

ARTE FUSE

Whose Care Is It Anyway? Reflections on In the Power of Your Care

September 20, 2016 by **AUDRA LAMBERT**



***In the Power of Your Care* at The 8th Floor. (L-R) Frank Moore, Jody Wood, Hannah Wilke, Jordan Eagles and Ana Mendieta.**

In the Power of Your Care, an exhibit held at The 8th Floor was a celebration of health care as a human right. Works on view ranged from video art and sculpture to works on paper and mixed media, paintings and photographs. Taking over the Rubin Foundation's The 8th Floor space from February to August 2016, the exhibit featured works of art meditating on the power of community-based efforts to enact

social change in health-related initiatives. Artists on exhibit included caraballo-farman, Jordan Eagles, Pepe Espaliú, Rajkamal Kahlon, Simone Leigh, Ana Mendieta, Mladen Miljanovic, Frank Moore, Carmen Papalia, Hunter Reynolds, Jo Spence, Andreas Sterzing, Sunaura Taylor, Fred Tomaselli, Hannah Wilke, David Wojnarowicz, and Jody Wood.

Reflecting on the various areas of programming taking place over the course of the exhibit and the implications that the various artworks on display held for contemporary healthcare-related issues, curator Sara Reisman sat down to discuss the Foundation's approach and how artists can also be responsible for paradigm shifts in healthcare and community building.

AL: Thank you Sara for sitting down with me today. In looking at the exhibit *In the Power of Your Care* here at The 8th Floor space, I was interested in the timespan and themes the artworks address, ranging from art produced during the height of the AIDS crisis in the 80s all the way to contemporary, emerging artists such as Jordan Eagles, exploring health issues related to social inequality, war trauma, etc. I was hoping we could start by exploring how you approached this exhibit in relation to this broad spectrum, perhaps expanding on areas where they overlap or diverge?

SR: Sure – first, one of the differences is that innovation in AIDS medication allows those living with AIDS to manage their symptoms and live longer, and there are campaigns for new methods [such as PrEP] to prevent HIV infection. Looking at Jordan's works you can gauge the struggle to survive...it's not my expertise, but [one can] sense from his work that there's a totally different sense of crisis now than during this prior [AIDS epidemic] era. Eagles is looking at nuanced policies such as laws prohibiting gay and bisexual men from giving blood. While there are many prejudices in the medical community, Eagles is taking a look [specifically] at laws that have been implemented [against these

populations] and saying, “It isn’t fair that these laws are still in place.” Younger activists have nuances in the criticisms they can make, and this could indicate that the situation now is less dire. Now it’s more about equality.



Pepe Espaliú, *El Nido (The Nest)* (1993) for *In the Power of Your Care*.
[Courtesy of Fundación Coca-Cola, Spain]

AL: Would you say artists working in this vein today have more empowerment?

SR: Sure, there’s more agency because there’s a bit of a better understanding of the disease today. Dionisio Cruz, a collaborator of Jody Wood’s, was reminiscing about one of his first jobs at St. Vincent’s Hospital when clients were coming in with AIDS and the hospital didn’t know if they could catch the disease from these clients. In spite of that they pressed on knowing the urgency was there and there was a need to do as much as they could. There was this general feeling of, you

know, could we catch this? It takes time to understand how new diseases like this are transmitted.

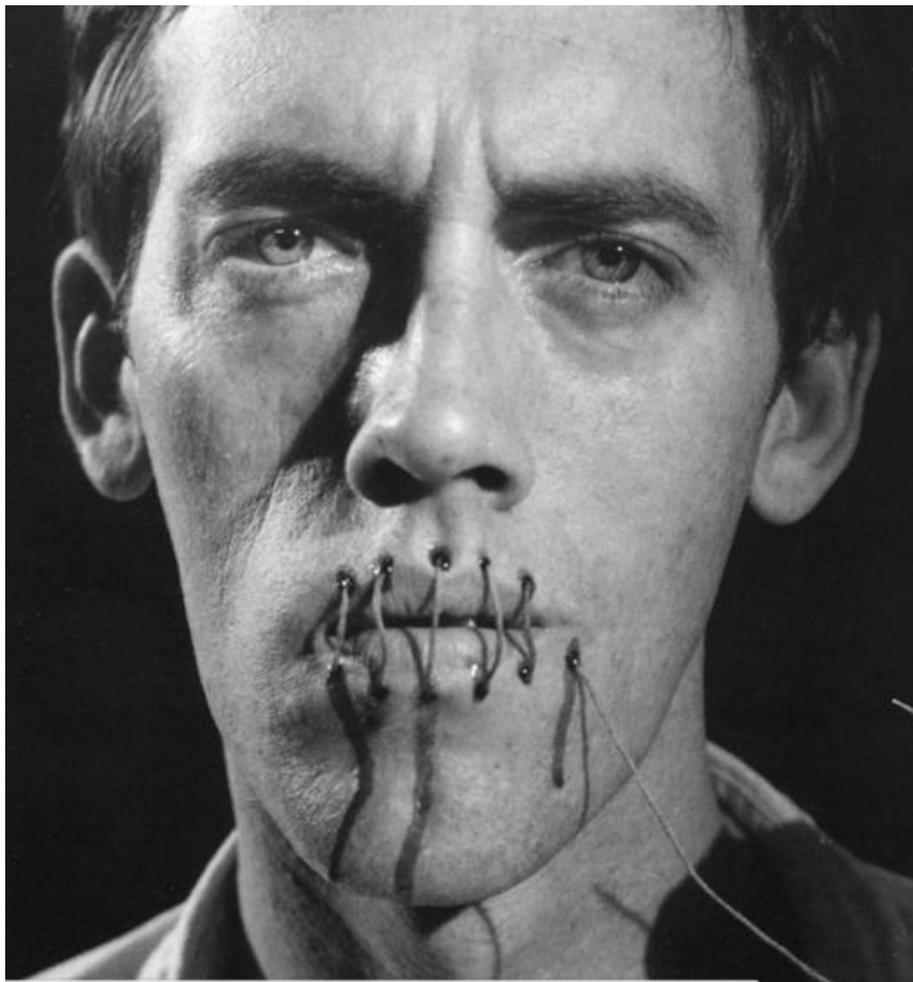
AL: I had never considered it, but when a disease is new there are so many unknowns.

SR: In the beginning you just can't know everything.

AL: Moving on to Jody Wood and Simone Leigh's works: I was already familiar with Jody Wood's *Beauty in Transition* work, so seeing her work and Simone Leigh's *Free People's Medical Clinic*, the sociopolitical overtones here are explicit — how do you see these practices in particular in relation to the wider medical community and how do you see these works sparking a greater conversation on healthcare access in the US? [Interviewer's note – The Rubins previously founded an affordable health insurance company called Multiplan – AL]

SR: What Wood and Leigh's projects bring to light is that healthcare is monetized in this country. The Affordable Care Act has brought more public to these [health insurance] plans but people are penalized by not buying in. The level of monetization is disturbing and on the other hand these two artists reveal how some care is available for some people but not for all. In Simone [Leigh]'s case she wonders how to reach a community of women of color where perhaps members of the community are uncomfortable demanding a certain level of care for themselves or their families. And so the conversation then addresses the fact that [these projects] do not replace a basic level of healthcare, but there are layers of care that both can and should happen. At the Visual AIDS talk *IV Embrace: On Caregiving and Creativity* one of the final presenters was Lodz Joseph who is a doula. She gave a presentation with the subject, "How do you care for yourself?" and it was a shift in the room from artist memorials [to this]. Joseph showed

an image of cup of tea spilling and noting, “What is inside the cup is for you and what spills over is for other people.” It was a poignant way of observing that we are not raised to look after ourselves... it’s a very real [concern.] Jody Wood [meanwhile] addresses the care of beauty: thinking about how identity is constructed through beauty and supporting how that affects identity... there are these gaps in the system [which indicate] there has to be more access in a more nuanced way.



Andreas Sterzing, *David Wojnarowicz (Silence=Death)*; New York (1989/2014)

AL: Can you talk a little more about how you selected works to ascribe context to the exhibit *In the Power of Your Care*? The AIDS crisis is a clear departure point as you encounter the exhibit.

SR: This diversity of aesthetics and content [of these works] interested me as a starting point in [documenting] the history of the AIDS crisis. Visual AIDS organized a show at La Mama's La Galleria in 2007 called *Side by Side*, curated by Dean Daderko, which looked at the work of women artists who supported male artists during the AIDS crisis. This isn't a criticism by any means but this show really affected me [and inspired me] to think about human rights. If you think about the Visual AIDS archive ... [you can find men] but there are women's voices and other voices as well who committed themselves to highlighting this crisis.

I was also interested in looking at other health crises that have happened: AIDS is one of several that are accounted for in this exhibition and in some ways it's not only about health in terms of treatments/cures [as there's no cure for cancer or AIDS, for example] but you have Jody Wood's *Beauty in Transition* project asking: how can you help the homeless in a way not accounted for in our social services system? In a way she offers a solution that is ephemeral in the sense that she offers [seemingly frivolous] beauty services that actually reveal something unacknowledged in the world – namely, if you don't have money, it can be construed that you don't have the right to take care of yourself a certain way. [*Beauty in Transition*] brings this to light and celebrates people as people [in their own right].



In the Power of Your Care at The 8th Floor. Installation by artist caraballo-farman.

AL: Celebrating human rights.

SR: Yes, within the *Beauty in Transition* project there's an acknowledgment that often people who are homeless are that way for mental health reasons. Also, there is a trauma produced by [the reality of] being homeless and there's a need for services [as a result].

AL: So then it seems the identity of the artist themselves or their lived experience [relates to] the artwork they've produced in response?

SR: Yes, these artworks often incorporate subjective experiences that have to do with relationships. Hunter Reynolds and his friendship with Kathleen White, for example, who is the voiceover of his video artwork *Medication Reminder*; that was a relationship that was very substantial. For artist Jody Wood, in that moment of haircare for the homeless, though it may not be a long relationship [the artist] has been doing this for some time now. Each artist brings a different perspective.

AL – Right: I think of seeing the fabricated tumors by caraballo-farman belying a personal experience, but the medium itself also relates to the subject matter.

SR: Yes that's happening as well: Jody Wood is working with video to document the social exchange and caraballo-farman's work uses sculpture to model something that can't be seen.

AL: Looking at the works on view by Fred Tomaselli, they seem incredibly intuitive in the relationship between the figurative element of each individual and the abstract visualization of [these individuals]. Here when he's creating a work for each individual in a chart, do you see this as intrinsically connected to healthcare in the US in terms of an individual approach?

SR: There is a relationship and it's not one that I've thought about—his diagrams as [a proxy for] the health make-up of an individual. What is strange in our time is that there's a lot in medicine that is not understood. I thought of his works as more playful than as a critique of medicine but that is interesting: if you've ever known someone experiencing treatment where side effects can range from anxiety to migraines, then this chain reaction [can result if] someone with many doctors [is potentially] not receiving consideration of how these medications interact. In Tomaselli's work, [these medications] make up the identity of a person and show how [the medications] do interact. No criticism is intended but we live in a time when younger and younger people are prescribed medication before their identities are set, and it's [interesting] to think about how that interference over a lifetime can change who somebody is. That is the darker side that I read into these works: if I use a substance, how does that change me for forever even if I only use it one time— there are some things that are not necessarily reversible.