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Queer Artists Show that Activism Is Key to Survival

VOICE = SURVIVAL contains some wrong turns and dead ends, but these impediments are few and do not detract from the sublime experience of listening to activists speak their truth.

Zachary Small | July 21, 2017



Installation view of *VOICE = SURVIVAL* at the 8th Floor gallery (all installation photos by Julia Gillard and courtesy The 8th Floor).

On the eve of 1992's US presidential election, Mark Fisher's corpse landed on the steps of George H.W. Bush's Midtown Manhattan reelection offices. Succumbing to complications of HIV/AIDS, Fisher's dying wish was to be buried "furiously," and to place a hex on Bush's political career. Bob Rafsky, complied, carrying his friend's body downtown alongside fellow ACT UP members in proud, strident solidarity. The AIDS epidemic of the '80s and '90s required transgressive demonstrations like these to upend the willful ignorance of politicians and the demonizing hysteria of the news media. Assimilationist messages championed by mainstream LGBT advocates were getting nowhere; for survival, it became necessary for these advocates to radicalize.



Installation view of *VOICE = SURVIVAL* at The 8th Floor gallery.

VOICE = SURVIVAL at the 8th Floor enshrines the multimedia art activism of queer radicals while exploring its legacy in contemporary agitprop. Still, the exhibition anchors its thesis in the past, predominantly focusing on how artists associated with AIDS activist groups like ACT UP and Gran Fury cultivated an aesthetic of resistance.



David Wojnarowicz, James Romberger and Marguerite Van Cook, *7 Miles a Second* (1996), page from the graphic novel, (photo by the author for *Hyperallergic*).

One such artist was David Wojnarowicz, who dominates the gallery space. Wojnarowicz was a major figure in New York's downtown community of queer artists; he was also an activist in his own right. Here, he's introduced as the protagonist of a graphic novel he collaborated on with James Romberger and Marguerite Van Cook before his death from AIDS. The illustrations of *7 Miles a Second* (1996) are hallucinatory and vivid, depicting Wojnarowicz vacillating between life and death. The comic also includes excerpts from the artist's writings, explaining the alienation and isolation that people living with AIDS suffer through.

Curators Claudia Maria Carrera and Adrian Saldaña also include archival audio cassette tapes made by Wojnarowicz. I was particularly struck by "Time Period of Peter's Death – Phone Machine" (1992), which contains a series of voicemails from friends and family concerning the welfare of

photographer Peter Hujar. The messages become more urgent as Hujar's condition worsens. Friends trade status reports and coordinate hospital visits. Slowly, while listening I create a mental tapestry of Hujar's network of supporters who, through their messages, give voice to the photographer's gradual degradation. And the voice is as important here as in the rest of the exhibition. If voice equals survival, then what does that mean for people who can't talk, who are too sick to talk? One of the show's wall texts quotes Wojnarowicz saying, "I think what I really fear about death is the silencing of my voice — I feel this incredible pressure to leave something of myself behind."



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The remainder of the exhibition riffs on Wojnarowicz's desire for an audible legacy. And *VOICE = SURVIVAL* is itself a sort of legacy, a sequel to ACT UP's seminal poster campaign, "SILENCE = DEATH." Both equations essentially mean the same thing: life requires action and action requires activism. Fine. But the curators waste too much breath justifying their theme of voice rather than simply accepting ACT UP's original equation and running with it. Coincidentally, *VOICE = SURVIVAL* contains some wrong turns and dead ends. Take Kiki Smith's "Tongue in Ear,"

(1983-93) which she once gifted to Wojnarowicz. I understand how Smith's sculpture tangentially relates to the theme of voice and to Wojnarowicz. But what does it have to do with queer activism? And why does the wall text waste space describing exactly what we see — a red tongue snaking into someone's ear.



Kiki Smith, "Tongue in Ear" (1983-93) (photo by the author for *Hyperallergic*).

Nevertheless, these impediments are few and do not detract from the sublime experience of listening to activists like Pat Parker who speaks her truth through another archival audio recording. A proud feminist and out lesbian, Parker recites “Where Will You Be” at 1977’s Third World Gay Caucus. Her poem is a screed against assimilationists and the “politics of respectability” that compel LGBT people to suppress their identities for the sake of homophobes. “Every time we let straight relatives bury our dead and push our lovers away — it was an act of perversion,” she proclaims, making it clear that self-denial is the slipperiest of gay slopes.

Another gem is *A Declaration of Poetic Disobedience from the New Border* by Guillermo Gómez-Peña in collaboration with Gustavo Vazquez. This film is a spellbinding invocation of solidarity, articulating the physical and conceptual bonds that unite Chicano, indigenous, and migratory communities with queer people. Created in 2003, Gómez-Peña’s work suggests a nascent intersectionalism that reaches across race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class to envision a global vanguard for social justice causes. Better still, Gómez-Peña deftly shows how the topics of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class must be discussed together by presenting his poetic doctrine through a variety of queer, Chicano, and indigenous personas — all derived from his own multifarious identities.



Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Gustavo Vazquez, *A Declaration of Poetic Disobedience from the New Border* (2003), film still (photo by Steve Rosen).

It is here that *VOICE = SURVIVAL* justifies its new equation, but with a corollary. Yes, queer people must have a voice to champion themselves, but they must also use their voices to champion others if they want to survive.

VOICE = SURVIVAL continues at The 8th Floor (17 West 17th Street, Flatiron district, Manhattan) through August 11.

Editor's Note: An earlier version inaccurately referred to Mark Fisher and Bob Rafsky as romantic partners. This has now been corrected.