



LJ Roberts, *Portrait of Deb (1988-199?)*, detail, 2012-13. Courtesy of the artist.

OPINIONS

Your Silence Will Not Protect You

July 14, 2017 • By Emily Colucci

“Silence is my shield, it crushes.
Silence is my cloak, it smothers
Silence is my sword, it cuts both ways
Silence is the deadliest weapon”
—Marlon Riggs, from *Tongues Untied*

“My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you,” warns Audre Lorde in her paper *The Transformation of Silence Into Language And Action*. In this essay, Lorde argues for speaking—the voice—as an essential, if not the most essential, activist tool. She concludes, “The fact that we are here and that I speak these words is an attempt to break the silence and bridge

some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken.”

Even though Lorde’s paper was first delivered at the Modern Language Association’s “Lesbian and Literature Panel” in December 1977—a few years before HIV/AIDS, or then called GRID, entered widespread public consciousness, her juxtaposition of the oppression of silence and the agency and empowerment of speech is heavily reflected in the visual cultures, archives and writing of AIDS activism. In fact, Lorde’s invocation of breaking silences is strikingly reminiscent of a similar excerpt from David Wojnarowicz’s *Close To The Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*. “Words can strip power from a memory or an event,” Wojnarowicz observes, “Words can cut the ropes of experience. Breaking silence about an experience can break the codes of the code of silence. Describing the once indescribable can dismantle the power of taboo. To speak about the once unspeakable can make the INVISIBLE familiar if repeated often enough in clear and loud tones.”



Gran Fury, *Read My Lips (women)*, 1988. Poster reproduction from digital scan, photocopy on paper. ACT UP; Spring AIDS Action '88. Courtesy of Avram Finkelstein.

These tones come out loud and clear in *VOICE = SURVIVAL*, an exhibition at The 8th Floor, co-presented by The Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation and Visual AIDS (Full disclosure: I co-curated Visual AIDS' 2015 exhibition with Osman Can Yerebakan. I never pretended to be objective), that delves into the place of voice in activism, in particular AIDS activism. Curated by Claudia Maria Carrera and Adrian Geraldo Saldaña, *VOICE = SURVIVAL* presents a new way of considering AIDS activist legacies as remnants of sound and vocalizations. While some of the materials in the show may be familiar to viewers including Gran Fury's posters "Read My Lips," a sly combination of the first President Bush's slogan "Read My Lips: No New Taxes" with vintage representations of same-sex desire, the show's take on AIDS activist histories feels fresh, turning the volume up on a topic that has been recently frequently revisited by institutions.

Repurposing the slogan SILENCE = DEATH, which was created by the Silence = Death collective and became synonymous with ACT UP, the curators heed its warning, concluding that if silence equals death then voice must equal survival. Not only proving how this notion, in fact, worked to force HIV/AIDS out of invisibility by speaking up, the exhibition also asserts that speaking out remains necessary now, especially as assumptions about HIV/AIDS being "over" continue to be propagated. While co-presented by Visual AIDS, *VOICE = SURVIVAL* doesn't just fixate on HIV/AIDS, but on activism more widely, bringing in earlier works by figures like Audre Lorde and Pat Parker to expand the show's critical scope.



Installation view of "VOICE = SURVIVAL" at The 8th Floor. Courtesy of the artists and The 8th Floor, New York

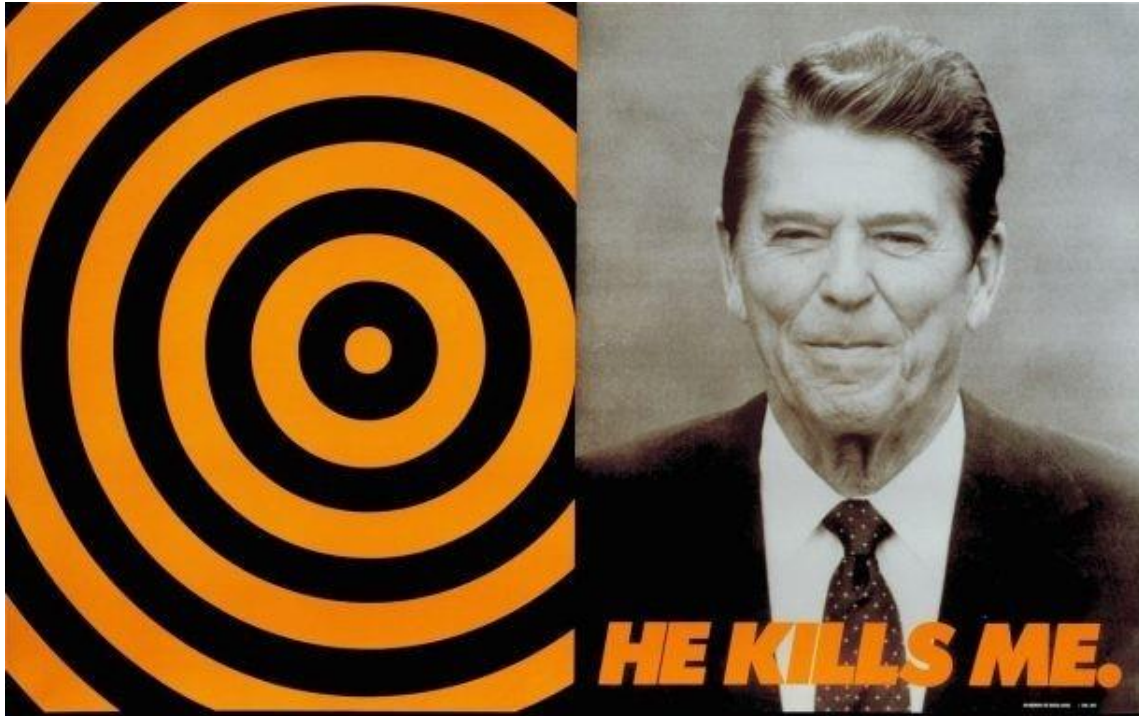
Immediately to the left of the entrance in The 8th Floor, *VOICE = SURVIVAL* begins with a series of videos, which include outspoken clips featuring Vito Russo, Bob Rafsky, David Wojnarowicz

and Mykki Blanco that echo through the gallery space, creating a cacophony of voices—both current and past. The sound of recordings like Russo’s seminal *Why We Fight* speech (“Someday, the AIDS crisis will be over. Remember that. And when that day comes—when that day has come and gone, there’ll be people alive on this earth—gay and straight people, men and women, black and white, who will hear the story that once there was a terrible disease in this country and all over the world, and that a brave group of people stood up and fought and, in some cases, gave their lives, so that other people might live and be free.”) also expose the reality that while many of these artists and activists are no longer with us, their voices are anything but silent. Their words still resonate. Their voices, like Wojnarowicz’s booming baritone, still cut deep.



Mykki Blaco and Adinah Dancyger, *I Want a Dyke For President*, 2016. Video. Performed by Mykki Blanco. Directed by Adinah Dancyger. Text by Zoe Leonard (1992). Produced by Thomas Gorton for *Dazed*. Courtesy of the artists and *Dazed*.

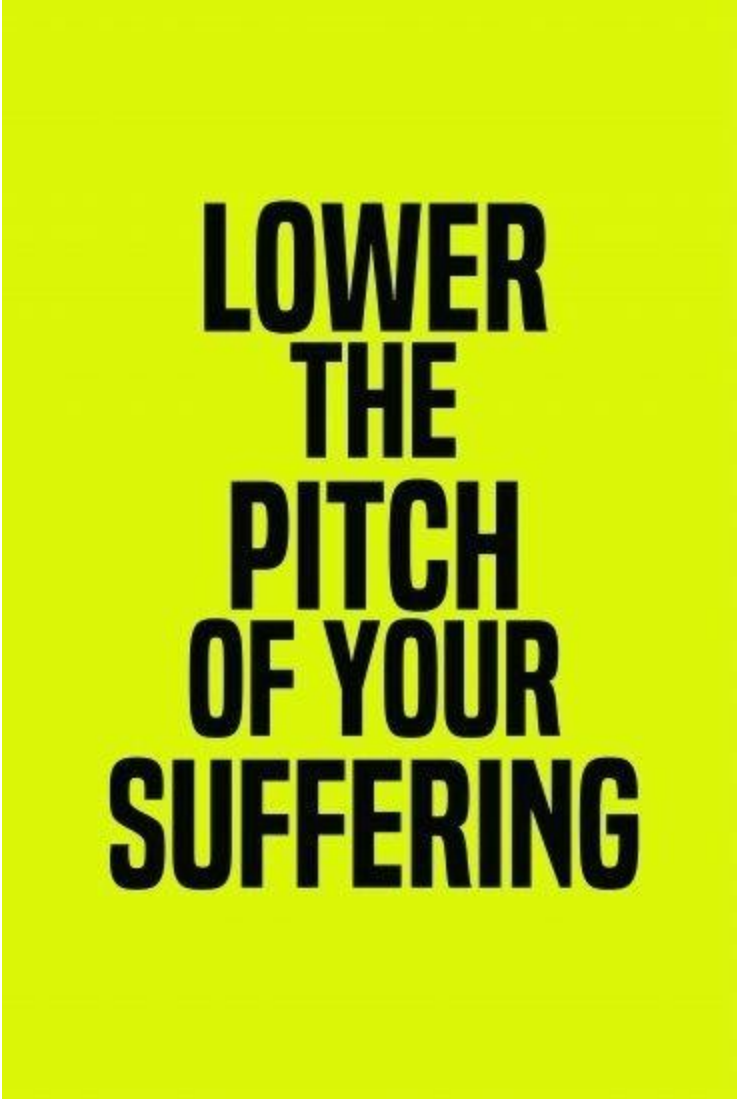
This series of screened clips achieves, as does the rest of *VOICE = SURVIVAL*, a genealogy of activism, especially with the inclusion of Mykki Blanco’s reading of Zoe Leonard’s *I Want A President* (“I want a dyke for president. I want a person with AIDS for president and I want a fag for vice president and I want someone with no health insurance...”). With the text written in 1992, the video, by Adinah Dancyger, presents Blanco as the next generation of AIDS activists, aware of their history while still looking toward the future and the continuation of vocally-based activism.



Donald Moffett, *He Kills Me*, 1987. Poster, offset lithography.
Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York, Aspen. © Donald Moffett.

While unsurprisingly filled with copious video and audio, *VOICE = SURVIVAL* expands the definition of voice to also include metaphorical representations of vocalicity. Here, this means text-based works including Donald Moffett's critical representation of Ronald Reagan, reading "He Kills Me," and Chloe Dzubilo's drawing, which announces "DON'T CALL ME CRAZY to make your position less insane," which not only takes on the patriarchy, but also feels wholly relevant in our era of trolling. Text-based artistic activism is no new topic for Visual AIDS, which presented the exhibition *Mixed Messages* in 2011, curated by John Chaich, focusing on text-based artworks engaging with activism.

Though visually exploring the voice, some of the text-based works in *VOICE = SURVIVAL* spoke so loudly that you could almost hear the voice of the artist behind the words. Take, for example, Kameelah Janan Rasheed's prints that announced, "LOWER THE PITCH OF YOUR SUFFERING" and "TELL YOUR STRUGGLE WITH TRIUMPHANT HUMOR." While applicable to many fields, I couldn't help but think of how art institutions expect this polite suffering from queer artists, artists of color and others from minoritarian communities. Institutions want to engage with the struggles of the other in order to perform as the "good progressives" (nevermind the Trumpers on their boards), but they also don't want artists to express their suffering TOO loud or in a way that might compromise relationships with donors. It's exhausting to witness as a writer, let alone to participate in as an artist.



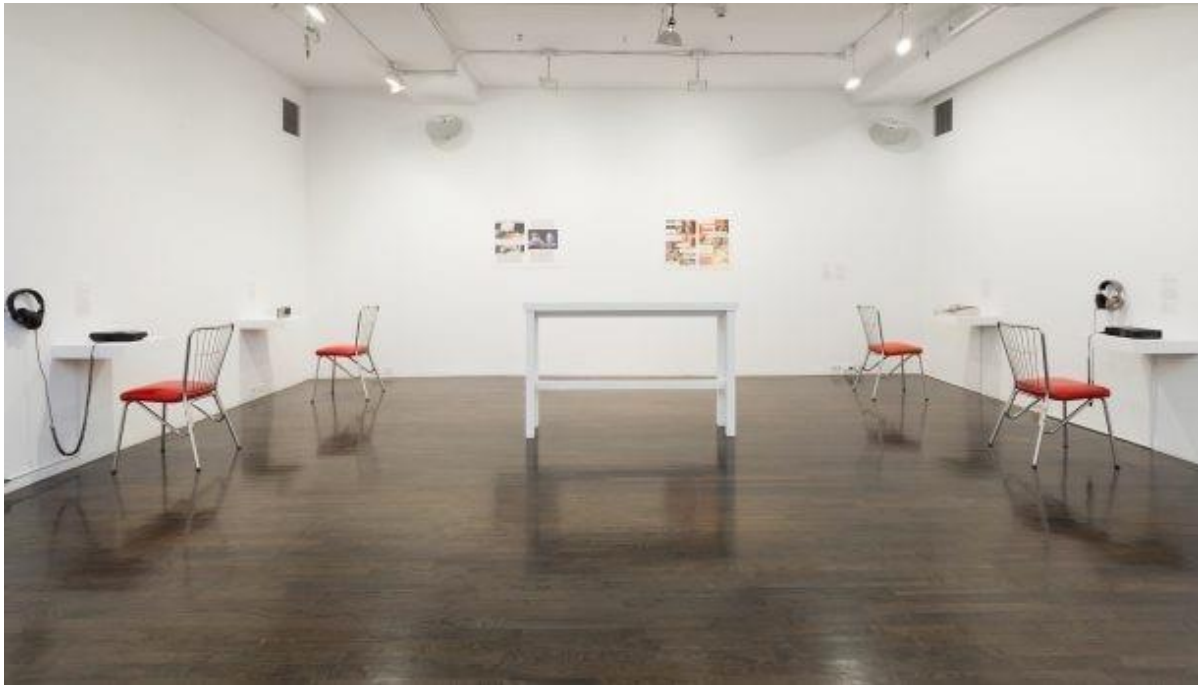
**LOWER
THE
PITCH
OF YOUR
SUFFERING**

Kameelah Janan Rasheed, *Lower the Pitch of Your Suffering* from *How to Suffer Politely (And Other Eti-quette)*, 2014.
Archival inkjet print. Courtesy of the artist.

While these works were engaging, I found myself gravitating toward the recorded audio works. The highlights here were the audiotapes from the David Wojnarowicz Papers at Fales Library & Special Collections. Exhibited in various vintage tape players, adding a nostalgic tactile and participatory aspect to their listening, these tapes preserve Wojnarowicz’s voice, as well as the community around him. From the crushing answering machine messages that narrate the decline and eventual death of Peter Hugar to Wojnarowicz’s playful interview with Hugar and recordings of protest chants, Wojnaorwicz, in his archive fever, painted an audio portrait of himself and his experiences, even if his voice is absent in some of the tapes.

Quoted in Carrera’s catalogue essay, Wojnarowicz once admitted that his fear lies not with death but with silence. He states, “I think what I really fear about death is the silencing of my voice—I feel this incredible pressure to leave something behind.” And he did—a testimony to both his

efforts to assert his imitable voice throughout his life and the continued work of archivists and activists to refuse to allow these powerful voices to be quieted.



Installation view of "VOICE = SURVIVAL" at The 8th Floor. Courtesy of the artists and The 8th Floor, New York

What Wojnarowicz's works show, as well as others in *VOICE = SURVIVAL*, is the equal importance of the preservation of these voices. It's no mistake that oral history has emerged as a means of recording the histories of HIV/AIDS activism as seen in the ACT UP Oral History Project. Referring to the preservation of Bob Rafsky's speech in her catalogue essay, Carrera writes, "This multi-step process reflects a strong commitment by AIDS activists to preserve, historicize and disseminate voices that would otherwise be lost to us today... The potential of a human voice like Rafsky's to persist and circulate beyond absence or death relies on the continued stewardship of survivors."

This care in preservation of activist histories is visible in LJ Roberts's inclusion *Portrait of Deb (1988-199?)*, which features a staggering collection of embroidered activist buttons from the collection of their friend's ex-partner. By painstakingly embroidering each button, Roberts physically embodies the strenuous, time-consuming nature of maintaining archives, as well as their material significance.

Overall, *VOICE = SURVIVAL* provides an essential reminder of the radical presence of the human voice in activism. As Marlon Riggs states in *Tongues Untied*, which is also featured in the show, "I listen for my own quiet implosion. But while I wait, older, stronger rhythms resonate within me, sustain my spirit, silence the clock. I was mute, tongue-tied, burdened by shadows and spirits. Now I speak and my burden is lightened, lifted and free."

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Magazine, POZ Magazine, ArtVoices Magazine, Salon, LA Review of Books, Art Papers Magazine, Art F City, Ms Magazine Blog, Hi-Fructose Magazine, Malibu Magazine, Frontrunner Magazine, CRUSH Fanzine, New York Magazine's Bedford and Bowery, WhiteWall Magazine, among others. She co-curated Visual AIDS's annual exhibition Party Out Of Bounds: Nightlife As Activism Since 1980 at LaMaMa Galleria, as well as its satellite installation Courtship Disorder by John Walter in London's White Cubicle Toilet Gallery at the late George & Dragon Pub. Party Out Of Bounds was featured in I-D Magazine, OUT Magazine, Hyperallergic, The Art Newspaper, Unicorn Booty, New York Magazine's Bedford + Bowery, Posture Mag, Paper Magazine and Sang Bleu.

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