

ARTSEEN

AUGUST 14TH, 2017

WEBEXCLUSIVE

VOICE=SURVIVAL

by JESSE BANDLER FIRESTONE

THE EIGHTH FLOOR | JUNE 15 – AUGUST 11, 2017



Kiki Smith, *Tongue in Ear*, 1983-93. Plaster and oil.
Courtesy of artist and Pace Gallery, New York.

In the back gallery of *VOICE = SURVIVAL*, curated by Claudia Maria Carrera and Adrian Geraldo Saldana, one finds Kiki Smith's *Tongue in Ear* (1983-93). Because it is the only three-dimensional work in the show, its presence looms as a metaphor for the curators' aim to "reset the iconic SILENCE = DEATH rallying cry, proposing a relationship between vocal empowerment and the fight for individual and communal survival." The tongue is inextricably linked

to speech and Smith's sculpture eroticizes the voice as a catalyst of desire capable of moving a body with chills.

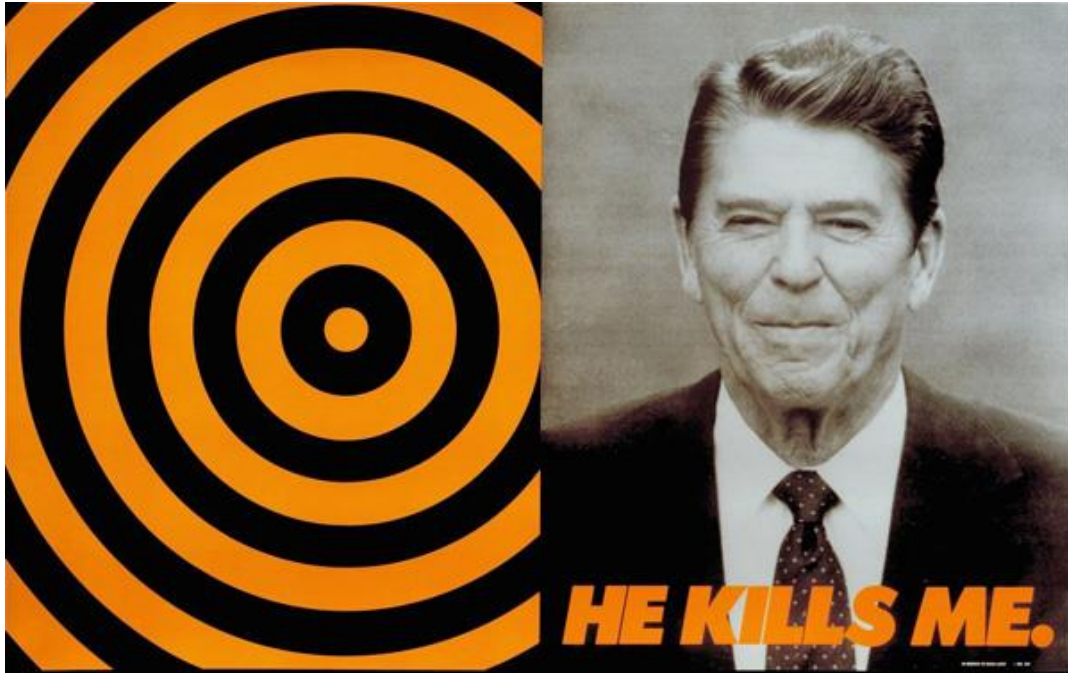
Yet, what makes this exploration of radical activism and voice stand out is its intersectional point of view. The usual whitewashing of AIDS and LGBT activism is actively combatted by the inclusion of Marlon Riggs's video and film work alongside the work of the more prominent art world figure, David Wojnarowicz. While both died of AIDS (in 1994 and 1992, respectively) and both used their body, voice, and illness as tools for illumination and activism, Riggs dismantles the racist notion that male black bodies are inherently more violent. In the music video *Anthem* (1991), the expression on Riggs's face, juxtaposed against the backdrop of the American flag, is bold but earnest as "black men loving black men is the revolutionary act" plays over the speakers. However, in his pivotal film, *Tongues Untied* (1989), of which only a segment is on view, Riggs also expresses how the revolution of radical black love, overshadowed by systematic oppression, can lead to "anger unvented becomes pain unspoken becomes rage released becomes violence." Riggs's use of repetition is a tactic to lull the viewer as he repeats mantras like "brother to brother, brother to brother" to stress that black love is a critical tool to heal from within while disrupting the oppressive system at large.



Mykki Blanco 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*. Makeup by Raisa Flowers. Camera and Sound Assistance by Alice Plati. Courtesy of the artists and *Dazed*.

Riggs's videos are projected prominently and Wojnarowicz's works appear at a more intimate scale. A selection of his audio journals, collaborations, and performances offers a trove of melancholic, poignant, and apoplectic criticisms against a society of deadly indifference. An excerpt from *7 Miles a Second* (1996), a graphic novel made by James Romberger and Marguerite Van Cook using Wojnarowicz's journal entries, is a heartbreaking portrait as he watches the news from his bed, enraged over the divisive tactics of politicians and the media who use "AIDS as a weapon to reinforce the conservative agenda." In the last scenes of the illustration, Wojnarowicz has dwindled to skeletal remains; however, his corpse is not alone and the skeleton of an elephant can be seen lingering in the shadows, barely illuminated by the TV light. This specter of the "elephant in the room" makes literal the deadly political agendas manifested in the silence of the public conscience. The sentiments of *7 Miles a Second* are deeply personal and specific to Wojnarowicz and his AIDS diagnosis, yet his lamentations are aimed at a (still) failing system where people "can't afford the limited drugs that might extend their life" and senators are assured "that these people were dying so quickly from lack of healthcare that there wouldn't be a noticeable increase in visibility." These words resonate deeply to this day, when opiate overdoses—the current elephant in the room—are the leading cause of death for people under fifty, while others are continually bankrupted by their illnesses in a sham healthcare system run by big Pharma assisted by corrupt politicians.

Of all the works in the exhibition, Pat Parker's poetic sound piece, *Don't Let the Fascists Speak* (1977) may be the one that most effectively "licks the ear" as her words carry the viewer through histories defined by nationalism and gross abuses of power. From headphones, we listen to Parker's voice as it enters our bodies and burrows into our brains describing images of Jews in camps and Black Panther organizers jailed. Yet, she also reminds the listener that "every citizen is entitled to free speech." In this way, Parker is quick to present the skewed limitations of the First Amendment wherein it is illegal to yell "Fire" in a movie theatre and "cause people to run / to panic / to hurt" yet there is "no contradiction" in the inflammatory rhetoric of the Nazis (or the contemporary Alt-Right movement) and how their words "will cause people to hurt me."



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

But the curators are also keen to trace the trajectory of artists whose work is critical of today's socio-political climate where white-students decry safe spaces because of discrimination and men can sue movie theatres for stand-alone, all female screenings of *Wonder Woman*, while the anger towards all white-male politicians deciding the future of women's healthcare seems to have no impact. So, what can be done if, unlike Riggs and Wojnarowicz, you are hurt and survive? In her bright yellow posters, Kameelah Janan Rasheed tells her viewers to simply “lower the pitch of your suffering,” suggesting that vulnerable communities must be careful to frame their struggles in a way that is not offensive to the powers at large. Rasheed's posters cite the stifling contemporary politics of politeness and correctness as a failure of identity politics and an effectual safeguard to neoliberal policies. Similarly, in an attempt to trace the origin and impact of neoliberalism on queer bodies, Donald Moffett's *He Kills Me* (1987) features a shooting target beside a smiling photograph of Ronald Reagan with “he kills me” written below. In doing so, Moffett makes it clear that Reagan and all others who silenced HIV related research are complicit in every AIDS death and so are their constituents; thus the equation SILENCE = DEATH.

The artists featured in *VOICE = SURVIVAL* use raw performative actions, subversive gestures, and collaborations as means to resist oppressive systems. Their vulnerabilities become weapons capable of dismantling a system of power sustained by purposeful neglect by showing that their struggles are perpetuated and exacerbated by inaction and ambivalence. While the artists don't explicitly provide tools for thriving under these oppressive systems, the curators have organized an exhibition that forces the viewer to ask themselves what role their own voice will have in this ongoing fight for justice.

CONTRIBUTOR

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