ART AFTER STONEWALL, 1969-1989

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[Fig. 2, top right] Keith Haring, *National Coming Out Day*, 1988 offset-lithograph on glazed paper, 85 x 59.4 in. Keith Haring artwork © Keith Haring Foundation

[Previous page] Lyle Ashton Harris, *Americas*, 1987-1988/2007 Three silver gelatin prints. Sheet: 40 x 30 inches [101.6 x 76.2 cm] each. Image: 29 15/16 x 19 7/8 inches [76 x 50.50 cm] each. Collection of Gregory R. Miller. Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94. Image courtesy of Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum / Art Resource.

[Fig. 6, bottom right] © David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled (One Day This Kid...)*, 1990. Courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P·P·O·W, New York.

NATIONAL COMING OUT DAY...
OCTOBER 11 - 1988 NATIONAL GAY RIGHTS ADVOCATES

One day this kid will get larger. One day this kid will come to know something that causes a sensation equivalent to the separation of the earth from its axis. One day this kid will reach a point where he senses a division that isn't mathematical. One day this kid will feel something stir in his heart and throat and mouth. One day this kid will find something in his mind and body and soul that makes him hungry. One day this kid will do something that causes men who wear the uniforms of priests and rabbis, men who inhabit certain stone buildings, to call for his death. One day politicians will enact legislation against this kid. One day families will give false information to their children and each child will pass that information down generationally to their families and that information will be designed to make existence intolerable for this kid. One day this kid will begin to experience all this activity in his environment and that activity and information will compell him to commit suicide or submit to danger in hopes of being murdered or submit to silence and invisibility. Or one day this kid will talk. When he begins to talk, men who develop a fear of this kid will attempt to silence him with strangling, fists, prison, suffocation, rape, intimidation, drugging, ropes, guns, laws, menace, roving gangs, bottles, knives, religion, decapitation, and immolation by fire. Doctors will pronounce this kid curable as if his brain were a virus. This kid will lose his constitutional rights against the government's invasion of his privacy. This kid will be faced with electro-shock, drugs, and conditioning therapies in laboratories tended by psychologists and research scientists. He will be subject to loss of home, civil rights, jobs, and all conceivable freedoms. All this will begin to happen in one or two years when he discovers he desires to place his naked body on the naked body of another boy.

[Fig. 5] © Ann Meredith, *AIDS Foundation Women's Support Group, San Francisco, June 1987*, Archival digital print, Collection of Leslie-Lohman Museum, 2016.88.3, Museum purchase © AnnPMeredith.com UNTIL THAT LAST BREATH! The Global Face of Women with HIV/AIDS 1987-1997.

This is an excerpt from the introduction to the catalog published by Rizzoli for the touring exhibition, *Art after Stonewall, 1969-1989*, that is on view at the Leslie-Lohman Museum and the New York University Grey Art Gallery April through July, 2019.

It all began with a routine police raid on the Stonewall Inn, a Mafia-run gay bar on Christopher Street in New York City. Like so many times before, the police expected to line up an acquiescent group of homosexuals and issue summons. But instead, they encountered resistance from the patrons, which escalated to several nights of rioting by a community who were tired of being harassed and ready to fight back. The Stonewall rebellion marked what historian Martin Duberman has called "the birth of the modern gay and lesbian political movement."

Art after Stonewall, organized by the Columbus Museum of Art, celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall Riots by examining the impact of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) movement on the art world. The exhibition focuses attention on over two hundred works of LGBTQ artists including Judy Baca, Vaginal Davis, Lyle Ashton Harris, Greer Lankton, Robert Mapplethorpe, Catherine Opie, Joan Snyder, and Andy Warhol. The exhibition considers the work as well of such "straight-identified" artists as Diane Arbus, Lynda Benglis, and Judy Chicago in terms of their engagement with newly emerging queer subcultures. Cutting across disciplines and hierarchies of media and taste, it mixes performance, photography, painting, sculpture, and video with historical documents and images taken from magazines, newspapers, and television.

Much has been written on the impact of the LGBTQ movement on American society and yet fifty years after Stonewall, key artists in that story and their works remain little known. Although Kate Millett is famous for her groundbreaking book *Sexual Politics*, few are aware that she was an ambitious sculptor and performance artist. Her installation *Approaching Futility* (Fig. 1), with its caged figure ascending a ladder as if to look over the bars or even escape, is expressive of the struggle to transcend the oppression of homophobia and misogyny.

Even more obscure is the immense forty-foot mural celebrating the gay rights movement by artists Mario Dubsky and John Button, collaged from photographs of queer people marching for their rights and uninhibitedly expressing their affection for each other. In 1974, it was installed in the Gay Activists Alliance Headquarters in New York but was almost immediately destroyed in a fire. Represented in the exhibit through a large-scale photograph, the mural aligned the queer movement with the wider struggle for civil rights.

But the mural's attempt at inclusiveness only went so far. Its emphasis on scantily clad young male bodies, pointed to the ways gay men were not necessarily exempt from sexism. Surely one of the things Louise Fishman's "Angry Paintings" are angry about is this kind of chauvinism, whether it comes from hetero- or homosexual men. For the cultural critic Jill Johnston, the subject of *Angry Jill*, the solution was clear: "Until all women are lesbians there will be no political revolution."[1] Unfortunately, many mainstream feminists were also wary of lesbians. In 1969, Betty Friedan, leader of the National Organization of Women, denounced lesbians as "the Lavender Menace" threatening the integrity of the women's movement. Indignant and empowered by their growing visibility, this insult was boldly

reclaimed by the very women it was supposed to denigrate. In the poster *Gay In III* one of the founders of the Radicalesbians, Karla Jay, proudly sports a T-shirt emblazoned with the phrase "LAVENDER MENACE." Similarly, McDermott and McGough's *A Friend of Dorothy*, harnesses homophobic words in a strategy of co-option. Just as some feminists could be homophobic, some lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men were hostile to the emerging movement for transgender rights spearheaded by Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera's organization, Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR).

Bettye Lane's photograph of Rivera captures her during the 1973 Pride March. This was the day Rivera gave her "Y'all better quiet down" speech about the dangers transgender people face and how their role in the vanguard of liberation was being ignored. Given the complex set of relationships and tensions between the many groups and identities, finding common ground in the Stonewall movement was difficult. As Tommi Avicolli Mecca put it "Women, who suffered a dual oppression, preferred struggling with the homophobia of their straight sisters to dealing with the sexism of their gay brothers. Transgenders felt unwelcome at many gay organizations and were eventually left out of proposed gay rights legislation. Issues raised by people of color were ignored or deemed unimportant. The movement often acted as if it were a private party for white boys."[2]

Twenty-five years after the riots, in a feature with the same title as this exhibition, the influential art critic Holland Cotter asked twelve openly queer artists how Stonewall had impacted their lives and work. Louise Fishman was unequivocal:

"I came to New York in 1965, but it took me until the Gay Liberation movement—which began with Stonewall in 1969—and the women's movement before I really started to accept my identity. . . . I was everything I ever wanted to be. With the coming of the movements and the communities in New York, I felt at home."[3]

Unfortunately, Fishman's sense of autonomy and belonging continues to be elusive for many in the long hard struggle for liberation. "None of us is free until all of us are free," or so says a protest sign held by a black child at the 1972 Los Angeles Gay Pride march, as shown in Cathy Cade's inspiring photograph. This ideal continues today to motivate coalition building in the ongoing fight for social justice and equal rights. As Sylvia Rivera put it, "We still got a long way ahead of us."[4]

Loosely chronological, ***Art after Stonewall*** is organized around seven key themes described below:

Coming Out

No single work captures the spirit of the early Stonewall movement as much as the Gay Liberation Front recruitment poster, *Come Out!!*, designed by Jim Fouratt with its iconic photograph by Peter Hujar. Instead of conceiving disclosure of one's sexual or gender identity as an individual act, this image is all about community, about being out and queer together. Keith Haring's *National Coming Out Day* (1988) (Fig. 2) poster represents a difficult and complex undertaking and turns it into a happy hop, skip, and jump. Robert Gober's installation *Untitled*, Closet is far more ambivalent, playing with the idea that the open closet can still remain a hiding place in plain sight. The whole notion of coming out is based on the idea of agency, yet some people choose not to come out of the closet for reasons of safety and economic security, while for others who do not pass as straight or cisgender there may be no choice.

Outlaws

The rebellion sparked at Stonewall was more than just a fight for equality; on the tails of the 1960s sexual revolution there was a growing belief that society's norms, and particularly the ways in which sexuality was policed, needed to be challenged. The works in this section are not just about a personal declaration of identity, but they provoke strong and even visceral responses that challenge repressive social systems that regulate behavior. Nancy Grossman's series of heads, evoke leather sado-masochistic (S/M) culture and set the tone for this pose of proud deviancy. Artists like Robert Mapplethorpe and Tee Corinne went far beyond coming out of the closet to frankly explore sexual content; they brazenly refused bourgeois standards of decency and pushed the limits of obscenity laws. In the art of Honey Lee Cottrell, Michela Griffo, Mapplethorpe, and Catherine Opie among others, life and art merge, and the pose of outlaw takes on a whole new set of meanings when artists approach their subjects as insiders.

The Uses of the Erotic

Audre Lorde asserted the erotic as a powerful source of female energy that can fuel personal growth and creative collaborations. The erotic is a part of our sexuality, but it's also a vital source for our politics and how we move through life with passion and conviction: "There is, for me, no difference *between* writing a good poem and moving into the sunlight against the body of a woman I love."[5] The erotic is an internal power as well as something that happens *between women*. We see this inspired partnership directly in a sketchbook titled *Journey Stones* that Lorde made with the painter Mildred Thompson, which pairs Lorde's love poems with drawings of female nudes.

Harmony Hammond's *Duo* (Fig. 3), isn't obviously figurative, yet its ladder-shaped forms align with Lorde's notion of spiritual transcendence. Certainly, the tactility and sensuousness of her materials allow for all kinds of erotic imaginings. Likewise, Joan Snyder's *Heart On* evokes what the artist calls "a palette of female pain, anger, and needs."

[Fig. 1] Kate Millett, *Approaching Futility*, 1976, mixed media. Courtesy of the Kate Millett Estate.

Art after Stonewall expands Lorde's concept of the female erotic to think about the ways queer artists of all genders tap desire as a rich source of creativity. Works by Alvin Baltrop and Stanley Stellar were meant to be sexy, and key lesbian photographers at this time, such as Corinne and Morgan Gwenwald published their work in erotic books and lesbian pornography magazines. However, the power of these images is not limited to their ability to arouse but lies in their potential to offer alternative ways of making physical, social, and spiritual connections.

Gender Play

Cross-dressing and gender bending permeates the art of the 1970s and 1980s. In a new world where identities and sexualities were becoming more fluid and mutable, how artists presented and played with gender didn't necessarily reflect how they personally identified–whether as straight or gay, cis or trans, femme or butch.

Louise Bourgeois's *Confrontation* directly parodies the runway of couture fashion by having regular people rather than professionals model her extraordinary wearable sculpture. The idea of the multiplicity and malleability of gender is central to the sloppy drag of the Cockettes' *Tricia's Wedding* or Stephen Varble's performance at the 12th Avant-Garde Festival. Their genderfuck of the mass-media's notion of celebrity and sex appeal short-circuit our expectations of where the edge lies between male and female, masculinity and femininity.

Things are Queer

If Stonewall exhorted liberation and the imperative to come out, a new LGBTQ generation was increasingly suspicious of the systems of knowledge that construct identity categories. Originally a slur for homosexuals, "queer" was reclaimed in the late 1970s as an umbrella term to resist labeling people only in terms of lesbian, bisexual and gay. Built into the word is an emphasis on difference and nonnormative behavior. It defies categorization, since no one or no thing can be queer in quite the same way.

When Greer Lankton reflects on her transition in works such as *Coming Out of Surgery*, and the scrap-book *Medical Magic*, she is also considering the role of medicine in mediating the relationship between our bodies and our genders. Lankton was a close friend and frequent subject of the East Village photographer Nan Goldin, whose closely knit circle also included David Armstrong, Mark Morrisroe, Stephen Tashjian (Tabboo!), Gail Thacker, and David Wojnarowicz. All of these artists were dismissive of attempts to categorize or limit their gender and sexual expression. Likewise, performance artist Holly Hughes and her community of performers at the Wow Café (Fig. 4), refused to accept certain expectations of the straight world and conventions within the lesbian community.

[Fig. 4, this page] © Dona Ann McAdams, *Holly Hughes in The Lady Dick*, Cafe Wow, 1985, silver-gelatin print. Courtesy of the artist.

[Fig. 3, following page] Harmony Hammond, *Bed*, 2000, mixed media, Collection of New Mexico Museum of Art. © 2019 Harmony Hammond / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

AIDS and Activism

Ten years after Stonewall, the AIDS epidemic challenged the LGBTQ community to literally fight for their lives. Artists collaboratives like Gran Fury, General Idea and the NAMES Project created some of the campaigns that were most effective at raising awareness and demanding government action. The spirit of coalition building and protest that was central to the Stonewall movement became a model for this new struggle for equality and social justice. The gold embossed sticker Riot and Felix Gonzalez-Torres's billboard *Untitled* both directly reference the legacy of Stonewall amidst the AIDS crisis. Ann Meredith creates a very different image of hands with her AIDS *Foundation Women's Support Group*; these are the hands of kindness and solidarity in the face of suffering (Fig. 5).

We're Here

In the late 1980s, at any LGBTQ march, AIDS protest, or pride parade, you would invariably hear the chant "We're here! We're queer! Get used to it!" This unapologetic demand for acceptance was and still is aspirational. The works in this final section declare the presence of queer people everywhere and assert the validity of their existence. In Lyle Ashton Harris's altar like triptych, *Americas*, it is impossible to untangle his heroes from the stars and stripes, offering a vision of the United States where queer people of color and drag queens are the modern icons. In this new world, expectations based on gender and race no longer should apply. Written below the photograph *Carla* by Laura Aguilar are the words "I used to worry about being different. Now I realize my differences are my strengths." In all of Aguilar's work, including her later self-portraits, there is a strong sense that if queer people want in, it is now on their own terms. In considering the continuing relevance of Stonewall on our politics today and on our visions for the future,

Heather Love writes:

> The origin story of gay liberation describes how on one particular night an underground bar turned into the frontlines of a struggle for freedom and civil rights. Early work in lesbian and gay studies was marked by the legacy of Stonewall. . . . The emergent field's powerful utopian-ism, affirmation of gay identity, and hope for the future resonated with the seemingly magical power of this new movement to transmute shame into pride, secrecy into visibility, social exclusion into outsider glamour.[6]

However, even in moments of triumph and liberation, Love reminds us that personal and collective feelings of shame, inadequacy, and melancholy linger. The trauma of homophobia cannot be healed by one riot or even fifty years of struggle. David Wojnarowicz's *Untitled (One day this kid . . .)* (Fig. 6) poignantly addresses the way in which almost from our first moments after birth society inculcates these shameful feelings and brutally enforces the conditions of acceptable behavior. And yet, in the face of hatred and injustice, we resist and fight back. The beauty of *This Kid* is that its words can be so easily related to all kinds of prejudice and oppression today. This kid is us.

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[1] Jill Johnston, *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 271.

[2] Tommi Avicolli Mecca, "Introduction," *Smash the Church, Smash the State!: The Early Years of Gay Liberation*, ed. Tommi Avicolli Mecca (San Francisco: City Lights, 2009), xii.

[3] Holland Cotter, "Art after Stonewall: 12 Artists Interviewed," *Art in America* Marcusa (June 1994), 61.

[4] Leslie Feinberg interview with Sylvia Rivera, no date, *Workers World Service*, https://www.workers.org/ww/1998/sylvia0702.php accessed July 2, 2018.

[5] Audre Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic," paper delivered at the Fourth Berkshire Conference on the *History of Women, Mount Holyoke College*, August 25, 1978, reprinted in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove et al. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 342.

[6] Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 28.