mixed messages

curated by JOHN CHAICH
for VISUAL AIDS
mixed messages

JUNE 2 — JULY 3, 2011
La MaMa La Galleria

6 E. 1st Street
btw Bowery & 2nd Avenue
New York, NY 10003
212-505-2476

GALLERY HOURS
Thursday – Sunday
1 – 6 PM

OPENING RECEPTION
Thursday June 2
6 – 8 PM

MIXED MESSENGERS TALK
A panel discussion among the creatives behind recent HIV prevention campaigns

MODERATED by Kenyon Farrow
co-editor, Letters from Young Activists

FEATURING
Stephen Karpiak, PhD, of ACRIA’s HIV & aging outreach
Ivan Monforte of GMHC’s First Ladies Care & featured Mixed Messages artist
Kevin O’Malley of NYC’s GayMeth.org & Stop AIDS San Francisco’s What Makes You Strong?
Chuck Pollard of L’Oreal’s Hairdressers Against AIDS

Sunday June 12
4 – 6 PM

ASK ME: MIXED MESSAGES
BENEFITING Visual AIDS
A night of storytelling inspired by the exhibition, co-hosted by Cammi Climaco and David Crabb.
Learn more at askmestories.com.
Suggested donation sliding scale, everyone is welcome

Wednesday June 29
7 – 9 PM

EVENTS ARE OPEN TO THE PUBLIC
Call Visual AIDS to arrange group and class tours or to view the exhibition by appointment
Contact Executive Director Amy Sadao at 212-627-9855
In curating Mixed Messages for Visual AIDS, I returned again and again to one of the most simple but profound messages I have ever heard about HIV/AIDS: “AIDS is a crisis of connections.”

I was told this in the mid-’90s, from the staff psychologist at the AIDS service and education organization where I began my career. Years since, I have forgotten the therapist’s name, but never her words.

As a writer and designer, I am always drawn to words and the experience they conjure—whether spoken, written, stylized, or arranged. I have strived to present text-based works here because I’m curious what associations their verbal and formal compositions can trigger in the context of an AIDS-related show. From the poetic to the polemic, the words in these works reflect reactions to and connections through HIV/AIDS across generations.

In this exhibition and beyond, HIV/AIDS is embedded in deep relationships and diverse entry points. Cultural, educational, financial, and medical connections at macro- and micro-levels build the support systems individuals need to make healthful decisions. The acts through which HIV is transmitted—intercourse, sharing needles, and even giving birth—may be the very ways through which we find connection.

At once interpersonal and social, this connection starts between Two People, as Rob Wynne’s poured-glass wall sculpture shows, divides between “you” and “me,” as echoed in Amanda Curreri’s Leveller doormat, and escalates to the chorus of Matt Keegan’s You, Me, I, We.

From the intimacy of Yoko Ono’s postcard sized Touch Me to the anonymity of Larry Krone’s handwritten installation repeating And I Will Always Love You, a hunger for emotional, physical, spiritual, and temporal connection dwells in these works. Deborah Kass and Nolan Hendrickson reference not just classic disco lyrics but moments of exasperation and exaltation. Joe De Hoyos’s Stay, Stay, Stay looks like a ransom note but pleads like a love note. Charlie Welch’s Expresso! translates as “I don’t know sex without latex and it makes me sad,” while Craig Damrauer reminds us what happens, after all, when you assume. Risk and reward live in the intersection of Desire/Despair, Jack Pierson insinuates.

Like the synonyms for “aids” that Kay Rosen’s print details, AIDS always has challenged us to take care of ourselves and to care beyond ourselves. In this context, Glenn Ligon’s One Live and Die speaks to the disproportionate impact of HIV on African-American and African peoples. J. Morrison invites viewers to take an American flag hand-printed with the logo aids: Made in the USA—a gesture oddly fitting for a show that opens and closes on the heels of Memorial Day and the Fourth of July. Leslie Hewitt and Lucas Michael subtly use numerals to capture moments and locations critical to personal and public histories—be it a year in the life of a loved one lost or the address of a bathhouse, respectively. David Wojnarowicz’s seminal 1990 Untitled (One Day This Kid...) speaks as an everyman’s transformation of hurt into art; here, the scale of this reproduction amplifies the artist’s story and presence.

Likewise, the impact of AIDS on the lives of gay men and the impact of gay men on AIDS has been historic and symbiotic, evolving, and evocative, as poet Justin Chin frames in his contributing essay, The Gutted:

They said, “You don’t know what it’s like! To love & fight & struggle & need, to want & to bury, to heal & hope & can-can, to despair, to decay, to sparkle & to screw down to the bone. You don’t know what it’s like to be, but We do! We Do! Why won’t you listen to us? Why won’t you do as you’re told because we know so well.”

Inspired by gay club culture, James Jaxxa uses goopy, shimmery materials in Take/Need/Fear/Junk to imply that all that glitters is not gold, but it sure feels good. As Sam McKinniss’s work states, “lifestyles ultra sensitive” indeed.

Sometimes apparent and sometimes ambiguous, the in/direct influence of HIV in these works is as mixed as the messages we hear about the virus today, from the ongoing battle over safer-sex versus abstinence-only education to the contrast between AIDS-is-not-over and HIV-is-a-manageable-disease campaigns. In the gallery, these messages may be undetectable: Nicholas Fraser places barely visible text in surprising locations, and Christopher Pennock’s I Am A Danger to Myself and Maybe Others challenges legibility.

The tone-on-tone quality of Gran Fury’s Four Questions t-shirt furthers pairs visibility with divisibility. Asking “Are you afraid of people with AIDS?” and “Do you trust HIV-negatives?” Rudy Lemcke captures the historic debate over needle distribution and harm reduction. Andrew Graham’s AIDS is God’s Curse appropriates the visual language of hate-mongers like Fred Phelps, while Frederick Weston recalls the typography of ’60s protest posters and Felix Gonzalez-Torres places not only the viewer within a heritage of gay activism, but also gay and AIDS rights within a continuum of civil rights.

At these moments, Amanda Keeley’s door hanger cleverly signals, our ideologies and actions can so easily shift from love to hate, empathy to apathy. British graphic designer James Joyce observes: You Do What You Do and They Do What They Do.

Well So What If I Did, Lou Laurita’s painting counters.

Same old, same old, Jayson Keeling’s New Graffiti/Old Revolutions seems to summarize.

So is AIDS still a crisis of connections? Depends on how you’re connected…

With adequate access to drug regimens and support systems, HIV may not necessarily be fatal, but, as John Giorno’s canvas reminds, life inevitably is. For me and for many, the threat or reality of HIV infection has reframed life, loss, love, risk, health, and hope. Ultimately, I hope Mixed Messages can reexamine our connections to HIV and each other. Life may be a killer, but in the words of the screenprint by Nightswea...T-cells, we somehow manage to Annoy Them...Survive.

I am grateful to the staff at Visual AIDS and at La MaMa La Galleria for this opportunity. I am also indebted to the featured artists and their representatives for lending their words, works, and commitment, and to all readers and visitors for connecting with this exhibition.
We were the fuck-ups or so we thought we were, lacking a system to make it through the day, much less a year, a lifetime. We clung to lifelines, like aging spiders cling to the last silken thread hanging off their arse, the last chance for nourishment, protection, defense, identity. We clung to fistful of Clutched straw, weaving a manger, a cozy forge to call our gulch a home.

We grew up to be children, infants, stillborn even. And like children of every generation, we felt it in our bones to taunt death, tempt it to cross this line we drew in spit on the ground; some days we even mixed our spit to draw our always maddening, never intersecting, ever widening lines; we train tracked into our nevermores.

And like children of every generation, we tested the firmaments of our maturing bodies by vowing never to toe the line, we tested the dribble of our growing up by crossing the line. Our decapitated taste buds long accustomed to day-old meat, desired the belly-fill of a thousand & one tales of better feasts. How then could we help our bleeding gnashed chewed tongues? Oh, kiss kiss! kill kill! Our blood-mixed spit-scored axis drawn, all pistons fueled, we would walk the line: we went to war, we romanced every chemical awe.

We were the atom that stubbornly refused to split, the element that secretly & selfishly held more elementary particulars. We were the Lost Boys if they had dicks to use, & understood their perverse urges, their untinkered bells. We were Lost Boys who declared ourselves found.

We ripped the rubbers out of their foils and made balloon animals from them, great beasts with slippery spermicidal hides, slicked-backed pelted for every poke. We punctured, penetrated & connected end to end to the very end: A procession of rutting animals from here to the icy outer rings of Saturn.

We chased bugs. Such entomologists we were, even as we lacked a system of nomenclature. We would write our own field guide, we believed, and so went scouring wild in the fields & swamps with our butterfly nets & specimen jars. We substituted taxonomy with taxidermy. Our display cases were legendary. Bug meet pin. Hello, Pin! Is that your friend Needle? Does he want to play? Ouch! You’re a pokey pair, aren’t you? Watch where you put your prick now. Envious of our subjects, we were pupael & larval in all we sought, we glinted crystalline in our out-strung useless beauty.

How the judges on their yachts in the marina, cocktails in hand, laughed & mocked as we stood at the shoreline. Look at them, so useless in the shallow! they tittered. Little did they consider nor care that we were preparing to wade all the way in to the deep end. En route we would learn to ride barracuda, learn the finer whipping stabs of personal poison from stingray & catfish, we would trade dental tips with sharks of all stripes, trade potions with fugu.
But still those ancient sun-leathered mossbacks remained unmoved, senile & contemptuous in their scorn. They thought their moors solids. They did not believe the coming storms even as they watched us write the weather forecasts. But still, we did not have a system to move the doldrums, set twister to seed sky, to rain lava & ash.

They said, “You don’t know what it’s like! To love & fight & struggle & need, to want & to bury, to heal & hope & can-can, to despair, to decay, to sparkle & to screw down to the bone. You don’t know what it’s like to be, but We do! We Do! Why won’t you listen to us? Why won’t you do as you’re told because we know so well. Look at our bombed-out corpses? Isn’t that evidence of our knowledge?” They said and soon we would too, & you will, & refrain till the last intake of oxygen on our living square.

“Show us your rituals of hope,” they said. And we did.

We sought shelter & peace. Our musk was survival, our slick-back stamina. We ate bullet-ridden crow. We armed up and went on crusade: righteousness our tit-shield, superiority our cup firmly tucked. We stamped our feet and stood our ground. With our glower intact and in overdrive, we faced down god & man & all the arms & armaments of authority. We did not have the system to know there was no greater God nor good, no higher authority nor flexing arm than our infinitesimal germinating selves.

We ran our bodies into the ground trusting we would heal, we would resurrect, trusting we would regain strength, composure, might. We are the gutted & the chawed. Our conga line was glorious on Monday, invincible by Wednesday, cortege by Thursday and when weekend rolls around, after fasting on Friday, feasting & fucking on Saturday and all-day Church on Sunday, we regroup and we become glorious if not quite whole again in the new week.

Like disciples & addicts of all stripes, who tasted one flash of clarity, once so brief as to be torture, we emptied our coin purse, ever in pursuit of that quench, ever only gaining bibble, but greedy little piglets that we are, oinking for more than droplets, we wanted Unlimited Refills at the fountain. We did not know nor realize that each flash & drop, each dew & line – scattered, infrequent & lonely, private & barely – when assembled, when called together could form a skein rich enough to make anyone whole again. We had no stitching skills, and could not realize that all those flashes counted for something, credit not to a life, but a living.

We harbored hope – not for the perfect epic sunset to ride into, but that the closing, no matter how it ran itself down & out, would come with purpose, with sense enough to feed our starving destructive need for salvation. Not everyone was made to be a hero, the mud was never all that pure. “Either we are all saved or we are all damned, that’s it, end of story.” Oh my heart you have nothing to fear now!

In the last scene of the dream: The family sits down to dinner. There is a condor with razor savage talons chained to the center of the table, and we are afraid to approach, whereas everyone else has hungrily begun eating.

In the last scene of the dream: Over the vista, the land is liquefying, buildings collapse methodically. But we are not surprised, nor afraid.

We create monsters, then live in such dizzying fear of them. We create Gods who abandon us in our time of need. We worship Gods who demand more than our capacity of grace. Then we lose face, toss faith to deep sea depths for fishes to fat on, while creating another set of idols, puppets, divinities, demons, all equally flawed & beautiful, all equal fuss & fill.

And at the end of the long road, what have we built? what was created? does it even exist, or is it just a name we give to an abstract idea, one we cannot, know not how to properly name. Or use. Or dispose of.

The path ahead is littered with banana peels & anthills, diamonds & oxide, scripture & stress tests, crack & crybabies, buckshot & ballots, wedding rings & discount coffins, deeds & donefors.

The beach is glorious, in plain view.

And there we stand.

Our bonfires guttering.

This version of The Gutted was redacted & remixed by the author specifically for this publication. The full poem (or at least one of its full-length versions) can be found in Gutted (Manic D Press, 2006).

Justin Chin is the author of three collections of poetry, Gutted, Bite Hard and Harmless Medicine, and three collections of essays, Burden of Ashes; Mongrel: Essays, Diatribes & Pranks; and, Attack of the Man-Eating Lotus Blossoms. 98 Wounds, a collection of short fiction, is forthcoming in fall 2011. He lives in San Francisco.
ROBERT BLANCHON

We shall always remember with deep gratitude your comforting expression of sympathy

PAUL CHISHOLM

LOVE & HATE

ANTHONY BURRILL

DON’T SAY NOTHING

CAMMI CLIMACO

creaming
GLENN LIGON

LIZ MAUGANS

SAM MCKINNIS

LUCAS MICHAEL
AIDS – assistance, advocate, save, assist, secours, socorro, ayuda, help, stand-by, accommodation, ally, lift, succor, recourse, service, resource, benefit, friend, helping hand, rally, care, subsidy, relief, humanitarian, co-operation, sustenance, support
FREDERICK WESTON

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DAVID WOJNAROWICZ

ROB WYNNE
Robert Blanchon  
_Untitled (Sympathy),_ 1992  
cibachrome print and wood frame  
13 ¼ x 10 ¼ inches  
_COURTESY OF THE FALES LIBRARY & SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY AND THE ESTATE OF ROBERT BLANCHON_

Anthony Burrill  
_Don’t Say Nothing, 2010_  
woodblock print on paper  
20 x 30 inches  

Paul Chisholm  
_Love & H**TV, 2010_  
vinyl letters on wood  
57 x 53 x 1 inches  

Joe De Hoyos  
_Woodcut_  
2011  

Amanda Curreri  
_Stay Stay Stay, 1995_  
acrylic on canvas  
12 x 9 inches  

Andrew Graham  
_AIDS is God’s Curse, 2009_  
acrylic on canvas  
20 x 30 inches  

Gran Fury  
_The Four Questions, 2010_  
high density ink on cotton t-shirt  
28 x 23 inches  

Nolan Hendrickson  
_Love Hangover, 2010_  
ink on paper  
8 x 5 inches  

Leslie Hewitt  
_Untitled, 2010_  
laser print on newsprint  
11 x 8 ¼ inches  

James Jaxxa  
_Take/Need/Feed/Junk, 2010_  
styrofoam, glass & plastic beads, straight pins, fabric, acrylic paint and medium  
45 x 40 x 1 ½ inches  

James Joyce  
_You Do What You Do and They Do What They Do, 2008_  
giclee print  
47 x 34 ½ inches  

Deborah Kass  
_Make Me Feel Mighty Real, 2007_  
gouache on paper  
9 x 12 inches  
_COURTESY OF THE ARTIST & PAUL KASMIN GALLERY, NY_

Matt Keegan  
_You, Me, I, We, 2007_  
silkscreen  
30 x 25 inches  

Amanda Keeley  
_Love/Hate, 2008_  
plastic doorhanger  
6 x 2 ½ inches  

Jayson Keeling  
_New Graffiti, Old Revolutions, 2010_  
c-print  
30 x 40 inches  

James Klein & David Reid—Klein Reid  
_Overbend, 2009_  
lustered porcelain  
12 ¼ x 8 ¼ inches  

Larry Krone  
_And I Will Always Love You (In Reach), 1996/2011_  
permanent marker on wall dimensions variable  

Lou Laurita  
_So What, 2008_  
gouache on paper  
41 x 29 ½ inches  
_COURTESY OF THE ESTATE OF LOU LAURITA & COLLECTION OF JOHN CHAICH_

Rudy Lemcke  
_Distribute, 1989_  
acrylic on canvas  
30 x 28 ¼ inches  

Glenn Ligon  
_One Live and Die, 2006_  
neon installation  
6 x 66 x 6 inches  
one of two  
ADSFA 06.105  
_COURTESY OF THE SENDER COLLECTION, NY PHOTO COURTESY OF RESEN PROJECTS, LA COPYRIGHT GLENN LIGON_

Liz Maugans  
_Shut Up and Listen, 2009_  
charcoal on handmade paper  
18 x 24 inches  

Sam McKinniss  
_Untitled, 2010_  
acrylic on cardboard  
13 ¼ x 15 ¼ inches  

Lucas Michael  
_Threesome, 2009_  
foam, cotton and liquid rubber  
60 x 49 x 22 inches  
_COURTESY OF THE ARTIST & SILVERMAN GALLERY, SF_

Ivan Monforte  
_You’re Beautiful, 2003_  
silkscreen, scented calligraphic ink and embroidery on canvas  
60 x 36 inches  
_COLLLECTION OF FABIAN BEDOLLA_

J. Morrison  
_aids: Made in U.S.A, 2010_  
hand-silkscreen on 50 stacks of polyester flags as a take-away piece  
92 ½ x 69 inches  

_Nightsweats & T-cells_  
_Annoy Them…Survive, 2011_  
silkscreen on paper  
11 x 17 inches  

Yoko Ono  
_Touch Me, 2008_  
acrylic on canvas  
5 ½ x 7 x 1 ¼ inches  
_COLLECTION OF AMY SADAO_

Christopher Pennock  
_I Am a Dancer to Myself and Maybe Others, 2004_  
64 x 7 inches  
gesso, gouache, watercolor on paper  
_COLLECTION OF KELLY PICKERING_

Jack Pierson  
_Desire/Despair, 1998_  
c-print  
20 x 16 inches AP 2/2  
_COURTESY OF THE ARTIST & CHEIM & READ, NY_

Kay Rosen  
_AIDS, 1990/1998_  
offset lithograph  
11 x 17 inches  
_COURTESY OF THE ARTIST & SIRENA JENKINS & CO., NY_

Charlie Welch  
_Expressa’s, 2007/11_  
collage on paper  
18 x 24 inches  

Frederick Weston  
_Untitled (6), 1998_  
pen, marker, collage and paper  
17 x 11 inches  
_COLLECTION OF BRETT DE PALMA_

David Wojnarowicz (Reproduction of)  
_Untitled (One Day This Kid…), 1990_  
photostat  
30 ¼ x 41 inches  
edition of 10  
_COURTESY OF THE ESTATE OF DAVID WOJNAROWICZ AND P.P.O.W. GALLERY, NY_

Rob Wynne  
_Two People, 2009_  
hand poured and mirrored glass  
35 x 32 inches
ABOUT THE CURATOR
Beginning his career as an HIV testing counselor and community educator, John Chaich has designed a range of multi-arts projects to raise AIDS awareness, from an educational theatre project funded with support from Do Something and LifeBeat, to a nationally distributed edutainment zine by and for young adults, to social marketing campaigns recognized by *Print* magazine and annual artist edition broadsides for Visual AIDS.

He has presented at national conferences on AIDS and the arts and written on visual responses to HIV/AIDS for *Art & Understanding* magazine, as well as contributed to *BUST* magazine and the anthology, *Body Outlaws: Rewriting the Rules of Beauty and Body Image*.

Chaich holds an MFA in Communications Design from Pratt Institute.

LA MAMA LA GALLERIA
As an extension of the internationally acclaimed La Mama Experimental Theatre Club, La MaMa La Galleria is a nonprofit gallery committed to nurturing artistic experimentation in the visual arts. La Galleria’s programming responds to questions raised by the larger cultural, artistic, and intellectual community.

VISUAL AIDS
Visual AIDS utilizes art to fight AIDS by provoking dialogue, supporting HIV+ artists, and preserving a legacy, because AIDS is not over.

Visual AIDS is the only contemporary arts organization fully committed to HIV prevention and AIDS awareness through producing and presenting visual art projects, while assisting artists living with HIV/AIDS. We are committed to preserving and honoring the work of artists with HIV/AIDS and the artistic contributions of the AIDS movement.

DEDICATION
*Mixed Messages* is dedicated to the memory of Lou Laurita, curatorial advisor of La MaMa La Galleria, friend of Visual AIDS, and respected artist.

We also mourn the loss of trans AIDS activist, artist, performer, and Visual AIDS Archive Member artist, our brave sister Chloe Dzubilo.

EXTRA SPECIAL THANKS
for their extraordinary support:
Amy Sadao and Nelson Santos, Visual AIDS

for their ongoing commitment to Visual AIDS and to this exhibition:
Adriana Farmiga and Matt Nasser, La MaMa La Galleria

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for their generous loaning of works from respective collections:

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