s Health Action Mobilization) demonstration “Stop the Church” at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City on December 10th, 1989.19 The video chronicles the controversial and highly publicized demonstration against Cardinal John O’Connor’s opposition to abortion and the use of condoms.20 The filmmakers use

the “Stop the Church” protest as an opportunity to illustrate the history of the Catholic church’s problematic defiance of safe-sex practices and education. The force of the institutionalized church directly sustained the AIDS epidemic, influencing the banning of safe sex education in public schools, the termination of governmental funding for AIDS organizations that serviced gay men, as well as the sodomy laws.21 Coded in presumptuous, homophobic rhetoric, the government bills that passed these laws paired with Cardinal O’Connor’s offensive statements all contributed to the execution of the “Stop the Church” protest and Like A Prayer.

The tape interlaces demonstration footage, studio interviews, street interviews, safe-sex educational scripted sketches, and even a montage of mainstream news coverage including segments from a talk show on broadcast television. The vast range of video encompassed in Like A Prayer might position the tape as a partial survey of types of video within the category of “alternative AIDS media,” of which there was an outpouring during the representational crises of the AIDS epidemic.22 While various writers and scholars have defined “alternative AIDS media” in different ways, all the videos and films on this bill were made in direct relation to the “form, reach, or agenda” of mainstream television productions about AIDS.23 As demonstrated by the appropriative techniques within Like A Prayer, the binary terms of “‘mainstream’ and ‘alternative’ obscure a great deal of cross-fertilization, mimicry, and hybridization: actually, both media use experimental as well as conventional forms.”24 However filmmakers and activists like Alexandra Juhasz continue to use this terminology to reference the ideological implications of

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22 Juhasz, AIDS TV, 4.
24 Ibid., 289.
these methods of production. In her book *AIDS TV*, Juhasz uses “alternative” to distinguish independently produced video from mainstream, broadcast, or commercial television about AIDS that was created within “a system of media production which is standardized, profit-oriented, seemingly authorless and unbiased, and directed toward mass consumption.”

Enabled by the technological advancements that made video production more affordable and accessible than ever before, alternative AIDS media unleashed “many other possible systems of media production and distribution which are organized through much less regulation and standardized conjunctions of finance, ideology, partisanship, profit and style.” In other words, dominant media reproduces the interests and agendas of corporate and political hegemonies while alternative video represents a marginal yet developmental arena for exploration and ideological resistance.

Alternative activist video practices were often developed and maintained through the efforts of video collectives like DIVA TV, whose particular philosophy emphasized the importance of democratic production processes and supporting activist communities. DIVA TV grew out of a separate video collective called Testing the Limits, both of which emerged as affinity groups of ACT UP, whose initial core membership included a handful of media-makers and artists that encouraged the exploitation of “media spectacle and graphic publicity.” With the activist agenda to infiltrate mainstream media and reach a wide audience, Testing the Limits evolved into an institutionalized organization. In direct contrast, DIVA TV was intentionally “unprofessional” and sought to achieve its “essential goal of inclusivity, with open lines of communication among collective members for expressing opinions and offering analyses. Here

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25 Juhasz, *AIDS TV*, 4
26 ibid.
protest is the process, communication is our form of resistance, and everyone has a say.”

While it’s approach may have had a “limited audience,” “inconsistent participation,” and often improvised technique, DIVA TV produced three influential tapes that provided HIV/AIDS communities with their own news service and a form of counter-surveillance against police brutality, all the while creating an archive of alternative, self-empowered video production. Additionally, DIVA TV’s investment in non-hierarchical, democratic video production led to more self-expressive and stylistically experimental tapes like Like A Prayer, in which each of the seven sections of the tape were produced by different members of the collective.

In both the protest and the video, AIDS activists demonstrate a remarkably playful and camp cooption of the video medium and Catholic signifiers, asserting the agency, resilience, intelligence, and community of AIDS activists. A celebratory and lively spirit marks the content and form of Like A Prayer, which despite addressing urgent concerns of human rights, is able to elicit a nearly palpable eruption of humor, intimacy, and self-love. It is this stylistic coexistence of ludic performance and social activism which makes Like A Prayer not only intriguing but radically subversive and politically staunch. Through the camp employment of parody, performance, and spectacle, DIVA TV offers humor as a tool with which to facilitate the emotional and political intersections of artist and activist, loss and vitality, individual and community. The content and form of Like A Prayer evokes a sensibility of humor and politicized camp which encourages an optimistic coalition against AIDS, undermines authorities of oppressive forces which sustain the AIDS crisis, and carves out a space for resonant viewers to explore the affective complexities of AIDS activism.

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28 Juhasz, AIDS TV, 63
29 Ibid., 16.
The traces of humor and camp in Like A Prayer are prolific, spanning across various media techniques and vignettes. Following an inaugural chorus from Madonna’s “Like A Prayer,” the first scene of the 28-minute video introduces a long haired, bearded newscaster wearing a crown of thorns and draped in a white, makeshift toga. In the midst of a dense crowd of engaged protesters, the costumed newscaster reports, “This is Jesus Christ. I’m in front of St. Patrick’s Cathedral on Sunday.” The handheld camera is unsteady yet Jesus retains unabiding eye contact and a firm grip on the microphone, a firm commitment to character. Perhaps the filmmaker is dodging clever protest signs characteristic of AIDS demonstrations such as “Curb Your Dogma,” “Keep Your Rosaries Off My Ovaries” and “Keep Your Church Out of My Crotch.”

Christ continues, “Inside, Cardinal O’Connor is busy spreading his lies and rumors about the position of lesbians and gays. We’re here to say ‘We wanna go to heaven, too!’” Jesus is played by Ray Navarro, artist, activist and co-founding member of DIVA TV. Charming interviews between Navarro and fellow protesters are woven throughout the video compilations that follow. In one interview, Navarro follows behind a marching protester who is carrying the end of a giant condom made of transparent plastic and filled with balloons, an amateur parade float. “J.C.,” as he refers to himself, wittily reports from the “Fire and Brimstone Network,” seeking information about the “large vision that you’ve risen above us.” The protester responds, “Well we’ve decided to rename the Cardinal. He’s now Cardinal O’Condom. This is our message to him: Condoms are safe, it’s no sin.” Following a sound compilation of Cardinal O’Connor reciting the “Gloria Patri” mixed with chanting protesters, sequential text appears with a statement from DIVA TV: “For centuries the church leadership has tried to govern individual morality and to limit everyone’s right to choose for themselves. These men (and they have

always been men) must be told that they cannot impose their morality on people who do not share their doctrine…” An oscillation between this series of political statements and a Madonna crescendo captures the eccentric spirit of the work.

Eventually, the video introduces “The 7 Deadly Sins of Cardinal O’Connor and Church Politicians.” Each of the seven sections within Like A Prayer addresses one of the newly established sins that DIVA TV has reclaimed to explain the hypocrisies of the church. These new sins include Ignorant Denial, Endangering Women’s Lives, No Safe Sex Education, No Condoms, No Clean Needles, Bias, and Assault of Lesbians and Gay Men. Each section serves an argumentative function, showcasing a variety of quick paced video segments that explain each heading. Central to each chapter are more formal interviews with Catholic and ex-Catholic activists describing their incentive for protest, sharing personal anecdotes on their complicated or strained relationship to Catholicism in relation to issues of reproductive rights and safe sex. These documentary style interviews, which take place in front of a bright, purple green screen, are especially sensible and private in comparison to the other footage of the demonstration itself or even the mock advertisements for safe sex practices starring Ray Navarro’s Jesus Christ. The intimacy of these personal interviews make reference to rituals of both religious confession and public testimony and suggest one way in which the technical appropriations within Like A Prayer are also coded in layers of satire or parody.

The principle structuring devices employed within Like A Prayer are most often appropriative, resignifying dominant conventions of representation in news broadcasting and music video. Navarro’s field reporting is just one example, for it borrows television news’ established mechanisms of virtual authority and immediacy. Navarro also stars as Jesus Christ in

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sporadic, short, and scripted scenes that incorporate practices of direct address typical of public service announcements. The in-studio interviews with activists demonstrate a similar appropriative tendency, taking advantage of television news traditions of spatially constructed intimacy and realness. The video even includes footage from real mainstream television programs including coverage of the Stop the Church protest that was aired on Channel 11 News. Another segment incorporates footage from a talk show with a young Matt Lauer on 9BP, in which Lauer questions a panel of AIDS activists on their sacrilegious behavior. 32 Like A Prayer showcases an amazing array of video footage both staged and live, sampling a multitude of viewer experiences. The film functions as an eclectic compilation of video programs whose pace and hyper stimulation might resemble the gaudy sensation of watching say, a Madonna music video. The interwoven pop music contributes to such a feel and further suggests DIVA TV’s appropriative impulse.

With these practices of reframing, DIVA TV participates in a larger ideological critique of mainstream depictions of people with HIV/AIDS, a fundamental schema of alternative AIDS media. Through the low-end and relatively accessible video technologies of the camcorder, satellite, VCR, and low-cost computer editing, newly recruited, empowered videomakers could directly confront the particularly oppressive and sensationalizing effects of mainstream television on misrepresentations of AIDS. 33 Accessible video production promised appropriative possibilities, therefore television would become an offering site for reductionist and threatening representations of PWAs with which activist media-makers could “appropriate, parody, and analyze...” 34 In Reframing Bodies, Roger Hallas credits television news broadcasting as “the

32 Petro, “Ray Navarro’s Jesus Camp, AIDS Activist Video, and the ‘New Anti-Catholicism,’” 18
33 Juhasz, AIDS TV, 2.
34 Hallas, Reframing Bodies, 78.
most important medium for shaping the dominant public perception of AIDS in the United States,” where “News anchors sit at the apex of a discursive hierarchy.” Hallas deconstructs the mechanisms of television news which frames “its anchors within a set of reality effects that simulate both the temporal and the spatial sense of presence necessary for a simulated face-to-face encounter.” In adopting and performing the enunciative techniques of broadcast news, activist videomakers could demystify the assumed hierarchy of news media as a mere construction, a product of compositional arrangements offering a false impression of liveness, enfranchisement, and truth. In doing so, alternative AIDS videomakers could reclaim the authority of mainstream news, providing the AIDS community with the ability to articulate its own experiences while simultaneously demonstrating an affirmative agency unseen in dominant depictions of PWAs. Additionally, the hybridity of television genres further requests a heightened attention of the viewer to notice genre as a product of formal cues and constructions.

In Like A Prayer, humor and mockery play an instrumental role in the dismantling of the news broadcast, offering traditionally queer counter-cultural practices of politicized camp as a resource to further investigate dominant forms of representation. There are a multitude of segments that directly address the news broadcast in camp fashion. As previously described, the opening scene of the video shows hand held footage of Navarro’s Christ at the center of a bustling crowd in winter coats while protest signs dance overhead. His station interrupts the animated flow of protesters who continue to move, march, and shout around him, for it is clear that unlike mainstream field reporters who might present on the perimeter of the spectacle, as mediators between the television audience and the news event, our Jesus Christ associates

35 Hallas, Reframing Bodies, 80.
36 Ibid.
himself with the action by casually and comically standing in the midst of it all. Captured in the background of the unsteady shot is the frontward facade of the St. Patrick’s Cathedral with Navarro’s head almost satirically perched between and American flag and the official banner of the Roman Catholic church protruding from the entrance.

Classically camp qualities of Ray Navarro’s witty and ebullient drag performance mock and decenter the constructed power relations of broadcast journalism, rearticulating its assumed audience as part of a generative and affirmative AIDS activism. The framing devices through which Navarro reports parodies news correspondents’ duty to mediate between a presumably uninformed audience and a threatening “world out ‘there.’”37 This constructed hierarchy around enunciation and reporting disempowers mainstream audiences by projecting their reliance on news media while invoking a fearful sensationalization of AIDS. Along with the reporter’s Jesus costume, his physical proximity to the center of the situation disrupts internalized spatial hierarchies of broadcast news in a chaotic, humorous way. No longer is there a “hegemonic ‘here’” or a “threatening ‘there,’” for Navarro’s ridiculously slight movement into the protest does away with the discursive cues that guide the mainstream audience through ideologically backed power relations. The (intentionally) failed mimesis of mainstream reporting is reinforced through the low-level light and the jerky instability of the handheld camera. These rough qualities elicit a sense of what Roger Hallas has called “embodied immediacy,” a sense of the “here and now in ACT UP’s occupation of symbolically and institutionally powerful spaces.” Hallas has particularly noted that Like A Prayer’s “use of camp, parody and black humor effectively imitates the tone of many strategies used in actual demonstration.”38 This said, Like A

37 Hallas, Reframing Bodies, 37
38 Hallas, Reframing Bodies,” 93.
Prayer uses humor and camp to activate a sense of embodied immediacy that is local to the activist community the video represents, adding a visceral depth to DIVA TV’s initial goal of documenting political action. The low, makeshift quality of the video is also representative of what Juhasz calls “down and dirty footage,” a form of unprofessional film production shot by “whoever had a camera,” a testament to the urgency and necessity of alternative AIDS video, funded or not.39 While the use of the hand-held camcorder may not have been a stylistic choice but a result of limited funding, Navarro’s drag performance, which is equally as passionate as it is amateur, compliments the low quality of the video and adorns the work with a camp sensibility, framing the aesthetic approach in an parodical exchange between ambition and success. This celebratory commitment to limited means is characteristically camp, a dialogical aesthetic and countercultural practice.

Through a stylistic embrace of extravagance, artifice, kitsch, and theatricality, camp emphasizes the possibilities and constraints of material play, both literally and ideologically, thus threatening the authority of aesthetic values and semiotic hierarchies. As in Navarro’s opening scene, camp often demonstrates a “failed seriousness” which is famously “good because it’s awful.”40 Historically, camp has been employed as a political tool to puncture dominant understandings of aesthetic, cultural and therefore political value, providing queer social movements with a humorous and playful form of resistance to heteronormative constructions of identity and consent that are “typically involved with the affluent white, straight male elite [and] are strongly associated with the commercial and cooptative culture industry.”41 Susan Sontag’s

39 Juhasz, AIDS TV, 61.
influential treatise “Notes on Camp” forges a definition of camp through and in relation to popular cultural references with which she compares and contrasts, further reiterating the fundamental dynamic between camp and mass media. Camp’s relationship to mainstream media is essential to the opening scene in Like A Prayer, a satirical and makeshift ensemble which exists against professionally produced, high quality video programs that persistently misrepresent AIDS. Effectively, the scene reinterprets “the good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgement” and inaugurates a power play. 42 Through their campy approach, DIVA TV introduces the viewer to a new “way of looking at things,” through which they are able to redefine and reclaim their own standards of success in the face of the mainstream visual apparatus. 43

At the tail end of the introductory scene, our Jesus Christ reporter proclaims “‘we’re here to say, we want to go to heaven too.’” Here, Navarro’s wit assists the video’s overall subversion of conventional address. Navarro’s reporter status initiates his adoption of what Hallas calls “the talking head,” a convention of direct address that regulates “the visible identification of specific bodies and identities, their authority to speak, and the possible forms of address they may perform.” 44 The newscaster’s unanticipated use of “we” further dismantles assumed power relations of television news by asserting his own participation in the demonstration as well as implicating the news audience in the embodied “here.” This calls on a recurrent feature of AIDS activist video which filmmaker Catherine Saalfield called “amongness,” meaning the “positioning of producer, subject, and audience of a video in a similar place- self-proclaimed

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42 Sontag, “Notes on Camp.”
43 Ibid.
44 Hallas, Reframing Bodies, 37.
difference, marginality, activism, oppression, distinctiveness, and sometimes, infection.” This employment of amongness undoes the essentializing tendencies of “character” and TV performances, claiming Navarro as a complex figure, human, and activist, who is a protester, a witness, a viewer, and an entertainer. Thus, the subtle power of humorous remarks like these have an almost liberatory effect, unfastening mechanisms of containment, like identity, and models a news report with an alternative approach to authoritative reporting.

Navarro’s dual persona of both Jesus Christ and newscaster parallels a camp tendency towards “duality” and “double interpretations” in which something can both “mean something” and at the same time be understood as “pure artifice,” further deconstructing the semiotic import of societal value and meaning. His two-fold character performance references the constructed authorities of religious and media institutions, dramatizing their dependency on material signifiers for ideological strength. Through the mimicry and mockery of news broadcasting techniques, the campy newscaster scene and Navarro’s character suggest that authority is preserved and perpetuated through performance. While this might expose the malleability and superficiality of certain communication tactics, it does not explicitly denounce aesthetic significance. Rather, the passionate and exaggerated qualities of Navarro’s performance indicate an allegiance to aesthetic effect and personal taste. The character performance celebrates stylization, demonstrating how the appropriative and formal play of expression, gesture, and language can empower a generative queer countercultural resistance with “its own brand of visibility.”

In “Cultural Studies and the Culture of Everyday Life,” John Fiske argues that the dominant material and economic constraints of the social order “oppresses the people but at the

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45 Juhasz, _AIDS TV_, 7.
46 Sontag, “Notes on Camp.”
same time offers them the resources to fight those constraints.”

Thus, creative interpretations and impersonations of formal conventions become an activist strategy with which to dethrone “the authority over perceptions of reality.” In this way, camp tactics can carve out previously unseen space around understandings of fixed truth, making reference to alternative realities, perspectives, and emotional possibilities.

In itself, Navarro’s performance is an example of how DIVA TV uses spectacle to assert an impressionable agency and presence of the AIDS activist community. Dressing as Jesus Christ for the Stop the Church protest calls on camp qualities of artifice and irony, charging the whole effort with a self-awareness that in typical camp fashion, balances “a delicate relationship between parody and self-parody.” Navarro’s fierce commitment to character demonstrates one of the many paradoxical revelations of camp sensibility in which self-parody reflects self-love and confidence. It is this willingness to be laughable that colors camp performances like these in a charming vulnerability and seeming authenticity, through which a genuine interest in celebration and community is articulated. Against an industry of commercial television that dominates “the leisure time of audience in order to sell products [and] to engender a public of consumers,” camp works become radical.

While the tape ridicules news broadcasting’ techniques, DIVA TV simultaneously exploits these forms for their ability to enfranchise and create community. By adorning mass media techniques with a camp sensibility, DIVA TV coopts the efficacy of these tactics for their own benefit, constructing a sense of shared space, intimacy, and presence for AIDS activists. The

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49 Juhasz, *AIDS TV*, 76.
50 Sontag, “Notes on Camp,”
51 Bordowitz, “The AIDS Crisis is Ridiculous,” 75.
embodied scenes with Navarro at the lively protest are one example of this, along with interspersed footage from inside the demonstration where activists sing in unison, some in “clerical drag” and others carrying witty banners. These moments of immediacy and intimacy are also present in the documentation of a “die-in” that occurred inside the church itself, the handheld camera placed on the floor alongside the protesters who lay on the ground, chanting. Even the individual interviews with ACT UP members elicit a sense of intersubjectivity, for the appropriation of the first person direct address invokes an intimacy as the speakers share their honest, enthusiastic attitudes.

During the section entitled “Endangering Women’s Lives,” Like A Prayer showcases a narrative account of a WHAM! affinity group by the name of Operation Ridiculous. The footage follows the actions and preparations of the collective at the Stop The Church protest and represents a notable example of video’s ability to service a communal spirit and culture of activism. The first introductory shot of the group interrupts the “serial progression of the Seven Deadly Sins” and shows an animated group of people gearing up in urgent yet seemingly excited fashion. Smokey Robinson’s “Tears of a Clown” plays over footage of the group pulling on classic clown costumes with colorful wigs, face makeup, and big-buttoned body suits. There’s a close up shot of a clown smoking a cigarette as she struggles to adjust her foam red nose as well as footage of planned performance sketches, both scenes embellished in balloon tossing. Over the footage, voices from the group speak slowly and in unison, announcing themselves as Operation Ridiculous: “Our mission is to diffuse the energy of the flag-waving, fetus-loving, bible-thumping bigots, we go where no clown has gone before.” By the end of the spoken

52 Petro, “Ray Navarro’s Jesus Camp, AIDS Activist Video, and the ‘New Anti-Catholicism,’” 15
53 Ibid.
manifesto, the voices proclaim “Calling all clowns! Calling all clowns! It's time for Operation Ridiculous to rescue this demonstration from the hands of the cops.”54 In their name and agenda, Operation Ridiculous is a camp parody of Operation Rescue, a militant pro-life group whose actions included blocking access to abortion clinics.55 Leading up to the Stop the Church protests, several newspapers published Cardinal O’Connor’s explicit advocacy of the group as well as his desire to join.56 The segment includes footage of Operation Rescue carrying images of fetuses in tandem with footage of Operation Ridiculous as they arrive to the demonstration “holding dolls dressed as ‘clown babies’ and screeching, ‘Save the Babies! Save our clown babies!’ The affinity group intervenes wherever members of Operation Rescue gather to disrupt the protest at St. Patrick’s.”57 Over this sequence, the voices of Operation Ridiculous continue their manifesto,

It’s ridiculous that Operation Rescue, a predominantly white group preaches carrying all pregnancies to term while there are over thirty thousand babies waiting to be adopted, the majority of whom are babies of color. Its ridiculous that the Catholic Church actively blocks safe sex and birth control education in the schools. Teenagers are exceptionally active. They’re getting pregnant, and there has been a forty percent rise in teenage AIDS cases. Its ridiculous that dialogue on reproductive rights has been limited to abortion when real issues like the lack of prenatal, neonatal, and gynecological care are virtually ignored. Its ridiculous that the Catholic Church preaches brotherly love yet promotes antigay and antilesbian violence by calling homosexuality a sin.58

Immediately following this series of stark statements, the audience is met again with a familiar face: our reporter Jesus, Ray Navarro. Situated once again in the frame of a classic field report, holding his microphone up to a couple of clown activists. Although not much is actually spoken

58 ibid.
between Navarro and the clowns, the dynamic between them is friendly and positive. The comical array of costumed activists smile at each other and like rambunctious kids in a school classroom, they are trying and failing to suppress the giggles bursting out of them. As a viewer, it’s almost impossible not to smile with them. The visceral feeling of containing laughter somehow existing alongside (yet does not taint) the alarming information previously noted. Just before the interview cuts out, one female clown sarcastically exclaims “We’re doing this for you, Jesus!” before running into the protest. Footage continues of clowns dancing for protesters as they march, some of whom are being carried away by New York City police. The end of this segment shows a member of Operation Ridiculous smiling as he shimmies in cuffs, dancing however he can while being dragged away by a police officer. While he may not be physically resistant to his arrest, his positivity and self-love nonetheless register as oppositional. That Operation Ridiculous is able to address urgent and life threatening issues while displaying carnival and comical behavior is a reward of politicized camp.

Operation Ridiculous’ accomplishment situates the work in a tradition of queer-identified practices of camp which have historically demonstrated this ability to perform a complex of affective registers. Like Navarro’s dual-character performance, Operation Ridiculous references both Operation Rescue and Charles Ludlam’s Theatre Ridiculous. Ludlam’s “Theatre of the Ridiculous” was an absurdist theatrical movement of the 1960s and 1970s that employed explicitly camp strategies of cross-gender casting and low-budget productions in an effort to resist the exclusive and heteronormative culture of traditional art and mass media. Thus, Operation Ridiculous nods to a queer countercultural community and fixes their efforts within a lineage of heterosexist resistance. This historical reference is one of many ways in which the
inclusion of Operation Ridiculous in *Like A Prayer* demonstrates how video is used to engender a virtual, self-sufficient, self-empowered community of AIDS activists.

By including this segment in an effort to document the protest, DIVA TV assert that disseminating a visceral experience of activist culture is just as important as the consequences of the demonstration (of which there were many). Understanding the activist use of video as a form of direct action, Gregg Bordowitz has advocated for the medium’s ability to put “into play the means of recognizing one’s place within the movement in relation to that of others in the movement. Video has the potential to render the concerted efforts— as yet unimagined— between groups.” Thus, the AIDS movement “creates itself as it attempts to represent itself.”

In his comparative essay “The AIDS Crisis is Ridiculous,” Bordowitz parallels Ludlam’s philosophy of theatre with AIDS activist video, implying that both frameworks elicit what he calls “queer structures of feeling,” “an articulation of presence forged through resistance to heterosexist society.” Such an articulation functions as “a set of cultural strategies of survival for queers. It is marked by an appreciation for the ridiculous, and it values masquerade. Mockery is its form; posing its it strategy.” The qualities of Bordowitz’s queer structures of feeling manifest as humor and camp in the documentation and action of Operation Ridiculous. Strategies of humor and camp are used to exploit and convert the impersonal, formulaic, and restraining techniques of mass media into a meaningful, affective space for coalition building. DIVA TV appropriates the medium of video technique and documentation to engender a virtual activist space in which queer structures of feeling can go beyond their situatedness, potentially moving others to take action.

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60 Ibid., “The AIDS Crisis is Ridiculous,” 49
61 Ibid.
This melding of two agendas, to resist and exploit heteronormative culture while also generating and recruiting counterculture echo the complex paradoxes of representation during the AIDS crisis in which AIDS activists both deny and depend on mainstream systems of representation to assert their presence and announce their identity. In an interview from 1989, Gregg Bordowitz advocates for the critical employment of seemingly regressive traditional forms of representation, stating

We have to use these forms, no matter how tired they are, in order to experiment and to develop new forms. It’s the way I feel about art and documentaries: how are we doing to develop more effective means of representation ‘for us,’ for the people who are affected by AIDS, unless we use the available forms? That means employing cliché forms. What we can try to do is to alter them and make them signify for us, so that what we come up with is something radically different than what is presented to us. Its radically different because it's ‘us’ making meaning about our situation and not just waiting for an invitation from culture,’ which someone else has always defined.62

Bordowitz’s use of the word “cliché” suggests the shallow and reductive nature of dominant representational forms, their inherent inability to properly contain or convey that which they are meant to refer. Similarly, Susan Sontag describes camp as moments in which form and content do not entirely match up. Her ideas of camp, be they notions of “failed seriousness” or “exaggeration” and “artifice,” imply that camp is determined by a sort of misstep, a point at which something gets lost in translation in the process of expression. Art historian Richard Meyer has stated that to be camp “is to present oneself as being committed to the marginal with a commitment greater than marginal merits.”63 Perhaps then, camp might be understood as an intermediary space, an aesthetic and philosophical sensibility that takes into account Bordowitz’s

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implication of representation as inherently flawed, forever hitting against walls of confinement and essentialization. Regarding the relationship between camp works, gender, and aesthetics, Jonathan Dollimore has addressed this revelatory moment of recognition where that which seems like “mimetic realism” is actually “an effect of convention, genre, form, or some kind of artifice,” stating: “For some this is a moment of disappointment in which the real, the true, and the authentic are surrendered to, or contaminated by, the fictitious and the contrived. But camp comes to life around that recognition; it is situated at the point of emergence of the artificial from the real, culture from nature- or rather when and where the real collapses into artifice, nature into culture.”

In the context of alternative AIDS media, the employment of camp sensibility makes reference to the crisis of representation that determined the AIDS epidemic.

In both Operation Ridiculous and Ray Navarro’s newscaster scene, camp is used to parody the limits of representation and conventional understandings of fixed truth as normalized through established media conventions. Between the absurdity of Jesus Christ as a news reporter and clowns fighting for abortion rights, humor and camp tend to facilitate the collapse of conventional expressions of meaning. The comedic effect of these scenes and the carnival protest practices register as so in part because they disrupt and make unrecognizable conventional or expected systems of meaning. The ridiculousness of these scenes showcase sites where institutional failures in protecting human rights might coexist alongside a giant, amateur parade float of a condom, sites where the grief and the loss of community members can somehow be the same space where activists find comic relief and dance for hours on end in front of a New York City cathedral. Humor and absurdity bear the liberatory effect of making reference to other possibilities of meaning configuration, hitting up against but not quite breaking

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through a realm outside of representational constraint. Such a reconfiguration bears affective
effects, for when emotional norms are complicated and disorganized, complex and non-
normative affects are witnessed or recognized.

Put in the context of AIDS activist video as seen in *Like A Prayer*, camp and humor
become intermediary sites for the exploration, holding, and/or witnessing of internal and
complex affects elicited by the AIDS crisis and its demands. In the introduction to her book
*Moving Politics*, Deborah Gould draws the meaningful distinction between “affect” and
“emotion,” two terms she believes are often misused interchangeably. She defines “affect” as the
“nonconscious and unnamed, but nevertheless registered, experiences of bodily energy and
intensity that arise in response to stimuli impinging on the body. These experiences are
*registered* in that the organism senses the impingement and the bodily effects, but *nonconscious*
in that this sensing is outside of the individual's conscious awareness and is of intensities that are
inchoate and as yet inarticulable.”65 In other words, affect is the unbound, mobile energy that
escapes language but is nevertheless interacting with and generated through our interaction with
the world whereas “emotion” is “the expression of affect in gesture and language, in
conventional or coded expression,” a reductive translation that is “never complete, never an
exact representation of our affective experience.” Gould’s understanding of affect parallels a
camp philosophy, for while affect exists in an internal well of sensation not yet translated
through language, camp sensibility similarly illuminates a realm of untapped potential of
meaning and value. Both showcase the inadequacy of language for its inherent inability to
represent complex identities, experiences, and feelings. For just as with works of camp, a

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65 Deborah Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago,
2009), 24.
consideration of affect might lead to the realization that “There is always something more than what is actualized in social life.”

For Gould, the recognition and prioritization of affect in scholarship is vital for its insight into political motivation, action, and inaction. In addition to supporting ideologies and seemingly innate beliefs, affect can motivate someone to take action, for “you sense that you have been moved, that you are feeling something, but you do not quite know what it is because you lack immediate access to it; those qualities spur and give force to the impetus to make sense of the affective states.” Thus, affect has the potential to invoke shifts in social and political systems of knowledge. Gould speaks to this power, proclaiming that strong affective state might succeed in puncturing the dominant emotional habitus with its prevailing attitudes, norms, and ways of feeling and emoting, and inaugurate a new constellation of feelings, emotions and emotional postures. It might challenge the more general reigning dispositions and orientations to action as well. Affect, in short, has the potential to escape social control, and that quality creates greater space for counter-hegemonic possibilities and for social transformation.

In *Like A Prayer*, humor and camp demonstrate a counterintuitive mesh of affective registers that stand in contrast to normative constructions of rational and non-emotional protest. This effect of humor and camp resembles the indecipherable and convoluted experience of affect that Gould describes. In *Like A Prayer*, that which is comical, ironic, or witty, is also a stark assertion of power in the face of systemic homophobia and governmental neglect. Grief, loss, and illness saturate the manifold crises of AIDS and yet *Like A Prayer* addresses these threats with various camp commitments to character and pop music.

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67 Ibid., 28.
68 Ibid., 39.
Writers and theorists like Roger Hallas and Alexandra Juhasz have recognized alternative AIDS media as powerful partially for its ability to address a complex of institutionalized forces that sustain the crisis (be they governmental, local, religious, etc.) all within one video piece. Juhasz states that “The work of alternative media is based upon an understanding of multiple, sometimes competing, histories, interpretations, and politics of AIDS.”69 The guiding premise of Hallas’ book *Reframing Bodies* is that “Queer AIDS Media,” another, specialized term within alternative AIDS media, “produced transformative means to bear witness to the historical trauma of the epidemic.”70 Hallas claims that “the act of bearing witness provides a conceptually rich prism through which to examine the complex set of queer responses to the AIDS epidemic.” Perhaps camp and humor, as explored in *Like A Prayer*, exist as a space within activist video’s address of complex, interrelated powers, to hold and witness the manifold *affects* and *emotions* invoked by the combatting forces of illness, death, community building, love, loss, the demand for activist action, defeat, achievement, caregiving, care-receiving, etc. In a (mis)representational crisis where a photograph of a hospitalized AIDS patient or even demonstration footage inherently reduce the multi-layered, varied-textured reality of AIDS-related experience to visual signifiers, perhaps humor and camp, in their borderline absurd and playful register, generate opportunities for nonnormative affectives to be felt or recognized as opposed to repressed or dismissed.

Techniques of politicized camp during the AIDS crisis can be understood within a larger activist debate around appropriate or productive approaches to cultural production around AIDS.

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activist John Greyson describes this debate as “urgent, vital, and voluminous,” in which “dissecting mass cultural constructions of AIDS and its effects” are pitted against the integration of “the various expressions of artists addressing the crisis.” Greyson implicates himself in this critical debate, claiming, “We especially disagree about what we mean by aesthetics and politics. Its no surprise that we’re so vehement—the stakes of the crisis are as high as they get. This fag debate between the dandy and the activist, which is certainly a false opposition, but which nevertheless forces us onto higher critical ground, is but one of many.” Greyson writes that “AIDS, by its very scale, has forced us to reexamine many of our fundamental assumptions about the very ‘nature’ of art and politics.” Within the article, Greyson publishes a mock video script entitled “Parma Violets,” an absurdist and extremely camp non-linear narrative involving a talking African green monkey and a flamboyant “dandy” named Aschenbach. He integrates references to actual news programs, as well as text from Artforum and October. In a description for one of the scenes, Greyson writes of the “simplistic oppositions” between the “dandy” and the “activist” as “inflexible, didactic, exclusionary, defensive, ignoring contradictions and erasing common points of allegiance. The reciprocal (and certainly uneasy) developing relationship between service and activist groups is far too complicated to reduce to dogmatic disavowals. In a similar way, the work that gay men are producing about AIDS cannot be reduced to a false opposition between propaganda and personal expression. As Crimp and others have pointed out many times, the complex intertwinings of political and aesthetic agendas in cultural productions are far too subtle (and vital) to reduce to expedient dichotomies. Under

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72 ibid.
careful scrutiny, the dandy and the activist may turn out (in some cases) to be one and the same.\textsuperscript{73}

The fine line between political resistance and personal expression might mirror the sliver of a second that separates text describing governmental inaction with a troupe of clowns throwing baby dolls into the air in \textit{Like A Prayer}. Following Greyson, the use of humor and camp in \textit{Like A Prayer} is directly political, generating an exploratory space for affective experience that escapes language, ultimately serving as proof of the reciprocal influence of aesthetics and politics. This understanding might perpetuate the activist outpouring of all forms of expression in an urgent attempt to bring about political change.

In Gregg Bordowitz’s essay “The AIDS Crisis is Ridiculous,” he includes Charles Ludlam’s manifesto for the Theatre of the Ridiculous, which offers a series of axioms to follow in producing “a theater for ridicule.” Each of his short, cheeky assertions are compelling for their seeming contradictions. For example, the first states, “You are a living mockery of your own ideals. If not, you have set your ideals too low.”\textsuperscript{74} The fifth claims: “Bathos is that which is intended to be sorrowful but because of the extremity of its expression becomes comic. Pathos is that which is meant to be comic but because of the extremity of expression becomes sorrowful. Some things which seem to be opposites are actually different degrees of the same thing.” These statements resonate with an ethos of camp and much of \textit{Like A Prayer}, which as noted, has demonstrated an impressive ability to hold contradiction without tension. The “aim” of the manifesto is: “To get beyond nihilism by reevaluating combat.” What does it look like to get beyond nihilism? Is it to find (or force) meaning in the face of none? Or is it to accept that there

\textsuperscript{73} Greyson, “Parma Violets.”
\textsuperscript{74} Bordowitz, “The AIDS Crisis is Ridiculous,” 44.
is none? Does “combat” refer to our approach to nihilism or does it refer to the material tools we are using? To what extent are our tools dependent on our approach and vice versa? Camp and humor, while they are used to contribute to community, counter-surveillance against police, and an alternative media archive, are also tools that leave room for questions to be left unanswered, aware of representational and linguistic constraints.

In a representational crisis where Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, a medical condition defined by “a seemingly open-ended list of contributing or ‘presenting’ illnesses,” is reduced to the acronym “AIDS,” a morally charged disease that falsely connotes “indulgence, delinquency- addictions to chemicals that are illegal and to sex regarded as deviant,” the unfixed, inarticulable realm of affect and uncertainty could hold a refreshing space for being as opposed to being something. \(^75\)\(^76\) In *Like A Prayer*, DIVA TV’s use of camp exposes the deficiency and potential of formal play, a counterintuitive duality which might parallel the baffling ways in which the mere depletion of someone’s T-cells can lead to the loss of their occupation, apartment lease, or military standing. In his introduction to *Moralism and Melancholia*, Douglas Crimp writes, “If we recognize that AIDS exists only in and through its representations, culture, and politics, then the hope is that we can also recognize the imperative to know them, analyze them, and wrest control of them.”\(^77\) Thus, the use of humor and camp in *Like A Prayer* activates a progressive shift towards nuanced perception in which representations of AIDS are not taken as truth but can still hold meaning, ultimately deeming alternative AIDS media a vital component of direct action against AIDS. DIVA TV’s employment of humor and camp model the

\(^76\) Ibid., 25
\(^77\) Crimp, Introduction to *Moralism and Melancholia*, 28.
innovative creation of meaning through a process of dismantling meaning, a creative practice that builds a coalition just as it builds a counterculture.
Chapter Two

In 1988, The Testing the Limits Collective got an office from which to produce their AIDS activist videos. Despite the cost of rent and other bills, a consistent address brought in more loans and grants which made the investment worthwhile. With a newly formed bank account and two phone lines, the collective took steps towards professionalization to further their goal of producing “accessible, professional, conventional television that would speak to a ‘general public’ who knew nothing about the AIDS crisis except for the bigoted, limited reportage on the broadcast networks’ nightly news.” Their collectively-produced work tended towards the style of PBS-documentary and actively sought to counter phobic representations of AIDS that dominated the mainstream media landscape. While popular journalistic accounts of the epidemic drew from false stereotypes of gay men, IV drug users, people of color, and the poor, TTL appropriated the form of documentary and the conventions of realism to transfer the AIDS community from a marginal to central status. Their films showcased “huge, well-organized ACT UP demonstrations that led to concrete political victories” and served an “uplifting objective.” In addition to being “highly inspirational,” cultural theorist and AIDS activist Douglas Crimp considered the films as “useful organizing tools.”

Their fifth and final film *Voices from the Front* (1992) premiered at the New York Film Forum and received a *New York Times* review. In addition to airing on public television, it also played at art and independent film houses in both the U.S. and internationally, even winning a

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79 Ibid., 61
80 Ibid.
81 Crimp, “De-Moralizing Portraits of AIDS,” in *Moralism and Melancholia*, 262
prize at the Berlin Film Festival.\textsuperscript{83,84} In October 1992, the film aired on HBO, profiting $15,000.\textsuperscript{85} However despite the film’s success, certain activist critiques of the work point to a gridlock at the center of a representational crisis in which no media account could ever possibly represent the subjective, affective complexity of experiences with AIDS. In his essay “De-Moralizing Representations of AIDS,” Crimp responds directly to \textit{Voices from the Front}, writing “those of us whose own activism is represented by the video often feel violated, as once again the complexities of our lives are oversimplified—and this time not by mass media but by our own activist artists. First we were pariahs or victims, now we are immortal heroes. But of course we are neither.”\textsuperscript{86} Crimp wrote this in 1994, a transitional moment of uncertainty and reevaluation within many AIDS activist projects; A moment in which the hard-earned recognition of successful activist efforts tend to overshadow a continual struggle with grief, illness, governmental neglect, and cultural change. Crimp writes that the film “represents a wider failure of AIDS activism to confront the daily emotional toll that AIDS inevitably takes,” and calls for the employment of rhetoric that is “faithful to our situation at this moment.” Later in the essay, he questions the film’s viewership, stating that “\textit{Voices} does not presume its primary audience to be those shown in the video coalescing around their own self-representation. Rather, it presumes its audience to be outside looking in. The subjectivity of those represented is sacrificed at the goal of reaching others.”\textsuperscript{87} Despite TTL’s successes, Crimp’s critique suggests that \textit{Voices from the Front} still upholds certain power relations and moral binaries within the dominant and problematic discourse of AIDS, in which stigmatized or non-normative emotions

\textsuperscript{83} Juhasz, \textit{AIDS TV}, 63.
\textsuperscript{84} Crimp, “De-Moralizing Portraits of AIDS,” 262.
\textsuperscript{85} Juhasz, 62.
\textsuperscript{86} Crimp, “De-Moralizing Portraits of AIDS,” 262.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 266.
and experiences are ignored for the sake of an activist approach and an accessible audience. His comments also illustrate an ongoing debate around AIDS activist approaches to cultural media production, what John Greyson referred to as an opposition between “the dandy” and “the activist,” between “personal expression” and “propaganda.”

While many alternative AIDS mediamakers like TTL adopted a conventional realist approach to activist video, this style was questioned for its risk of reinforcing dominant structures of knowledge and power, in which media representations are to be taken as uncontested truth. In *AIDS TV*, Alexandra Juhasz highlights one effect of a “mimetic approach,” stating that the use of conventional documentary form “allows for and then neutralizes distance from the recorded subject. The distance of realism—especially in the recording of the marginalized bodies of AIDS— is presented as objectivity.”

Thus, “alternative media claims the authority of dominant culture by usurping dominant forms,” and is able to insert positive and other underrepresented depictions of PWAs. By “realist,” Juhasz refers to “any variety of structural devices which are, at the particular moment of their use, considered by makers and viewers to allow for a relatively unencumbered passage of the real world before the camera and onto the television sets which later project this world as images.”

Alternative filmmakers and film critics like John Greyson and Bill Nichols are therefore critical of the extent to which traditional forms can communicate radical messages and call for films that employ more explicitly deconstructive, often avant-garde techniques. Many activist mediamakers hold the belief that for the language of film and representation to be interrogated and exposed, “the prevailing realist codes—of camera, lighting, sound, editing, mise-en-scene— must be abandoned

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88 Juhasz, *AIDS TV*, 76.
89 Ibid., 77.
and the cinematic apparatus used in a new ways so as to challenge the audiences’ expectations and assumptions about life.”\(^90\) In other words, “Realism as a style is unable to change consciousness because it does not depart from the forms that embody the old consciousness.”\(^91\) Juhasz ultimately advocates for the employment of conventional documentary form, suggesting that despite offering “less than entirely ‘real’ images,” videos “that willingly identifies its construction form a position of difference, opinion, and politics can aid the spectator to challenge the stability of these positions,” and even lead a non-activist viewer to see themselves in the subject.\(^92\)\(^93\) Both Crimp and Juhasz illuminate that in this crisis of misrepresentation, it is not only perceptions of “reality” and “truth” that are at stake, but the authority over such perceptions.\(^94\)

Central to this debate in representational strategy is the uncertainty of creating a “faithful” representation at all. Gregg Bordowitz considers this part of “an existential dimension of production,” writing, “The agency of the subject is opposed by the arbitrary nature of the sign-When I speak I risk being understood in very different ways than I intended; perhaps I will not be understood at all.”\(^95\) He advises his media-making reader: “To avoid facile, vulgar, deterministic accounts of events one must admit that there are limits to what one can know. All accounts must allow for unknown factors. No single cause can explain a situation. No explanation can sum up the totality of a situation. Truth, like tradition, is an absolute category established in the interests of an established order.”\(^96\) Similarly, Douglas Crimp directly

\(^{90}\) Juhasz, *AIDS TV*, 79.
\(^{91}\) Ibid., 22.
\(^{92}\) Ibid., 77.
\(^{93}\) Ibid., 18.
\(^{94}\) Ibid., 76.
\(^{96}\) Ibid.
addresses the AIDS activist community in “Portraits of People with AIDS” declaring, “We must continue to demand and create our own counterimages, images of PWA empowerment, of the organized PWA movement and of larger AIDS activist movement… But we must also recognize that every image of a PWA is a *representation*, and formulate our activist demands not in relation to the ‘truth’ of the image, but in relation to the conditions of its construction and to its social effects.”

Read in relation to these demands and the limits of conventional technique, alternative activist media that employs a camp sensibility might be understood as counter-hegemonic: In addition to energizing and empowering a communal movement, camp’s celebratory and theatrical spirit can assert an enthusiastic and life-affirming coalition that recognizes and mocks the impossibilities of truthful representation, ultimately resisting and subverting the moralized binaries on which representation depends. Through an exaggerated display of irony and flamboyant mimicry, camp techniques offer up meaning as a question of aesthetics, proposing that “what seemed like mimetic realism is actually an effect of convention, genre, form, or some other kind of artifice.” Camp’s playful embrace of stylization sensationalizes aesthetic experience, often showcasing “incongruous juxtapositions” and always illuminating that the value or essence of an image, object, or even self-identity is distinct from its aesthetic presentation which is malleable and often easily manipulated. In other words, camp works overstrain media and reveal aesthetic representation as an impossible attempt at representing complex truths. Theatrical techniques of drag and other forms of spectacle can therefore puncture conceptions of fixed meaning that underlie dominant value systems and which fuel not just a

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97 Crimp, “Portraits of People With AIDS,” in *Moralism and Melancholia*, 100.
crisis of representation, but widespread and uncontested associations between moral value and their visual signifiers.

Camp techniques of theatrical play and drag performance have been continually used by AIDS activists in a dual effort to oppose methods of mainstream representation while engendering a queer communal spirit. Street protest often included “a range of pranks and theatrical displays [of] sit ins, die-ins, kiss-ins” often accompanied by crossing dressing, DIY costumes, and elaborate parade floats. Benjamin Shepard writes that playful political performance “typically serve as statements of existence and coping mechanisms that allow social actors to renarrate their experiences while maintaining traditions and identities.”

On the political performances of ACT UP, Shepard writes that “cultural resistance functions as creative support, not merely a reactive force. Chockfull of hopeful celebrations, camp, and humor, many such performances inject a resilient dose of creative play into struggles against social and cultural oblivion.”

Many AIDS activist filmmakers documented demonstrations that showcased these practices of play, thus extending and disseminating a celebratory, life-affirming culture of AIDS activism through videos both entertaining and oppositional. As is the case with Like A Prayer, some filmmakers utilized campy editing techniques to meld fictional narratives with real demonstration footage.

Stiff Sheets (1989) and Marta: Portrait of a Teen Activist (1990) are two activist video works of this kind, in which the filmmakers utilized actual sites of protest as theatrical stages on which to put on campy drag performances for their respective activist communities. As opposed to activist works like Voices from the Front, these videos and the performances they document

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100 Shepard, Queer Political Performance and Protest, 12.
101 Ibid.
are made for specific AIDS activist cohorts. Produced by John Goss, *Stiff Sheets* presents footage of a fashion show put on by an anonymous artist/activist collective for the demonstrators outside the LA County/University of Southern California Medical Center, where ACT UP Los Angeles organized a week-long vigil demanding the immediate creation of AIDS services and facilities. The fashion show itself is drenched in camp, for each costume is an elaborate yet low-production, makeshift drag ensemble that parodies some aspect of AIDS related experiences, be it particular symptoms of illness or trying to entertain friends from a hospital room. A costumed master of ceremonies dramatically narrates each runway walk with a script that is saturated in word play, inside jokes, and shout outs to the audience of ACT UP Los Angeles. Kitschy editing techniques, behind the scenes footage, and an additional fictional narrative are packaged into the 21 minute video. Although also filmed at an actual demonstration, Matthew Erbert and Ryan Landry’s *Marta: Portrait of a Teen Activist* is a single drag performance and fictional documentary chronicling the activist adventures of Marta, an utterly incompetent but hyper-enthusiastic schoolgirl. The footage is mostly taken during an action at the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, where activists (including Marta) protested sodomy laws as well as the CDC’s refusal to recognize lesbians as an epidemiological category in relation to AIDS. Like *Stiff Sheets, Marta* is charged with a spirit of wit and sarcasm, offering a satire of particular activist practices and social dynamics. The video includes a series of improvised interviews with Marta’s peers in ACT UP Atlanta, therefore joining *Stiff Sheets* in illustrating a virtual portrait of a shared culture and knowledge around AIDS activism.

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102 Bordowitz, “The AIDS Crisis is Ridiculous” in *The AIDS Crisis is Ridiculous*, 52.
103 Ibid.
Marta and Stiff Sheets are notable for their embrace of self-parody and dark humor, their tendency to showcase qualities of an AIDS activist lifestyle that are unpleasant, uncertain, or conventionally addressed through a more sober rhetoric. Using camp techniques of drag, physical comedy, cheeky one-liners, and extravagant ball gowns, these videos reference failed attempts at activist outreach, the threat of quarantine, and even the rash disproportion of people of color receiving medical treatment. This creative confrontation with complex and difficult sentiments and situations offers a nuanced approach to AIDS activism, for in light of reductive, oversimplified depictions of PWAs, these films demonstrate a radical willingness to engage and explore affects around AIDS activism that might seem contradictory to an activist agenda. Yet through a camp sensibility, these filmmakers are able to address underrepresented issues of political turmoil and social embarrassment, while holding off tendencies toward pessimism or self-deprecation. In these works, a camp approach of self-parody is intimately linked to self-love, offering a mockery and subversion of the heteronormative, exclusive conceptions of “success” that motivate mainstream representations around AIDS. These films and their camp employment of self-parody demonstrate a form of parodic and playful self-reflexivity less common in realist film productions.

Although the performance in Stiff Sheets exists within the context of a week-long demonstration, the video primarily documents the fashion show, further distinguishing the work from other AIDS activist media that maintained an agenda of producing straightforward and accessible documentation of protest. By prioritizing the creative work behind the show in addition to the performance, filmmaker John Goss enfranchises a community of activists that are undoubtedly creative, intelligibly humorous, community-oriented, and resilient, contributing a nuanced representation of activists to a body alternative AIDS video. The makers of Stiff Sheets
poke holes in realist conventions of activist video that follow narrative and explicitly educational strategies, disrupting exclusive assumptions around protest etiquette and encouraging alternative and innovative approaches to activism.

The witty, comically dark fashion show occurred on the sixth night of the vigil/demonstration which took place between January 21st and 28th, 1989, “complete with tents and a soup kitchen,” showcasing ACT UP’s commitment to community-centered activism.104 The action initiated a sustained campaign “that lasted all spring and included a disruption of a Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors meeting that resulted in fifteen arrests. Soon after, Los Angeles County acceded to the central demand for the creation of a dedicated AIDS unit at the hospital, and in September 1989 a 20-bed unit was opened.”105 Stiff Sheets might then be understood as a part of the process leading to the action’s success, an exhibition of the way that camp tactics can fuel and empower a community while addressing the specific concerns of the protest.

The video begins with pink text across a black screen that reads “A message from FAG: Fundamentalists Against Gayness.” The acronym is paired with a small icon of a cross piercing the inverted pink triangle, over which a melodramatic voice warns “the following material may be judged to be offensive to some viewers. Parents may wish to put their children to bed and lock their doors. As for the rest of you, get on your knees and pray!” This image inaugurates a thoroughly camp approach to political crisis, activist experience, and even alternative AIDS video, for nearly every formal and textual component of Stiff Sheets is delivered in clever and passionate quip. The sarcastic indulgence in fearful, puritan rhetoric is a testament to the self-

105 Ibid.
awareness of camp sensibility, introducing a collective of media-makers who hold an intelligible understanding and formal control of dominant discourse strategies, values, and logic.

Directly following the opening screen is quiet footage of the L.A. Country/University of Southern California Medical Center in daytime. Before the facade of the towering hospital is a large scale tapestry that reads “Welcome to AIDS care in Los Angeles County,” under which appears text and statistics regarding the institution’s inattention to AIDS patients. Close-ups of candles in white cups, resting bouquets, and protest banners illustrate the dual vigil/demonstration. These images are edited with footage of crowds close together and holding hands while stenciled cardboard cutouts of American presidents and other incriminating authority bobble up and down.

An abrupt cut coopts the mood of the vigil, presenting shaky footage from a small, dimly lit room, where a group of half-costumed men pitch witty-one liners and “what-ifs” between each other, the fast paced sounds of a typewriter add to a sense of urgency and excitement. One wears a masquerade mask, another sports a feather boa, and most of them fiddle with paper scripts in their hands. Stamped onto the footage for a fleeting moment is “Courtier Stiff Sheets” in curly, kitchy font reminiscent of Disney credits. The banter between them is fluid and casual yet charged with an inspired momentum that indicates “behind the scenes.” As brainstorming continues, the camera rolls over close up shots of fabric on the floor, piles of sequins, glitter, and an array of wigs presented on a table. They discuss wig maintenance as enthusiastically as they discuss the ethics of a Christian group that visits hospitals to persuade gay men into renouncing their sexuality. Their winded conversations lead them in and out of brainstorming, laughter, and back again to costume ideas for what will become the Stiff Sheets fashion show. “Christian vampires, that's a great idea,” someone says. The quick pace of both the camera and the
conversation suggest a group that is in sync and incredibly comfortable with one another, engrossed in a shared project that remains mostly a mystery to the viewer until the video eventually cuts to an outdoor setting, this time at night, with the same black, large scale poster previously seen outside the opening footage of the hospital announcing “Welcome to AIDS Care.”

The poster is now transformed into the backdrop of a stage where an energized master of ceremonies wears a sequined red smoking jacket. With one hand he grips his script and with the other he gestures for an audience to rise. The handheld camera focuses in and out, cutting to footage of tuxedo wearing men rolling out a red carpet on the plaza in front of the hospital, the same space where the footage from the daytime vigil had been taken. Welcoming his audience to “what we at Stiff Sheets feel will be the most provocative fashion show seen in this town in years,” the MC offers a “polite disclaimer: this fashion show is brought to you in the worst taste imaginable. And you are the most sensitized of audiences imaginable so if you are offended, we are too.” In its self-aware embrace of failure and of marginality, the MC’s disclaimer embodies a spirit of camp. His statement suggests solidarity through this outlook, reiterating camp as a countercultural tool for building shared space and community. And so begins the bulk of the video, a lengthy, elaborately planned “fabulous fascist fashion show” divided into five sections of theatrically narrated DIY drag ensembles for “day wear,” “active wear,” “evening wear,” “hospital wear,” and even “bridal gowns.” From safe-sex gear, to concentration camp garb, to stylized IV-drips, “each costume is a glamorous vision of subjugation.”

Each new genre of fashion is introduced identically, with the kitschy, curly font and the Stiff Sheets emblem stamped onto an intermediary screen of unfocused footage.

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For the majority of the video, the red carpet runs down the center of the frame, tucked between the edge of the stage and an unseen audience whose sneakers trickle into the shot. Between the shadowy silhouettes of poster boards in the background, the vigil candles onstage, the scuffed up ground of the plaza, and the tuxedo-wearing ushers, the scene illustrates a composite site of protest, mourning, and entertainment all in one. This integrated, multi-functional practice of demonstration echoes the culture of ACT UP, which cultural theorist and former ACT UP Chicago participant Deborah Gould says experienced no separation between its “political intensities” and “its erotically charged atmosphere, or between our protests actions and the caretaking networks that we set up when members got sick. Lives are often lived in that sort of uncompartementalized way, and perhaps even more so when lived at such a high level of intensity.”

In the second part of Moving Politics, Gould writes extensively about the collective character of ACT UP, pulling from interviews with former members who readily describe one of the movement’s “greatest qualities” as its “combination of serious politics and joyful living.” Through her interviews, Gould demonstrates that this integrative approach to activism helped sustain ACT UP’s participation by creating a bonded, immersive community for political resistance, intellectual discussion, friendship, medical care, a space to express of grief, rage, etc. This description of ACT UP’s hybrid form of activism might explain why practices of play and camp were often executed, for such practices facilitate the erosion of rigid categorical expectations that ACT UP’s communal culture sought to defy.

With his arms widespread, the first runway walker steps carefully into the video frame and onto the red carpet. Atop his head is a pillow, strapped to his neck with red string whose

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108 Ibid., 183.
loose ends dangle onto the flimsy, white, twin-sized mattress he is wearing vertically on his body as a dress. With a humble, even embarrassed smile, he spins slowly onto the classic carpet path that premeditates the trajectory of his performance. Over a harmonic tune, a dubbed version of the MC’s script dramatically narrates “Our day begins in bed. Rick is wearing a light foam posturepedic mattress. Colorful ticking emphasizes the slender proportions of the wearer, making this bedridden boy ready for a nice, long wait for a real bed.” Rick twirls, rocking back and forth with his hands on his hips, marketing his unique garb to the audience. His costume and the accompanied tagline make direct reference to ACT UP L.A.’s demand for a hospital unit dedicated to AIDS patients.

Following Rick’s plie comes the next costumed model wearing the designers’ “personal solution to the AIDS epidemic.” Giant pink band-aids are stickered across the model’s body, one is even placed across his forehead like an outrageous headband. With a big smile, he awkwardly flaunts his costume to each direction of the audience while the MC goes on, “these non-ouchless creations acutely emphasize form without function for any function. Its timeless, its stupid, its republican.” Next, a figure in drag emerges from the dark end of the red carpet runway, sporting a tight, red mini dress, an elegant fur shawl, and a seemingly misplaced red fez. The model struts down the runway, flirting with the audience while the MC continues with his non-stop punch lines: “Don't let hospital protocol interfere with your fashion sense. Make a statement with this multifaceted travel wear ensemble... so you can carry a supply of your own blood for those long hauls from hospital referral to hospital referral.” Shuffling out slowly with cradled hands and bare feet, the next model sports a white bandana on his head to match his long white hospital gown, what the MC calls a “white hospital washed tafeda shmata.” Handpainted on the bottom right side of the dress are a vertical row of numbers and the pink triangle. “Jolene,” as the MC
refers to the model, poses dramatically into the stage lights at the end of the runway and grazes the “personalized identification number” on his side which “take this outfit out of the hospital and into the relocation center.” The tuxedoed ushers pull the lingering model back onto the runway while the narrator warns “This trend is infectious and is spreading into the heterosexual community so be sure to order now in quantity before Auschwitz opens next spring.” A transitionary shot reads “ACTIVE SPORTS WEAR” over obscure, blurry footage while the MC introduces the next line of fashion.

The consecutive sections advance similarly. Clever and innovative costumes follow one another, each paired with a biting line of dark humor from the MC. With some exceptions, nearly all of the costumes and their taglines address some AIDS-related experience. Each outfit is marketed as providing some sort of beneficial service for the wearer and through which the activist designers insert political critique. For example, in the Active Sportswear section, one model comes out in an elegant tuxedo with a large swatch of foam across his body like a shield. He wears a fencing mask and fiddles with a baseball bat, confidently sashaying down the carpet and pausing to pose intermittently. The MC narrates: “Want to take your lover for a romantic stroll through your increasingly homophobic neighborhood?” The look apparently comes with a pit bull accessory: “It’s not just fashionable, its necessary!” Once again the narrator satirically adopts the role of salesmen with an outfit entitled “Night Sweats,” a full sweat suit attire. He asks his audience, “Cant get those new drug protocols? Tired of standing in those long lines. Night sweats are just what the doctor ordered!” The look is “More than a fashion, its a condition. More than a style, its a symptom,” and “It took 8 years of federal inaction to perfect this outfit and it’ll last a lifetime!”
Nearly the entire script is comprised of word play; a running line of sarcasm mocking the absurdity and ridiculousness of costumes that claim to fix or amend the politically and affectively complex issues at hand, be it symptoms of night sweats to neighborhood homophobia. The irony of such a suggestion parallels issues of representation, for these “simple fixes” are absurdly inept attempts to package and sell a simple solution or understanding. Additionally, Stiff Sheets’ commitment to camp is colored by an irony that Gregg Bordowitz says “depends on stereotypical views of gay men as stylish, or as drag queens, coupled with an awareness that a pink triangle accompanied by the SILENCE = DEATH logo is a fashion statement about the AIDS epidemic.”¹⁰⁹ Exercising humor and play within the visible sartorial system, these performers aestheticize and sensationalize practices of representation itself.¹¹⁰ Theirs is a way to expose and mock an uncontested faith in mainstream representations of AIDS.

The camp technique of drag performance functions as a mechanism for productive self-parody, through which the activist performers can enunciate personal experience, mock dominant misrepresentations of their experience, inset personal experience, and highlight discrepancies between the two. Using the dynamic visual vocabulary of drag, these activists can articulate underrepresented experiences related to AIDS while asserting that in essence, they are not their circumstances, their serological status, nor their societal oppression. Thus, the activist performers harness the ethos and revelation of drag for political benefit, utilizing drag’s subversive impulse to comment on the misrepresentation and sensationalization of AIDS related experiences while nodding to traditions of queer theatre.

¹⁰⁹ Bordowitz, “The AIDS Crisis is Ridiculous,” 52.
¹¹⁰ Newton, “Selections from Mother Camp”, 122.
The camp fashion show as venue for political critique resembles anthropologist Ester Newton’s understanding of drag as a “strategy for a situation.” In *Mother Camp*, her 1972 ethnography on Midwestern American drag queens, Newton proposes that drag is most often a practice of camp, for both utilize “incongruity, theatricality, and humor” as a method of exploring and exploiting “culturally standardized canons of taste, behavior, speech, and so on rigorously associated (prescribed) with the male role.” Through their tendency towards exaggeration and artifice, camp strategies offer a “perception of incongruity,” the locus of which is “moral deviation.” In emphasizing outward appearance as a role, drag performances question the “naturalness” of the sex-role system,” and assert that “sex-role behavior is an appearance; it is an ‘outside’ that can manipulated.” This concept “implies distance between the actor and the role or ‘act.’ he performs” Thus, drag showcases this “distance” between the prescribed social role (to which their costume dramatizes) and a self unrepresented by visual signifiers. To the extent that drag performance is read as “inappropriate” behavior, deviating from and pushing against heteronormativity, Newton writes that drag “signifies stigma.” Similarly to camp, drag performance reference a failure of aesthetic representation to encompass a complex experience like that of self-identity.

With Newton’s logic, we might understand the drag performances of *Stiff Sheets* as communicating a similar distance between the actor/activist and the various AIDS-related stigmas or circumstances to which their costumes make reference. In opposition to the reductive representations that conflate AIDS with identity, *Stiff Sheets* uses drag performance to complicate and mock this tendency, demonstrating a creative assertion of self-definition. For

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111 Ibid., 125.
Newton, “all drag symbolism opposes the ‘inner’ or ‘real’ self (subjective self) to the ‘outer’ self (social self),” a opposition that parallels binaries of masculine/feminine dramatized in drag and which imply that the complex identity of ‘the self’ “has to be indicated in some other way” than binary formations. 113 Practices of drag that illuminate dominant misrepresentations of the self through “endless textual and iconic duplication” too easily depletes complex experience. 114 Somewhat ironically, drag’s “distancing” between the actor and his performed social role humanizes the actors in Stiff Sheets, implying that their identities are more complex than any representation of AIDS, suggesting that alternative meanings and representations are possible but made inaccessible through internalized hegemonies. The loss of a unique subjectivity through dominant conventions of representation is further reiterated through the continuous stream of silent, costumed performers, for as curator John Davies writes, the models “‘do not stand out in their individual subjectivities, but instead personify emblems of oppression.’” 115 Drag performances disrupt fixed ideas of gender, sexuality, and other socialized truths, offering spaces of inadequacy as opportunity to imagine and assert alternative meanings.

Within and around the “distance” between actor and role, this unique space of disassociation, these activists insert alternative significations of AIDS, disrupting damaging social codes that feed the epidemic. Drag performance proposes a body “that is not fully fictional and not fully real,” a liminal space that facilitates “a kind of critical ‘parodic inhabitance.’” 116 This liminal space offers certain enunciative possibilities that can aid an activist agenda, as seen in the activist zines made by and for the HIV/AIDS community. Daniel C. Brouwer writes of

113 Newton, “Selections from Mother Camp”, 122.
114 Davies, “Irony Rising: The Body and AIDS in the 1980s.”
115 Ibid.
these zines in his essay Risibility Politics.” Like much of the performance in Stiff Sheets, the zines he references borrow the rhetoric of advertising for parodical purposes and embody the camp theme of “glamour.” Brouwer writes that camp humor in “HIV/AIDS zines,” offers “a modality of (counter)publicity” through which to understand communication practices and engender a queer community. He refers to the zine writers’ frequent (and camp) use of noms de plume or pseudonyms as “writing in drag,” suggesting that the technique performs “a queer trope on the prophylaxis of self-abstraction.” Noms de plume have historically enabled an “appropriation of a persona” that “allowed male writers and speakers to construct a ‘prosthetic’ person, which deflected critique away from the individual and also allowed the individual to be judged on the basis of what he said and not who he was.” He writes, “These appropriations of dramatic personae are dissociating in the sense that they create a prosthetic persona for the writer: there is a ‘real person with AIDS’ behind the persona, but the writer chooses to ‘hide’ behind the persona. At the same time prosthetic personae also dramatizes the gay male AIDS body- its functions, its capacities, its limitations, its multiple and various (and sometimes nefarious) possibilities.” In practices of live drag performance, the activist cannot quite “‘hide’ behind the persona” to the same extent as the zine writer, however the drag performances in Stiff Sheets bear a similar dissociative effect, proposing the runway model as an indexical reference to “the PWA,” a subject of sensationalist mass media. The models/designers exploit the problematic trope of “the PWA” an opportunity to express underrepresented experiences while at the same time, mock the legitimacy and authority of such tropes to represent a wide variety of

118 Ibid., 230.
119 Ibid., 231.
120 Ibid.
121 Ibid.
perspectives and subjectivities. In typical camp form, the makers of *Stiff Sheets* demonstrate the simultaneous inadequacy and import of aesthetics and formal representation. With drag, the models utilize camp’s celebratory tendencies toward self love and humor to reclaim, renarrate, and undo associations and connotations of “the PWA.”

The dark humor and irony of the fashion show also serves this renarration, supporting a representation of AIDS activism that is contradictory, complex, and counter to hegemonic norms of emotionality. The drag ensembles are provocative for their embrace of sex, friendship, and entertainment in the context of crisis, government neglect, and violence. For example, in the Evening Wear section of the tape, a model elegantly sways onto the runway in a luxurious, black gown overflowing with different fabrics. A dark hoop skirt is paired with a sheer mesh top under which is a black bandeau with the inverted pink triangle pasted onto it. The model wears long white satin gloves with matching white 1950s shades:

And what to wear in the new AIDS quarantine camps? Never underestimate your hoop skirt! Alfina used to work as a successful consultant for Security Pacific Bank before he was tested and deported. But, since arriving at camp, he’s emerged as the leading campy camp drag queen. And for safe fun while you're camping it up, Alfina’s hoop skirt holds a multitude of accessories. There's condoms, lubricant, and toys! Worn with a black spandex hood which deftly hides chemotherapy causes baldness and topped off with a black silk topper and white knit bow.

The shock value and comedic register of the outfit depend on the dominant expectation and understanding of the PWA as passive, voice-less, and depressed. The attention to sex, play, and personal pleasure adds affective dimensions to these dominant expectations of AIDS that posit the PWA as a victim or patient, stripped of all other human capacities including those of agency and optimism. Additionally, the designers mock negative stereotypes of gay men as sexually deviant and demonstrate a campy embrace of sex and pleasure. Leaning into case scenarios of uncertainty and alienation with glamour and resilient enthusiasm, the performers
and designers of *Stiff Sheets* employ camp technique to redefine what it means to be “infected.” They reclaim a normative, one-dimensional referent of “the PWA” and project playful contradiction, not to better define “the PWA” but to complicate it, therefore opening up new possibilities and potentialities of “the PWA” and of AIDS activism. In their convolution and ridiculousness, these camp practices of drag make reference to experiences and affects that exist on grey-scales and textured spectrums as opposed to the stark, moral binaries perpetuated by mainstream media, political, and religious hegemonies. Camp’s disorganization of socio-cultural order is perhaps just as much of a liberation as it is a collapse, for as Sontag writes in her seminal text on Camp, the creative sensibility often suggests “another kind of truth about the human situation, another experience of what it is to be human— in short, another valid sensibility.” In *Stiff Sheets*, the camp attention to paradox and complexity recognizes, expresses, and therefore models a prioritization of underrepresented affects and sentiments related to AIDS while resisting “the usual traps and impasses of binary formations.” For a social movement committed to self-representation and a modality of being that threatens hegemonic hierarchies, camp facilitates a project in search of alternative emotional, social, and political possibilities.

Jack Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* represents a similar project, employing “low theory” as an antidisciplinary model of thinking through which new social worlds and codas can be blueprinted. Halberstam describes low theory as existing against a canonical and hegemonic “high theory,” therefore resisting “prescriptive methods, fixed logics, and epistles,” and elevating certain circumstances of “failing, losing, forgetting, making, unmaking, undoing,

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122 Sontag, “Notes on Camp.”
124 Ibid., 3
unbecoming, not knowing”

all in hopes of “orienting us toward problem-solving knowledge or social visions of radical justice.” Low theory aspires to locate “the in-between spaces that save us from being snared by the hooks of hegemony,” also making “peace with the possibility that alternatives dwell in the murky waters of a counterintuitive, often impossibly dark and negative realm of critique and refusal.”

We might draw a parallel between low theory and camp sensibility, for both offer alternative modes of perception through which to navigate “the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development.” Just as low-theory turns stigmatized conceptions of “failure” on its head, camp, too, inverts assumptions of fixed meaning, converting “the serious” into the “the frivolous” and often proposing a “comic version of the world.”

Both bear activist impulses, for Gilad Padva writes that camp performance “provokes or at least challenges straight mechanisms of discipline and control, and provokes heterofantasies produced by these mechanisms that aimed to shape straight (self) image and queer image, as inferior and abused subjectivity.”

We might understand camp sensibility as an aesthetic manifestation of low theory, for through artifice, exaggeration, and absurdity, camp showcases weakness and inadequacy in normative systems of knowledge, doing so in such a way that considers convolution, ridiculousness, and humor for their generative potential.

As seen in Stiff Sheets, camp sensibility resembles low theory in its celebratory indulgence of uncertainty and its parodical, playful approach to trying circumstance. With camp techniques of irony and drag, the producers of Stiff Sheets unfix certain binary systems of normative logic around morality and emotionality, upending mainstream attitudes about what proper activism should look like and accomplish, particularly assumptions that rationalism and

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125 Ibid., 2
126 Halberstam, The Queer Art of Failure, 17.
127 Sontag, “Notes on Camp.”
unemotionality legitimize political protest. The MC, the designers, the models, and the audience, collectively usurp the plaza outfront the LA County hospital, imposing a proactive lense of camp, community, and humor onto a site of loss and lethally slow governmental inaction. In using low theory, Halberstam seeks to “dismantle logics of success and failure with which we currently live,” and in doing so, offer a “new kind of optimism. Not an optimism that relies on positive thinking as an explanatory engine for social order, nor one that insists upon the bright side at all costs; rather this is a little ray of sunshine that produces shade and light in equal measure and knows that the meaning of one always depends upon the meaning of the other.”

_The Queer Art of Failure_ proposes “alternative ways of knowing and being that are not unduly optimistic, but nor are they mired in nihilistic critical dead ends.” Halberstam’s incentives might inform the employment of camp in _Stiff Sheets_ as a device for fueling and inspiring a new kind of optimism. Camp’s redefinition of hope might be read in response to the previously stated demands of Crimp and Bordowitz that called for representations which can hold complexities of affective experience while maintaining an assertive activist agenda. A comparison of Halberstam’s low theory with camp sensibility of AIDS activist video reiterates camp as a multifunctional activist tool with which to not only resist restrictive systems of meaning and knowledge, but also to foster alternative political and social worlds, a practice Deborah Gould believes is essential to the activation and sustainability of a social movement.

In _Moving Politics_, Gould analyzes social movements as sites of “collective world-making,” spaces which facilitate the manifestation and encouragement of “new modes of being.” Gould theorizes that this is actualized by continually mobilizing “affective states and

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130 Halberstam, _The Queer Art of Failure_, 5.
131 Gould, _Moving Politics_, 178.
emotions that mesh with the movements political objectives and tactics, and pedagogies to participants and supporters, authorizing ways to feel and to emote that often go against the grain of dominant societies emotional norms.” Social movements offer a “‘vocabulary of sentiment,’” or “a ‘sentimental education,’” that do more than manage pre-existing emotions, they frequently elevate and generate new affect. ¹³² In other words, social movements make space for the expression of new emotional and consequently social and political possibilities. A “new matrix of feelings” enacted by a social movement’s “emotional pedagogy” is engendered by a movement’s “rhetorical and ritual practices” which serve to legitimize and name certain feelings while suppressing others.¹³³ In Stiff Sheets, camp sensibility provides the “rhetorical and ritual practices” through which an emotional pedagogy is executed. Techniques of drag, word play, spectacle, and dark humor collectively form a dynamic vocabulary that is conscious of its own representational limitations, for camp simultaneously expresses sentiment as it acknowledges the construction of its expression. For the activist cohort of ACT UP L.A., camp sensibility offers a mode of expression and communication with which to build a counterculture that can defy the reductiveness of mainstream representation as it generates tools for a newform reality.

In giving campy, aesthetic referents to the AIDS related circumstances described in the script, the makers of Stiff Sheets generate a new visual vocabulary with which to rearticulate the meaning of challenging circumstances. In his essay “Operative Assumptions,” Bordowitz ends with the question, “Can one become resigned to the fact of misery without losing one’s hope?” while Jack Halberstam asks: “What is the alternative… to cynical resignation on the one hand and naive optimism on the other?” We might understand the project of Stiff Sheet as an attempt

¹³² Gould, Moving Politics, 213.
¹³³ Ibid., 205.
to answer and approach these impossible questions, for in their employment of camp sensibility, the producers of the video are able to redefine hope as an not a heroism, but an exercise in self-definition and community. With camp, these activists locate a halfway point between “cynical resignation” and “naive optimism,” or at least point in a direction towards alternative meaning-making.
Chapter Three

From 1988 to 1994, Gregg Bordowitz co-produced a weekly cable television program called *Living with AIDS* for the Gay Men’s Health Crisis with Jean Carlomusto; both of whom were also founding members of DIVA TV in 1989. A show made “by and for people with AIDS,” the show included ACT UP demonstration footage, interviews, educational tapes, as well as what Bordowitz calls “empowerment tapes” for people with AIDS; in a 2002 interview with Sarah Schulman he cites “‘Work Your Body’ and “PWA Power” as two notable programs. “We made tapes about thinking about death. We made tapes about women and AIDS. We made safer-sex porn. And all these things ended up going on the cable show, more or less.”

Towards the end of his work with GMHC, Bordowitz began a series of five-minute episodes, each of which portrays the daily lifestyle of a person living with HIV. Regularly featured on *Living with AIDS*, the new series came out of a growing interest in representing the “subjective conditions of living with HIV in ways that challenge conventional means of representation.” He calls for a consideration of “the uncertainties inherent in the experience of being a person with HIV, uncertainties regarding sexuality, agency, and death.”

Focused on the use of individual testimony and personal record, Bordowitz sees these techniques as “efforts to legitimate the concerns of people hardest hit by the AIDS epidemic and to pressure established institutions to take responsibility for some of the work that needs to be done in facing the continuing crisis.” This series, along with Bordowitz’s 1993 experimental autobiography *Fast Trip, Long Drop* represent a body of “new video work that explores the psychic complexities of living with HIV,”

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136 Ibid.
so to “bring an acute awareness of mortality into debate with the ordinary tasks of daily existence.”

A recurring segment in *Fast Trip, Long Drop* is a fictional recreation of a conventional cable talk show ironically entitled “Thriving with AIDS,” an obvious parody of Bordowitz’s previous video work for GMHC. The set-up is complete with an awkward host named Henry Roth who interviews a jaded-looking Bordowitz. However in this recreation, Bordowitz is introduced by Roth as “Alter Allesman,” a “long-time survivor of AIDS.” Allesman bears little to no characteristic distinctions to Bordowitz himself, as he is portrayed in other documentary footage in the film. The ambiguity begs an impossible attempt to distinguish an “authentic” Bordowitz from this fictional character. Further obscuring the distinction between the two is the content of Allesman’s monologues, for much of the script is taken directly from “Dense Moments” an essay written by Bordowitz in the first person and which resembles a stream of consciousness, non-chronological ebb and flow of paranoia, grief, frustration, and love; A testimonial reflection of the last decade or so in the AIDS epidemic. In the opening lines of “Dense Moments” Bordowitz writes:

I’m sick and I don't want a cure. I like my illness. It's just as much a part of me as any of my other characteristics. I identify as my illness... I have a disease, an infection that horrifies the uninfected… the routes of transmission are well known. Sex. Intravenous drugs. Pregnancy, mother to child. Pleasurable, life-affirming things. The kinds of things people have guilt about regardless of their association with the disease… I will die. Of course, I may not. Like everyone else, I could get hit by a car, be murdered, kill myself. Barring these contingencies, it is almost certain that I will die of this disease. I don't know when. Perhaps there will be a cure. Perhaps I can successfully fight the infections my failing immune system will be increasingly unable to fight. More contingencies.

137 Bordowitz, “Operative Assumptions” 89.
The stark candor positions Bordowitz against the previous decade of AIDS activist video, which was interested in inserting and upholding fiercely optimistic depictions of AIDS activism and PWAs. In an instant, Bordowitz provokes and subverts an activist etiquette around the repression of ambivalent and pessimistic sentiments. Many of his assertions are undermined by consecutive statements, a rhythm that entertains contradiction. Simultaneously, he peels apart the association between AIDS and death, reminding the reader that they too will eventually die, regardless of their HIV status.

In the first segment of “Thriving with AIDS,” Allesman delivers an almost identical speech. Through the character of Allesman, whose name translates to “old everyman” in Yiddish, Bordowitz mocks the opportunity to represent his own feelings, as if to skip straight to the inevitable reduction of the self into a trope, stereotype, or in this case, caricature. Through what Roger Hallas calls a “doubling strategy,” Bordowitz creates an alter-ego in order to disrupt the assumed “unity of authorship, perspective, and embodiment” of conventional autobiography. Allesman is “an autobiographical subject in quotes, allowing Bordowitz, the video maker, the necessary distance to examine the social and political conditions under which people with AIDS can bear witness to their lives.”

The scene embodies a strange tension between self-mockery and sincere expression, absurdity and seriousness, relief and anger, leaving the viewer to wade in an ambivalence around emotionality and rationality that mimics the social and political climate that contextualizes the film.

*FTLD* is an experimental autobiography that melds documentary, scripted, and archival stock footage into a fragmented montage, positioning Bordowitz’s subjectivity in a constellation of historical, cultural, and social circumstances. It is through this disjointed network of footage,

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that Bordowitz illustrates a composite image of himself as an autobiographical subject, resisting conventions of chronology and incorporating bouts of fiction (both explicit and ambiguous) so as to problematize assumptions of the autobiographical self as an indexical, true, and authentic depiction of subjectivity. The film’s attention to Bordowitz’s contextual influences separates the film from a canonical discourse of autobiography that “marginalizes works that focus on relati

tinality rather than autonomy as the crucible in which the autobiographical subject is formed.”

Bordowitz and Bob Huff (Henry Roth) are not the only people who play characters in the film, for FTLD also includes several scripted sketches that mimic public service announcements, each of which feature characters that parody public figures with HIV or AIDS. Bordowitz appears as himself in footage of an interview with his mother and stepfather at home, documentary footage of a speech he delivered a demonstration, and footage of an in-home support group for men with HIV. Woven throughout is found footage of a Jewish shtetl, postwar city building demolitions, daredevil and automobile stunts. Much of this archival footage is coupled with Bordowitz’s retelling of his father’s death. A soundtrack of klezmer music adds more contextual depth to the work, included so to acknowledge an “otherness” related to Bordowitz’s Judaism as well as to reference “a culture of survival developed in the diaspora.”

Bordowitz has written that the segments of the film are edited together to resemble “run-on sentences,” linked together by “conjunctions” as opposed to cuts, and paced to feel breathless, exuberant. The ideas rush forward. It drew the momentum from an underlying desperation for answers to difficult questions: Why is this happening to me and the people around me? Where will this end? No definitive conclusion could be drawn, and yet the vitality of the inquiry implied hope for the future. FTLD was rushing toward something: its desperation was countered by a belief in something better.

140 Hallas, Reframing Bodies, 117.
141 Alisa Lebow, First Person Jewish, [electronic resource] (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
Bordowitz is intent on challenging “fantasies of authorship and a centered self,” not only to raise existential questions of his own grappling, but to liberate the viewer from commitments to certain socialized truths like the moral or temporal significance of one’s illness. This excerpt suggests that Bordowitz’s curiosity and his impulse to confront negative affect are driven by a belief in hope, in an alternative future. However Bordowitz is not motivated by the possibility of finding a definitive solution. Perhaps this “implied hope for the future” rests in the acknowledgement of the need for alternative approaches, not necessarily a singular, particular approach.

In the second scene of “Thriving with AIDS,” Roth turns to ask Alter Allesman, “What is it like for you, getting up every morning, knowing that you are living with AIDS?” to which Allesman offers no response, maintaining stubborn eye contact with the camera. Arms firmly folded, his silent treatment lasts for nearly 30 seconds and the host is caught unprepared. Awkward and uncomfortable, the host signals to the control room to roll a tape showing Allesman “going about his daily business.” This portion might resemble Living with AIDS, for in each episode “the subject is pictured in a variety of settings—the home, the office, a restaurant—talking about a variety of topics, not necessarily about HIV.” In FTLD, a handheld camera follows Allesman through his apartment, showcasing a few aspects of his ordinary life, each of which are burdened by feelings of unfulfillment and despair as a result of his infection. As he shaves, he anticlimactically reports his dropping T-cell count. While presenting his book shelf and his diligent reading habits, Allesman admits, “I can look forever and realize that the answers aren’t for sale. I’ve read most of my books and what have I learned? Nothing that helps me in the

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143 Lebow, First Person Jewish.
situation I’m in.” While the camera pans over details of his bookshelf, Allesman speaks to his loneliness and a yearning for intimacy, “Who wants a lover that is constantly reminded of his own mortality?” Hyper aware of his pessimism, he says “Being a person with AIDS, I know I’m not supposed to feel this way. I know the correct position, ‘People with AIDS are capable of everything healthy people are: love, sex… but that’s a nice bit of denial. I’m not living a very normal life, am I? Does everybody think about their death all the time, consciously?” This portrait of Allesman depicts a daily wrestle with mortality. Such an illustration strips the heroic charge of the AIDS activist that many other alternative AIDS videos were intent on demonstrating. In giving a voice to cynicism and doubt, Bordowitz dismantles an image of heroism that reinforces narrow and exclusive assumptions of progressive, productive displays of emotion and activism.

Additionally, this segment situates FTLD as a critique of a variety of subgenres in alternative AIDS activist media, reinforcing a general skepticism of a media representation’s ability to document affectively complex reality. The shift to a shaky, low-grade camera continues in an exposé of false and constructed forms of “TV ‘truth telling.’” The handheld camcorder performs “a localised, subjective and embodied account of experience,” cooperating with “the increasing privatization of the public sphere, in which individual subjective experience, framed within consumerism, becomes the emergent regime of truth.”

Back again in the studio, the host tells Allesman, “I think you’ve provided us with a powerful model of a person surviving and thriving with AIDS.” Allesman loses his temper, lifting himself out of his hunched position. He responds, “Fuck you. Fuck. You. I don’t want to be yours or anyone else’s fucking model. I’m not a hero, I’m not a revolutionary body, I’m not

an angel. I’m just trying to reconcile the fact that I’m going to die with the daily monotony of my life. How do you live with AIDS, huh?” He leans into the camera and orders the filmmaker to “Roll that in... I wanna speak to people with AIDS, I know you’re out there. Aren’t you sick of this shit? And people who are healthy- people who presume themselves to be negative, how do you live with AIDS? Why is it my burden?” Allesman goes on while the host bites his lip uncomfortably. He enunciates shame, anger, and discontedness with his illness as well as the pressure to properly represent it. He even shares a fantasy in which he infects a random person with HIV by means of unprotected sex. “It’s just a fantasy… But its very important to me to feel that my fantasies are powerful.” Suddenly, he switches to the use of a collective pronoun, perhaps now willing to make a more explicit activist statement: “If our fantasies cease to be compelling, even only to us, then we've lost! Then we’re truly dominated. And I feel that way. I’m not longer a person with AIDS. I am AIDS.” The implication that fantasy and imagination are vital to self-empowerment and self-definition echos much of the AIDS activist efforts that utilize playful and campy tactics. With Bordowitz’s advice, we might further understand camp as a necessary activist technique.

Immediately following Allesman’s rant, klezmer music picks up, playing over red-tinted archival footage of race car crashes and failed automobile stunts. Quick paced cuts showcase different angles of the catastrophes, details of glass shattering, body parts of mannequins jumbled in totaled cars. With the red -tone across the footage, it’s difficult to distinguish whether the footage is documentation of one crash or multiple. In “Operative Assumptions,” an essay written in preparation for the film, Bordowitz describes the format of the docu-shorts in Living With AIDS, writing “once the subject discloses his HIV status, whatever follows in the video—a walk down the street, a game of pool, a discussion about pets— becomes a metaphor for living
with AIDS or HIV.”146 Perhaps these found images of life-risking spectacles function similarly, an implication that daily life with HIV is much like the anticipatory experience of a demolition derby. The complex motives behind such a stunt—fear, excitement, danger, drive—are reduced to an erratic collision, the performance easily commodifiable, the viewers spared of the extensive and grueling clean-up that comes after the fact. Footage of this sort, of “the body at risk” for the “purpose of spectacle” interrupt a handful of testimonial scenes, asking the viewer to “contemplate our spectorial relation to the testimony before us.” Roger Hallas suggests that the stunt footage functions metaphorically, “the experience of risk and mortality in AIDS testimony may produce forms of unconscious pleasure for its audience. Testimony subsequently loses its ethical address in becoming a spectacle of transgression and suffering. It slips into the kind of commodified confession that has become a pervasive aspect of contemporary first person media.”147 Thus, Bordowitz’s use of this stock footage brings attention to the essentialization of experience through media representations, its reduction of complex affects, as well as the voyeuristic dynamic elicited by media representation.

Allesman’s impassioned speech, in which he breaks the fourth wall is itself a spectacularization, a performative and blunt confrontation with complex feelings towards AIDS and activism. This theatrical approach to breaking expectation might be Brechtian, for Bordowitz has stated that FTLD was crafted with Bertolt Brecht in mind, the 20th century playwright who “famously embraces shock as a mobilizing inducement to see the world anew.”148 In the second edition of “Operative Assumptions,” Bordowitz cites Brecht’s “defamiliarization” as a goal for FTLD, professing an especial concern with “what occurs immediately after the moment of a

147 Hallas, Reframing Bodies, 137.
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shocking rupture within the present actuality. The instance of surprise that interrupts the continuity of perception, so vital to the maintenance of consciousness, should not easily resolve itself into any one emotion—fear or anger, joy or calm. It should not come to rest around a particular object of contemplation. If a feeling of awe is produced, divorced from a particular emotion or object, it will linger in the mind of the viewer; defamiliarization will continue after the film is over.”149 Allesman’s rant interrupts the viewer’s “continuity of perception” in a few ways, not only in articulating stigmatized feelings about his infection, but also in his direct address to the viewer. Here, Bordowitz demonstrates a desire to leave the viewer changed: having harnessed a heightened awareness of internalized expectations and the possibility of breaking them. Additionally, Bordowitz implies that a witnessing of complex affect is vital to the maintenance of consciousness. Perhaps then true consciousness emerges at the site of disorganized emotional norms.

Much like camp sensibility, Bertolt Brecht’s defamiliarization or “alienation effect” refers to a theory of theatrical techniques designed to bring the audience to see the familiar in a new, strange way, so to enhance perception of the familiar and the artificiality of performance.150 If the character of Alter Allesman achieves this, it is pervasive conceptions of subjectivity and “the ill” that Bordowitz makes strange, problematizing images of the PWA as “surviving and thriving” which a generation of AIDS activists previously sought to do.151

A dual attention to spectacle and the expression of stigmatized sentiments in FTLD might resemble an effect elicited by the dark and campy fashion show in John Goss’ Stiff Sheets, for both performances upset expectations of a heroic AIDS activism by unabashedly articulating

negative circumstances or sentiments. The performances in both videos appropriate conventions through which AIDS and PWAs are commonly represented, and through forms of parody, disorganize the emotional norms attached to such representations. In *Stiff Sheets*, mainstream signifiers of AIDS are converted into extravagant displays of stylized artifice. Hospital gowns are embellished with feather boas, IV drips bejeweled and accessorized. The employment of outrageous costume similarly brings attention to the commodification of representational forms. In the “Thriving with AIDS” sketch, Bordowitz appropriates the autobiographical subject, complicating its authenticity through characterization and by breaking conventions in testimonial address. The fragmented found footage also problematizes the spectacle of AIDS in dominant forms of representation. While utilized in significantly different ways, both works adopt techniques of dark humor, parody, and character, generating a unique performative space on which to make explicit and decenter normative assumptions. In both circumstances, the complexity of the self and of the PWA experience is expressed if not implied.

The similarities between the two videos illuminate a number of shared intentions and achievements between *FTLD* and a politicized camp sensibility as used in alternative AIDS video, for both demystify conventions of representing truth and authority. Both appropriate the very material they seek to call into question, imposing a distancing lense of parody or hyper-stylization to reframe the content’s value and model an alternative approach to representation. In divorcing an assumed truth or value from its image, projects of politicized camp and *FTLD* elicit a collapse of normative meaning, through which new affective and political possibilities can be forged.

Despite these resonances, *FTLD* and the “Thriving with AIDS” segment are not nearly as celebratory or carnivalesque as *Stiff Sheets* or other camp performances. Even in light of its
satirical cues, *FTLD* is most often tense, at points depressing, and considerably more ambiguous in its affective inventions. Camp performances like *Stiff Sheets* reclaim signifiers and lean into positivity, cultivating an empowered communal spirit and energy. *FTLD* maintains a heightened skepticism of the representational techniques it appropriates and reinvents, perhaps less interested in reclaiming and more keen on disrupting. Many camp works, as noted in the previous two chapters, open up and illuminate the gaps and tears in representational conventions, looking into spaces of error for opportunities to acknowledge alternative modes of being and relating. The relationship between uncertainty and representation functions differently in *FTLD*, for the historical circumstances that contextualize the film’s production necessitate the inclusion of sentiments of uncertainty and ambivalence into a political framework, leading Bordowitz to harness a more serious affective register.

*FTLD* is particularly motivated by a shift in the historical circumstances around coping with AIDS. In the summer of 1993, the Berlin International AIDS conference announced that there was “no cure on the horizon.”\(^{152}\) Around this same moment in time, seroconversion rates among AIDS-informed gay men started rising and the pharmaceutical industry’s exploitation of PWAs as consumers led to a structural reorganization within the activist movement.\(^{153}\)\(^{154}\) Many alternative media-makers felt they had exhausted certain representational strategies in depicting a heroic coalition against AIDS, strategies that Bordowitz affirms were “legitimate responses to the overwhelming prejudicial representations of PWAs generated by the commercial media in the early days of the epidemic.”\(^{155}\)\(^{156}\) Driven to make work that would end government inaction,
Bordowitz reflects on his early video practice as adhering to a set of pragmatic goals that necessitated authoritative assertions, leaving “little room for speculation” - particularly on “fear of death,” reductive depictions of sexual identity, and “the complexities of desire.” As a result, Bordowitz admits to having repressed his own ambivalences, for “doubt, uncertainty, and contingency were temporarily removed from my vocabulary.”

Bordowitz’s personal writing on this period of “hopelessness” illustrate a two-fold existential crisis, for not only are representational methods continually inadequate in translating complex truths of identity and experience, but the meaning behind these truths are themselves called into question. Published in 1994, “Dense Moments” is an affectively charged diaristic text that recounts contradictory feelings of doubt and insecurity, sentiments that inform FTLD’s historical context. In it, Bordowitz writes, “I hate some of this spiritual crap people try to hand me to calm down— like everything happens for a reason. There’s no reason, no reason at all for why Im HIV positive, why some people get sick, why some people die. No reason.” The essay functions as a platform for reflection, on which Bordowitz recalibrates the efficacy and purpose of his own self-conceptions and other activist empowerment techniques: “Each time I came out about my HIV status and my sexuality I felt authenticated…. I had to repeatedly and consistently assert my new identity, fighting against an internal conclusion that my pleasure had to do with my death. Through a kind of exhibitionism, I was trying to exorcise the discourse of blame that would judgmentally bring sentence upon me…Where did this discourse exist? Among the homophobes. Among the right wing. And in my own mind. Sometimes, I believe that my

158 Ibid., 93
159 Bordowitz, “Dense Moments,” 131.
homosexuality is a disease and that I deserve to get sick from it.”

Similarly, Crimp writes of a “moralizing rhetoric of ‘relapse,’ ‘irresponsibility,’ ‘selfishness,’ and ‘compulsivity,’” that has been employed not just by the movements “declared enemies,” but by other HIV prevention activists. Bordowitz and Crimp highlight a pervasive and non-partisan effort to assign judgement and meaning onto AIDS, leaving Bordowitz skeptical and insecure in his own moral righteousness.

Consequently, FTLD displays an existential impulse, both in the subjects’ own personal testimonies and in the use of decontextualized found footage, the sporadic inclusion of which forces the viewer to forge narrative relations. One segment of the film shows an in-house support group for men with HIV, in which the men enunciate sentiments of disbelief and disappointment. Their articulations of complex and unresolved emotion further resist an idealized image of the PWA who has conquered a fear of death, and as a result, achieved a “greater purchase of truth,” a traditional portrayal of the ill that Bordowitz speaks to in an interview with James Meyer for Artforum. Such assumptions rely on notions of a universal truth, consequently upholding the PWA as other and distinct from the general public. Portraying one member at a time, the camera jumps from one personal statement to another. One man ponders, “I wonder what it is to be resolved about death. How do u really look at it and not be afraid of it?... There's a part of me that’s willing to give myself up to death… Because it is unknown its not as scary to me.”

The inclusion of stock footage in an autobiography also enforces an existential ethos, a suggestion that meaning begins not with the image but with the viewer’s conditioned reading of it. The viewer must make meaning out of decontextualized, arguably arbitrary footage, stringing

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160 Bordowitz, “Dense Moments,” 126.
relations between the klezmer soundtrack and the demolition derby. At the same time, it is through the strategic placement of the found images that Bordowitz demonstrates a practice in making meaning out of the meaningless, a form of both hope and healing. As much as Bordowitz demonstrates a distrust for assertions of truth, he harnesses this skepticism as an opportunity to generate new value and meaning. Over black and white stock footage of a Jewish shtetl, Bordowitz recounts his Ukrainian grandfather’s experience in the shtetl in Bessarabia, where epidemics of typhus and cholera “came and went.” He reflects, “People have been suffering from all kinds of things for some time. I guess I'm just a part of history. Until now, youth and ignorance have afforded me a kind of arrogance. I thought I was unique, ‘My suffering was different, my misery is a new kind of misery.’ What’s new about it is the way we speak about it, the meanings we make about it. What’s not so new is the misery.” In “Operative Assumptions,” Bordowitz writes that since learning of his diagnosis, “I have come to realize that there is no reason why I’m HIV positive, why some people get sick and why some people die. Although there are historical conditions that explain the crisis, there is no reason behind AIDS. But there is meaning. My experiences are rich with meaning. They’re full of pain, irony, and hope.”

Bordowitz leans into an existential impulse in part to tease out feelings of uncertainty, ambiguity, and meaninglessness and through which he hopes to find alternative modalities for survival.

In distrusting assertions of inherent meaning that manifest in concepts like fate or morality, Bordowitz and other AIDS activists resist certain “truth claims” that maintain the AIDS epidemic and the systematic prejudice that reinforces it. “Many people died, many continue to die, but the refusal to accept that ‘AIDS is a death sentence’ led to the development of treatments prolonging my life and the lives of others…. The idea that truth is a field of

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contestation gave us more than a tactical approach to our activism: it gave us hope.”164 In demystifying representational conventions that posit first-person media as an honest depiction of the self, Bordowitz disassociates the first person subject from the biases and false assumptions that inform and construct their representation. In doing so, Bordowitz combats conflations of a PWA with prejudiced associations around illness and AIDS that determine the conditions of their representation. To acknowledge the inherent failure of properly capturing a first person subject is also so liberate that subject from the conditions of his representation. In “Dense Moments,” Bordowitz acknowledges this, writing: “I don't want to spend the rest of my life being identified as a disease. I am much more than that. Don't reduce me to that… The shameful feelings behind my status as an infected person still exist, but I no longer need to subordinate my identity to the level of my status to ward off evil, uncertainty, and death. A kind of alchemy, turning shit into gold, stigma into pride.”165

Such an alchemy might resemble camp sensibility as a queer counterpraxis for the way it repurposes affect, the way it reorients aesthetic perception with an interest in reinvention. Gilad Padva writes of politicized camp techniques as a generative countercultural practice, for camp “reconsiders the epistemology intended by the bourgeois to produce and reproduce, present and represent its hegemony. Camp not only subverts and revises the dominant ideology, but also creates, produces and performs counterculture.”166 In some way, camp sensibility also adheres to an existential impulse for the way it reveals and performs the constructedness of social value and in the process, creates new value out of that revelation. Just as Bordowitz recognizes hope or possibility in the demystification of represented truths, camp too “comes to life around that

165 Bordowitz, “Dense Moments,” 127.
166 Padva, “Priscilla Fights Back: The Politicization of Camp Subculture”
recognition; it is situated at the point of emergence of the artificial from the real, culture from
nature- or rather when and where the real collapses into artifice, nature into culture."  
Like *FTLD* and its Brechtian influence, camp sensibility offers an alternative perception of everyday
social order and experience. In particular, camp dethrones the authority of the aesthetic from a
position of communicating truth, instead offering aesthetics and formal play as a resource with
which to reclaim and rethink ideological values.

Padva cites bell hooks in his article on politicized camp, offering the belief that practices
in redefining culture can have a liberatory and self-empowering effect. hooks maintains that
“cultural production can and does play a healing role in people's lives. It can be a catalyst for
them to begin the project of self-recovery.” hooks uses the term “self-recovery” in accordance
with “the work of Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn, who talks about it in relation to ways in
which people who are oppressed, dominated, or otherwise politically victimized recover
themselves, such as the way colonized people work to resist and throw off the colonized
mentality.” The deconstruction and therefore invalidation of uncontested assertions of truth,
especially as they function in representations of identity, can become sites for self-definition.

Similarly, Bordowitz disrupts conventions around emotion and reason not only to give
voice to underrepresented sentiments, but also to facilitate the opportunity for redefinition, for the
opening up of alternative affective and political possibilities. Bordowitz writes, “FTLD was
formulated to include despair and mourning within a political framework of analysis. To resist
the conclusions drawn from the logical end of profound despair, a kind of nihilism, I marshaled a
set of emotional strategies for coping with loss.” Such strategies included the production of

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168 Ibid., 237.
“inconclusive, hybrid” emotional cues, “moments as possible where the viewer didn’t know whether to laugh or cry,” for “Emotional confusion opens up the possibility for a new landscape of affects, a terrain of unexplored sensations.” For Bordowitz, the disruption of expectations and conventions around emotionality offers access to a well of affect and feeling not yet corrupted by the oppressive mainstream hegemony. Thus, a Brechtian shock as explored by Bordowitz and camp performance points to a wealth of potential within the self.

Deborah Gould’s *Moving Politics* aims to elevate and acknowledge the kind of “inconclusive, hybrid” emotions or affects that Bordowitz seeks to make space for, advocating that an “attention to affect, rather than assuming rational actors or rendering emotion in cognitive terms illuminates a great deal of the multiplicity and indeterminacy of human needs and desires,” including “the often ambivalent and contradictory nature of our feelings,” “our more bodily and nonconscious forms of knowing and sense making,” “our non-rational attachments (e.g. to normativity, to the social order)” and so on, all of which Gould says “have political consequences.” For Gould, affect is under-acknowledged as a political force, believing that affect constitutes a social movement’s “emotional habitus,” which she defines as “a social groupings collective and only partly conscious emotional dispositions, that is, members’ embodied, axiomatic inclinations toward certain feelings and ways of emoting.” A collective emotional habitus “not only shapes how members feel and express their feelings, but also helps to establish their sense of political possibility and attitudes about what forms of political activism are viable and desirable in a given moment.” Gould writes that human practices often transform a specific emotional habitus, for the affective impulses that define it directly shape a

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171 Ibid., 33.
movement’s “political horizon,” what a social group sees as “politically possible, desirable, necessary.” Therefore, the disruption of conventions in emotional expression opens up affective spaces both personal and political.

If *FTLD* is driven by an interest in excavating and generating affect so as to expand the dimensions of political discourse, we can understand Bordowitz’s film as an effort in adjusting the boundaries of an AIDS activist movement’s political horizon. Such a suggestion follows Gould in her belief that the opening up, authorization, and attention to complex affect bears active political consequences, not just communally but also on a personal level. *FTLD* gives space to the articulation of repressed affect and in doing so, intentionally defies “feeling rules” by refusing to manage emotion in accordance to normative expectations. Feminist philosopher Alison M. Jaggar calls these feelings *outlaw emotions*, claiming that they bear subversive potential, often providing “the first indications that something is wrong with the way alleged facts have been constructed, with accepted understandings of how things are… [They] may lead us to make subversive observations that challenge dominant conceptions of the status quo.”

>173 To tend to affect and outlaw emotion is to subvert socialized norms, to seek alternative answers. Perhaps, then, to unhinge affect is tap into a personal agency and political power, for Bordowitz himself has stated that “new work about AIDS must question agency, the role of the individual in social change.”

We might think about camp sensibility, which similarly opens up alternative affective possibilities, as an aesthetic toolbox with which to redraw a political horizon line. In his reflections of camp sensibility, Padva cites Jack Bubscio’s description of camp “as a creative

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173 Ibid., 41.
energy reflecting a consciousness that is different from the mainstream; a heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppression…”

Also interested in communicating or referencing the affectively complex reality of subjectivity, camp works might also succeed in puncturing a dominant emotional habitus “with its prevailing attitudes, norms, and ways of feeling and emoting, and inaugurate a new constellation of feelings, emotions and emotional postures.” On the political valence of affect, Gould writes that a strong affective state “might challenge the more general reigning dispositions and orientations to action as well. Affect, in short, has the potential to escape social control, and that quality creates greater space for counter-hegemonic possibilities and for social transformation.” Both FTLD and practices of camp puncture assertions of truth as they exist in conventions of representation, referencing the uncapturable complexity of subjectivity and affect and in turn, bring such ideas and articulations into political framework.

Camp works and FTLD particularly complicate representational conventions, using parody, dark humor, and contradiction to elicit an affective ambiguity through which to notice the rigid reductiveness of emotional norms. Both tend to leave the viewer uncertain, perhaps unable to find the language to properly represent the kind of hybrid composite of affect it elicits, be it a combination of humor, melancholy, grief, anger, empowerment, etc. Perhaps this is why Susan Sontag writes that “to talk about Camp is therefore to betray it,” why she chooses to define the sensibility in “the form of jottings, rather than an essay,” or why Ester Newton says that Camp is not “a thing,” but rather a “relationship between” things, people, activists, or

176 Gould, Moving Politics, 36.
177 Ibid., 10.
qualities…”178 For the political or subversive power of camp lies in spaces of uncertainty, where language and representation cannot perform and where alternative possibilities might be uncovered, even just for a moment. Bordowitz’s *FTLD* similarly explores an affective uncertainty and ambiguity. The film ends with a close up of shot of Bordowitz laying down in bed, wearing a SILENCE = DEATH shirt, an ashtray resting on his chest. Cigarette in hand and looking directly at the viewer, he says, “Death is the death of consciousness and I hope there’s nothing after this.” Seconds later he bursts out laughing, which turns into coughing and back again into laughing until finally, he is laughing so hard his cigarette slips and falls onto his shirt. He curses and mutters “cut.” The last moments of the film uphold its affective register, a sincere interest in expressing pain, anguish, and fear, all the while demonstrating an interest in relief and humor. It is in this final scene and others like it that Bordowitz relays the affective complexity of real time subjectivity, not only by expressing his own uncertainty but also in eliciting a multitude of emotions from the viewer. The film’s ending feels unfinished, the last scene a failure by conventional standards of autobiography. One last time, Bordowitz resists normative techniques of linearity and narrative, reminding the viewer of the constructed, highly edited nature of the autobiographical self, while simultaneously nodding to various alternative possibilities of representation, affect, and endings.

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178 Newton, “Selections from Mother Camp” 125.
Conclusion

In the last three chapters, I attempted to articulate why forms of camp and dark humor are fitting activist strategies in a crisis of representation maintaining the AIDS epidemic. Techniques of camp and humor like drag, irony, parody, play, and word-play demonstrate how social values and ideological conceptions of “truth” are formally constructed and supported by aesthetics. Through appropriation, exaggeration, and ornament, these techniques reveal and mock the malleability of formal constructions, thus making vulnerable the social and moral values that such constructions represent and rely on. In doing so, they demonstrate the limitations of aesthetics, of linguistics, of representation at large, to properly convey complex affective experiences. Subversively, camp embraces formal play and aesthetic possibilities, stylizing, dramatizing, and sensationalizing visual experience in such a way that fosters a sense of possibility and excitement, for camp is a countercultural mode of production, taking the objects of oppressive culture and its inherently reductive communicative tools to assert something creative and innovative, bearing new significations. In a context of AIDS, where the hegemonic authorities shape and reproduce constructions of AIDS that are clouded in ideological rhetoric, the skillset that camp and dark humor offers can be vital to the acknowledgment of bias in representational conventions. Such an acknowledgment holds pervasive effects, for denying the “truth” of an image, acknowledging the conditions of its construction, might prevent the perpetuation of toxic biases and the internalization of feelings of guilt and shame as perpetuated by heterosexist, racist, classist ideas.

In the works I have described, the use of these playful, theatrical, celebratory techniques in the context of AIDS and paired with critical, urgent matter, elicits a contradictory or seemingly counterintuitive reading that defies norms of emotionality, rationality, and morality;
dominant systems of value that uphold and legitimize mainstream representations of PWAs, AIDS, and activism. In *Like A Prayer, Stiff Sheets*, and certain moments of *Fast Trip, Long Drop*, the filmmakers confront AIDS-related issues, sentiments, circumstances while embracing humorous, parodic, ironic practices of theatre and play, eliciting an emotional effect that tends to a multitude of conventionally oppositional responses like laughter, grief, doubt, satire, etc. In disrupting these norms and complicating the affective register elicited by AIDS cultural production and activism, these filmmakers shed light on new affective possibilities. Using Deborah Gould’s *Moving Politics*, I have tried to illustrate affect as an internal, sensational response to stimuli that determines how we name, legitimate, recognize, and tend to emotion and feeling. Affect then, is a force that determines the impetus for action and inaction, political and social. In disorganizing the affective expectations around AIDS and activism, these works illuminate glitches in binary assumptions around emotion and rationale, suggesting alternative configurations of feeling and therefore of being, relating, political action, social inaction, etc.

An affective state is inherently shaped by the contextual forces that give rise to it, thus my reading of the affect elicited by these works are specific to my contemporary time, place, and my distance from these videos’ production. I risk essentializing and romanticizing the affective state or emotional response elicited by the viewing of these works in the moment of their production and in their circulation. I cannot begin to imagine or assume what it may have been like to view these works as an HIV-positive person, as an AIDS activist, as a person of color, as a person in the midst of a life-threatening epidemic, let alone a person alive in the late 1980s. In some way, the limitations to this project echo the constraints of representation that AIDS activists resisted through techniques of camp and humor, for these videos cannot encompass the complex entirety of the experiences behind them.
Gould’s interest in studying affect aims to resist “social constructivist understandings of emotion” that tame “feelings by rendering them in overly cognitive terms.” Her interest is in “carving out a conceptual space” for “the noncognitive, nonconscious, nonlinguistic, and nonrational aspects of the general phenomenon of emotion. The definitional distinctions I offer here are in no sense ‘real,’ of course; like all definitions, they are artificial naming conventions. Each term, in fact, has been defined in a variety of ways.” Nonetheless, she is interested in “pulling out certain distinctions in order to strengthen our understandings of the emotional dimensions of political action and inaction,” for “Even when it is not the decisive factor, a political horizon influences whether and how people turn to collective action. And the very concept requires consideration of emotion because a sense of political (im)possibilities is itself an emotional state.” Her general point is that “emotion, in the words fullest sense- sensations, feelings, passions, whether conscious or not- conditions the possibilities for opposition activism. It does so by facilitating, and blocking, our political imaginations, our political horizons, our ideas about the politically (im)possible, (un)desirable, (un)necessary in a given moment. Our affective states can constrict our political imaginaries…”

That said, I am interested in the relationship between political impetus, art, and art-making, for how else does art work is not affectively? The visual arts might replace language, picking up where language leaves off, dynamic in ways that often escape the written or spoken word. I’d like to believe that if art is stimuli that activates affect, that elevates and generates new emotion, then art can play a massive role in the mobilization of an activist movement, in the constructions and constrictions of our political imaginaries, of our political horizons. The videowork described in this project then, is compelling in part for the way it generates new emotion.

179 Gould, Moving Politics, 19.
emotional and affective states, motives, and drives, *through* the deconstruction of emotional norms and traditional activist practice. In part, what drew me to these videos is the fascinating way in which they are simultaneously satirical and sincere, occupying an necessary inbetween. These works inspire me for their rearticulation of whom activism can be for and what it can look like. The works also inspire me to relinquish my own counterproductive ties to normative expectations around success and happiness.

I hope that in some way, this project resists a “type of forgetting that frequently characterizes the way we Americans deal with our country’s often horrific past.” Gould writes in her introduction that she is concerned that AIDS activism from the 1980s and 1990s are being forgotten. Multiple writers have spoke to this cultural “amnesia,” which Cindy Patton wrote of as early as the 1990s. Gould writes specifically of the history of ACT UP, which she says “has started to disappear, in a manner similar to the erasure from official history of other defiant social movements and practices of resistance in the United States.”

I’d like this project to stand against not just a forgetting or an amnesia but a particular “gentrification mentality” that Sarah Schulman speaks to in *The Gentrification of the Mind*, a “replacement of complex realities with simplistic ones.” Schulman writes that “AIDS has been bombarded by simplification since the beginning,” and I hope this project teases out one of the many ways in which AIDS activists creatively and impressively fought against the simplification of AIDS and cultural values at large.

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Images

*Tom Moran, Boston, January, 1988,* Nicholas Nixon
https://www.artsy.net/artwork/nicholas-nixon-tom-moran-boston-january

*Tom Moran, Boston, 1988,* Nicholas Nixon
https://www.moma.org/collection/works/50239
Stills from *Like A Prayer* (1989):

Opening image of *Like A Prayer*.
https://archive.org/details/ddtv_35_like_a_prayer

Ray Navarro as Jesus Christ outside of St. Patrick’s Cathedral.
https://tif.ssrc.org/2018/02/21/that-naked-public-squares-really-a-drag/

DIVA TV reclaims “No Condoms” as one of their new “Seven Deadly Sins.
https://www.aubinpictures.com/diva-tv/
“Make sure your second coming is a safe one,” says Ray Navarro dressed as Jesus Christ. https://www.artsy.net/artwork/ray-navarro-diva-tv-still-featuring-ray-navarro-from-like-a-prayer

Still from *Marta: Portrait of A Teen Activist* (1990)

Ryan Landry as Marta
Stills from *Stiff Sheets* (1991):

The Master of Ceremonies reading his script on the platform
The string of numbers of the bottom left hand side references the identification numbers given to concentration camp occupants during the holocaust.
A shot of the audience.
This model wears a hospital smock embellished with a feather boa and black jewels.

The dangling accessory is an IV drip turned hand-bag.
The fashion show concludes with a parade of cardboard cut-out figures of various political and religious leaders.
Stills from *Fast Trip, Long Drop* (1993):

Gregg Bordowitz as Alter Allesman
Bob Huff as Henry Roth

Fictional set of “Thriving with AIDS”
Allesman in his apartment.
Footage from ACT UP demonstration outside CDC in Atlanta

Gregg Bordowitz.
Concluding shot of Bordowitz in bed.
Bibliography


