

Active Grieving:
The Aesthetic Activism of ACT UP Montréal

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ABSTRACT

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Mark Andrew Hamilton

Much of the historical record on HIV/AIDS activism focuses on the highly documented activities of ACT UP/NY while silencing the work and achievements of other chapters and organizations also operating at the height of the crisis. Following the 1989 AIDS Conference in Montréal, a local chapter christened ACT UP Montréal was co-founded by ACT UP/NY's Blane Charles the following year. Equally vibrant, the graphic ephemera of ACT UP Montréal—posters, protest signs, pamphlets, manifestation documentation and T-shirts—demonstrates activist voices deserving of similar in-depth analysis. What emerges through looking closely at these items is not only a distinctly *québécois* framework, but an entirely different set of reference points and goals for HIV/AIDS activist work when compared to ACT UP/NY (often referred to as “the Vatican” in interviews collected for this work). Furthermore, “Active Grieving: The Aesthetic Activism of ACT UP Montréal” reveals a multifaceted microhistory of localized reaction to an international pandemic. This thesis builds on the increasing literature and academic discourse on the many groups that made revolutionary change during this era, this work connects activism history, art history, oral history, archival history, and object analysis to contextualize better known HIV/AIDS activist imagery and show the foundational differences between ACT UP Montréal and other activist groups.

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PRELUDE: The Fifth International AIDS Conference, June 4-9, 1989

ACT UP is a diverse non-partisan group of individuals
united in anger and committed to direct action to
end the AIDS crisis.¹

The handheld, shaky footage is grainy, the sound at times muffled and inaudible.² On what appears to be a crisp late-spring morning in Manhattan in early June 1989, members of the HIV/AIDS activist group ACT UP/NY (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power/New York, “render[ed] rather approximately in French as ‘*Coalition de lutte contre le sida*’”) file into buses and vans, shouting coordinators checking off names on clipboards.³ The raw footage jump cuts next to a parking lot at the Canadian border in which the off-screen cameraperson asks one-by-one what French her activist comrades know. For the most part, few can provide anything much beyond “*voulez-vous coucher avec moi, ce soir?*,” delivered with a wink or a laugh at the camera. The overall impression is that of a group road trip video, not that of activists preparing for a monumental fight in front of the international media’s cameras. The only visual clue of their intentions are their matching T-shirts emblazoned in all-caps (see fig. 1.1):

WE ARE ALL LIVING WITH AIDS

NOUS VIVONS TOUS AVEC LA SIDA⁴

But wait! Our omnipresent narrator notices an error on the shirts—that *sida* in French is in fact masculine, requiring the definite article *le*, not the feminine *la*. Following another quick cut, the footage resumes with the shirts corrected with black permanent marker. Shot on the fly, there is a

¹ These lines have been spoken at the start of every weekly ACT UP/NY meeting since its founding in 1987, and translated into multiple languages for use by ACT UP chapters around the world.

² *Royal S. Marks AIDS Activist Video Collection*, filmed by Catherine Gund (1989; New York City, NY: AIDS Activist Video Collection, New York Public Library, 1989), DVD.

³ ACT UP Montréal, “ACT UP Montreal—New Member Packet,” *AIDS Activist History Project*, accessed November 1, 2021, <https://aidsactivisthistory.omeka.net/items/show/734>, 1.

⁴ ACT UP New York, “We are all living with AIDS / Nous vivons tous avec la sida,” The New York Public Library Digital Collections, accessed May 23, 2023, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/e7519610-f71d-0136-6aac-554e417c52af>.

palpable sense of fellowship and excitement as this erstwhile convoy rests momentarily *en route* to Montréal for the 5th International AIDS Conference at which the group—pointedly *without* an official invitation to attend—has planned to make its presence known in characteristic ACT UP/NY headline-grabbing fashion.⁵ Strikingly, this footage sticks out as particularly unique in the ACT UP/NY canon—their most familiar and widely seen footage features church, federal, and pharmaceutical company building takeovers, the tearful dumping of cremated ashes on the White House’s manicured lawns, and so-called political funerals in which the bodies of deceased activists are marched in open caskets through the streets of New York City, most met with vicious riot police response.⁶ In contrast, these clips provide a somewhat unexpected image of conviviality and collaboration, lightness and humour. Indeed, few of those seen on-screen seem conscious of the historical shift in HIV/AIDS activism they would achieve upon their arrival in Montréal.

Collected onto 12 DVDs as the *Royal S. Marks AIDS Activist Video Collection* and credited to Catherine Gund, the footage’s tone takes a turn towards the deathly serious as the setting shifts to the conference’s base at the *Palais des congrès de Montréal* and ACT UP/NY springs into action.⁷ Mid-morning June 4, 1989, the conference opened its doors and in a combined force

⁵ The conference ran June 4-9, 1989, as announced in Smith, “Montréal: 5th International AIDS Conference,” *AIDS Action News!*, *AIDS Activist History Project*, accessed May 23, 2023, <https://aidsactivisthistory.omeka.net/items/show/586>, 1.

⁶ For full description of these actions, see chapters “3. Choosing the Right Target: Seize Control of the FDA”, “4. Collective Leadership: Stop the Church”, “21. Storm the NIH Action at the National Institutes of Health, Washington, D.C., May 21, 1990”, “28. Ashes Action: October 5, 1992”, and “29. Political Funerals” in Sarah Schulman, *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987-1993* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021). For footage of these actions see *Stop the Church*, directed by Robert Hilferty (1991; San Francisco, CA: Frameline), 23 min., <https://www.kanopy.com/en/product/stop-church>; *How to Survive a Plague*, directed by David France (2012; Toronto, ON: Mongrel Media), <https://media3-criterionpic-com.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/htbin/wwform/006?T=MON1893> or *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP*, directed by Jim Hubbard (ACT UP Oral History Project, 2012), 1 hr., 34 min., <https://banq.kanopy.com/video/united-anger-history-act-0>.

⁷ The unseen voice on the other side of the camera, Gund is also a co-founder of ACT UP/NY’s DIVA-TV or Damned Interfering Video Activist Television, responsible for video documentation of the group’s operations and protests. See “DIVA-TV (Damned Interfering Video Activists),” *ACT UP/NY Historical Archive*, accessed March 28, 2025, <https://actupny.org/divatv.1.html>.

with members of Toronto's AIDS Action Now! and the small Montréal-based *Réaction-SIDA*, the now more than 200 activists bypassed the security teams unchallenged and swarmed the escalators of the conference centre (in effect storming the *Palais*) in a surprise move that forever changed the relationship between HIV/AIDS activists and researchers.⁸ Since the pandemic's initial appearance earlier that decade, those infected with and most directly affected by the virus finally met the members of the medical community charged with their care face-to-face. Despite a 702-page programme and a 1264-page collection of presentation abstracts, until these activists forcibly took their rightful place at the table none had previously been made for them.⁹ Reminiscing about that day, leading ACT UP/NY figure Peter Staley recalled:

ACT UP's big scheduled action was right before the opening ceremony outside, which I went to for a bit. And I think I was just hanging outside when I started hearing that a bunch of us had blown past security so I was not even in the group that pushed their way in. But I heard about it almost very quickly and was inside soon after to witness the rest of the opening ceremony.¹⁰

Carrying placard signs and chanting, “the AIDS crisis knows no borders!” and “the whole world is watching!” the ACT UP/NY, *Réaction SIDA*, and AIDS ACTION NOW! protestors seized the event's main stage, delaying Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's opening remarks by two hours (see fig. 1.2 and fig. 1.3).¹¹

⁸ Depending on who is asked, this burst past security was either intricately planned or altogether a spur of the moment move. For one example, see Karen Herland, “Interview Transcript 29,” by Gary Kinsman and Chris Hurl, *AIDS Activist History Project*, accessed May 28, 2023, <https://aidsactivisthistory.files.wordpress.com/2018/03/aahp-karen-herland-eng-final.pdf>, 11.

⁹ Le Centre de recherches pour le développement international, Santé et Bien-être social Canada, et l'Organisation mondiale de la santé, *V^e Conférence internationale sur le SIDA—Le défi scientifique et social: Programme* (Montréal: 1989); Le Centre de recherches pour le développement international, Santé et Bien-être social Canada, et l'Organisation mondiale de la santé, *V^e Conférence internationale sur le SIDA—Le défi scientifique et social: Abrégés* (Ottawa: 1989). AGQ-1994-17-13B, Fonds Ken Morrison, Archives Gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec, Canada.

¹⁰ Peter Staley, Interview with the author, February 14, 2022.

¹¹ While seen in full in *Royal S. Marks AIDS Activist Video Collection*, additional footage is excerpted in France, *How to Survive a Plague*; Hubbard, *United in Anger*; *The World is Sick [sic]*, directed by John Greyson (1989; Vancouver, BC: Video Out), DVD.

Filmmaker John Greyson's short film *The World is Sick [sic]* features further rare footage from within the conference, capturing both the pandemonium and the palpable excitement of the activists' "entirely unplanned action, without script or leader."¹² The film includes the apex moment when Toronto-based activist Tim McCaskell delivered an impromptu on-mic opening on behalf of people living with AIDS in Canada and around the world. Greyson stars in drag as fictional journalist Andrea Austin-Sibley, who spends much of her time on-screen annoyed by the protestors and referring to the film's interview subjects including AIDS and sex worker activists from Thailand, Soweto, San Francisco, and Australia as "scruffy prostitutes."¹³ By the film's end, however, Austin-Sibley claims "Patty Hearst syndrome" and, removing her blazer to reveal an iconic *SILENCE=DEATH* T-shirt, asks for directions to the closest protest.¹⁴ Despite its satirical bent, Greyson's activist fury is apparent. Sharply edited conference footage includes a presentation by a member of the HIV-positive Indigenous American community, a multilingual reading of sections of *Le Manifeste de Montréal: Déclaration internationale des droits et des besoins de la personne atteinte du VIH* to assembled protestors outside of the conference centre, and a tour through the Palais' exhibition halls filled with pharmaceutical company booths set to a raucous cover of the Motown hit 'Money (That's What I Want)'.¹⁵

¹² Greyson, *The World is Sick [sic]*; David France, *How to Survive a Plague: the Story of How Activists and Scientists Tamed AIDS* (Toronto, ON: Signal, 2016), 368.

¹³ Greyson, *The World is Sick [sic]*.

¹⁴ The *SILENCE=DEATH* image served—and continues to serve—as the most iconic design for ACT UP's international chapters. Its creation and dissemination is explored at length in Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, Jack Lowery, *It was Vulgar and it was Beautiful: How AIDS Activists Used Art to Fight a Pandemic* (New York, NY: Bold Type Books, 2022), and Avram Finkelstein, *After Silence: A History of AIDS Through its Images* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018).

¹⁵ ACT UP/NY & AIDS Action Now!, "Montréal Manifesto," Aids Activist History Project, 1989, accessed March 28, 2025, <https://aidsactivisthistory.omeka.net/items/show/67>. Also known as the *Declaration of the Universal Rights and Needs of People Living with HIV Disease*, the jointly-issued *Le Manifeste de Montréal* proposed a 25-point approach to tackling the HIV/AIDS crisis, in particular the access to information and participation by people living with HIV/AIDS in developments in research and treatment. The *Manifeste* was distributed widely both inside and outside of the *Palais des congrès de Montréal* throughout the *AIDS V* conference, and is typical of the types of leaflet and brochure materials produced in particular by ACT UP/NY throughout this period. Peter Staley comments,

With over 12,000 registered attendees, at its opening *AIDS V* was the biggest medical conference in history. Yet just as importantly, it was also the first in which HIV/AIDS activists were permitted to attend for the full duration of the conference and most importantly present publicly their demands and expectations to those working to save their lives—but only after having forced their way in.¹⁶ This activist body was largely composed of People Living with AIDS (using the acronyms PLWAs or PWAs) dressed in the by then standard dress code of faded jeans, lace-up Doc Martens, ACT UP T-shirts, badges, and caps.¹⁷ Over the course of the conference, ACT UP/NY members distributed 4,000 copies of their *A National AIDS Treatment Research Agenda* booklet with its urgent eye-grabbing yellow cover page, and also disseminated their distinctly iconographic message via stickers, T-shirts, and badges throughout the crowd.¹⁸ They did this so thoroughly that, “by the end of the conference perhaps one-third of the more than 12,000 people attending were wearing *SILENCE=DEATH* buttons.”¹⁹ Clearly, their success at *AIDS V* was both in making an activist impact *and* an aesthetic one.²⁰

“It’s still important. I mean, all of our documents and statements back then are history now whether they got accomplished or not. *Nothing* we ever wrote got fully accomplished.”—Peter Staley, Interview with the author, February 14, 2022.

¹⁶ James Hale, “After Montréal, International AIDS Conferences Will Never Be the Same,” *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 141 (July 15, 1989).

¹⁷ Early in the HIV/AIDS activist movement, the adoption and forwarding of the term PWAs and PLWAs replaced the previously common terms “AIDS victim,” “AIDS carrier,” and “AIDS patient.” For more in-depth discussion on this shift, see Jan Zita Grover, “AIDS: Keywords,” in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis / Cultural Activism*, eds. Douglas Crimp and Leo Bersani (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 17-30, 18; and Max Navarre, “Fighting the Victim Label,” in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis / Cultural Activism*, eds. Douglas Crimp and Leo Bersani (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 143-146.

¹⁸ “5th International AIDS Conference - Montreal,” *ACT UP Golden Gate*, Calisphere, UC San Francisco, Library, Special Collections, accessed December 8, 2021, <https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/81983/s98d1x>.

¹⁹ Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston, *AIDS DEMO GRAPHICS* (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1990), 14.

²⁰ Later that same month, however, the June 29, 1989 issue of *The New York Times*’s Opinion page ran the piece “Why Make AIDS Worse Than It Is?,” continuing the so-called newspaper of record’s dismissal of the pandemic. This piece remains infamous due to its suggestion that the crisis would soon end once PWAs—all from undesirable communities—had all died off. “Why Make AIDS Worse Than It Is?,” *The New York Times* (New York City), June 29, 1989, A22, <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/06/29/opinion/why-make-aids-worse-than-it-is.html>.

AIDS V is rightfully remembered for its transformation of HIV/AIDS research and the participation of PWAs in its processes after the assembled activists “took the stage—literally—during the opening ceremonies [and] never relinquished it.”²¹ Thomas Keenan writes:

The Montréal protestors did not merely claim preexisting rights. They had no rights prior to this, in both the limited and the extended sense, in this context. In this zone, a matter of (their, among others) lives and deaths, they had no access; they did not count. They were excluded, but not simply excluded. They were condemned, banished, or abandoned. Here they claimed, and enacted, the right to claim rights, the right to politics, the right to be human, to participate in a forum and a community, to sit at a table and speak and be heard.²²

This seismic shift marks a clear demarcation in the acceptance—albeit a *forced* acceptance—of PWAs and HIV/AIDS activists as vital participants in the ongoing pandemic. Up to the point of *AIDS V*, Cindy J. Kistenberg notes, “experts determine and tell us the facts while the ‘victims’ are silenced. Because the ‘victims’ are living with AIDS, they are considered too biased, too close to the issues, to have a voice in AIDS care or treatment.”²³ In the weeks following *AIDS V*, ACT UP/NY had managed to force monumental changes in the handling of HIV/AIDS drug testing by the Food and Drug Administration in the United States, which they had long viewed as having slowed down the testing process to an unacceptable snail’s pace.²⁴ By the following AIDS conference in San Francisco, however, activists including Staley were given keynote mic time on the main stage, and ACT UP/NY’s Treatment & Data committee was commonly meeting with major figures in government healthcare departments both at state and national levels.²⁵

²¹ Crimp and Rolston, *AIDS DEMO GRAPHICS*, 14.

²² Thomas Keenan, “Re JD: Remembering Jacques Derrida (Part 2), Drift: Politics and the Simulation of Real Life,” *Grey Room* 21 (2005): pp. 94–111, <https://doi.org/10.1162/152638105774539725>, 99.

²³ Cindy J. Kistenberg, *AIDS, Social Change, and Theater: Performance as Protest* (New York, NY: Garland Publishing, 1995), 18.

²⁴ Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 429. For more on the post conference results and ACT UP/NY’s relationship with Anthony Fauci and the National Institutes of Health, see also Peter Staley, “Antony Fauci Quietly Shocked Us All,” *The New York Times*, December 31, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/31/opinion/anthony-fauci-hiv-aids-act-up.html>.

²⁵ David French’s film *How to Survive a Plague* uses footage of Staley’s speech at its dramatic climax. The speech can be viewed in full at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vn8qEjPnoSo>.

These meetings included several with Anthony Fauci, then director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease (NIAID), who called these interactions “transformational” and wrote, “I realized that if I were in their shoes, I would do anything to be heard, just as they were doing.”²⁶ However, despite this monumental change in HIV/AIDS research and direct intervention and interaction by and between PWAs and members of the medical and government establishments, this striking moment of main stage disobedience was overshadowed by the violent confrontation between the military and students in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, China, taking front and centre on the world’s front pages that week.²⁷

For the Montréalers involved, the conference experience left them overwhelmed and floundering. In the weeks following AIDS V’s closing, *Réaction-SIDA* lay in exhausted shambles, uncertain of even continuing as an active concern. One of the group’s final gestures was to express their disillusionment and discomfort through an open post-conference letter sent to AIDS Action Now! and ACT UP/NY, highlighting issues the upstart local activists had experienced with the big name out-of-towners.²⁸ For the New York-based participants, however, this stunted collaboration with local activists left the impression of a “painful lack of direct action in Montréal.”²⁹ Within months, ACT UP/NY approved the move of member Blane Mosley (now Blane Charles) to establish a chapter in the city and “teach new activists how ‘hyperdemocracy’ à

²⁶ Anthony S. Fauci in *Up Against the Wall: Art, Activism and the AIDS Poster*, eds. Donald Albrecht, Jessica Lacher-Feldman, and William M. Valent (Rochester, NY: 2021), 198.

²⁷ As noted in Ron Goldberg, “Conference Call: When PWAs First Sat at the High Table,” <https://actupny.org/documents/montreal.html>. Of that morning, Peter Staley recalls, “I think we got there the night before, and of course the morning of the first day we were all, like the rest of the world, shocked at what was happening in Tiananmen Square.” Peter Staley, Interview with the author, February 14, 2022. Additionally, in Gund’s video footage of the day, there is a short passing conversation on ACT UP/NY’s official statement in support of the students.

²⁸ This four-page *Réaction-SIDA* outlines their frustrations and disappointments, in particular the disregard for Québec’s language politics and the patronizing treatment they received at the hands of the visiting Americans. HIV/AIDS Vertical Files, Archives Gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec, Canada.

²⁹ Michael Hendricks, “ACT UP MONTRÉAL, VIH ET LES FEMMES (version anglaise) *Une mémoire personnelle de Michael Hendricks*”, 2004, AGQ-F0107, Michael Hendricks / René LeBoeuf fonds, Archives Gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec, Canada.

l'ACT UP worked.”³⁰ Transplanting ACT UP/NY’s proven structures and techniques of social disobedience and media savvy, Charles also brought ACT UP/NY’s aesthetic arsenal—a framework of stylized graphics, typography, and design motifs, largely driven by ACT UP/NY’s in house design team Gran Fury.³¹ This overall aesthetic, however, would be adapted, altered, and reconfigured to suit a specifically *here-and-now* context, in the process developing into a uniquely *Québécois* language of bold visuals and performative protest under the name of ACT UP Montréal.

³⁰ Michael Hendricks, “ACT UP Montréal, vih et les femmes (version anglaise). Blane Charles is also seen on-stage at the Palais towering above the other protestors while standing on a raised platform, the camera lingering on their swaying hips and crotch-level SILENCE=DEATH button in Gund’s video documentation. Throughout the rest of this thesis, I will use their current chosen name.

³¹ Before christening themselves Gran Fury, the Silence=Death design collective was responsible for the *SILENCE=DEATH* poster, adapted by ACT UP/NY as a calling card image and still in use today.



Figure 1.1 ACT UP New York, *We Are All Living With AIDS / Nous vivons tous avec la sida* T-shirt, *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*, accessed May 23, 2023, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/e7519610-f71d-0136-6aac-554e417c52af>.



Figure 1.2 AIDS ACTION NOW!, ACT-UP NYC and Réaction SIDA, Photo of the disruption of the opening ceremonies during the V International AIDS Conference, Montréal," *AIDS Activist History Project*, accessed July 17, 2025, <https://aidsactivisthistory.omeka.net/items/show/387>.

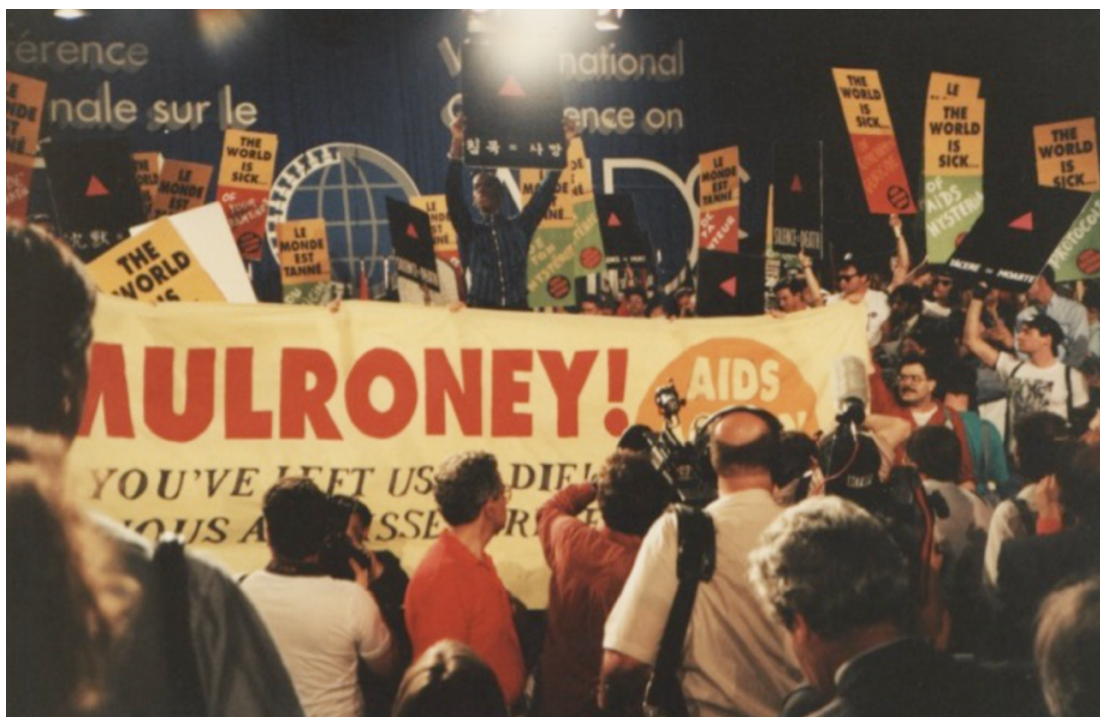


Figure 1.3 AIDS ACTION NOW!, ACT-UP NYC and Réaction SIDA, Photo of the disruption of the opening ceremonies during the V International AIDS Conference, Montréal," *AIDS Activist History Project*, accessed July 17, 2025, <https://aidsactivisthistory.omeka.net/items/show/386>.

Introduction: Active Grieving

In this thesis, I will stake a claim for ACT UP Montréal's rightful place at the forefront of early-1990s HIV/AIDS activism. In order to tell this history in full, this thesis offers oral histories compiled from extensive interviews with surviving members of ACT UP Montréal, coupled with an aesthetic analysis of their protest creations, enlightening and expanding the available documentation on the group. Throughout their short yet incredibly active three-year existence, ACT UP Montréal educated, entertained, and antagonized the Québec government and wider public with heightened acts of protest, activism, and evocative graphic ephemera which left an indelible impression on Montréal. Yet, this memory and influence have not been considered by the historiography, and it is through these oral histories and graphic analysis that I will claim ACT UP Montréal's importance and impact, both on those who were members of its ranks and those who witnessed their activities. ACT UP/NY has often been credited as a major influence on subsequent protest movements including Occupy and Black Lives Matter, both of which similarly showed strong presence on the streets of Montréal in local iterations.¹ Given the speed and rush with which the majority of direct-response activist movements operate, there is often very little consideration given to documentation and consideration of the cultural implications and individualities of their actions. ACT UP's broader image consciousness, however, leaves researchers with extensive materials capturing both the on-the-street realities of their manifestations, as well

¹ For more on ACT UP's influence on modern civil disobedience movements see David France, "The Activists: How ACT UP—the coalition that fought against AIDS stigma and won medications that slowed the plague—forever changed patients' rights, protests and American political organizing as it's practiced today," *The New York Times Style Magazine*, April 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/13/t-magazine/act-up-aids.html>; Kyle Turner, "12 People on Joining ACT UP: 'I Went to That First Meeting and Never Left'," *The New York Times Style Magazine*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/13/t-magazine/act-up-members.html>; Michelangelo Signorile, "Black Lives Matter, ACT UP and the Urgency of Violence and Death," *The Huffington Post*, August 19, 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/black-lives-matter-act-up_b_8010242.

as rich glimpses behind the scenes.² Through an extensive series of interviews—most of which included the viewing of photographs and protest graphics held in the Archives gaies du Québec’s collections—I have collected first-hand personal memories and commentaries from the group’s surviving members. In asking participants to review and relive their experiences, I have engaged in a collective remembrance and reconsideration which time did not permit at the actual moment of its occurrence. Throughout these interviews, all narrators highlighted this period of the HIV/AIDS crisis as a life-or-death moment. More than one mentioned losing over 100 friends and acquaintances, often losing count past that number.³ And still, most also referred to this period as one of the most important times of their lives.⁴

As a queer-identifying man who reached adolescence in the early 1990s in Calgary, Alberta, the HIV/AIDS crisis negatively impacted my own sexual awakening and early development. I lived in fear, under the misguided belief that were I to experiment with any of my growing sexual urges the only possible result would be a horrible death tinged with shame. One of my few sources of information on queer life outside of Calgary was my junior high and high school library’s subscriptions to *SPIN* magazine, which specialized in alternative music but also contained Bob Guccione, Jr.’s “Words from the Front” column focused on the HIV/AIDS pandemic, printed from 1987 to 1997.⁵ “Words from the Front” both enthralled and terrified me. While

² ACT UP Montréal was documented in particular by photographer René LeBoeuf, whose prints, contact sheets, and negatives are all held at the Archives gaies du Québec.

³ At the opening of an exhibition of photos, posters other ephemera that I co-curated entitled *L’Activisme esthétique d’ACT UP Montréal : une histoire en photos et en affiches* on June 13, 2023 at the Archives gaies du Québec, the archive’s director Pierre Pilote also mentioned this number. My co-curator LeBoeuf, whose photographs formed the backbone of the show, took me through one last look of the final hanging, repeating the words, “*Il est mort ... il est mort ... il est mort*,” as we glanced at his photographs of his lost friends taken three decades earlier.

⁴ This sentiment is shared throughout other ACT UP-related histories. See: Schulman, *Let the Record Show*; Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago, IL: 2009); Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁵ Michael Klein, “Our Groundbreaking AIDS Column: An Interview with SPIN Founder Bob Guccione Jr.,” *SPIN*, December 1, 2022, <https://www.spin.com/2022/12/our-groundbreaking-aids-column-an-interview-with-spin-founder-bob-guccione-jr/>.

there was regularly-printed proof of an active and united queer world beyond the library's walls, it was one overwhelmed by a devastating and tragic illness brutally cutting vibrant individuals down by the thousands. Also a time of incredible discovery, some of my favourite artists and writers with whom I became acquainted then—including David Wojnarowicz (1954-1992), Keith Haring (1958-1990), and Klaus Nomi (1944-1983)—were amongst those lost, all before the age of 40.⁶ By the time I enrolled in film studies at the University of Calgary in 1996, protease inhibitors (PIs) and HAART (Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy) had been introduced as effective HIV treatments and transformed this most deadly of infections into a manageable disease.⁷ “Words from the Front” remained one of my primary sources of information throughout the years 1990-1996, and also introduced me to the actions and demands of ACT UP/NY, who maintained an intriguing mystique for me during that period both in terms of their strong militant queer presence and striking graphic design.

Following a move to Montréal in 2015, I learned of the local chapter's existence, and the onset of the Covid pandemic presented the opportunity to undertake this historical tribute to their members, manifestations, and ephemera. Throughout the research period, I also experienced an act of building bridges between myself and the prior generations who were on the frontlines, in the process discovering a community of queer elders previously missing in my life. While any explorations into queer history as undertaken by a queer person are undoubtedly enriching and an act of lineage construction, I found myself both pleasantly surprised and emotionally affected by

⁶ See “David Wojnarowicz,” *artnet*, accessed March 11, 2025, <https://www.artnet.com/artists/david-wojnarowicz/>; “The Keith Haring Foundation,” *The Keith Haring Foundation*, accessed March 11, 2025, <https://www.haring.com/>; Kathy Iandoli, “The Curious Career of Klaus Nomi,” *Pitchfork*, December 10, 2015, <https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/970-the-curious-career-of-klaus-nomi/>.

⁷ For a year-by-year overview of treatment developments, see “A Timeline of HIV and AIDS,” *hiv.gov*, accessed March 11, 2025, <https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/history/hiv-and-aids-timeline>.

the gathering of these stories and testimonials and the new connections and relationships that developed as a result. And while some major players in the story of ACT UP Montréal were accessible only through their posthumous fonds at the Archives gaies du Québec via photographic record, handwritten notes and other objects maintained in their memory or through spoken remembrances, I was also happy and moved to make their acquaintance.

Methodology

In her *Viral Cultures: Activist Archiving in the Age of AIDS*, Marika Cifor proclaims, “as a queer person, HIV/AIDS is my inheritance,” calling to and echoing the T-shirts worn by ACT UP/NY and AIDS ACTION NOW! protestors in Montréal earlier described.⁸ As such, this research work feels in part an obligation as a member of the queer community currently living in a time of protective precautionary measures including PrEP thanks to the activist work of those who came before me.⁹ At the same time, I must also acknowledge Marika Cifor’s suggestion that “ACT UP nostalgia names the desire for affectively unified community, radical politics, and powerful activist aesthetic” as a magnetic draw towards studies related to the group I myself have long experienced from a distance, which can at times trigger a feeling of lacking an equally connected and militant queer community in the here and now. In analyzing footage of activist reaction to the 1990 Sex Garage raid in Montréal (an event and following series of municipal protests in Montréal with strong presence of ACT UP Montréal and its members) Jason B. Crawford echoes Cifor’s suggestion of ACT UP nostalgia remaining a driving force in academic queer identity

⁸ Marika Cifor, *Viral Cultures: Activist Archiving in the Age of AIDS* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), 15.

⁹ Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) can be taken in multiple ways—as a daily pill, on-demand before and after sexual activities, and as of 2025 as an injection every two months—and is considered 99% effective in reducing the risk of HIV transmission. For more information, see the Community Based Research Centre (CBRC)’s website at <https://www.cbrc.net/prep>.

building related to the era, while also admitting, “rather than nostalgia, I felt dissonance and shock, which led to an intense curiosity: What was going on here? Who are these people? Where are they now?”¹⁰ I find myself in a middle-ground between Cifor and Crawford in finding a somewhat messy push-pull sensation between romanticizing and mourning this period as an associated weight of research related to the HIV/AIDS era, and in particular to that of its activists.

This thesis utilizes two approaches in telling the story of ACT UP Montréal, blending oral history compiled from interviews undertaken over the course of two years and archival analysis of protest ephemera including posters, banners, T-shirts, stickers and flyers. My initial plans were to tell the story of ACT UP Montréal solely through analyzing their archival traces at the Archives gaies du Québec in Montréal, inspired in part by Ann Cvetkovich’s moving description of the power of objects in queer archives in her *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*:

The stock-in-trade of the gay and lesbian archive is ephemera, the term used by archivists and librarians to describe occasional publications and paper documents, material objects, and items that fall into the miscellaneous category when being catalogued. Gay and lesbian archives are often built on the donations of private collectors who have saved the ephemeral evidence of gay and lesbian life—both personal and public—because it might otherwise disappear [...] In insisting on the value of apparently marginal or ephemeral materials, the collectors of gay and lesbian archives propose that affects—associated with nostalgia, personal memory, fantasy, and trauma—make a document significant.¹¹

Items produced in the initial wave of HIV/AIDS activism in the late 1980s and early 1990s have taken on a queer cultural cachet, with posters, banners, postcards, T-shirts and hats appearing regularly on eBay, in collector markets, and at auction houses at consistently increasing prices.¹²

¹⁰ Jason B. Crawford and Karen Herland, “Sex Garage: Unspooling Narratives, Rethinking Collectivities,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 48, no. 1 (2014): pp. 106-131, <https://doi.org/10.3138/jcs.48.1.106>, 113.

¹¹ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 243.

¹² At time of writing, eBay Canada lists *Read My Lips* T-shirt for \$337.76 CDN, a *SILENCE=DEATH* T-shirt for \$539.07, and a Mr. Yuck *300,000 U.S. AIDS Deaths, Fuck Apathy and Greed* T-shirt for \$727.02 CDN, all originals

Subsequent protest movements including Black Lives Matter and the Women’s March on Washington also utilized a strong thread of design graphics running through their presence on the streets and online (bold text-based designs for the former, and the iconic pink knit Pussyhats of the latter). I argue, however, that no other movement has attained a similarly rich and successful blend of graphics and protest than those created and utilized by HIV/AIDS activists in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, led in particular by ACT UP/NY and its subsidiary chapters throughout the world.¹³ However, this project took a transformative shift towards also including an extensive oral history component following an initial interview with narrators Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf after which I realized their remembrances would lend an aesthetic analysis far more context and weight than merely interpreting physical objects found in the archive.

As several former primary members of ACT UP Montréal are still alive, the opportunity to get their remembrances down on tape became a driving factor in the composition of this thesis. In their *What Makes Queer Oral History Different*, Kevin P. Murphy, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Jason Ruiz note, “a seeming dearth in the written record of subjective experiences of queerness among nonelites,” prompting “early practitioners of lesbian and gay history [to] immediately

printed by ACT UP/NY in the 1980s. ACT UP/NY still sells *SILENCE=DEATH* T-shirts on their website for \$38.00 USD. A Keith Haring-designed *Ignorance=Fear, Silence=Death* ACT UP/NY poster—one of several designs Haring donated to the group, of which he was also an active member—is listed for \$4,714.98 CDN. Additionally, at the 2023 Printed Matter NY Art Book Fair in New York City, a dealer of printed queer materials had several original posters and stickers for sale with several items priced at \$1,000 USD and above.

¹³ The Pussyhat’s infamy has itself been museumified, including its placement in the permanent collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, UK. See V&A Museum, “The Pussyhat,” <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-pussyhat>.

[embrace] oral history methodology [...] collecting and interpreting oral histories were absolutely necessary—and even urgent—to their project.”¹⁴ To this time-sensitive pressure to collect and document, Ann Cvetkovich adds:

the history of ACT UP/NY, for example, reveal[s] how perilously close to being lost even the recent past is, especially when it includes not only traumatic experience but gay and lesbian and activist histories, which are constantly being erased by resistance and neglect.¹⁵

Further driving home the necessity expressed by Murphy *et al.* and the neglect described by Cvetkovich, two individuals important to both ACT UP Montréal and the *milieu* in which their activities took place passed away in 2023 before I could interview them—designer Pierre-Marc Pelletier and graffiti artist Zilon, both of whom created works used by ACT UP Montréal and whose stories of that time unfortunately left with them.¹⁶ Out of this pressure to collect whatever remembrances I could, however, there was also the parallel creation of inter-generational joy and connection, echoed by Murphy *et al.* who claim oral history—*queer* oral history, specifically—is “transformative and complex [...] in which narrator and interviewer can form bonds of friendship and political commitment.”¹⁷ And while these newly formed relationships have proven highly valuable in my own understanding of the larger LGBTQ+ community to which I belong, this process has also given an opportunity for commemoration both to my interview subjects’ painful experiences and for myself as recorder and editor encountering and processing a scale of

¹⁴ Kevin P. Murphy, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Jason Ruiz, “What Makes Queer Oral History Different,” *The Oral History Review* Volume 43, Issue 1 (2016): pp. 1-24, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/ohw022>, 4.

¹⁵ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 10.

¹⁶ After several attempts to contact Pelletier via old telephone numbers and LinkedIn, multiple interview subjects suggested he may have preferred to not look back at the period in question given the emotional toll of doing so. News of Pelletier’s death was shared by his friend and former co-worker at *The Montreal Mirror* Matthew Hays on his Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/18NSxFFvy5/> and confirmed by follow-up messages between us. Fierté Montréal held a memorial service for Zilon on August 10, 2023, following his passing in late July of that year. “Zilon,” *Fierté Montréal*, accessed March 19, 2025, <https://fiertemontreal.com/en/artists/zilon-2023>. While their voices are missing from this research, works by both artists were included in the ACT UP Montréal exhibition *L’activisme esthétique d’ACT UP MONTRÉAL : une histoire en photos et en affiches* that I co-curated with René LeBoeuf at the Archive gaies du Québec in the summer of 2023.

¹⁷ Murphy, Pierce, and Ruiz, “What Makes Queer Oral History Different,” 7.

loss I have not directly experienced in my lifetime. Cvetkovich echoes this sentiment in direct reference to this impact of trauma on queer communities:

These stories vividly reveal oral history's power to turn affective memory into public history. Gathering oral history is itself a form of mourning, a practice of revivifying the dead by talking about them and revivifying moments of intimacy that are gone. The loss of a movement and the loss of people are entwined now, even as new forms of activism continue. Moreover, because mourning is not punctual and need not come to an end in order to avoid pathology or overcome trauma, and because the dead stay with us, it is important to keep the historical record open.¹⁸

Following this particularly enriching experience and its effect on my personal queer experience, I strongly echo Murphy *et al.*'s proclamation that "oral history might be best understood as a queer methodology and as a method that shares a genealogy with queer studies and politics."¹⁹

Sources

As mentioned previously, much of this work is based on archival research conducted at the *Archives gaies du Québec* (AGQ) between 2021-2024, with additional research via the *AIDS Activist History Project* (AAHP) coordinated by Alexis Shotwell, Gary Kinsman, and the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives.²⁰ While the AGQ's ACT UP Montréal holdings are extensive, there are scans of a few items at the AAHP not available at the AGQ at the time of my initial research. Following our exhibition *L'Activisme esthétique d'ACT UP Montréal* in the summer of 2023, multiple followup donations—including the subsequent creation of the Fonds Luc Desaulniers, one of this project's narrators—arrived including some of those items previously only found as scans at the AAHP. While the bulk of sources referenced in this thesis are located in the Fonds Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, both the Fonds Douglas Buckley-Couvrette and Fonds

¹⁸ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 238.

¹⁹ Murphy, Pierce, and Ruiz, "What Makes Queer Oral History Different," 8.

²⁰ For more on the AAHP see <https://www.aidsactivisthistory.ca/>.

Ken Morrison also provided useful materials.²¹ Of particular note, the Fonds Buckley-Couvrette includes a wealth of behind-the-scenes documents, including the original working document of ACT UP Montréal’s foundational principles, press release drafts, and financial statements.

Despite the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS on the local LGBTQ+ population, at the time of research between 2021 and 2024, several foundational members of ACT UP Montréal remained accessible for interviews. I put an emphasis on those available to speak with me face-to-face, and the Archives gaies du Québec also permitted me to hold several interviews there allowing hands-on perusal of the group’s photographic record and graphic creations. While the overall process of procuring, compiling, and transcribing these interviews took more than two years to complete—due in part to difficulties in locating certain figures deemed as having particular importance by other participants—those quoted here were all not only incredibly giving of their time and recollections, but also expressed genuine surprise that such research was being done on their activities as members of ACT UP Montréal.

As opposed to a chronological play-by-play of ACT UP Montréal’s demonstrations and ephemeral remnants, this oral history plays out on a somewhat looser framework paying particular attention to emotional responses and broader memories of the time than what was done precisely when. Most interviews followed a similar path of personal biography, initial experiences with HIV/AIDS, memories of joining ACT UP Montréal (including recollections of the initial meetings which they attended), emotional responses to their participation in planning and executing events, and finally reflections on the group’s downfall and following legacy. ACT UP Montréal operated as an active activist concern between December 1989 and November 1993, making their first public appearance on March 19, 1990 staging a die-in on the heated pavements in front

²¹ For further information on the Archives gaies du Québec’s holdings, see “Fonds d’archives,” *Archives gaies du Québec*, accessed March 20, 2025, <https://agq.qc.ca/fonds-archives/>.

of the Complexe Desjardins on the first anniversary of the murder of local activist Joe Rose.²²

From that demonstration onwards, the group operated in a pressure cooker, making countless appearances throughout the city either protesting, disseminating safer sex information, or fundraising at parties, drag, and ballroom (voguing) events. Despite the sheer losses of friends and lovers experienced by the narrators of this project, throughout these interviews there was also a clear fondness in remembering ACT UP Montréal.

Our narrators include Blane Charles (formerly Mosely), viewed by many as the initial spark for ACT UP Montréal following their relocation from New York City. Previously, they held the role of “chalk queen” at meetings of ACT UP/NY, responsible for taking minutes on the large chalkboards at the group’s legendary meetings.²³ Luc Desaulniers, one of Blane’s first contacts and closest friends in Montréal and a co-driving force in founding both ACT UP Montréal and the World Pride Ball voguing events held in the city in the early 1990s sat for one interview in-person at the Archives gaies du Québec. Pierre Durand, a noted illustrator and cartoonist in Québec publications including the gay newspaper *Sortie* and satirical magazine *Croc* was interviewed once via Zoom. Michael Hendricks, a noted long-time activist based in Montréal following his evasion of the US draft during the Vietnam War whose activism work has included anti-war, anti-police violence, HIV/AIDS-crisis related, and pro-gay marriage initiatives and his husband René LeBoeuf, ACT UP Montréal’s in-house photographer and long-time labour activist and sat for five in-person interviews at their home in Montréal.²⁴

²² John MacFarlane, “30 years later, Montréal’s gay community reflects on the murder of Joe Rose,” CBC News, March 20, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/joe-rose-murder-30-years-1.5062744>.

²³ I conducted four interviews with Blane Charles, three on Zoom and one in person in New York City.

²⁴ Archival materials were brought to the Hendricks/LeBoeuf home for these interviews, and during the curation process of our AGQ exhibition I worked closely with LeBoeuf. On their struggle for marriage equality see Erika Morris, “Quebec’s 1st married same-sex couple reminisces on 20th anniversary: The fight for 2SLGBTQ+ ongoing, couple says,” *CBC News*, April 1, 2024, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/quebec-first-gay-marriage-20-anniversary-1.7160593>.

Marc Pageau, one of ACT UP Montréal's primary graphic designers sat for one interview on Zoom and another in-person at the Archives gaies du Québec. Author Neil Smith, one of the youngest members of ACT UP Montréal sat for one interview at my apartment in Montréal. Peter Staley, original ACT UP/NY member and co-founder of Treatment Action Group (TAG) sat for one interview via Zoom. And Paula Sypnowich, former meeting animator of ACT UP Montréal sat for one interview in person at the Archives gaies du Québec. With most of these narrators I also asked subsequent questions for clarification via e-mail, as noted in the full transcriptions which will remain in the holdings of the Archives gaies du Québec.

Historiography

This thesis is situated at a crossroads of several literatures. Firstly, it is a contribution to the history of activist responses to the HIV/AIDS crisis and, in particular, of ACT UP as an international project, not just one taking place in New York City. An important goal from this perspective is to demonstrate the unique approach used by ACT UP Montréal, one that not only embraces but also utilizes locality. Secondly, this thesis represents a new study of the visual culture of political and social movements, and in particular the progression of design aesthetics used in popular protest movements. And thirdly, I seek to make an intervention in the broader discussion of the distinctive nature of LGBTQ+ activism in Canada, Québec, and Montréal, and its important differences from those seen in the United States.

Activist Responses to HIV/AIDS

The historiography related to HIV/AIDS activism is one in which ACT UP/NY casts a long shadow. This is somewhat problematic for researchers given the presence of not only the nearly

150 international chapters including Montréal's, but the other groups operating independently of the ACT UP network.²⁵ Works including Sarah Schulman's extensive and best-selling oral history *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987-1993* (and its adjacent feature-length documentary *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP* on which she acted as co-producer) and David France's film and subsequent book both titled *How to Survive a Plague* centre the majority of activist gains and their related narratives in New York City, despite the accomplishments of other ACT UP chapters.²⁶ While other works including Benita Roth's *The Life and Death of ACT UP/LA: Anti-AIDS Activism in Los Angeles from the 1980s to the 2000s*, Deborah B. Gould's *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS* and *Life During Wartime: Emotions and the Development of ACT UP* based on that writer's experiences with ACT UP/Chicago, and Cvetkovich's remembrances of her time with ACT UP/Austin in *An Archive of Feelings* offer vital and differing points of view, the biggest space remains occupied by the foundational chapter and some of its larger-than-life personalities.²⁷ Roth, in particular, stakes a claim for the accomplishments of other chapters by disputing ACT UP/NY's central role "although ACT UP/NY was the first and the largest ACT UP, it was not the only ACT UP of consequence. The conflation of ACT UP with ACT UP/NY minimizes the scope and appeal of militant anti-AIDS activism in the mid-1980s to early 1990s."²⁸ Roth further explores the often

²⁵ At the time of writing, several international chapters are also still active including ACT UP Paris, ACT UP London, ACT UP Philadelphia and ACT UP Sud-Ouest in the South of France. Many chapters are also commemorated in archives, such as ACT UP/RI's archives at Brown University's John Hay Library in Providence, Rhode Island and materials related to ACT UP Vancouver in the City of Vancouver Archives.

²⁶ Schulman, *Let the Record Show*; Hubbard, *United in Anger*; France, *How to Survive a Plague* [book]; France, *How to Survive a Plague* [film]. France's works both utilize a heroic figures format, with much attention paid to recognizable white male ACT UP/NY figures including Larry Kramer, Peter Staley, and Mark Harrington while Schulman casts a far wider net of interview subjects both on the page and on-screen. While ACT UP/NY is self-defined as a non-hierarchical organization, it is not one without its own stars.

²⁷ Benita Roth, *The Life and Death of ACT UP/LA: Anti-AIDS Activism in Los Angeles from the 1980s to the 2000s* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Gould, *Moving Politics*; Deborah B. Gould, "Life During Wartime: Emotions and the Development of ACT UP," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* Vol. 7, Issue 2 (2002): pp. 177-200, <https://doi.org/10.17813/mai.7.2.8u264427k88v1764>; Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*.

²⁸ Roth, *The Life and Death of ACT UP/LA*, 6.

frustrating interaction between the Los Angeles and New York chapters, in part blaming an expectation on the LA group's participation in major national manifestations as a direct cause of LA's eventual cessation of activities, claiming, "the oscillation between local and national actions that had characterized ACT UP/LA's approach to anti-AIDS direct action was beginning to show diminishing returns for the local group."²⁹

Scholarship devoted to the activist response to HIV/AIDS in Canada often also places the national response within the shadow of the American one. Two of the earliest writers to focus on Canada in the 1980s and early 1990s were David M. Rayside and Evert A. Lindquist, responsible for several publications including a chapter in the 1992 publication *AIDS in the Industrialized Democracies: Passions, Politics, and Policies*, an important early document on international responses to the pandemic. Here they state, "unlimited access to the American media meant that Canadians were made aware of the disease at about the same time as Americans, before substantial numbers of Canadians became sick."³⁰ This sentiment was echoed by the anglophone interview partners involved in this project who initially gathered the bulk of their early information from American publications. They further acknowledge the US influence over Canadian activism:

Canadian AIDS activists, especially in English Canada, have also been greatly influenced by the agendas and tactics of their American counterparts, for example in developing community-based AIDS prevention programs and acquiring information on experimental drugs.³¹

²⁹ By 1988, ACT UP chapters throughout the network were connected via the umbrella organization ACT NOW (AIDS Coalition to Network, Organize and Win—later known as ACT UP/Network), although ACT UP Montréal were not included in this grouping; Roth, *The Life and Death of ACT UP/LA*, 147.

³⁰ 2. David M. Rayside and Evert A. Lindquist, "Canada: Community Activism, Federalism, and the New Politics of Disease," *AIDS in the Industrialized Democracies: Passions, Politics, and Policies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 51.

³¹ Rayside and Lindquist, "Canada," 52.

Nearly 30 years later, in “AIDS Histories Otherwise: The Case of Haitians in Montréal,” Viviane Namaste expands on this sentiment through a look at a very specific response to the crisis:

Research and cultural productions underline the tremendous role and leadership played by the United States [...] this [...] puts into question the ways in which the simple adoption of such a US framework occludes local histories of AIDS in North America, including local histories *within* the United States.³²

Parallel to Namaste’s investigation on a specific cultural group response, Rayside and Lindquist also note differences in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis across provincial lines:

Since each province is separated from the others either by enormous geographic distance or by language, policymakers and AIDS activists have often followed strikingly distinct paths, and at times have had remarkably little contact with one another. The primacy of provincial jurisdiction in the health care field and the failure of the federal government to play much of a coordinating role in the battle against AIDS has reinforced the distinctiveness of AIDS policy in each of the major policy centers.³³

Finally, *Seeing Red: HIV/AIDS and Public Policy in Canada*, edited by Suzanne Hindmarch, Michael Orsini, and Marilou Gagnon and featuring writers including Alex McClelland, Randy Jackson, and Gary Kinsman analyzes Canada’s overall response to the crisis through several unique lenses, including that of Indigenous communities, trans women, and legal frameworks, classifying the overall effort as “neither uniquely compassionate nor proactive when it comes to supporting those living with HIV/AIDS.”³⁴ By focusing on a specific Montréal response at a point of

³² Viviane Namaste, “Five. AIDS Histories Otherwise: The Case of Haitians in Montréal,” in *AIDS and the Distribution of Crises*, eds. Jih-Fei Cheng, Alexandra Juhasz, and Nishant Shahani (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 132. Interestingly, one of the first HIV/AIDS activist groups in Montréal was the Group haïtien pour la prévention du SIDA. I was unable to find much about their operations or longevity in the archives used for this project, yet this organization clearly deserves a dedicated research study of its own. Sean Mills’ *A Place in the Sun: Haiti, Haitians and the Remaking of Québec* (Montréal, QC and Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2016), makes no mention of the group despite acknowledging AIDS-related difficulties faced by the local Haitian community.

³³ Rayside and Lindquist, “Canada,” 55.

³⁴ Suzanne Hindmarch, Michael Orsini, and Marilou Gagnon, eds., *Seeing Red: HIV/AIDS and Public Policy in Canada* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2018). Canada is one of more than 90 countries in the world in which HIV-nondisclosure is treated as a criminal offence akin to sexual assault. In cases where those living with HIV do not disclose their status to their sexual partners, jail time is a possible outcome, although this law is presently under review following a 2023 public consultation and activist work by writers including Alex McClelland whose work is printed in this volume.

time early in the crisis, this project also adds to the overall narrative of AIDS activism through presenting a group reaction that was both vibrant and unique.

Visual Cultures of Political and Social Movements

After a protest all that remains is ephemeral evidence—discarded placards, posters, banners, and ripped T-shirts, media reports more often than not unsupportive of the protesting group in question, and a scantily documented record in the form of oral histories seldom collected. Created to fill a pressing need for quickly-designed and produced materials for use at protests and rapidly-approaching manifestations, the driving intention behind the objects used in protest is both an ease of multiplication and the implication of an organized movement behind their creation. Often produced in quick-timed reaction to a particular event, placards, posters and other protest ephemera are considered of little value, and garbage cans stuffed with discarded ephemera are a common sight following a march or protest.

In his *A People's Art History of the United States: 250 Years of Activist Art and Artists Working in Social Justice Movements*, Nicolas Lambert credits “graphic agitation” as a primary driving force in American protest from the 1700s.³⁵ Despite this early timeline, however, much of the focus for Lambert and several others analyzing protest and activist art focuses primarily on the 20th century and its overriding movements of civil rights, anti-war activism, and feminism. Indeed, given the rise of acknowledgment and appreciation of graphic design and the solidification of its links to the world of advertising in the 1950s and 1960s, such a growing presence throughout this period is fitting. Stephen J. McCarthy acknowledges the skills of graphic designers as an arsenal equally useful for prompting social change, in particular that work which is self-

³⁵ Nicolas Lambert, *A People's Art History of the United States: 250 Years of Activist Art and Artists Working in Social Justice Movements* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2013), 33.

directed, which “instead of being reactive, it is proactive.”³⁶ Through spotlighting self-directed—and most often unpaid—work as holding a particular power in regards to activist creations, McCarthy also emphasizes an importance of voluntary participation in activist movements. As one major example, McCarthy discusses Lorraine Schneider’s 1968 fundraising poster *War is Not Healthy for Children and Other Living Things*, a ubiquitous visual motif seen on buttons, posters, and postcards, “the right image at the right time in the right place [...] the campaign promoting it may have been as important to its success as the icon itself.”³⁷

Professor of Visual and Critical Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago Maud Lavin considers the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973 as the kick-off point for the “image wars” era, prompting a wealth of graphic protest ephemera created by both sides of the debate—and surely no-one has been left untouched by these graphic works in the public space ever since.³⁸ Lavin also dates much of the current visual language of protest graphics to New York City in the 1970s and 1980s, including the 1979 founding of Group Material gallery in the East Village, and the subsequent activities of the Guerrilla Girls (founded in 1985) and ACT UP/NY’s in-house design team Gran Fury (active from 1988).³⁹ The works of these artists have also crossed over from their initial function as activist tools into the collections of museums and gallery walls. Even the Guerrilla Girls’ *These galleries show no more than 10% women artists or none at all* poster, wheat pasted throughout Soho in 1985 in protest of discriminatory sexist practices, now finds itself in multiple museum collections.⁴⁰

³⁶ Steven J. McCarthy, *The Designer as Author, Producer, Activist, Entrepreneur, Curator & Collaborator: New Models for Communicating* (Amsterdam, NL: BIS, 2013), 95.

³⁷ McCarthy, *The Designer as Author, Producer, Activist, Entrepreneur, Curator & Collaborator*, 104.

³⁸ Maud Lavin, *Clean New World: Culture, Politics, and Graphic Design* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 145.

³⁹ Lavin, *Clean New World*, 94.

⁴⁰ Lavin, *Clean New World*, 105.

Despite this growing presence in hallowed art spaces, however, the initial locality of activist art remains outside of those constraints. Gie Goris writes:

The locus of subversive art is not the gallery or the museum, but the space where decisions are made or negotiated. It can be the street, the (mass) media, religious spaces. It takes a cultural position in the first place, subverting the symbolic or real power where and when it is relevant to do so.⁴¹

This gradual transition from wheat pasted disruption of the urban visual space to display as framed gallery pieces can also be considered to commemorate the passing of, or completion of an activist movement. Following the introduction of life-saving medical treatments, much of the discourse related to HIV/AIDS in North America and Europe transitioned to a “post-AIDS” era. While this discounts the experiences of much of the rest of the world, including within poorer parts of the USA where HIV transmission rates continue to affect poorer populations, this form of thinking has seen works created at the peak of the early crisis make their way off of the streets and into modern art collections, a past-tense commemoration—and at times romanticization—of an event akin to the Vietnam War.

When considering the aesthetics of design pieces and performative protests created by ACT UP/NY, present historiography is similarly conflicted. Across the board, ACT UP’s overriding aesthetic is celebrated, however the available scholarship is often contradictory as to the value of these aesthetic creations above and beyond their role in protest. Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston’s *AIDS Demo Graphics*, Avram Finkelstein’s *After Silence: A History of AIDS Through its Images* and Jack Lowery’s *It Was Vulgar and it Was Beautiful: How AIDS Activists Used Art to Fight a Pandemic* pull back the curtain on ACT UP/NY’s highly considered—and still highly prized and influential—graphic and performative identity. While the first two titles

⁴¹ Gie Goris, “Looking for Trouble: Appeal for a Radical Activist Art,” in *Art and Activism in the Age of Globalization*, eds. Lieven de Cauter, Ruben de Roo, and Karel Vanhaesebrouck (Rotterdam, NL: NAI Publishers, 2011), 312.

were released nearly two decades apart, both were authored by prior members of ACT UP/NY—Finkelstein himself a primary participant of Gran Fury and in part responsible for such iconic works as the *SILENCE=DEATH* and *AIDSGATE* poster art. Released in 1990, *AIDS Demo Graphics* is a vital insider primary source compiled at the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis and protest movement co-created by ACT UP/NY itself that feels a piece of a larger unified movement, while Lowery's book is a love letter written directly to Gran Fury with little notice of other creatives more than three decades after the fact.⁴²

Claiming, "The *Silence=Death* poster is so saturated in codes, it took six months to finalize," Finkelstein acknowledges deep nuance and process yet later also presents strict views regarding activist visual work which he classifies, "as lived experience rather than as archival material."⁴³ Throughout the historiography specifically dedicated to the aesthetic powers of ACT UP, this sentiment of *activism not art* is common. In Finkelstein's case, it is particularly bewildering given his book's thorough chronicle of both the creation of and the graphic power of these works of activist ephemera. Writing in 1990, Crimp and Rolston are more comfortable with acknowledging ACT UP ephemera as eye-catching design objects via the use of terms like *activist art*, while also focusing on the necessity of speedy design and production timelines. "ACT UP's innovation is to get the wheels of mechanical reproduction turning on equally short notice," they write, paying tribute to the speed with which all ACT UP chapters approached their potent visuals.⁴⁴ Crimp and Rolston's emphasis on the need for rapidity contradicts Finkelstein's portrayal of lengthier processes, yet throughout both ACT UP/NY and ACT UP Montréal's parallel histo-

⁴² See Crimp and Rolston, *AIDS Demo Graphics*; Finkelstein, *After Silence*; Lowery, *It was Vulgar and it was Beautiful*.

⁴³ Finkelstein, *After Silence*, 4; Finkelstein, *After Silence*, 5.

⁴⁴ Crimp and Rolston, *AIDS DEMO GRAPHICS*, 22.

ries, there are examples of gallery and museum exhibitions of posters, photos, and other ephemera including collaborations with the Whitney Museum and the Venice Biennale.⁴⁵ A more nuanced portrayal of the artistic requirements of ACT UP chapters across the board would instead reveal a duality of design requirements with some pieces required on rapid turnaround, while others allowed Art Committees the opportunity for deeper exploration of ideas on much longer timelines.⁴⁶ Where Finkelstein is openly uncomfortable with ACT UP artifacts on gallery walls, Crimp and Rolston openly acknowledge their artistry. The latter approach better permits my own analysis on aesthetic grounds, allowing acknowledgment of ACT UP Montréal's creative protest projects as more than mere public disturbance.

Casting a wider net across HIV/AIDS activist art historiography, *Up Against the Wall: Art, Activism and the AIDS Poster* edited by Donald Albrecht, Jessica Lacher-Feldman and William M. Valent, offers more reflective analysis of ACT UP from behind an additional layer of breadth and distance.⁴⁷ Commemorating the largest ever gathering of AIDS-related posters opening in Rochester, New York in March, 2022, *Up Against the Wall* compiles numerous short pieces by HIV/AIDS activists and art world commentators, expanding its scope far beyond just those pieces created by ACT UP/NY.⁴⁸ Despite these creations' visual punch, the majority of

⁴⁵ My archival research has also revealed two separate examples of gallery showings of posters and photographs presented by ACT UP Montréal, proving their ethos hews closer to Crimp and Rolston's than Finkelstein's. As mentioned previously, I also co-curated an exhibition of photographs, posters, banners and other materials alongside René LeBoeuf at the Archives gaies du Québec entitled *L'activisme esthétique d'ACT UP Montréal : Une histoire en photos et en affiches* as part of Fierté Montréal's community programming.

⁴⁶ In 1992, one of Gran Fury's final projects was a collaboration with Montréal's *Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal*. Even amongst themselves, the resulting poster is considered one of the group's weakest and caused some derision amongst ACT UP Montréal's artists including Marc Pageau. Interaction between Gran Fury and ACT UP Montréal on the project was nonexistent—the majority of my interview subjects couldn't even remember the posters despite their presence around the city while ACT UP Montréal was still in operation. See "Pour la suite du Monde 1992-05-26 —> 1992-10-11," *MACrépertoire*, accessed March 28, 2025, <https://macrepertoire.macm.org/evenement/pour-la-suite-du-monde/>.

⁴⁷ Donald Albrecht, Jessica Lacher-Feldman, and William M. Valenti, eds., *Up Against the Wall: Art, Activism and the AIDS Poster* (Rochester, NY: RIT Press, 2021).

⁴⁸ Pieces included in this volume with either a Montréal or Québec provenance are not actually those by ACT UP Montréal, another example of their disappointing omission.

these long-unseen graphics have doubtlessly spent the past decades gathering dust in archival collections.

LGBTQ+ Activism in Canada, Québec, and Montréal

Gary Kinsman's in-depth study *The Regulation of Desire: Queer Histories, Queer Struggles* provides the most thorough overview of LGBTQ+ sexuality in Canada, revised first in 1996 and again in 2024 following its initial printing in 1987.⁴⁹ Kinsman's interventions into queer Canada include a lengthy postscript to the near-present day, in which the notion of a "post-acceptance" world still requires questioning and pressure towards equality. Any study of Canadian queer-centric activism would be incomplete without reference to Kinsman's body of work, which also includes the *AIDS Activist History Project* online database and oral history collection co-researched with Alexis Shotwell and the book-length analysis of the Canadian military's homophobic policies *The Canadian War on Queers*, co-authored with Patrizia Gentile.⁵⁰

Activism and social movements in Québec follow a unique path, increasing exponentially following the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s. Armande Saint-Jean argues "while feminist culture emerged and endured as an oppositional force, an ephemeral counterculture became part of the dominant social structure," visible in the province throughout the 1960s in the province on a comparatively compressed timeline to the rest of North America.⁵¹ Québec's separation of church and state throughout this decade also left the province with much to catch up on. During

⁴⁹ Gary Kinsman, *The Regulation of Desire: Queer Histories, Queer Struggles* (Montréal, QC: Concordia University Press, 2024).

⁵⁰ Gary Kinsman and Patrizia Gentile, *The Canadian War on Queers: National Security as Sexual Regulation* (Vancouver, B.C.: UBC Press, 2010); <https://www.aidsactivisthistory.ca/>.

⁵¹ Armande Saint-Jean, "From Counterculture to Feminist Culture," in *Old Passions, New Visions: Social Movements and Political Activism in Québec*, ed. Marc Raboy (Toronto, ON: Between the Lines, 1986), 39.

this process of consciousness building, rapid effort was required by the baby boom generation in particular to bridge the gaps left following centuries of church authority. Saint-Jean continues:

Québec society as a whole had to adapt to scientific progress, pluralism, secularization, and accelerating industrial development all at the same time, and the post-war generation felt the effects of the economic, political, technological, and religious changes brought on by that process.⁵²

These all-at-once changes were punctuated by “contact with the effervescent American counter-culture during Expo 67 in Montréal [which] provided the spark that produced Québec’s own counterculture movement,” leading also in-part to nationalist sentiment into the 1970s.⁵³ Radical groups including the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ), the Front de libération des femmes du Québec (FLF), and the Front de libération homosexuel (FLH) have also cast a long shadow, declared by Éric Alsène as “a product of the 1970s, a decade when the grand illusions of the 1960s either crumbled or began to be seen in perspective.”⁵⁴ Major events including Operation McGill Français in 1968 in which francophone protesters demanded instruction in their mother tongue, the October Crisis of 1970 during which nationalist sentiment reached a frenzied peak, and the general strikes of May 1972, put Montréal on the map as an active and volatile location for dissent and protest.⁵⁵

These actions also invigorated other groups to claim space in Québec society, including LGBTQ+ activists who became very present in the city by the end of the 1970s. In his *A Sense of Belonging: Pre-liberation Space, Symbiotics, and Leadership in Gay Montréal*, Ross Higgins poses the question, “How was it possible for a social group which had until recently existed in

⁵² Armande Saint-Jean, “From Counterculture to Feminist Culture,” 51.

⁵³ Éric Alsène, “The Alternative at the Crossroads,” in *Old Passions, New Visions: Social Movements and Political Activism in Québec*, ed. Marc Raboy (Toronto, ON: Between the Lines, 1986), 63.

⁵⁴ Éric Alsène, “The Alternative at the Crossroads,” 63.

⁵⁵ These events and their importance to Montréal’s social development are explored in Sean Mills, *The Empire Within: Postcolonial Thought and Political Activism in Sixties Montréal* (Montréal, QC: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010).

almost total clandestinity to suddenly make such a dramatic appearance in public life?”⁵⁶ Clearly the stage had been set with multiple outside forces creating a conducive environment to gay movements in the city. Manon Tremblay gives credit to the Quiet Revolution and subsequent actions in playing a tangible role in queer mobilizations in the city, “by advancing a modernizing nationalism with which lesbian and gay groups could associate,” an aspect of Québec’s social development also felt by many minority groups.⁵⁷ Julie Podmore further characterizes the first half of the 1970s as a period “focused on the initial organization of the lesbian and gay populations rather than on demonstrations,” which allowed for large-scale responses to government and police actions from 1975 onwards.⁵⁸ Some of the first major appearances of this now more organized than ever LGBTQ+ community were in response to a “clean-up” campaign mounted by Montréal’s city hall under the mayoral hand of Jean Drapeau in advance of the 1976 Summer Olympics.⁵⁹ Following a series of raids on gay and lesbian establishments, local activists first formed the Comité homosexuelle anti-répression (CHAR) and then the Association pour les droits des gai(e)s du Québec (ADGQ).⁶⁰ By 1977, the local LGBTQ+ community under the ADGQ’s direction was capable of mounting demonstrations of more than 2,000 people. By the end of that year, with the support from the Québec Human Rights Commission and the public, the ADGQ successfully pressured the newly-elected Parti Québécois into including protections

⁵⁶ Ross Higgins, “A Sense of Belonging: Pre-liberation Space, Symbiotics, and Leadership in Gay Montréal” (PhD dissertation, McGill University, 1997), 11.

⁵⁷ Manon Tremblay, “Quebec and Sexual Diversity: From Repression to Citizenship?” in *Queer Mobilizations: Social Movement Activism and Canadian Public Policy*, ed. Manon Tremblay (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2016), 107.

⁵⁸ Julie Podmore, “From Contestation to Incorporation: LGBT Activism and Urban Politics in Montréal,” in *Queer Mobilizations: Social Movement Activism and Canadian Public Policy*, ed. Manon Tremblay (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2016), 189.

⁵⁹ This series of clean-up raids also included several such events in Ottawa and Toronto and collaboration with the RCMP, particularly aimed at gay activists whom it was feared would protest in Montréal during the Olympics.

⁶⁰ Julie Podmore, “From Contestation to Incorporation,” 189.

on the basis of sexual orientation in the provincial *Charte des droits et libertés de la personne*.⁶¹

The ripple effect from such demonstrations and successes as those mentioned here was felt far beyond the province's borders. As Mills argues, "in no other region of North America did the politicization of class occur with such speed and intensity, and many looked to Québec for inspiration."⁶²

Organisation

This thesis focuses primarily on the period of roughly a decade during which the HIV/AIDS crisis struck the city of Montréal, from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. There is a particular focus on the years 1990-1993 during which ACT UP Montréal was active. The text is separated into two chapters. Based on extensive oral-history recollections, chapter one paints a portrait of the local *milieu* preceding and including the group's formation, its activist activities, the group's dissolution and its aftermath, and ACT UP Montréal's local legacy. The second chapter shifts the focus to an aesthetic analysis of the group's posters, banners, and performative protests and the ways in which these materials also tell a unique activist story. By interpreting these items, this project also memorializes other ACT UP Montréal participants no longer with us, yet still available for consultation via their posthumous fonds held at the Archives gaies du Québec. While important figures in the story including Douglas Buckley-Couvrette, David Shannon, and Kalpesh Oza are deceased, through undertaking an examination of the materials they personally saved—

⁶¹ Julie Podmore, "From Contestation to Incorporation," 190. This change marked Québec as the first province in Canada, and the second jurisdiction internationally only behind The Netherlands to guarantee such protections.

⁶² Sean Mills, *The Empire Within*, 208.

or those related to them in the fonds of friends and associates—I hope their memory and presence can still be felt in this project.⁶³

⁶³ All three were foundational members of ACT UP Montréal towards whom the narrators of this thesis maintain very warm feelings. Douglas Buckley-Couvrette (1961-2002) worked tirelessly in LGBTQ+ activism throughout his life including ACT UP Montréal, Dire enfin la violence, la Table de concertation des lesbiennes et des gais du Grand Montréal, and le Comité des personnes atteintes du VIH du Québec, and also ran for public office in the city. His fonds are held at the Archives gaies du Québec, and were instrumental in the research for this project. David Shannon (1972-2018) was a journalist for *The Montréal Mirror* and a co-founder of both ACT UP Montréal and AIDS Community Care Montréal (ACCM). Kalpesh Oza (1961-1995) was a microbiologist and artist involved with the Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention (ASAAP), the Canadian HIV Trials Network and ACT UP Montréal.

Chapter 1—An Oral History of ACT UP Montréal

“We never got arrested. We never got caught. We ran faster than they did!”¹

This chapter offers a history of ACT UP Montréal through the remembrances of some of its original members. While ACT UP Montréal’s manifestations and protests were occasionally capable of pulling together over 1,000 participants, the narrators consulted here make up a primary piece of the group’s core members from its founding in 1990 to its dissolution in 1993.

Beginnings: Pre-AIDS and the gathering storm of HIV

Running counter to Québec’s Catholic past, Montréal’s reputation as a city of celebration and debauchery prompted Mayor Jean Drapeau’s municipal administration to undertake city-wide clean-up operations in the periods leading up to both Expo 67 in 1967 and the 1976 Summer Olympics, marking him as a primary antagonist of the LGBTQ+ community.² These initiatives included an eastward relocation of the Gay Village from the area surrounding Sir George Williams University (now part of Concordia University) in downtown Montréal as it existed primarily on Dominion Square and Drummond, MacKay, Stanley, and Peel Streets, to its present location bordered between boulevard René-Lévesque Est and rue Ontario at its northern and southern edges, and rue Saint-Hubert and avenue Papineau marking its western and eastern ends. After leaving his birthplace of Shawinigan, Québec to attend classes at Montréal’s Dawson College in the early 1980s, Luc Desaulniers recalls the years immediately preceding the HIV/AIDS crisis in Montréal’s gay gathering spaces as vibrant and exciting:

I ran to Montréal. I was of the generation that went out eight days a week in Montréal, and it was fun [...] and people didn’t dance on the dance floor with

¹ Interview with Michael Hendricks, December 8, 2021.

² Julie Podmore, “From Contestation to Incorporation,” 197.

their cell doing selfies. [...] [It] was like *heaven*. Really, really good music. Everybody was gorgeous.³

LeBoeuf has similar recollections of Montréal's pre-HIV epidemic gay scene:

Montréal was a very lively city. There were tons of bars. And you could go out every night of the week, seven days a week. The bars were full! There were parties everywhere. There were people drinking, there were *soirées* and \$1.00 for the beer. There was something like that everywhere. And the Village was very, very, very lively.⁴

In late 1977, 200 partiers were arrested at gunpoint in a police raid on the TRUXX nightclub located on Stanley Street, prompting the largest gay liberation demonstration in the city's history.⁵ In the wake of this surprising mobilization, the Parti Québécois passed *Loi 88*, bringing protections on the basis of sexual orientation in Québec's *Charte des droits et libertés de la personne*, the first such provincial rights in Canada.⁶ Following this landmark development, Montréal's gay male population enjoyed somewhat more open freedoms and a period of almost limitless sexual expression, and traveled regularly to other nearby major cities including Toronto and New York City. Given these protected rights and freedoms, Pageau recalls the differing priorities of Montréal's gay and lesbian populations from those of the rest of Canada and the U.S.:

[My partner] Normand [Boucher] had some previous studies at McGill, so he was more exposed than I was with gay and lesbian activism. In French Canadian spaces, there was not really anything that was really existing. Most gays and lesbians—and even feminists to an extent—were more into the Nationalist cause. That was the predominant cause for all of us.⁷

Indeed, when Pageau and Boucher became more involved in activist movements, the reaction from family and friends was often negative:

³ Interview with Luc Desaulniers, June 22, 2023.

⁴ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 21, 2022.

⁵ *TRUXX*, directed by Harry Sutherland (1978; Montréal, QC: Mediaqueer), 16mm.

⁶ "40e de la descente policière du bar TRUXX : un tournant pour les droits des homosexuels," *Radio-Canada* online, October 20, 2017, <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1062535/40e-de-la-descente-policiere-du-bar-truxx-un-tournant-pour-les-droits-des-homosexuels>.

⁷ Interview with Marc Pageau, March 31, 2023. Normand Boucher was also a writer at ACT UP Montréal, the two forming a genuine activist power couple.

In my family and my extended gay family, it was really hard to deal with, especially among French Canadians. That's not something that you do, you know? 'What are you to complain?' I guess it's something about Canadians in general because we already have a good social net, so why would you complain about this or that? There was things going on with the police raids in bathhouses, but people were not used to seeing or hearing someone in their close friends doing actions or being involved in stuff like that. So we did lose a lot of friends because of that. [...] The French Canadian cause, the *Québécois* thing, the language thing was so powerful that the other stuff, like feminist and Gay and Lesbian activism and even Natives—like forget about Natives—we were not even talking about things like that back then. The only cause was that one. People didn't understand why you would protest.⁸

Desaulniers recalls these years as carefree, without knowledge of the gathering storm—and even in many cases, as still occurring somewhat below the surface of open society.⁹

It was all the monster behind the quiet cloud. It's obvious that the under culture was huge, huge, huge. Not out, but huge. I heard stories of gay parties with 5,000 people. And there were orgy rooms and bathhouses, which is kind of normal because you need an outlet. And the meat market and the piers. [...] You'd go to a bar and the bar is like 10 feet by 10 feet, and then there's a bathroom that's like 3,000 square feet. But you know it's there, and there's an outlet. Some people called it—to have multiple partners and orgies—not a good behaviour. I think it's a great behaviour! People could be gay for 15 minutes and then go back to their lover. It was kind of both behind *and* in front of the curtain.¹⁰

HIV made its presence felt in Montréal in the mid-1980s, albeit at a distance. Several ACT UP Montréalers recall first having heard of HIV as something elsewhere, centred geographically in New York City and San Francisco and limited only to those frequenting the infamous gay bathhouses and darkroom clubs located there. Under this mindset, HIV's appearance in Montréal came as a shock as it snaked its way through the local gay community. For Desaulniers, HIV's arrival was akin to a game of telephone:

You have friends that have friends that have friends. And those friends have friends in New York and then you hear stories, so you know it's there. Until it's in

⁸ Interview with Marc Pageau, March 31, 2023.

⁹ Julie Podmore, "From Contestation to Incorporation," 190. As mentioned previously, this change marked Québec as the first province in Canada, and the second internationally only behind The Netherlands to guarantee such protections.

¹⁰ Interview with Luc Desaulniers, June 22, 2023.

your house [...] You know this is happening. It was behind the curtain before. You may not want to look at it, but it's there.¹¹

As a transplanted American, murmurs of mysterious ailments affecting gay men in San Francisco moved through Hendricks' social circle back in the US, coupled with a refusal to consider curbing sexual lifestyles:

In Québec there was this fantasy that it was a New York problem [...] I knew people in '82 that became ill, but they all frequented the Anvil in Manhattan—bars like that—or they were regulars in San Francisco. I had this ex-lover who was a psychiatrist in San Francisco. And in '77 he came here to visit us and he told René and I that there was this strange lifestyle disease that was occurring in the Castro. And that there were gay men who were having what he called fatigue, and it looked like the fatigue syndrome. That was happening, but the resistance to the use of condoms was staggering. We're talking about 20 years into the sexual revolution, where birth control had become significant and the pill had eliminated the need for condoms. That the condom changed the sexual reality for men, people believed that. It never did for me. It never did for anybody I knew. But they actually believed that sex was better without it. They had some crazy idea that it was more natural.¹²

As these whispers crossed over into the mainstream media and into the general population, Pageau remembers the stark response of certain family members:

'The Gay Disease' or 'The Gay Cancer'—that's what they were calling it, tagging it. In my family, some family members were saying, 'oh, we won't be able to shake hands with any gay' [...] At the beginning, all the anti-gay or anti-gay lifestyle messaging was so strong, we just thought that it was yet another one of those propagandas that was being pushed against us. We didn't think much more than that about it.¹³

Despite Pierre-Elliott Trudeau's proclamation in 1967 that the state had no place in the bedrooms of the nation, as HIV's link with sexuality was strengthened by the mainstream media Montréal's gays and lesbians found their personal lives under increasing scrutiny.¹⁴ For Synnowich, the shift

¹¹ Interview with Luc Desaulniers, June 22, 2023.

¹² Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 28, 2022.

¹³ Interview with Marc Pageau, March 31, 2023.

¹⁴ Trudeau made this statement during his tenure as Justice Minister and sponsor of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1968-68 omnibus bill that, amongst other things, decriminalized same-sex relations between consenting adults.

was noticeably politicized: “Generally our private is public because it’s political. Once it ceases to be political, then who cares? It’s as important as my being partially deaf, which isn’t nearly as fun as sex.”¹⁵ Pageau also recalls palpably feeling the shift from HIV as something far away into something in the immediate vicinity:

It was truly liberated back then. We could go in bars and have sex with anyone and have fun all night long. I mean, we’d just pick up someone. We’d have fun. [...] We were so young. I was 20-something. You had all the same clichés, like you say ‘it’s only guys that go into those leather bars.’ And then suddenly, you have a friend that just disappeared and went back to his family and we never hear or see them in the bars anymore. And that’s when the reality started sinking in.¹⁶

Growing up in Québec City, LeBoeuf’s tightest friend group was with three fellow gay men, a self-proclaimed *quatre folles ensemble*. Of these, Bernard was the first individual he knew who was infected in the mid-1980s. He recalls:

Bernard was a nice person. A normal gay guy. He had a very active sex life. He used to go to New York and have fun in the Mineshaft and doing all those kinds of things. And then one day he called me and said, ‘I’m infected. [...] I got it, and I don’t know what to do.’¹⁷

After his lover kicked him out of their shared apartment in Toronto, Bernard moved to Montréal, passing away at the Royal Victoria Hospital in 1985 or 1986. Hendricks remembers:

It was awful. You know, we had our opportunities to see the heroes, the people who were described as heroes for the recent COVID epidemic, and they weren’t hero-like at all during HIV. We saw the meanness and the cruelty. Bernard was really sick and he couldn’t get out of bed, but they would leave his tray of food in the hall outside because he was infected. And he couldn’t get to it [...] The first time we went to visit Bernard in the hospital, the nurse gave us a hard time. We had to get in this hazardous risk suit and whatnot, all dressed up. We get inside and our friend Pierre-Paul is in bed with Bernard. Pierre-Paul was like, ‘Don’t be stupid, get those clothes off, you can’t get HIV that way!’ And yeah, we were that dumb that we let them tell us—bamboozle us—into putting on this stupid protection. And of course, we knew that everybody had kissed Bernard and we weren’t

¹⁵ Interview with Paula Sypnowich, May 6, 2024.

¹⁶ Interview with March Pageau, March 31, 2023.

¹⁷ The Mineshaft was an infamous members-only BDSM and leather bar in New York City in operation between 1977 and 1985, during which it became one of the world’s most infamous clubs. Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 21, 2022.

getting it from kissing. We knew it wasn't that. It was more intimate contact.¹⁸

Having previously worked in community groups including the Coalition Against Systemic Oppression (CASO), Hendricks and LeBoeuf were no strangers to local organizing and the rise in HIV-related deaths left them wanting an organized public response.¹⁹ LeBoeuf explains, “our friends were starting to die at that moment. We wanted to do something. We *had* to do something. It was a very, very sad time. It was a very, very dark time. And nothing was done. People were dying and nothing was being done.”²⁰

As infection spread into closely-knit friend groups, several of those interviewed became politicized, including Pageau, Sypnowich, and Desaulniers. For Sypnowich, the unveiling of one of her closest friends' HIV-status in the early '80s paired with the experience of sexual assault formed her activist mentality:

I became radicalized. I was with my friend Chris and I was talking with him and he pulled a condom out of his wallet. I knew he'd dabbled with women once a blue moon, but still, I was like, ‘What the hell are you doing with a condom?’ So he explained all this to me, and going through the details of when he became HIV-positive by having sex with his boyfriend's lover. They did a little threesome in the shower and they didn't use protection between the two of them, and they should've because there was a third person there. Anyway, he and his boyfriend got positive [...] I was definitely not getting involved with anybody for a while after being raped, so my friendships were all that much more important. And he started getting involved in C-SAM and CPAVIH.²¹

As Chris' condition worsened, Sypnowich remembers the scientific severity of what the LGBTQ+ community was up against:

¹⁸ Here Hendricks refers to the Covid-19 pandemic during which healthcare workers were celebrated for their public health interventions. Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 21, 2022.

¹⁹ The Coalition Against Systemic Oppression was founded following the death of 19-year-old Anthony Griffin, shot in the head by police officer Allan Gosset who was subsequently acquitted of the charge of manslaughter resulting in mass protests in Montréal.

²⁰ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 21, 2022. Hendricks added, “They were dying every day.”

²¹ Interview with Paula Sypnowich, May 6, 2024. The two organizations mentioned are the *Comité SIDA Aide Montréal* (C-SAM) and the *Comité des personnes atteintes du VIH* (CPAVIH), two of the city's earliest HIV organizations.

It's endless, the number of things that could go wrong. I remember once I saw a documentary by David Suzuki on AIDS, about the immune system and exactly what's going on. You look at it and you think, 'it's not weird that things go bad, it's weird that things work.' There's so many things that could go wrong, and AIDS is an excellent example of when the body starts working against itself. This auto-immune disease, holy shit. It's just a fiasco. At some point, Chris' T4 cell count was two. We called them Frankie and Johnny.²²

In these early days of the crisis, Durand also recalls the environment of fear spreading amongst healthcare workers surrounding the epidemic:

We had a friend in Rimouski. He was living in Rimouski but he was working in the gay bars in Montréal. I think he's the first one who got it, and it went in his brain. We went to see him in Rimouski at the hospital and we had to dress up like astronauts to get into the room. They didn't know too much, you know? That was sad. At a certain point of his sickness he was so proud of his body because he was a bit overweight. The first 15 pounds that he lost he was like, 'look at me, I'm so gorgeous!' But it went down a lot after that, so that was really sad. He was like, I don't know, 25? It's a really sad period. I cannot go over it.²³

Sypnowich describes her friend's similarly macabre humour in facing his then certain death:

At the end, he looked like he was something out of Auschwitz. It was awful. But he was cracking jokes. 'Mom, these drugs are great! You really gotta try them!' I once came and he was like, 'You shall have some!' Admittedly he was high, but was accepting his fate to make the best of the very little time he had remaining. He was his old self again. Yeah, he was a good person.²⁴

Following the 1989 AIDS conference at the Palais des congrès and the dissolution of the short-lived group calling themselves Réaction SIDA, there remained a clear need for a localized activist force capable of taking over the reins.²⁵ Returning to Montréal from Toronto—where they both attended university—Boucher and Pageau discovered a considerably smaller activist presence in the gay community:

²² Interview with Paula Sypnowich, May 6, 2024. T4 cells are also known as Helper Cells or T4-lymphocytes, and lead the body's immunological response.

²³ Interview with Pierre Durand, December 30, 2024.

²⁴ Interview with Paula Sypnowich, May 6, 2024.

²⁵ Réaction SIDA formed in the lead-up to the 1989 AIDS conference, offering ACT UP/NY and AIDS ACTION NOW work and meeting space in their offices beneath an anarchist bookstore on Saint-Laurent Boulevard. Their short history can be traced through holdings at the Archives gaies du Québec.

The thing that struck me as really different was how the community here was not into any type of activism. That really struck me, like, ‘what the hell is going on here?’ The Gay Parade was in the Village. Like what? We’re going to be proud among ourselves? I mean, yeah, great. I hope so. But can we just go out a little bit? And you know, women were not allowed in bars, let alone transvestites, transgenders. So it was different [...] You come here and it’s only party. There was not much transgression going on here. It was like keeping low and having fun.²⁶

The formation of ACT UP Montréal

Much of the credit for ACT UP Montréal’s formation is given to Blane Charles, who relocated to Montréal from New York City in late 1989. At ACT UP/NY, Charles earned notoriety not only as the “chalk queen” taking notes on the chalkboard at the front of the room at the weekly Monday night meetings, but also as a participant in the April 21, 1989 sit-in at the North Carolina offices of Burroughs Wellcome protesting the record breaking price tag of AZT, at that point the only approved HIV/AIDS treatment drug available in the US.²⁷ Charles acknowledges the foundational myth of ACT UP Montréal putting their involvement at front and centre—“They point to the spark that started the fire, right?”—while also making effort to share credit where credit is due.²⁸ Reflecting on the 1989 AIDS Conference, they say:

Yes there was action, but you could tell that it wasn’t solid. That’s the word I’ll use. One of the things that made ACT UP so effective was the structure upon which ACT UP ran or functioned. In Montréal you could see that there wasn’t that necessary structure to really be effective in getting the results that you would want from your actions. So they were taking notes, watching us in action, and then we were observing them until one point we rallied to come together. All of the numbers, of course, obviously were stronger together than separate. You could

²⁶ Interview with Marc Pageau, March 31, 2023. Synnowich echoes these thoughts on Pride marches in the Village Gai: “How can you be all that proud walking down this dusty empty street in a hidden corner?” Interview with Paula Synnowich, May 6, 2024.

²⁷ “April 21, 1989: ACT UP/NY joins ACT UP/Atlanta to protest a South Carolina provision that would allow PWAs to be quarantined. The same day, using steel plates and rivets, four ACT UP members barricade themselves into a Burroughs Wellcome office in North Carolina. They demand a cut in the price of AZT, still the most expensive medicine in history at \$8,000 for a year’s dosage. “ACTUP Capsule History 1989,” ACT UP—AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, accessed August 13, 2024, <https://actupny.org/documents/cron-89.html>.

²⁸ Interview with Blane Charles, March 19, 2022.

tell that they really wanted to do better. The desire to be more effective was there. It was just a matter of implementing certain structures to help make that happen, and that's where ACT UP New York came in.²⁹

But more than just offering a framework for more effective activism, Charles also carried a primary goal of transplanting additional impacts of ACT UP/NY's presence to Montréal:

I was committed and passionate about what ACT UP was doing for the community. The Gay and Lesbian Centre was our hub and our haven. So I wanted to make sure that I was authentic and helping to create that kind of safe space in Montréal. A safe space where anyone could come and be honest and transparent and be nurtured and be appreciated and respected, and to be something greater than they were when they came into the space.³⁰

However, bringing ACT UP/NY across the border presented numerous initial challenges particular to Montréal, as Charles recalls:

[The 1989 AIDS conference was] the impetus to the idea of having an ACT UP in Montréal, just to really get shit done because the situation was critical in Montréal like it was in New York. It was time to really figure out a way to bring everybody together. You not only had the issues of the differences between lesbians and gays and black and whites, but you also had the language issue too. So there was a lot of obstacles that we had to clear out of the way to really get work done.³¹

As to their decision to relocate to Montréal to get the ball rolling, Charles describes it as a perfect solution to a period of turbulence in their personal life:

As soon as they made the request, my hand was the first hand to go up. I was also on my own shit, you know what I mean? I had just returned back to New York after having been ex-communicated from my community and my religion and family as Jehovah's Witnesses, and I was in a process of self-healing and of finding myself, and my first two lovers in New York had both passed away from AIDS so I was really, really angry. Angry, frustrated, all of the above. So the opportunity to help a group of people come together was a great source of empowerment and also it gave me a project to really realize my own self-worth and really realize the importance and the vitality of our community as contributors to our society and to our nation. Whether that's Canada or the United States, it didn't really matter where. It was just a matter of being validated and recognized, so I was just ready

²⁹ Interview with Blane Charles, December 3, 2022.

³⁰ Interview with Blane Charles, December 3, 2022. The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center—most often simply referred to as The Center—at 208 W 13th Street in Manhattan still hosts ACT UP/NY's Monday night meetings in Room 101, where they have been held since 1987.

³¹ Interview with Blane Charles, March 19, 2022.

for a new chapter. I was ready for a new project. The timing was just perfect.³²

ACT UP Montréal's initial canvassing for membership involved both word of mouth and advertisements in the city's underground press in publications like *Voir* and *The Mirror*. Hendricks and LeBoeuf made their way to the first meeting after reading David Shannon's *Mirror* column *Out in the City*, which focused on Montréal's gay community and chronicled Charles' move to the city to open a local ACT UP chapter.³³ LeBoeuf describes that first meeting as particularly chaotic:

Oh my God, it was so disorganized. Everybody was talking at the same time and having opinions and trying to do something. It was awful! I hated it. People were going in every way. 'I have this idea, and this, and this!' But Blane was there. Luc was there. There were a few people who were there from the beginning until the end. And those people were interesting because they were the *le pouls* of ACT UP, of what we wanted to be.³⁴

Despite leaving the first meeting early, angry and frustrated (as well as the second), Hendricks and LeBoeuf still felt a pull towards the potential of a Montréal-based chapter of ACT UP. Despite their misgivings, Hendricks puts their reason for returning simply: "Our friends were dying. We had no other choice."³⁵ For Pageau and his partner, the call to join the ACT UP Montréal franchise was similarly urgent:

We had a few friends that were caught. I think that's why we said, 'OK, let's go to this' because of that. But we were also getting worried about the lack of involvement from the governments in general into the HIV/AIDS community. There was no prevention back then. It was business as usual.³⁶

³² Interview with Blane Charles, March 19, 2022.

³³ Matthew Hays, "David Shannon's alt-media legacy: A look back at highlights from Out in the City, the Montréal Mirror column by the late writer and activist," *CULT MTL*, May 31, 2018, <https://cultmtl.com/2018/05/david-shannons-alt-media-legacy/>.

³⁴ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 21, 2022. ACT UP/NY's historical website includes rules of orders for meetings. See "Monday Night Meetings," *ACT UP/NY Historical Archive*, accessed April 2, 2025, <https://actupny.org/documents/newmem1.html>.

³⁵ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 21, 2022.

³⁶ Interview with Marc Pageau, March 31, 2023.

ACT UP Montréal appealed directly to younger members of the local queer community, who both came of age and came out of the closet following the increase of HIV/AIDS-related media coverage and the rise of safer sex practices. In his early twenties at the time, Neil Smith viewed ACT UP Montréal as an opportunity for both deeper participation in the city's gay community and a potential source of writing inspiration:

It was already in the news, so there was a lot of talk about safe sex. I'm not HIV-positive. I didn't join ACT UP because of that. I was younger than some of the other people involved who were HIV-positive and who had come out earlier than me. I got involved mainly because I wanted to get to know that world a bit more. I wanted to write about it too—I was trying to decide what I would write because I worked as a fiction writer and I did some journalism. I was in my early twenties and still trying to figure things out.³⁷

For many who were involved, ACT UP Montréal was not only a chance to partake in headline-worthy activism, but also a way of holding tragedy at bay. In 1988, Desaulniers lost his close friend and mentor Louise Lamothe, a fixture in Montréal's 1980s clubbing scene who introduced Desaulniers to HIV/AIDS activism. Lamothe died of AIDS in 1988 and was later memorialized by Nicole Beaulieu in a moving article published in the *Gazette des femmes*, her only remaining trace on the internet at time of writing:

A la mémoire de Louise Lamothe

Les témoins de la première heure ont parfois payé cher d'avoir brisé le silence. Vous vous souvenez de cette femme, visage dissimulé derrière de grosses lunettes noires, qui s'était assise à la table de Jeanette Bertrand en février 1988? Louise Lamothe voulait dire aux femmes que le sida les guette aussi.

Malgré ses artifices, son employeur l'avait reconnue. Puis congédiée... Parce qu'elle refusait de se soumettre au test de séropositivité; qu'il exigeait d'elle.

Plus tard, un tribunal d'arbitrage devait donner raison à Louise Lamothe et ordonner à l'employeur de la dédommager pour le salaire et autres pertes subies.

³⁷ Interview with Neil Smith, March 19, 2024.

*Hélas! la jeune femme n'a pas eu le temps de toucher son dédommagement. Elle s'est éteinte quelques jours avant que l'affaire ne se règle.*³⁸

For Desaulniers, ACT UP Montréal provided both solace and diversion. He recalls:

ACT UP Montréal was the best place for me. It was kind of a continuation because Louise had died and I was bitter and angry. Very angry and very, very, very bitter. So when Blane came along, it was—and this is really not in a bad way—but it was a great distraction for me which I needed. He had the structure of ACT UP and I certainly had the energy.³⁹

When it came to the HIV status of its members, ACT UP Montréal operated under an unspoken *don't ask, don't tell* arrangement. Pageau recalls, “in the spirit of ACT UP, we never said or never did mention anything about our status.”⁴⁰ Those who chose to be open about their status were free to do so, while others maintained the right to keep that information private. And for Smith, these interactions marked the first time he'd come face-to-face with people living with HIV:

At the time people weren't open about whether they were HIV. It wasn't something that people asked you directly. At ACT UP, no one ever asked me if I was HIV-positive and I never asked anybody else. Maybe some of the other people were asking each other, I don't know. I didn't know, for example, that David [Shannon] and Douglas [Buckley-Couvrette] were HIV-positive [...] I wasn't so fearful of it only because I came out late enough that I never had unprotected sex.⁴¹

Despite the growing fear over HIV/AIDS' effect on the gay community, a long held separation between gay men and lesbian women remained in place with little crossover. Sypnowich recalls being one of the first to take an active role in activism outside of the lesbian subculture:

Chris got me more in the gay world, and I was in both because of AIDS. But I was more in the lesbian world. It was sort of like a snowball. You end up being in a certain *milieu* [...] At the Women's Union, I got to know more and more dykes, and then I went to UQÀM and hung out with the lesbian world there. And then

³⁸ Nicole Beaulieu, “L'amour au temps du sida,” *Gazette des femmes*, Vol. 12, no. 3, September-October 1990, 13-20.

³⁹ Interview with Luc Desaulniers, June 22, 2023.

⁴⁰ Interview with Marc Pageau, March 31, 2023.

⁴¹ Interview with Neil Smith, March 19, 2024.

AIDS showed its shrouded face, and getting involved with that got me more involved with a lot more gay men [...] The worlds didn't mix very much at all [...] There was a time, I think, when they were working more together. When the Olympics happened and the Village was sort of moved east, it became very apolitical.⁴²

Taking to the streets: ACT UP Montréal, 1990-1993

By December 1989, ACT UP Montréal began holding weekly meetings, attended by a small core group of participants. Smith recalls his initial trepidation, meetings and demo experiences as equal parts frightening and invigorating:

I was terrified [...] People could get very upset and there were a lot of different opinions thrown about. But it was also exciting. It was terrifying *and* exciting, and I felt like I was part of something that was big elsewhere and could be big here. And it just made me feel part of the community, and I hadn't that way before because I was just starting to come out [...] Sometimes it was nitpicky things and sometimes it was more major things. There were arguments over how women could be involved in the group and how francophones would be involved in the group [...] I remember the arguments over every word used in a flyer, that type of thing.⁴³

But it wasn't just the mood of these meetings that caused nervousness amongst some of the early membership. Indeed, ACT UP Montréal meetings and demonstrations could also be a hotspot of flirting and cruising rife with infatuations and crushes, as Neil Smith recalls, "David [Shannon] was like a god for me. He was so vibrant, with his red bright hair. And he was very handsome and he was so intelligent, so it was like I was almost nervous to talk to that guy."⁴⁴ Of Charles and the unforgettable impression they left on the city during their time in Montréal, Smith recalls, "He was *so* American. He was *so* New York. The way he dressed, the way he spoke."⁴⁵

⁴² Interview with Paula Sypnowich, May 6, 2024.

⁴³ Interview with Neil Smith, March 19, 2024.

⁴⁴ Interview with Neil Smith, March 19, 2024.

⁴⁵ Interview with Neil Smith, March 19, 2024.

Durand, on the other hand, found such frivolity more of an annoyance pulling them from the task at hand:

It was like a social activity to be part of the ACT UP thing. The meetings. Some guys were gossiping about who slept with whom and I was like, ‘OK come on, *non non*. I don’t want to hear that. Let’s do this. Let’s have our meeting.’ So maybe sometimes I wasn’t that funny. I was just like, ‘we have stuff to do.’⁴⁶

Sypnowich also found the social aspect of ACT UP Montréal’s early meetings as detrimental, and quickly assumed her role as meeting animator:

When I first joined ACT UP, god what a disorganized group! It was kind of the cool place to be so there was a lot of cruising. It was a social event. And I felt pretty anxious about AIDS, or pretty pissed about AIDS anyway. And the guy who chaired, every time someone spoke, he spoke. And then someone spoke, and then he spoke. And I was like, ‘whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, what the hell is going on here?’ You know, Robert’s Rules of Order, there’s a speakers list. And I really pissed him off apparently because he circulated a petition to have me removed from the group and instead they made me animator. And then came the name Helga from Hell. I wore it proudly. Cracking the whip. Enough of this nonsense, back to work!⁴⁷

While the arguments and dramatics of ACT UP Montréal’s early meetings occasionally reappeared, those who persevered and stayed involved found comfortable roles, building a sense of usefulness and belonging. For Smith, his bilingual upbringing proved essential as he recalls, “I spoke French, and they needed someone to translate for francophones who were unilingual, so I volunteered to do that. I had to sit beside a francophone and try to translate as the meeting went on.”⁴⁸ From this auspicious start, a small core membership responsible for much of the group’s gains and forward momentum emerged. For Sypnowich, these were the participants most responsible for ACT UP Montréal’s successes:

We never had more than 100 people, and that would’ve been a really, really good meeting. And then active people—really active, getting things done—was probably about 20. But we got things happening. At some point, partly because of the

⁴⁶ Interview with Pierre Durand, December 30, 2022.

⁴⁷ Interview with Paula Sypnowich, May 6, 2024.

⁴⁸ Interview with Neil Smith, March 19, 2024.

treatments, governments also started paying attention to it. Doctors knew more about it.⁴⁹

LeBoeuf also took note of the disparity between those who would show up for demonstrations but leave the heavy lifting to others:

For the demo, for the cameras, there's always people there. But for doing the job, nah. It was the same little group who were doing most of the job. And then people would come to the demo because it was interesting to be seen there, to participate in a demo like that.⁵⁰

ACT UP Montréal's initial growing pains included a desire to represent the city's entire population affected by HIV/AIDS, prompting a push towards bilingualism and the use of French. Pageau recalls the linguistic breakdown of early meetings as, "not many French Canadians—I would say we were maybe a quarter of French Canadians versus the others."⁵¹ As one of the group's translators, Smith recalls the shift to French as, "the goal, and Douglas [Buckley-Couvette] was very completely bilingual, so I think that was something that he wanted as well."⁵² Indeed, a strong shift towards French was recalled by Hendricks as a palpable change in the group's early development:

First of all, we were almost all English in the beginning, and all of us knew what HIV was and how it was communicated because we were reading American gay publications and there was nothing in French. And we realized that we didn't need ACT UP in English. We needed ACT UP in French because it had to address the problems in our own community and that our own government wasn't doing its job. And so that's how we started to reorient ACT UP, and it became problematic for the founders because most of them didn't speak very good French. The original members. David [Shannon] was very poor in French. I mean, it was amazing. They were mostly Westmount people, and they disappeared as it became more and more French. Interestingly, Blane, who didn't speak a word of French at that time, stayed. It didn't bother him. He was a true believer and he was Mr. ACT UP and he was extremely patient. But it must have been very difficult for him because the meetings were in French after a while, after about six months. And we

⁴⁹ Interview with Paula Sypnowich, May 6, 2024.

⁵⁰ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 28, 2022.

⁵¹ Interview with Marc Pageau, March 31, 2023.

⁵² Interview with Neil Smith, March 19, 2024.

decided that there would be no point in replicating ACT UP New York.⁵³

The assembled members also struggled at times with the strict rules of order adhered to by ACT UP/NY, for example the traditional meeting kick-off with a moment of silence to commemorate those who'd succumbed to AIDS. Co-founding member Kalpesh Oza protested the moment of silence from the first meeting, fondly remembered by Michael Hendricks:

The facilitator who ran the meeting would say now we are having a moment of silence for all of those people that we've lost to HIV infection, and then Kalpesh, who was a master's student in organic chemistry at McGill, would start screaming, 'Silence? I don't want silence, I want noise! I'm going to die! I've sinned—I'll have eternity in silence. I don't need that, I need the fight. Let's do that now! What's this silence stuff?'⁵⁴

Still, there were occasional crossovers with the New York chapter, including guidelines for focus points or across-the-board targets shared with the nearly 150 international chapters in operation in the early 1990s.⁵⁵ Hendricks also depicts a visit to New York City in 1990 for a closer look at ACT UP/NY's Treatment and Data Committee, whose primary focus was to keep tabs on potential drugs and their progression through the US drug testing process:

I went there to see how their Treatment and Data Committee functioned, and I realized that we would never be able to do what they could do. We went there to see if we could model our Treatment and Data Committee after theirs but, first of all, these people were extremely sophisticated. We're in a meeting there and it was 12:00 o'clock lunchtime and suddenly everybody's alarm went off on their watches. It was time to take their pills. These people were serious treatment freaks and they really knew their stuff. We had about three [T&D] members. Fortunately we had Kalpesh Oza who, for all of the screaming about, every other aspect of Kalpesh was wonderful. It was also José Sousa, and there was Christopher Cockrell. Christopher and Kalpesh are dead, but they were both scientifically inclined

⁵³ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 21, 2022.

⁵⁴ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 21, 2022; for more on Kalpesh Oza see Glenn Sumi, "Homos away from home: South Asian fest serves up a spicy Desh of queer culture," *Xtra!*, April 29, 1994, 29. This article includes a photograph of Oza with the caption, "WHEEL LIFE. Kalpesh Oza is living with AIDS on roller blades." A Proposed Structure document at the Archives gaies du Québec lists the Minute of Silence as dropped from the agenda of the General Assembly as of April 9, 1990. See ACT UP Montréal, "Proposed Structure," 1990, Fonds Douglas Buckley-Couvrette, AGQ-F0077/S1/SS1/SSS1/D1: Propositions pour la structure de l'organisme (document de travail), Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.

⁵⁵ This info would also be disseminated throughout the network via ACT NOW.

and were really good at treatment questions. But after having met with the Treatment and Data Committee of ACT UP New York, they were out of our class [...] We did create visibility for the question and we put the pressure on. That was important. But we didn't have the scientific or intellectual power that ACT UP New York had, to influence Anthony Fauci and people like that. I mean, they were remarkable. Incredible. They seized control of the issue. They took over the issue and they decided what were the priorities. They had a list of priorities which they shoved down the American government's throat. We were never that powerful. All we could do was make noise, which we did.⁵⁶

And while directives to the other international chapters of ACT UP continued, adherence in Montréal wasn't always strictly to the company line as Hendricks explains:

It was the Vatican. The word came from them what you were supposed to do. We didn't always pay attention because it didn't always apply and we could hardly expect them to be culturally adapted. The principal *revendication* of ACT UP New York after the cure was a single payer public health network. In Québec, ours is the only single payer one in North America, and in the other provinces you have to pay for it. We don't. It just comes to us automatically. We already had that. They were amazed, but they still thought that should be our objective. I mean, that's how American they were [...] We were totally independent. What we got from them, which is really important, is publications. One of the major roles of ACT UP in New York was a publishing house, and they produced great volumes of treatment data about HIV and about opportunistic infections and all kinds of stuff that really affected the life of people living with HIV [...] So anybody that went to New York brought back stuff, and then we would use it and photocopy and make copies from them.⁵⁷

As ACT UP Montréal's weekly meetings continued, Charles observed the convergence of multiple viewpoints into an activist voice uniquely their own:

I think organically what was needed came out of conversations and preparing for the next action. We would have a series of meetings before we would even start making or preparing, and I think in those conversations we *discussed*. It was interesting too because in those conversations you had the viewpoint from anglo-phones, the viewpoint from *Québécois* and then you have the viewpoint from me

⁵⁶ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 21, 2022.

⁵⁷ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 5, 2022. Throughout our interviews, Hendricks often referred to ACT UP/NY with the nickname of the Vatican. Hendricks makes an error here in terms of single-payer healthcare in Canada, in effect nation-wide since 1984 following the passing of the Canada Health Act (CHA). Québec's Régie de l'assurance maladie du Québec (RAMQ), the coordinating healthcare organization in the province, has been a part of the national Medicare system since 1971. See Danielle Martin, Ashley P Miller, Amélie Quesnel-Vallée, Nadine R Caron, Bilkis Vissandjée, Gregory P Marchildon, "Canada's universal health-care system: achieving its potential," *The Lancet*, Vol 391 (April 28, 2018): 1718-1735, [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(18\)30181-8](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)30181-8).

as an American from New York ACT UP. So it was interesting that we had those three ingredients that had to always come to some harmonious agreement to move forward. So that's something.⁵⁸

March 19, 1990 marked the first anniversary of the murder of Joe Rose, and ACT UP Montréal's first public action occurred in the form of a die-in at Complexe Desjardins shopping centre in downtown Montréal.⁵⁹ In making their debut, the group also solidified itself internally.

Charles recalls:

I remember the excitement, the excitement everyone had. The die-in was a very unifying force for Montréal ACT UP at that time, because it was still very fragile at the foundation. And so I felt like that was a good sign going forward, and it would just keep being innovative and keep introducing effective ways to get the message across that ACT UP Montréal would be ok. That it would succeed. Once you have that feeling, once you experience that united group effort and the celebratory feeling of being successful, then it's infectious. You're already planning and ready for the next action.⁶⁰

Given ACT UP/NY's influence and reputation, ACT UP Montréal's first manifestation was met with support from the more informed and clued-in members of the local gay community and local media coverage, including an attention-grabbing headline in the following morning's *Le Devoir*.⁶¹ However, not everyone felt aligned with ACT UP Montréal's use of civil disobedience and front-line activism. Smith, for instance, experienced pressure to leave the group from his partner who remained fearful of ACT UP's overall tactics and their potential for harm:

I had a boyfriend at the time who was very dead set against my being a member of ACT UP, so that was problematic too. I did drag him to a meeting at one point, and I don't really think it was his bag at all [...] He was so closeted, so he was very *mal à l'aise*, uncomfortable in that kind of *milieu*. I was taking part in demos as well, and I think he was afraid that I'd get beaten up and I was eventually, so that was a reasonable thought. He thought that I could be thrown in jail, which I

⁵⁸ Interview with Blane Charles, April 28, 2023.

⁵⁹ Hendricks remarked, "The Complexe Desjardins was chosen because the sidewalk is heated and we'd never done a die-in before, but we wanted to do it in a comfortable place." Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 21, 2022.

⁶⁰ Interview with Blane Charles, December 3, 2022.

⁶¹ Paul Cauchon, "Act Up vient protester à Montréal contre l'inaction gouvernementale face au sida," *Le Devoir* (Montréal, QC), Mar. 20, 1990.

was. So yeah, he was very dead set against it.⁶²

Pageau also recalls an element of fear in getting involved, not wanting to cross paths with angered police or face any sort of blacklist:

I was a little bit scared that the police would show up or that I'd be registered into the RCMP. I was thinking about that, but also *there's no future* was really the spirit back then [...] We weren't breaking much. Maybe we could have been worse [...] I know some doctors came to our ACT UP meetings, and some other members of institutions came to just see what was going on. We were probably listed with the police and RCMP.⁶³

Within three months of this first action, ACT UP Montréal's presence on the streets of Montréal was not solely limited to HIV/AIDS-related protests, but extended to anti-war and anti-police violence events. Indeed, ACT UP Montréal could be counted on to make an appearance at many protests, particularly those that threatened the lives of LGBTQ+ persons living in the city. In 1990, the popular underground Sex Garage party hosted by Nicholas Jenkins was halted by uniformed officers, who then removed their badges and attacked revellers with truncheons and billy clubs in the most violent clash between Montréal's queer community and police since the TRUXX raid in 1977.⁶⁴ Following the police action, ACT UP Montréal experienced a swelling in membership at subsequent meetings following their own participation in the anti-police violence marches held in the raid's wake (see fig. 2.2). For Desaulniers, a change was immediately clear:

Sex Garage kicked it off. Not that it was small, but *boom!* ACT UP had the structure. I remember at one of the big meetings the animator said, 'This is an ACT UP meeting, but we'll put our agenda aside to work with this crisis.' And then, I don't want to say the first gay parade, but I'm going to say the first gay *political* parade

⁶² Interview with Neil Smith, March 19, 2024.

⁶³ Interview with Marc Pageau, March 31, 2023. For more on the fraught relationship between Canadian homosexuals and law enforcement—in particular the RCMP—see Gary Kinsman and Patrizia Gentile, *The Canadian War on Queers*; Gary Kinsman, *The Regulation of Desire*.

⁶⁴ Crawford and Herland, "Sex Garage: Unspooling Narratives, Rethinking Collectivities." In localized queer histories, both the TRUXX and Sex Garage raids are referred to as Montréal's Stonewall, echoing the monumental raid in New York City in 1969 credited with spearheading the Gay Liberation movement of the 1970s.

in Montréal to my knowledge happened. And that's what took over. A crowd took over the street. It wasn't about floats. It was about people taking the streets [...] I was quite impressed with Sex Garage and that gave me pride to be more political. Not that there is anything wrong with being proud in general, but I mean that was a *march for recognition*.⁶⁵

For co-founding member David Shannon, maintaining a multi-pronged focus on multiple fronts was of utmost importance, as remembered by Hendricks:

David had been proposing all along that the battle of ACT UP was not only about HIV infection, but that HIV infection would not have been the catastrophe it was if it were not for homophobia and the hate of homosexuals and the blaming and scapegoating of homosexuals. And David was very clear about that, that you couldn't put your sights on fighting HIV infection [without also focusing on] the things that cause the perpetuation [...] David always pointed out that we had to fight homophobia and HIV together, or else it was useless because HIV would march on the road paved by homophobia.⁶⁶

Much research on the HIV/AIDS crisis includes mention of the disbelief amongst middle-class gay men on their apparent disposability and worthlessness to both their governments and the societies in which they lived following the successful gains received through the Gay Liberation movement.⁶⁷ Indeed, this shocking disregard for their lives was a primary starting spark for ACT UP/NY. As protests were met with mass arrests and strong-arm police tactics, this shock continued to shake the LGBTQ+ community to its core, and despite individual involvement in several activist movements, for many their experiences related to the Sex Garage raid marked their first with such pronounced police brutality. The stone-cold realities of government inaction

⁶⁵ Interview with Luc Desaulniers, June 22, 2023.

⁶⁶ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 21, 2022.

⁶⁷ This reaction is described at length in Randy Shilt's best-selling *And the Band Played On*, a lengthy analysis of the early years of the crisis that perpetuated the story of French-Canadian flight attendant Gaétan Dugas as patient zero, portrayed as a villain deliberately spreading infection. Dugas as superspreader was later disproven, with biological evidence suggesting the initial transference of the HIV virus into humans resulting from consumed chimpanzee meat as early as the 1930s in central Africa, arriving in the United States around 1969. Several characters in Larry Kramer's play *The Normal Heart* also share this sense of disbelief and disappointment in the government's response to the crisis (Kramer was also a co-founder of ACT UP/NY in 1987). Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1988); Larry Kramer, *The Normal Heart* (New York, NY: New American Library, 1985).

and violent police response marked a rude awakening, but in the process transformed ACT UP Montréal's ranks of protestors into a street-savvy activist force to be reckoned with.⁶⁸

ACT UP Montréal's largest manifestations of the year were held annually on December 1, internationally recognized as World AIDS Day, during which they would march through the streets of Montréal and bring one of the city's primary shopping districts to a standstill in front of a captive, stunned urban audience. These events are without question some of the finest accomplishments of ACT UP Montréal, discussed at length in the next chapter, in particular their first major World AIDS Day march in 1990 which remains the group's high watermark for a performative public action.

ACT UP Montréal's presence was particularly embraced by a more radical section of the local LGBTQ+ community. As noted by Hendricks however, this notoriety didn't necessarily extend to increased participation at the weekly meetings and in the less glamorous parts of street level activism:

We generally drew 1,000, mostly gay men and a lot of lesbians. But you have to remember that ACT UP was a fashion statement. I remember a well-known lesbian activist got killed in an automobile accident—she was on a bicycle and she got hit—and there was a funeral and Douglas went and he said he was amazed. It was all her friends, all in the lesbian community, and all of them were wearing ACT UP buttons but he'd never seen any of them at an ACT UP meeting [...] That was the way that it was. People would show up for the parade, but they

⁶⁸ The Oka Crisis, AKA the Mohawk Resistance at Kanehsat'í:ke, lasted 78 days between July 11 and September 26, 1990 and dominated the local and national media concurrently with coverage of the Sex Garage protests. Prompted by plans to develop a golf course on traditional lands and burial grounds, a shootout between the *Sûreté du Québec* and Mohawk protesters prompted the deployment of the Canadian Armed Forces. This tense stand-off remains a dark moment in modern Canadian history. Taylor C. Noakes claims the Oka and Sex Garage controversies marked a low point in citizen trust in law enforcement in Montréal. These events in parallel, however, can also be seen as flashpoints in which local communities were also politicized and introduced to activist movements and public protest. Taylor C. Noakes, "A turning point in the fight for gay rights," *Ricochet*, July 21, 2015, <https://ricochet.media/justice/lgbtq/sex-garage-25-years-later-a-turning-point-in-the-fight-for-gay-rights>. Michael Hendricks expands, "it is true that the Sex Garage protests and the Oka Crisis, though unconnected, occurred at the same time and there was some pressure on ACT UP MTL to take a position on the Oka crisis. Our one Mohawk member, Edward Cook, who was arrested at the Sex Garage protest and badly beaten by the police while inside Station 25, was asked if the Mohawks in Oka would want our support; Edward told us that 'they would not understand the parallel and they had other things on their minds.'" Michael Hendricks, letter to the author, August 21, 2025.

didn't show up to do the work. The people that did the work, they came on Mondays, they came on Thursdays, and then on the weekend they did what was called wheat pasting in ACT UP code, a messy, horrible mess. You'd do it with flour and water and it ruined your clothes. More modern people used wallpaper glue, but Blane taught the old fashioned method of flour and water and it got on everything.⁶⁹

Still, for LeBoeuf and Hendricks this incongruity in participation could at least in part be attributed to the insider-ness of the weekly Monday night General Assembly meetings, where long-standing conversations and arguments were continued over multiple weeks. They recall:

RLB: They would come to the demo and to the party. We had a lot of people coming to the fundraisers and things like that, but at the meetings there weren't really many people.

MH: You had to be an insider to participate in the general meeting on Monday night because the arguments were deeply rooted. And I mean, they spoke in shorthand and everybody knew what they were talking about and what the other people were talking about. *We* all knew what we were arguing about. But outsiders, they often left. It was very difficult for them. [But] the best part of ACT UP was that once we got the ideas together and the fights were over, then everybody just locked step and they did it. We've seen the deployment and what the demos looked like. It was a lot of work, and all those people did that and we were just cogs in the wheel.⁷⁰

Despite these moments of friction, ACT UP Montréal remained a steady presence on the city's streets (not to mention at HIV-related events, political gatherings, and even on the offensive against local religious leaders), active until late 1993.

Endings: The dissolution of ACT UP Montréal

Much of the shuttering of ACT UP Montréal in late 1993 remains somewhat shrouded in participants' memories, too painful to fully explore or linked to individual burnout after such an intensely active period. The group's ending was not planned, but occurred somewhat unexpectedly

⁶⁹ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 8, 2021. Throughout our interviews, this idea of ACT UP as "fashion statement" came up at several points.

⁷⁰ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 21, 2022.

and unceremoniously, and recollections as to how and why are in some cases cloudy. Hendricks describes this period as particularly painful:

It folded because we had to have seropositive members running the show, and they were no longer physically able to. One of the lesser known side effects of untreated HIV infection is dementia, and that's what we had. A rash of dementia. Really pathetic. Wonderful people that turned into vegetables. Crazy vegetables. It was very painful for everybody concerned. It was no longer the same person.⁷¹

LeBoeuf remembers little of the last meeting, besides screaming and an abrupt finality: "I don't remember much of the last meeting, but it just finished like that. It was impossible to go on with the people who were there."⁷² And Hendricks vividly recalls the heavy sadness that followed:

It was such a depressing moment. None of us at the core wanted to accept that it happened, that we had really failed in what we were. We were trying to reverse what we were living, and we didn't admit that it was impossible. And we thought that we could do it somehow. Somehow, if we had another parade and another *manif*, we would somehow reverse the tendency and change things. Make it better again. But it never got any better.⁷³

Pageau remembers this growing list of losses, and a subsequent loss of membership due to grief and association:

We would see people disappearing and, for different reasons, some people would not want to be associated with us anymore because their boyfriend would die. They would be afraid of being associated with that. I still get emotional about that. I don't blame them because they would be stigmatized in their own group or in their family or something like that. So they would distance themselves from the group. I don't know if they're still alive today, but it was really hard to see this happening over and over again.⁷⁴

Sypnowich parted ways with ACT UP Montréal upon relocating to Ottawa to care for her close friend Chris, moving back to the city after the chapter's end. She recalls this period as crippling, similarly reeling from an ever-growing list of deaths:

The number of people that we lost ... There was a film, I can't remember what it

⁷¹ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 8, 2021.

⁷² Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 26, 2022.

⁷³ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 26, 2022.

⁷⁴ Interview with Marc Pageau, April 5, 2023.

was called, and it's about all these dead people who'd died of AIDS who came rushing back. I can't remember exactly what the plot was, but it made me cry just thinking already about the people that we'd lost. And my parents didn't understand when I moved to Ottawa, like, 'chasing after gay men? What are you doing?' That kind of thing. But my mother came to visit and I said to her, 'You know when it was the Second World War and all these young men just started to disappear? That's what's happening to me. I've been to too many funerals. All these guys we've just buried.' So she understood.⁷⁵

By 1993, much of the group's energies also went to nursing members through their final days—many of whom had been abandoned or disowned by their families—lovingly providing an ad hoc form of palliative care they referred to as Assisted Leaving.⁷⁶ Of these events, Hendricks recalls, “We were *accompanying* these people. And in our whole action, we were accompanying a whole generation. We didn't know that. We figured that out later.”⁷⁷ By ACT UP Montréal's dissolution, death had become such a familiar constant so as to be a somewhat normalized occurrence, the routine of loss and mourning on repeat. Hendricks adds, “We went to funerals. But you know, it was everybody. All of us had the experience of their friends dying so it was nothing new. We'd all been to so many funerals.”⁷⁸

Benita Roth's *The Life and Death of ACT UP/LA: Anti-AIDS Activism in Los Angeles from the 1980s to the 2000s* chronicles in-depth the lifespan of the long-lasting California chapter, its end classified as one marked with “burnout, grief, and exhaustion.”⁷⁹ Roth's account also focuses on the role of despondency in the closure of many ACT UP chapters, stating, “despair came not just from (the denial) of grief in the face of loss, but from the intractability of the crisis

⁷⁵ Interview with Paula Sypnowich, May 6, 2024. The film is most likely *Longtime Companion*, in which friends and lovers lost to AIDS reappear on a beach during a fantasy sequence. *Longtime Companion*, directed by Norman René (1989; Los Angeles, CA: Samuel Goldwyn Films, 1989).

⁷⁶ Assisted Leaving assured those facing death from HIV infection—many of whom had been disowned or estranged from their families—would not be doing so alone. This accompanying into death by HIV/AIDS activists is an often overlooked piece of their vital labour during the crisis.

⁷⁷ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 5, 2022.

⁷⁸ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 28, 2022.

⁷⁹ Benita Roth, *The Life and Death of ACT UP/LA*, 161.

itself,” a sentiment expressed by several members of ACT UP Montréal.⁸⁰ This suggestion is countered somewhat by Deborah B. Gould’s *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight Against AIDS* in which she suggests that despair need not necessarily lead to demobilization but can rather act as a “provocation” to further activism, although Gould does also acknowledge the emotional toll of ACT UP membership as unsustainable over longer periods of time.⁸¹ Additionally, Roth credits the downfall of some of the US’s larger ACT UP chapters including LA’s as in part related to the participation in national demonstrations far from home, including a presence at the 1989 AIDS Conference in Montréal—something ACT UP Montréal was not faced with given that all of their activities took place solely within the borders of Québec and primarily in Montréal.⁸² Hendricks echoes both of these ideas, viewing activist work as simultaneously a direct response and a powerful coping mechanism for a scarred community witnessing mass destruction, opting for his own term of *active grieving* as a driving force in his activism:

It seems to me, looking back at it, that it was a frenzy in three years. An avoidance of the reality that was surrounding us. Our best friends were dying and they were all dead by December 1st, 1995. And treatment didn’t come. I mean, we were ACT UP, so we believed that there had to be a vaccine and that they weren’t giving it to us. And we thought we’d have that vaccine by 1995 [...] We had no choice but to continue and do more. But much of it was a kind of active grieving. It was better than sitting alone in your room and crying [...] It was one way of expunging the horrible experience of being a survivor. You know, they talk about survivor guilt from accidents, but this wasn’t. I don’t want to minimize survivor guilt, but an accident happens on Monday or Tuesday and then you’ve got the rest of your life. These things were ongoing. They went on and on and on. They’re dying. And then new ones joined them as the infection spread. And of course, I think everybody admits now that everybody slept with everybody. There was an old doctor who was running a Nazareth house—a Christian home, the Catholic home for palliative care—and she told me that when it started in the mid-80s, she was already retired and she volunteered and she said what quickly impressed her was the fact that the people that came to visit her patients would soon be in the bed next to the patient. And that it spread through circles of *amitié*—social circles—

⁸⁰ Roth, *The Life and Death of ACT UP/LA*, 144.

⁸¹ Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics*, 438.

⁸² Roth, *The Life and Death of ACT UP/LA*, 147.

and that these people weren't necessarily the lovers. They were either sharing syringes or sharing sexual lives and innocently, because no one knew that HIV existed. But they all were infected in circles. Little circles of friends. And that observation was at the time unique because it was just spoken of as evil.⁸³

Despite an undiminished fury with continued government inaction in the wake of ACT UP

Montréal's demise, members like Desaulniers struggled with overwhelming feelings of burnout and drift:

[I was] fading out. I had a job and I couldn't commit I guess. After two years, one hopes that your anger goes down. My relationship with Blane went down too, I think, which is kind of normal. Moved on. And you move on. Whatever the reason, that's the story.⁸⁴

Several members also grappled with a sense of not having accomplished enough during their time together. Sypnowich remembers:

I wish that we had gotten more done. For me, Sex Garage really disrupted what was going on there. And Sex Garage was definitely something urgently in that moment that needed to be responded to, but that didn't change the fact that people were dying of AIDS and it was hard to balance those things. But I'm proud of what I tried to do. I don't know that I could say that we accomplished that much except that by just having the word AIDS said often enough was something. It wasn't everything, but it was a lot. Because, you know, Silence=Death. It was a bit too quiet. It was something happening that was life threatening, and it wasn't great to realize that they differentiate between lives worth saving and lives that maybe weren't. It was obviously not just a health issue. It was an issue of discrimination, which is what all these issues are ultimately.⁸⁵

After the demise of ACT UP Montréal, Sypnowich stepped back from activist work entirely, admitting, "I didn't do anything for a long time. I didn't do much of *anything*. I felt kind-of burned."⁸⁶ In turn, Pageau echoes this sense of burnout and a desire for less activity:

After all this turmoil, we wanted a bit of calmness. It was really, really hard those years. And I'm happy to have participated in it, and looking back I like what I did. [Now] I wouldn't mind things here and there, but maybe not as crazy as what we did. It takes a lot of your energy, and you *have* to. [And we were all] a bunch of

⁸³ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 5, 2022.

⁸⁴ Interview with Luc Desaulniers, June 22, 2023.

⁸⁵ Interview with Paula Sypnowich, May 6, 2024.

⁸⁶ Interview with Paula Sypnowich, May 6, 2024.

big heads. I mean, discussing with either Douglas or with Blane or all these people, they were all big personalities. They're all bigger than life.⁸⁷

Smith also acknowledges the transient nature of Montréal's population as another piece in the puzzle of ACT UP Montréal's demise, in particular amongst its anglophone students who often depart the city following graduation:

A lot of the other [members] weren't from here. And you know, it's still that way today in Montréal. They're 23 year-olds who come here to go to school, they finish, they move on to some other city. The Francophones stay around. So I think that's one of the reasons. Michael and René, they were older and René is from here so obviously they're still here. But a lot of the other people left.⁸⁸

And still for others who took a leading role on the Parc de l'Espoir project discussed later in this thesis, the disintegration of ACT UP Montréal was a much slower process. Pageau re-members:

The parting was a very long thing. A lot of press conferences. Press, press, press, this and that, up until it actually got built. After that we all went to our professional life. Douglas himself also. René and Michael got more invested into gay and lesbian couples' rights. I was sidetracked also in that field, but I was not as involved. I got more into my swimming team. So yeah, we all went to our own businesses.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Interview with Marc Pageau, April 5, 2023.

⁸⁸ Interview with Neil Smith, March 19, 2024.

⁸⁹ Interview with Marc Pageau, April 5, 2023. À Contre-Courant, the swimming team he co-founded in 1990, is still active in Montréal.

Montreal Daily News

TUESDAY, MARCH 21, 1989

VOLUME 2/NUMBER 6

50 CENTS

THE KILLING OF JOE ROSE

Gay activist David Shannon gazes at photo of his friend and colleague Joseph Rose, tortured and killed by a gang on a city bus early Sunday.

Shannon says the killing is part of a trend, and blames the media, in part, for hyping an image of gays as worse than criminals.

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Figure 2.1 "The Killing of Joe Rose," *Montréal Daily News*, March 21, 1989, Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.



Figure 2.2 René LeBoeuf, Photograph of Sex Garage protest, July 29, 1990, Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.

Chapter 2—The Aesthetic Activism of ACT UP Montréal

“It was an obsession. It was like somehow or other posterizing was going to defeat the HIV infection and the more posters you put up, the quicker it would get solved.”¹

SILENCE=DEATH was initially created by the New York City-based Silence=Death Collective in 1986 and soon after adopted by ACT UP/NY as its calling card image on posters, placards, T-shirts, buttons, banners, patches, and stickers (see fig. 3.1).² As the primary call to arms for ACT UP/NY, *SILENCE=DEATH* quickly graduated in stature from what was initially a small scale independent collective-driven posterizing project into an internationally ubiquitous icon for the HIV/AIDS activist movement. In the words of co-designer Avram Finkelstein, the poster’s beginnings were gradual but steady. The idea “slowly morphed over a two-year period from an impulse, to a call to arms, to a ‘logo,’ and now here it was, a trade sign.”³ *SILENCE=DEATH* also inaugurated a set of aesthetic guidelines for all the design emerging under the ACT UP banner that followed in its sublimely coded, multi-tiered formula of grabbing attention. Composed of a bold, simple graphic paired with direct, unflinching messaging, the design utilized both eye-popping large type and kicked off a parallel “history of the use of ‘fine print’ in the AIDS poster repertoire,” forcing passersby to enter into the poster and interact with a smaller body of text.⁴ Using this formula, ACT UP and its international chapters unleashed a double-barrelled volley of information *and* impression, “to prompt the LGBT community to organize around the politics of AIDS, and to imply to anyone outside those communities that we already were [...] It needed to create the impression of ubiquity, and to create its own literacy. It needed to be advertising.”⁵ In

¹ Interview with Michael Hendricks, December 8, 2021.

² Albrecht, Lacher-Feldman, and Valenti, eds., *Up Against the Wall*, 198. *SILENCE=DEATH* is alternately stylized in French as *SILENCE=MORT* or *LE SILENCE=LA MORT*.

³ Finkelstein, *After Silence*, 82.

⁴ Jordan Arseneault, “Silence=Sex,” in *Up Against the Wall: Art, Activism and the AIDS Poster*, ed. Donald Albrecht, Jessica Lacher-Feldman, and William M. Valenti (Rochester, NY: RIT Press, 2021), pp. 200-201, 200.

⁵ Avram Finkelstein, “A Propagandist’s Guide to Twenty-First-Century Image Literacy,” *Visual Inquiry: Learning and Teaching Art* 6, no. 2 (2017): pp. 165-171, https://doi.org/10.1386/vi.6.2.165_3, 168.

essence “manipulating an audience into accepting a brand before it exists,” Finkelstein *et al* not only provided the international ACT UP network with its most epochal image (soon after the group re-christened themselves Gran Fury, acting as ACT UP/NY’s in-house design firm), but in the process “even when they no longer did the graphics, they set the standard.”⁶ This high standard of design aesthetic also appealed to new members from the worlds of arts and marketing, distinguishing ACT UP/NY’s membership as representing:

the first movement of deeply oppressed people whose lives were at stake to have included such a large group of designers, advertising professionals, studio artists, marketers and publicists well versed in the visual language of branding [...] ACT UP not only adapted the aesthetics of advertising but also benefited from activists who were actually the people who *created* the aesthetics of advertising.⁷

Additionally, through its inverted fuchsia triangle—upending the pink triangle used by the Nazis to mark homosexuals in concentration camps to point defiantly upwards rather than down—*SILENCE=DEATH* also directly linked ACT UP/NY and its brand of HIV/AIDS activism to the atrocities of the Nazi regime.⁸ Prompted by conservative journalist William F. Buckley’s controversial suggestion that all PWAs should be tattooed on their arms and buttocks to protect other IV drug users and homosexuals, ACT UP/NY created several pieces further strengthening the connection, including use of imagery from the Nuremberg Trials in 1987’s *Let the Record Show* exhibition at the New Museum in Manhattan and the creation of a concentration camp float for the New York City Pride parade that same year.⁹ For ACT UP/NY’s activists,

⁶ Finkelstein, “A Propagandist’s Guide to Twenty-First Century Image Literacy,” Patrick Moore in *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP*, directed by Jim Hubbard (ACT UP Oral History Project, 2012), 1 hr., 34 min., <https://banq.kanopy.com/video/united-anger-history-act-0>.

⁷ Sarah Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 317.

⁸ This flipping of the triangle, however, was an accidental inversion that has come to be itself iconic, “a mistake later spun as an intentional signal of empowerment.” Caleb Crain, “Challenging Denial With Enduring Images,” *New York Times* (New York City, NY), Apr. 5, 2022.

⁹ William F. Buckley Jr., “Crucial Steps in Combating the Aids Epidemic; Identify All the Carriers,” *New York Times* (New York City, NY), Mar. 18, 1986; “Exhibitions: Let the Record Show...,” *New Museum Digital Archive*, accessed December 5, 2021, <https://archive.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/158>; Schulman, 322, 329, 330.

this genocidal comparison was apt given the horrifying projections of infections and deaths should viable treatments not be found. Contemplating the apparent disregard of politicians and the wider public, early activist Simon Watney warned, “let there be no mistake: the spectacle of AIDS calmly and constantly entertains the possible prospect of the death of all western European and American gay men from AIDS—a total, let us say, of some twenty million lives without the slightest flicker of concern, regret, or grief.”¹⁰ This act of linking the HIV/AIDS crisis with the horrors of National Socialism was not without its stumbling blocks, yet ACT UP/NY members both defended their use of this imagery and further acknowledged, “as historically problematic as an analogy of AIDS and the death camps is, it is also deeply resonant for gay men and lesbians, especially insofar as the analogy is already mediated by the gay movement’s adoption of the pink triangle.”¹¹

From its earliest moments, ACT UP Montréal followed closely in the design-savvy footsteps of ACT UP/NY and Gran Fury.¹² Yet while certain iconic pieces created initially in New York were in turn re-used in Montréal, the majority of ACT UP Montréal’s creative productions were original pieces created with local audiences in mind. The comparison between the Holocaust and the AIDS crisis was central to ACT UP/NY’s early propagandist materials, as were attacks on national US politicians, President Ronald Reagan, and international bodies including the Vatican. For its part, ACT UP Montréal opted instead for distinctly Québécois reference points in its posters and protests. Despite the group’s adherence to the ACT UP/NY visual aesthetics rulebook, the graphic ephemera and protest performatives created by ACT UP Montréal’s Art

¹⁰ Simon Watney, “The Spectacle of AIDS,” in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis / Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (London, UK: The MIT Press, 1987), pp. 71-86, 85.

¹¹ Crimp and Rolston, *AIDS DEMO GRAPHICS*, 14.

¹² For just three examples of book-length explorations of Gran Fury’s work during the HIV/AIDS crisis (listed here chronologically), see Crimp and Rolston, *AIDS DEMO GRAPHICS*; Finkelstein, *After Silence*; Lowery, *It Was Vulgar and it Was Beautiful*.

Committee broke with ACT UP/NY and presented instead a highly focused regional specificity, utilizing localized history, imagery, and dialect, and maintaining a determined aim strictly on the provincial Liberal government of Robert Bourassa and local health authorities.¹³ Furthermore, while ACT UP Montréal's official 'working language' was French (with on-hand translators available during meetings in both English and French), printing materials in both languages not only provided necessary information to both communities but also created a cooperative and participatory bridge between group members and curious onlookers on opposite sides of the language divide using close-to-home references they could all understand. In meeting what Sarah Schulman terms, "a great need for materials with cultural specificity, which is much larger than language," ACT UP Montréal skillfully met the needs of Québec's HIV/AIDS activist community in communicating to everyone in strikingly localized, inclusive fashion.¹⁴

As the imported guide from ACT UP/NY, Charles outlined the importance of maintaining a uniform look and influence across all chapters including Montréal:

It's one of the trademarks. It's a branding thing. You just know if you're going to do something with ACT UP's name on it, you have to bring it and pull it together and it has to really have that professional gallery of art sensibility. A lot of us were artists professionally, so bringing that to the table was really important.¹⁵

While acknowledging the influence from ACT UP/NY, Durand also agrees with the presence of a distinctly local uniqueness to the pieces created by ACT UP Montréal—in particular, the illustration-based pieces he himself created:

There was a base. The typesetting was Futura Bold. Everybody used that font for AIDS. The style was quite often white type on black background and it was quite basic and could look like the same kind of style. With the drawing, there weren't

¹³ Bourassa served as the premier of Québec from 1970 to 1976 and again from 1985 to 1994. He died in 1996.

¹⁴ Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 359.

¹⁵ Interview with Blane Charles, March 19, 2022. In a subsequent interview from December 3, 2022, Charles described annual visits to New York City in which members of ACT UP Montréal would march alongside ACT UP/NY in the parade, as well as discussing future projects, occasionally finding helpful overlap.

that many drawings over there in New York or other ACT UPs.¹⁶

Unquiet Revolution

From its first action on March 19, 1990, ACT UP Montréal's unique focus was reflected in its choice of subject matter and location, commemorating the first anniversary of the murder of Montréal PWA and activist Joe Rose (see fig. 3.2). As the first manifestation of the fledgling organization (who had met regularly only since January of that year), much was borrowed from ACT UP/NY's well-established *die-in* method of protest under Charles' guiding hand.¹⁷ Outlined in chalk, just over 20 ACT UP Montréal protesters lay on the heated sidewalks of Complexe Desjardins' Place des Arts entrance (selected for their warmth), clutching *SILENCE=MORT* placards and handmade signs beneath two billowing ACT UP Montréal banners (see fig. 3.3).¹⁸

Borrowing ACT UP/NY's mainstay motif of bloody handprints (based on another Gran Fury poster, 1988's *THE GOVERNMENT HAS BLOOD ON ITS HANDS. ONE AIDS DEATH EVERY HALF HOUR*), ACT UP Montréal reinterpreted that original image to communicate instead a highly localized commentary on very recent and shared trauma within their own community.¹⁹ In closely examining some of ACT UP Montréal's subsequent publications, public actions, and associated ephemera, the reinterpretation and recasting first seen in *UNE MANIF*

¹⁶ Interview with Pierre Durand, December 30, 2022; Alongside ACT UP/NY and Gran Fury, Pageau also credits artists like Barbara Kruger and zines like *Diseased Pariah News* as direct influences on ACT UP Montréal's design aesthetic. Interview with Marc Pageau, March 31, 2023.

¹⁷ The flyer included here is for a protest held in 1992. ACT UP Montréal—later in collaboration with Queer Nation Rose—held an event each year on the anniversary of Rose's death. Today, this anniversary continues to be commemorated online by Montréal's LGBTQ+ community.

¹⁸ Michael Hendricks and René Leboeuf, "Interview Transcript 38," 12.

¹⁹ Jori Finkel, "A masterclass in activism: What artists today can learn from ACT UP's response to the Aids crisis," *The Art Newspaper*, June 3, 2021, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/06/03/a-masterclass-in-activism-what-artists-today-can-learn-from-act-ups-response-to-the-aids-crisis>.

POUR JOE ROSE not only remains clearly visible, but vitally central to the group's activist identity.

Desaulniers, a foundational member of the Arts Department from the group's first meetings and largely responsible for the group's banners, puts the mandate for their design items as simply, "Stately. Considered. To make an impact."²⁰ Charles also acknowledges the need for material designed to cut through the noise and jolt the public:

The success of any activist effort is that you're trying to get a point across. You're trying to create change. Really a lot of it is visual, and you have a small window to make an impact. The more powerful the visual, the more concentrated the impact.²¹

Sypnowich expands the potential of design to also act as a highly useful conduit to parlay important material, adding, "Journalism can be a form of activism, informing people what's going on. And graphic design is a form of journalism. Editing by design, you can draw people into articles if you design it right."²²

For Pageau, ACT UP Montréal's manifestations and their use of strong graphic design provided surprising lessons in the power of graphics and collective effort, regardless of budget:

René and Michael were really mentors for me. They were coming from the aspect of demos and I learned a lot with them. I had no idea that you could do things with simple props and just putting things together. You didn't need tons of money. And we didn't have it anyways.²³

Simultaneously, Hendricks gives much of the credit to Pageau in regards to ACT UP Montréal's expert utilization of design drawn from outside influences but within a strong local context:

Marc was the artistic-intellectual-theoretical author of the earlier work of ACT UP MTL and his knowledge of the contemporary art world (in 1990) and how it

²⁰ Interview with Luc Desaulniers, June 22, 2023. Desaulniers also credits David Williams with the co-creation of ACT UP Montréal's banners.

²¹ Interview with Blane Charles, April 28, 2023.

²² Interview with Paula Sypnowich, May 6, 2024.

²³ Interview with Marc Pageau, March 31, 2023.

intersected with the HIV movement (in Toronto and New York City) was fundamental to ACT UP MTL's thinking (to the Art Committee's thinking), influencing all of us. He was instrumental in adding a "contemporary Québec content and visual message" to the ACT UP NY message using French-Canadian cultural terms. In other words, he showed us how to make stuff equally effective here by making it about us.

From Marc, the rest of us understood what General Idea was doing and this aesthetic spread like wild fire because it SPOKE to our community in terms the artists and the community understood, touching them deeply. That's why they did all that work, invested so much. Some of it may seem obscure today but, in 1991, it was "state of the art" in communication. While these guys were making posters and fliers à la mode of design at the time (commercial, hard-edged, smart), they were also in the throes of an epidemic that was killing their friends and sometimes killing them at the same time.²⁴

ACT UP Montréal's organized actions were multi-part operations discussed and agreed upon at Monday night meetings, leaving the creation and production of the required ephemeral pieces to the design-savvy members of the Art Committee on Thursdays. Actions were promoted in advance by flyers, stickers, and posters to alert both interested fellow protesters and the media, and ACT UP Montréal members embarked on undercover postering and stickering campaigns throughout the city. An intrinsic part of activist grunt work, participating in wheat pasting campaigns—simply white flour mixed with water, just as effective as wallpaper paste, but costing next to nothing—was viewed as a shared rite of passage, "a messy, horrible mess [...] it ruined your clothes!"²⁵ An eye-catching visual disruption in the cityscape, ACT UP Montréal's poster-ing methods utilized Warholian repetition, rows of identical images plastered over mainstream theatre and film posters creating an interruptive call to attention with stunning effect (see fig. 3.4). A common target for stickering campaigns was Montréal's underground Métro system, wagons often taken out of circulation for cleaning after ACT UP Montréal had covered every

²⁴ Michael Hendricks, e-mail message to author, April 7, 2023. General Idea was a Canadian art collective composed of AA Bronson, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal, active between 1967 and 1994. Much of their later output focused on the diminishing health of Partz and Zontal, who both succumbed to AIDS in 1994.

²⁵ Hendricks in discussion with the author, December 8, 2021.

visible surface. Utilizing a working relationship with the Confédération des syndicats nationaux (one of Québec's largest trade union federations), ACT UP Montréal ensured its messages in miniature could not be easily removed. ACT UP Montréal's in-house photographer René Leboeuf (himself one of the group's most active stickerists) recalls, "Those stickers were printed at the CSN, so they fucking stick! [...] The price was very low, they were very nice people. We'd give them out to our members and they would put them everywhere."²⁶

Following their involvement in the protests surrounding Sex Garage in the summer of 1990, ACT UP Montréal's productivity increased to a rapid pitch and their local presence increased. Amongst activists I interviewed for this thesis, this time of crisis for the LGBTQ+ community forced intensely focused labour and quick responses, often at the expense of other areas in their lives. For Desaulniers, a blend of available time—given how several of the leading figures in ACT UP Montréal were either unemployed or worked in flexible jobs like bars and nightclubs—and bursting creative energies were a necessary combination to achieve their goals. "That's what we were doing," he recalls. "We weren't sitting around. Creative people, we have an agenda."²⁷ For Hendricks, this activist work also became an all-encompassing matter of the moment: "We never thought of the future. I don't think any of us thought we were going to be alive. And most of them aren't."²⁸

On the required quickness needed for immediate responses to governmental actions, Pageau adds, "We were quite fast actually. We'd do [a piece] in a weekend or so."²⁹ For Durand, this rapid-fire need for new visual materials was a perfect fit for his quick working pace. No stranger to tight deadlines and quick turnarounds, he recalls, "When I draw, I draw fast. When I

²⁶ René Leboeuf in discussion with the author, December 8, 2021.

²⁷ Interview with Luc Desaulniers, June 22, 2023.

²⁸ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 8, 2021.

²⁹ Interview with Marc Pageau, April 5, 2023.

used to go to model class with models, like I'm finished and the other ones will take ten more minutes. Like, *des poses de vingt minutes ça j'haïs ça la*. It's too long! *Moi il faut que ça va vite !*"³⁰

All of these elements of visual ingenuity and performative protest came together in evocative and powerful harmony at ACT UP Montréal's second major official action, *93 FEMMES MORTES AU QUÉBEC* on World AIDS Day, December 1, 1990.³¹ This union of separately mobilized pieces represents a pinnacle moment for ACT UP Montréal and intensely localized activism in Montréal. Following directions from ACT UP/NY to *heterosexualize* HIV infections internationally, artist Charles Lamy proposed the fabrication of one *papier maché* mask for each of the 93 women officially recognized of having died of AIDS in Québec up to that point, made from face moulds of the women members of ACT UP Montréal.³² By keeping the manifestation mobile, the event held a moving theatricality impossible to capture via an immobile *die-in*.³³ Hendricks remembers, "Orders came from New York that the movement had to be de-gayed. They called it the de-gaying of HIV infection and, of course it was true, but nobody talked about it. It was the best kept secret of AIDS."³⁴ As *UNE MANIF POUR JOE ROSE* recast ACT UP/NY's bloody handprints in a uniquely local light, *93 FEMMES MORTES AU QUÉBEC*

³⁰ Interview with Pierre Durand, December 30, 2024.

³¹ I've taken the title for this action from the leading banner carried at the protest march

³² Despite similarities in the use of white masks, Hendricks and Leboeuf claim no prior knowledge of ACT UP/NY's *FACELESS BUREAUCRAT* action of April 22, 1990, in which suit-wearing protestors wore blank masks on Wall Street. Besides mention in Sarah Schulman's *Let the Record Show*, locating online evidence of this action also proves difficult. While these actions may have been similar in the use of masks, this similarity seems coincidental. Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 362.

³³ By 1990, ACT UP/NY was attempting to broaden the definition of HIV/AIDS beyond a distinctly gay male disease and spotlight other groups who were also facing high rates of infection and death. Much of their work that year gave particular focus to the experiences of women who were very commonly mis-diagnosed and whose deaths were severely under-counted. That year, ACT UP also published a book-length book on the topic. ACT UP/NY Women & AIDS Book Group, ed. Marion Banzhaf, *Women, AIDS & Activism* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990).

³⁴ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 8, 2021.

firmly distinguished ACT UP Montréal's *modus operandi* as one which would always remain distinctly Québécois.

After distributing the 93 masks on black sticks at the march's starting point on Dorchester Square, the assembled protesters marched solemnly and silently along rue Ste-Catherine in downtown Montréal "baffling many Christmas shoppers."³⁵ One thousand additional protestors joined the march, including many from Montréal-based feminist groups who opted for participation over altercation. The march received extensive press coverage and left a deep impression on passersby. Documented in LeBoeuf's photographs the result is eerie and dramatic, ghostly and performative. From all accounts, the street fell silent as the march ambled slowly by, awestruck observers silenced by those marching by (see fig. 3.5 and fig 3.6). From behind the camera, LeBoeuf recalls:

It was very impressive. The people were stunned when they were looking at it. I was taking pictures of course, and there was this look in the faces of the people. It's always incredible when you see it from their perspective. And people were like, 'what's going on? What's this?' And then when they saw the banner, then they knew what was going on.³⁶

For Charles, this march was a foundational piece in ACT UP Montréal's emergence in the city, coupled with supportive media coverage (see fig. 3.7):

The older onlookers, their faces were contorted until they looked really ugly, but the younger viewers were totally supportive and a lot of them joined us in the march [...] I felt like it was a new awakening for the community, I felt like they just needed a catalyst. They just needed a spark to get the flame going."³⁷

Hendricks also recalls this demonstration as also having built bridges within the LGBTQ+ community:

³⁵ Aaron Derfel, "Death-Mask Rally Delivers AIDS Message," *Montréal Gazette* (Montréal, QC), Dec. 2, 1990.

³⁶ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 28, 2022.

³⁷ Shawn Dearn, host, *Queer Legends: An Oral History Podcast*, season 1, episode 5, "Blane Charles: The NYC queen behind Québec's current-day activism," Secret Agents, October 22, 2021, 26 min., <https://podcasts.apple.com/fr/podcast/blane-charles-the-nyc-queen-behind-quebecs-current/id1587625685?i=1000539358100>.

The public were stunned by this performance, and it really was good. We felt it important that we communicate to women with women and not just with gay men saying these things, and the lesbian community turned out *en masse* for that one, as you can see in the photos.³⁸

While the march itself was very successful—the members of ACT UP Montréal backed up by a crowd of an estimated 1,000 fellow protestors, a large contingent from local feminist groups—the lead-up to the event caused intense local controversy. In its promotional materials, *93 FEMMES MORTES AU QUÉBEC* linked the recent Montréal École Polytechnique massacre of December 6, 1989 which left 14 women dead and 13 more people injured and was still painfully fresh in the public's minds, directly with the HIV/AIDS crisis in the province. The *IL N'Y A PAS QUE LES SEMI-AUTOMATIQUES QUI TUENT LES FEMMES AU QUÉBEC* flyer used stark lettering on a blank background, punctuated with a gun sight pointed both directly back at the viewer's forehead and forward towards unseen victims ahead (see fig. 3.8).³⁹ This repurposing further fanned the flames in a city still reeling from the massacre and caught in heavy debate and grief, causing immediate controversy in particular with a number of local feminist groups vehemently opposed to its use. Describing ACT UP Montréal's creative process, Hendricks explains:

It was Paula's concept that led to creating this controversial flyer. And this is a perfect example of how the political-creative process worked in ACT UP MTL. At a meeting of the General Assembly (on Monday nights), the coordinating committee informed the members that ACT UP/NY had asked the member groups to try to find ways to broaden the discussion around who was being infected with HIV from unprotected sex, to try to educate the general public that both men and women were being infected by way of unprotected sex, not just gay men. The reason: our gay-male directed information messages could be read to imply that only gay men were at risk, that sexually active women were immune when, in fact, the number of infected women was increasing rapidly all over the world. It is a fact that HIV had been very effectively labeled as a 'gay-related disease', caught by having 'gay sex'. When it came time to propose a plan of safer sex education for the first of December, [close to] the anniversary of the Polytechnique massacres

³⁸ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 28, 2022.

³⁹ This design was also used for a sticker.

(when Marc Lépine murdered the female engineering students at Poly), an active and respected member, our ‘facilitator,’ the presiding officer at our meetings, Paula Sypnowich, proposed that a good slogan would be something like ‘it isn’t only guns that kill women’ (NB: from memory, not an exact quote). Immediately, the men in the room were scandalized/frozen/upset—this subject, for them, was taboo, out of the question—any mention of Polytechnique was tainted. But the discussion of the proposition Paula had brought to the floor continued. The women present found Paula’s idea to be ‘difficult’ but very clear and direct plus it was sure to catch public attention. (This idea made many of the men present more fearful.) However, finally, after a vote, the majority (of all the members present and of the female members present) supported the idea of sending the concept to the Art Committee that met on Thursdays. By the next General Assembly, the following Monday night, Pierre-Marc [Pelletier] had come up with his first sketch which led to more long discussions of whether or not to associate the two concepts. By a majority, the members voted in favor of proceeding and Pierre-Marc produced the final flyer. Needless to say, the poster campaign for that December first engendered lots of commentary and much discussion. Paula was right, it was controversial and it worked. But Paula (and ACT UP MTL) paid a price for this boldness. Women who opposed the slogan blamed the members of ACT UP MTL (whom they wrote off as troglodytes).⁴⁰

“We wanted something very punchy,” recalls Leboeuf, “and it was a very touchy subject—both women with AIDS and the women killed by guns.”⁴¹ For Hendricks, this proximity to massacre gave ACT UP Montréal a tragic advantage, positioning the group as, “unfortunately quite lucky to have that material—it was shocking, and yes we caused a response.”⁴²

Sypnowich fully understood its inherent shock value. Before its publication, she recalls:

I organized the Comité des femmes contre le sida and I had a feminist column and I wrote about what happened at the Engineering School. I got permission from one of the mothers of one of the women to write that. I worked at CBC part-time doing research and interviewed one mother who was very anti-gun and I said I wanted to use that line. I knew it would offend some people, but she said it was fine. She liked it. It was a way of talking about women dying and people not noticing. In my column, I said women die because of violence and all sorts of violence reflects itself in all sorts of different ways. This was a focused, concen-

⁴⁰ Michael Hendricks, letter to the author, August 21, 2025.

⁴¹ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 8, 2021.

⁴² Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 8, 2021.

trated, spectacular event—but it’s not just those fourteen women. And it got attention.⁴³

Hendricks echoes these sentiments:

It was the right thing to do, bringing consciousness to it. It was shocking, and yes we caused a response. I think what they call nowadays is a trigger offence. Those things didn’t exist in those days so we just took the flak for it, but it worked. We got attention and people realized that there was a feminine side for HIV infection. It was an important moment.⁴⁴

In utilizing one disaster to help shine light on another, ACT UP Montréal also helped stake and reclaim the shooting as one directly related to the city’s women. In doing so, ACT UP Montréal’s focus on women with HIV/AIDS and its inspired callback to the Polytechnique helped address some deeper systemic issues in Québec in regards to gender. Leading up to the march, Smith recalls some of the extremely problematic dialogue surrounding the shooter’s intentions:

It was horrifying. I remember the discussion about how the killings were not necessarily against women. That some of the men were trying to promote this idea that it had nothing to do with hatred towards women, that they just *happened* to be the target in this particular event. The misogyny. I remember being very upset about that and writing about that as well. How men—certain men—just couldn’t accept that the hatred towards women was so vociferous that it would drive someone to do this.⁴⁵

Interviewed in 2024, Smith—who was on the campus the day of the shooting—reflected on the tragedy’s sustained importance to Montréalers to the present in how, “we commemorate it every year [...] the event is kind of sacred in a way.”⁴⁶ And in my own experiences in presenting this

⁴³ Interview with Paula Sypnowich, May 6, 2024. The Comité des femmes contre le sida was a committee within ACT UP Montréal focusing specifically on women’s issues and safety precautions, including the publication of a flyer on the use of dental dams.

⁴⁴ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 8, 2021.

⁴⁵ Interview with Neil Smith, March 19, 2024. Smith has written about his experiences on the day of the shooting and the city’s subsequent experiences related to it in two of his published novels.

⁴⁶ Interview with Neil Smith, March 19, 2024.

work in both presentations or exhibitions, there remains a strong reaction from Montréalers encountering the *SEMI-AUTOMATIQUES* flyer for the first time.⁴⁷

While future ACT UP Montréal actions continued to grab headlines throughout the province, *93 FEMMES MORTES AU QUÉBEC* remains the group's most finely orchestrated public manifestation. Future actions veered between performance art infused with dark humour and camp, public marches, and community-building commemorative ceremonies. Following the spark of *93 FEMMES MORTES AU QUÉBEC*, ACT UP MTL emerged as a ubiquitous presence in the Gay Village's bars, drag balls, and clubs and plastered across the city's walls and subway cars. World AIDS Day remained the year's most important event for ACT UP Montréal throughout its operations, with subsequent years marked with similarly breathtaking performative demonstrations to mark yet another year of losses. For the 1991 edition, the group borrowed a church bell from a local antiques dealer, marching slowly down rue Sainte-Catherine while tolling the bell with a 2x4 for each AIDS-related death (see fig. 3.9).⁴⁸ Following this march, the group proceeded to the corner of Sainte-Catherine and Panet streets and seized the vacant lot there as a park in commemoration of HIV-related deaths in Québec, now officially recognized as *Parc de l'Espoir* and discussed further below. For their final World AIDS Day march in 1992,

⁴⁷ I have shown this work both as part of the *L'activisme esthétique d'ACT UP Montréal* exhibition and during several conference presentations, and the impact on the audience remains the same. Those who experienced it in 1990 have never forgotten it. Those seeing it for the first time at the present moment remain stunned by its audacity and direct reference to a tragic piece of Montréal history.

⁴⁸ Hendricks says, "He lent it to us. We wanted to rent it, and he said, 'take it.' We told him what for, and then we damaged it, beating it. We destroyed pieces of it, hitting it with the 2x4. The boys had to go running and find construction sites around Sainte-Catherine Street to find new pieces of 2x4 so that I could continue to hit the bell. And when we took the bell back to the *antiquaire* we said, 'look, we have to pay for this. What is the damage worth?' And he said, 'we'll call that patina.'" Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 5, 2022.

the group again marched in single file holding a 2,000 foot long rope tied with black ribbons individually marking further losses.⁴⁹ For Hendricks, these December marches always required something special:

The ideas came up in the *Assemblée générale*. We had to have something. You always had to have a gimmick—because it’s ACT UP—and a way to get attention from the media and also to please the crowd and to draw the crowd and to get them in the spirit of the moment. We talked a lot about it.⁵⁰

Fashion Statement

A hallmark of ACT UP was its merchandise—including an ever expanding range of eye-catching buttons, hats, and T-shirts—with new designs appearing regularly for purchase (see fig. 3.10).

These items “played an enormous role in the movement. They not only united a look, a membership, a commitment, but also provided the first source of fundraising for the new organization.”⁵¹

While simultaneously presenting a “well-organized, professional look [...] the impressive appearance of the group made people on the sidelines curious: something’s happening here; I want to know what it is.”⁵² This wearable ephemera also made walking billboards of all who wore them—a poster can be torn down or plastered over, but an activist T-shirt remains on the wearer who further spreads the message every time they wear it—at \$25.00 a pop towards the next action or run of posters. Yet, despite the obvious financial upside, to Hendricks, “ACT UP was a fashion statement,” for most who came in contact with it.⁵³ Throughout its three-and-a-half year existence (with public actions occurring between March 19, 1990 and November 12, 1993) roughly 30 active ACT UP Montréal participants attended Monday meetings, worked on the

⁴⁹ Described in Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 26, 2022. Apparently at this event, there were no arguments over the colour of the ribbons used.

⁵⁰ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 5, 2022.

⁵¹ Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 318.

⁵² Crimp and Rolston, *AIDS DEMO GRAPHICS*, 34.

⁵³ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 28, 2022.

needed costumes and placards on Thursdays, and wheat pasted and stickered the rest of the week.⁵⁴ On average, events and marches drew up to an estimated 1,000 participants and ACT UP Montréal was booked regularly by local clubs for fundraising drag performances and to set up information tables at parties and club nights. Still, the actual grunt work of planning and production remained in the hands of a dedicated few, which also doubtlessly played a major part in maintaining the aesthetic cohesiveness across ACT UP Montréal's design catalogue. Hendricks remembers:

The majority of people who dressed up in ACT UP regalia and claimed to be active weren't actually involved at all, or very little. They went to parades once a year. It was like a Chowder and Marching society—all we lacked was the bagpipes [...] but it *worked* every time. And it was particularly effective in trapping the media to doing something about it, otherwise it didn't make the papers.⁵⁵

Donning ACT UP Montréal merchandise acted as both a coded show of support and connection to the movement, while also suggesting deeper involvement on the part of the wearer than was most often the case. Arguably by a certain point in the HIV/AIDS crisis, wearing an ACT UP pin or hat became *de rigueur* to fitting in and appearing informed. Looking back at his years in ACT UP/NY, Mark Harrington claimed, "ACT UPs spread like wildfire [...] They drew people into an exciting cultural and political ferment, with a new sense of community, collective power and joy [...] ACT UP was like a religious movement," placing much of the emphasis on any sort of involvement as one of inclusion and togetherness.⁵⁶ Yet, while achieving the goal of implying the existence of a powerful, united army of activists, for many simply wearing a logo'd T-shirt or hat was as deep as their involvement went.

⁵⁴ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 8, 2021.

⁵⁵ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 8, 2021.

⁵⁶ Mark Harrington, "Deconstructing the Drama" *Treatment Action Group*, November 26, 2019, accessed December 7, 2021, <https://www.treatmentactiongroup.org/resources/tagline/tagline-1996/deconstructing-the-drama>.

As ACT UP Montréal's activist presence increased, the need for financial support of their actions and operations did as well. Besides regularly scheduled drag and dance party fundraisers held at venues including KOX and Business, Desaulniers and Charles collaborated closely on the annual World Ball for Unity, introducing New York's ballroom and voguing community to Montréal. For Charles, blending communities and blurring the lines between them was of the utmost importance:

I felt that I had a responsibility to bring the best of what I knew from New York and merge it with the best of what Montréal had to offer. I think the culmination of that was the World Ball for Unity which I co-produced with Luc Desaulniers because we brought the voguing house ball element from New York, the Latino and Black communities of New York to Montréal, and Québec anglo and franco-phone. So all of that culture mixed into that one pot just made for a really tasty event or tasty celebration. I think that was probably my gift, to have the wisdom to know what would work and what wouldn't work and pulling the communities together.⁵⁷

Desaulniers also remembers these events as eye-opening experiences, particularly given his initial unfamiliarity with the ballroom culture:

I didn't know about the balls, but I guess when I like something I mark it. If I'm stimulated, I'm there. And it was great. I don't want to shoot myself down, but I'm a big wannabe. I want to be there. I want to try. I want to see. I want to push and gather people. I want to see art, darling. Art!⁵⁸

Besides these regularly-occurring club nights and events, ACT UP Montréal also sold T-shirts, hats and copies of silkscreened placards. Hendricks recalls, "That was another way we paid for our activities. We sold those things. We sold them for \$25 which was a lot in those days. It was a constant inventory of stuff like that that we sold, and every demo had its own artwork."⁵⁹ Many of the pieces made for protest actions would also go missing, taken by the auxiliary ACT UP Montréal members who would join in the march without much further participation. Hendricks

⁵⁷ Interview with Blane Charles, March 19, 2022.

⁵⁸ Interview with Luc Desaulniers, June 22, 2023.

⁵⁹ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 8, 2021.

continues, “Most people collected souvenirs. For many people ACT UP was a big experience in their life. And they collected souvenirs all the time, and so [photographic prints, posters, banners, etc.] went there.”⁶⁰

This rapidly evolving collection of material objects and design motifs called back to previous generations of protest movements and their “all-night poster-painting parties to prepare,” yet ACT UP’s visual presence flourished thanks to its unique method of setting, “the wheels of mechanical reproduction turning on equally short notice.”⁶¹ Merchandise created to mark a specific protest action became well-worn items in closets and wardrobes with a far longer lifespan than previously experienced by hand-painted protest signs typically discarded of once the rally or march was over. Hendricks suggests, “for many people ACT UP was a big experience in their life, and they collected souvenirs all the time” and in creating design-savvy *collectible* objects, specific actions and demands remained in the public eye as living, breathing *aesthetic* activism.

Homefront Activisms

More than mere local fashion accessory, ACT UP Montréal maintained its focus on Québec-specific activism with a series of performative actions, postering campaigns, and marches between 1990 and 1993. Throughout the group’s activities, a constant target of their placards and performances remained the unholy trinity of Premier Robert Bourassa, Denise Laberge-Ferron of the *Centre Québécois de coordination sur le SIDA*, and Health and Social Services Minister Marc Yvan Côté (preceded by the equally ineffective and despised Thérèse Lavoie-Roux, “a conserva-

⁶⁰ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 8, 2021.

⁶¹ Crimp and Rolston, *AIDS DEMO GRAPHICS*, 22.

tive Catholic who avoided the AIDS issue and resisted launching major public education programs on AIDS”).⁶² According to Hendricks, “They actually presumed that somehow, by teaching how to avoid HIV infection they would encourage people to either use drugs or be homosexual, while they were busy using drugs and being homosexual and getting infected.”⁶³ In response, a primary function of ACT UP Montréal was the dissemination of safer sex information through publications and outreach appearances and programs. Much attention was paid to educating younger populations in Montréal, including regular appearances on local university campuses and in city high schools. Smith recalls this outreach involvement aimed at teenagers and young adults:

There were a lot of younger people involved at the time. And one of my roles in the organization was to do outreach to high schools. So we put together a little program about safe sex with a lot of younger members, I would say. 21, 22 year olds. 23 year olds. And some of them were straight too. There was one guy and his girlfriend that got involved as well, and they came to talk about safe sex too.⁶⁴

While ACT UP Montréal was able to provide the anglophone community with safer sex materials brought in from AIDS Action Now! and ACT UP/NY, Québec’s francophones were faced with a shocking lack of safer sex instruction materials in French. In what Hendricks and LeBoeuf consider one of ACT UP Montréal’s greatest accomplishments, the group produced the bilingual brochure *SÉCURITÉ SEXE / SAFER SEX* punctuated with Durand’s graphically comedic illustrations (see fig. 3.11). One of the strongest printed examples of ACT UP Montréal’s ribald sense of humour, *SÉCURITÉ SEXE / SAFER SEX* offers blunt, unflinching tips and advice across a wide plethora of sexual activities including golden showers, oral sex, and fisting, with the health

⁶² Rayside and Lindquist, “AIDS Activism and the State in Canada,” 73.

⁶³ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 8, 2021

⁶⁴ Interview with Neil Smith, March 19, 2024.

minister's direct phone line listed 'for more information' should the no-nonsense text graphic illustrations leave any questions unanswered (see fig. 3.12, fig. 3.13, and fig. 3.14). The brochure's first run of 10,000 copies was initially distributed in the Gay Village, and then on June 24, 1990 to the crowds assembled for the *Fête nationale*. *SÉCURI SEXE / SAFER SEX*'s light-hearted and comedic illustrations paired with unabashedly honest text not only acknowledged the Québécois as a sexually active population, but also one deserving of straight-talking, well designed information that didn't shy away from the myriad variations of the subject at hand. Hendricks recalls the leaflet as being of utmost importance to the francophone community in particular:

The government of Québec, they set up an independent agency called C-SAM. They were supposed to do education and treatment information, all that crap. They didn't do anything. They just took the money and ran, and they were constantly congratulating themselves on this marvelous battle, yet there was nothing printed in French concerning prevention [...] It was a completely crazy thing [...] The big problem was that there was no information in French but there was plenty of information in English and they knew that and they didn't care. It was *French Canadians* they were protecting from being perverts.⁶⁵

Of the distinctly unhelpful materials produced by the government of Québec, LeBoeuf reminisces:

There wasn't much related to the [actual] transmission of HIV. It was either by shooting-up or by fucking. They were saying things like you could catch it from a door handle or from toilet seats and things like that, and we wanted to demystify that part. We wanted them to see that it's not that. Forget this! You *can* touch people. That's fine if you want. If somebody farts, you would be OK. You don't catch AIDS from things like that.⁶⁶

The use of comedic illustrations throughout *SÉCURI SEXE / SAFER SEX* ranging from bestiality to phone sex—featuring a man sodomizing himself with a phone receiver, naturally—

⁶⁵ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 8, 2021.

⁶⁶ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 28, 2022.

was used as a tool in ensuring information transmission to as broad an audience as possible in a memorable and unorthodox way. Hendricks remembers:

We'd all worked together on the text so were pretty sure that was the way we wanted to go, and we were going to be humourous about it. But the subjects are clear. You have to be honest with people. I worked at the NFB at the time and I approached [Durand] and asked if he'd be willing to do it, and he came up with the idea of cartoons because he wanted it to pass. It's a bit dry, the subject, honestly.⁶⁷

The ubiquity of *SÉCURI SEXE* / *SAFER SEX* brought straight-ahead, real information into the hands of sexually active people, and arguably played a role in the Québec government's eventual breaking of its self-imposed taboo in producing more thorough safer sex materials.

Still, despite its utility this material wasn't universally welcomed in the city's gay-themed venues. Despite the success of ACT UP Montréal events held at venues throughout the Village neighbourhood, the group still experienced a great deal of push-back from business owners—in particular from those not owned by members of the gay community themselves. Pageau says:

The gay bars were not interested in doing anything because they were making money. Why would you put in such a downer thing? They hated us. They hated ACT UP. They hated any type of activism because we were downers to them. 'What are you guys doing here?' Except only one exception—Pierre Viens was one of the few ones that was more around, giving us money for AIDS activism. But that was the only one. All the Sergakis and the other ones, there's a long tradition of mafia-owned gay bars in Montréal and they were not interested. The same thing goes with the bathhouses—it's the same owners most of the time. As long as they could make money! We were coming in with our flyers and we would have them in our pockets and put them everywhere in bars and saunas, and people hated us because we were doing that.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 8, 2021.

⁶⁸ Interview with Marc Pageau, March 31, 2023. The Sergakis family owns a number of bars, clubs, and restaurants in Montréal, including the Complexe Sky, one of North America's largest gay bars. In 2013, their Le Manoir bar received negative press for kicking out a lesbian couple who were kissing.

Hendricks and LeBoeuf remember a distinct impression of many in Montréal's gay community reacting to ACT UP Montréal's efforts with denial, leaving a palpable ostrich effect in the Gay Village:

RLB: They said, 'oh, we just want to have fun!' They wanted to party like it was in the '70s, but nothing was like before. 'We don't want to know that, don't talk about that!' It was very difficult to give the message to them because we were so in their face.

MH: Too angry. But if you didn't have anybody in your circle that was dying of HIV, you didn't know. Remember, this is before treatment and so we all got a lovely view right in the first row of what advanced HIV infection looks like. And it's not a pretty story.⁶⁹

This ostrich effect also caused a large portion of the gay population in Montréal to turn their backs on ACT UP Montréal and its members. As Hendricks recalls:

Nobody liked ACT UP. They didn't want us anywhere. We were never invited anywhere. We crashed. Like it or not, we were there. So it doesn't matter for us—if you don't like us, it's your problem. And on top of it, the homosexual community denounced us as troublemakers. The things they said about the people in New York are incredible, you know. But here locally, we were also dealt with as marginal and problem-makers. It wasn't the 'real gay community.' Respectable people weren't doing ACT UP things.⁷⁰

Sypnowich also recalls similar negative reactions to *SÉCURI SEXE* / *SAFER SEX* from not only the owners of local bathhouses, but some of their customers as well:

This caused a lot of controversy at the saunas. It's a complicated thing, because it's not like wearing a seatbelt. It's not just about protecting your own life. It's about protecting other people's lives too, and that's what makes it a moral responsibility and not just a personal choice in my mind. But at the same time, they were running a business. That's undoubtedly their biggest concern. And to demonize sexualized places, there was a lot of battling with them. It was the same thing in New York.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 28, 2022.

⁷⁰ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 28, 2022.

⁷¹ Interview with Paula Sypnowich, May 6, 2024.

This reticence to distribute safer sex materials on the part of gay venue owners will remain one of the most puzzling phenomena of the HIV/AIDS crisis—shouldn't these businesses have wanted a healthy, *living* clientele vs. a community decimated by disease?⁷²

Durand also created a trio of placards used at rallies and marches throughout the duration of ACT UP Montréal's operations, featuring images of Laberge-Ferron (*ENTEND RIEN*), Bourassa (*VOIT RIEN*), and Côté (*DIT RIEN*) (see fig. 3.15). Drawing from Québec's long tradition of pointed political cartooning and caricature, the trio were made to appear ridiculous (the Hear no Evil, See no Evil, Say no Evil trope commonly illustrated with monkeys) while also prompting knowing chuckles of recognition from passersby.⁷³ Focusing on such specifically localized individuals brought the crisis into sharp relief for ACT UP Montréal's audience, Hendricks acknowledging, "To make all of this relevant, we had to bring it and put it in touch with Québec reality."⁷⁴ In direct contrast with the heavy seriousness of *93 FEMMES MORTES AU QUÉBEC*, Durand's triptych remained a regular feature at ACT UP Montréal actions, and placed the group's sense of humour at the forefront. When I mentioned this duality of heart wrenching and humourous to Hendricks, he offered a correction, "All of it was heart wrenching. But it *was* often sarcastic and funny."⁷⁵

A primary contributor to ACT UP Montréal's Arts Department, Durand first gained attention for his work at independent gay publications like *Sortie* and the *MAD*-style pages of *Croc*. Durand worked with Michael Hendricks at the National Film Board of Canada, and his

⁷² For more on the fight between AIDS activists and gay sex venues in the American context, in particular San Francisco and New York City, see Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On*.

⁷³ Alan Hustak and Don Monet, "Political Cartoons," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, July 11, 2006, <https://www.the-canadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/political-cartoons>.

⁷⁴ Michael Hendricks in discussion with the author, December 8, 2021.

⁷⁵ Hendricks, in discussion with the author, December 8, 2021.

unique style of caricature-heavy illustration was seen as a natural fit for protest graphics and placards. Durand recalls Hendricks' role in his initial involvement:

We were friends, and sometimes we'd have conversations on the bus going to the Board, or meeting him in the *métro* and chatting all the way to the Board. I guess he invited me, I would say. He was quite a militant. Michael and René, they really never stop. I'm sure they do stuff still. They were really *comment on pourrait dire ça*, like 'models of activism'. So I guess because I was making cartoons also in that gay paper, he could relate it, or I could relate it to the cause also. And anyway, at that time everybody had friends who were dying or were sick. We were all concerned about that epidemic.⁷⁶

Taking local and provincial figures down a peg remained an important element of ACT UP

Montréal's ephemera throughout its existence, well-deserved treatment according to Hendricks:

The public rejection and the political collaboration with that rejection was really remarkable. That was our subject and that's what we were aimed at. Reagan and the United States and that imbecile Bourassa here in Montréal and in Ottawa Mulroney, they were just completely useless. They all consider themselves great statesmen, yet they didn't confront the worst epidemic of the time because it involved people that they wouldn't want to be associated with socially—homosexuals, prostitutes and drug users.⁷⁷

This strong element of humour remained present across much of ACT UP Montréal's creations, via Durand's sharp political caricatures and Pageau's visual jokes (see fig. 3.16).⁷⁸ For Pageau, the presence of such visual roasting also marked the group as distinctly local. He recalls, "We had to. We wanted to. It's part of the local culture and it was often about that. I mean, the subject was dark enough that we *had* to make fun of those people."⁷⁹ For Hendricks, the use of humour was a highly considered and particularly powerful tool to communicate the otherwise unsexy information of safer sex:

There were two main thrusts to ACT UP Montréal—one was public education, and is divided into the general public, the gay public, and other specific groups

⁷⁶ Interview with Pierre Durand, December 30, 2022.

⁷⁷ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 28, 2022.

⁷⁸ Pageau crowned Côte with a dunce cap for a poster, and replaced Queen Elizabeth's face with that of his assistant Jean Roberto Iglesias on mass-photocopied \$2 bills.

⁷⁹ Interview with Marc Pageau, May 4, 2023.

[including] youth. And then there was actual direct action, the majority of which are popular education. And that's why they're funny, and they're supposed to be funny. And they're artisanal handiwork, you know. They're not highly sophisticated!⁸⁰

LeBoeuf also spotlights the rush of involvement in actions and demos adding, “You have to do something to get the interest of the media or the people there to distribute the pamphlets and things like that. But it was always fun. We had a *lot* of fun. It was a lot of adrenaline.”⁸¹ As an outsider to *Québécois* culture, Charles viewed the more humourous pieces created by ACT UP Montréal as building a bridge between the differing groups present in the city, in stark contrast with the somewhat darker works created by ACT UP/NY:

Michael and Luc Desaulniers had a big hand in the humouristic aspect of it, so it kind of softened the blow. We were just the opposite in New York. In New York we were in your face. Very militant. Militant but in a non-violent way. Militant in our approach. And I think that that was appropriate for New York but not for Montréal because of the bilingual issue and making sure that the message was received both *québécois* and *anglais*. I think the humour helped to defer from that being an issue, because that was an issue and we wanted to take the focus off of that. The humour really helped to defer.⁸²

For Hendricks, the use of humour throughout ACT UP Montréal's activist paraphernalia also served another purpose:

One of the parts that made ACT UP effective was that it was funny and silly. And it was difficult for the government to react to that because we were getting the laughs and we weren't hurting anybody. So it was threatening to them, but not threatening in a negative way [...] All of it was heart wrenching, but it was often sarcastic and funny.⁸³

It was also a necessity for the members themselves to keep their fighting spirit alive. Hendricks adds, “by the time ACT UP formed, we'd all lost friends. So, the sad side and the tragedy, we'd

⁸⁰ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 28, 2022.

⁸¹ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 28, 2022.

⁸² Interview with Blane Charles, April 28, 2023.

⁸³ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 8, 2021.

all lived it and there was no point in continuing it. No. ACT UP was a moment of relief because we were fighting back.⁸⁴

There are few characterizations quite so distinctly Québécois as *le Bonhomme Carnaval*, the winter Carnaval de Québec's beloved snowman mascot. At the 1992 Carnaval, ACT UP Montréal recast *le Bonhomme Carnaval* as Bourassa, utilizing his diminutive nickname *Bou Bou*, also used on a large tombstone placard carried in several marches reading, "*BOU BOU ! NOUS IRONS CRACHER SUR TA TOMBE !*" (see fig. 3.17 and fig. 3.18). For this performance, *Bou Bou* was accompanied by stand-ins in drag for Laberge-Ferron and Côté, shown in queenly garb in Durand's accompanying flyer (see fig. 3.19).⁸⁵ Unexpectedly however, the anti-government messaging of this particular action was overshadowed in part by swarming tourists and local families asking for photographs with *le Bonhomme Carnaval*. Still, the Carnaval 1992 action continued ACT UP Montréal's theme of connecting directly and emphatically with Québécois imagery and symbolism.

In another direct example of Québécois iconography repurposed for activist purposes, Art Committee member Marc Pageau's use of the province's *Fleurdelisé* flag emblazoned with *SIDA* stamped across the stems of the lilies themselves was a primary graphic on posters, placards, and T-shirts throughout 1991 and 1992 (see fig. 3.20). Free of the humour expressed in recent public manifestations, Pageau's poster marked a return to the stark typography, messaging, and

⁸⁴ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 28, 2022.

⁸⁵ Michael Hendricks explains the context in these terms: "Under the Tommy Douglas original Sask healthcare plan, the province would pay for your prescriptions (signed by a doctor) if you were hospitalized but not if you were at home. *Malades sur pied*, a program in Québec (and no doubt in other provinces), was a way to pay the RXs for cancer patients so they did not have to be kept in the hospital at great cost just to get the RX needed to live. In English, it was roughly translated as the 'walking sick'. Our victory was that HIV+ people no longer had to quit their jobs and go on welfare to get prescription coverage paid by the provincial healthcare system. CPAVIH wanted their members included with those cancer patients. When the PQ came to power, they simply extended it to all Quebec citizens—avoiding more cartoons and parades, etc.. Qc is still the only province with a universal RX assurance program (not very generous but still insured)." Michael Hendricks, e-mail message to author, December 17, 2021.

graphics of *SILENCE=DEATH*, albeit once again within an entirely Québécois context with the province's projected infection and death rates tattooed across the white cross of the flag. By referring to June 24, 1992, the design also further connects the proliferation of AIDS infection with arguably the biggest party of the year within the province, the *Fête nationale du Québec*.⁸⁶ Released during a period of intense nationalist rhetoric, Pageau recalls the response to the design as particularly pointed:

They were always doing a gay event during the night for Saint Jean-Baptiste, and we made sure that this poster was all around and we got called. I think Michael or René got a phone call from some of the people that were totally outraged that we would do something like that. But we said, 'there's people dying. You might be outraged, but we are outraged too.'⁸⁷

Furthermore, by this point ACT UP Montréal's rallies included the appearance of a large banner featuring a 1970 quotation from poet and songwriter Claude Pélouquin: "*VOUS ÊTES PAS ÉCOEURÉS DE MOURIR, BANDE DE CAVES / C'EST ASSEZ !*" (see fig. 3.21). Despite its applicability towards the government in regards to their underwhelming response to the HIV/AIDS crisis in Québec, the quotation also recalls a particular moment from recent history credited with igniting a province-wide controversy regarding free speech in 1971, when revealed carved into the wall of the Grand Théâtre de Québec as part of a commissioned sculpture by Catalan-born artist Jordi Bonet (see fig. 3.22).⁸⁸ Despite a petition of over 8,000 names demanding

⁸⁶ The *Fête nationale* was formerly known as the *Fête de la Saint-Jean Baptiste* and is celebrated annually on June 24th. The associated visual culture plays an intriguing role in Québec, and is analyzed in depth by Genevieve Zubrzycki. See Genevieve Zubrzycki, *Beheading the Saint: Nationalism, Religion, and Secularism in Québec* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016). The *Fleurdelisé* also appears in one of the group's performance pieces, emblazoned on the front of a man-sized penis costume. Hendricks chased the penis through Montréal's streets with a large condom similar to a butterfly net on a long rod, 'saving' it from another performer dressed as the devil carrying a pitchfork representing HIV infection. By stamping the flag upon the walking phallus, the coding of the overall message carries a further denotation that ACT UP Montréal is here to save *specifically Québécois* penises from the demons of HIV.

⁸⁷ Interview with Marc Pageau, April 5, 2023.

⁸⁸ "Vous Êtes Pas Écoeürés De Mourir, Bande De Caves ? C'est Assez !", *Jordi Bonet : de Taüll au Grand Théâtre*, accessed November 21, 2021, <https://ccquebec.cat/taull/vous-etes-pas-ecoeures-de-mourir-bande-de-caves-cest-assez/>.

its removal for the use of vulgar language within an upscale arts venue and a province-wide debate on the rights of artists—during which it was covered with a curtain to spare the eyes of those who could potentially have been offended by it—this now-iconic carving still remains. Once again reconfiguring and recasting a uniquely Québec-tied reference (intriguingly utilized by an artist certainly familiar with the parallel Catalan quest for independence), ACT UP Montréal in essence continued to create an activist space both proudly by and intended for Québécois-identifying participants and observers. Additionally, references such as these would largely only be understood by fellow Quebecers, thus creating an implicit bridge of understanding between the activists and those watching from the sidelines.

In its constant referral to Québec history, iconography, and images, the ephemera and performance created by ACT UP Montréal basks in and propels an ambient nationalism consciously created through a continued striving for specific messaging *to* and *for* the regional HIV/AIDS experience. Hendricks remarks, “Most young French Canadians were nationalist at that point, and it just seemed like a lateral leitmotif for us. This was a flea calling for a cure—if ACT UP/NY couldn’t do it, 30 of us in Montréal weren’t going to do it, but we could do things within the bounds of what was acceptable here.”⁸⁹ As for the lingering influence of ACT UP/NY, Hendricks jokingly admits, “the orthodoxy was very important and we had representatives from ‘the Vatican’ [Charles and Desaulniers] watching everything [...] It gave us a catechism to live with and a way to approach things.”⁹⁰ However, the need for regional specificity remained at the forefront in the group’s aesthetic decisions. On December 1, 1991, members of ACT UP Montréal rechristened the empty lot at the corner of rue Panet and rue Ste-Catherine Est in the Gay Village as the *PARC COMMÉMORATIF DES PERSONNES MORTES DU SIDA AU QUÉBEC*

⁸⁹ Hendricks, in conversation with the author, December 8, 2021.

⁹⁰ Hendricks, in conversation with the author, December 8, 2021.

with a hand-painted hanging sign and covered its trees with 1,000-plus ribbons for Quebecers who had died of AIDS to that point (see fig. 3.23). In the planning stages for this manifestation, tensions came to a head between group members over the colour of ribbons to be used. Both Charles and Desaulniers (Hendricks' 'Vatican') wished to toe the line with ACT UP/NY's use of red ribbons, while others dug in their heels in refusal in favour of something distinctly québécois.⁹¹ LeBoeuf recalls, "They insisted, insisted, insisted they would be red. And we didn't want them to be red because it was red in New York and we wanted some other colour" (see fig. 3.24 and fig. 3.25).⁹² Hendricks continues:

It wasn't culturally appropriate. Black was for mourning here. And we were trying to communicate death and not infection. And no no, it had to be, so they [Charles and Desaulniers] resigned. The city then took down all of the black ribbons. Douglas, René and I called it Elizabeth Taylor Activism. But then the compromise was even better. Rainbows. That solved the problem. Then they came back and we got along, we forgot about that fight and had more fights about other things. But it was a fact that in order to make all of this relevant, we had to bring it and put it in touch with Québec reality.⁹³

Performance as protest

Throughout their time as a protest group, ACT UP Montréal continued utilizing theatricality including scripted performance pieces, seizures of public places, and die-ins blocking traffic on busy streets. Acknowledging and embracing this central role of the dramatic, Avram Finkelstein has argued, "the magic of ACT UP might actually be centered on performance."⁹⁴ Charles agrees, crediting these performative skills as a primary driving force in making deeper impact with observers and passers-by:

⁹¹ Gabriel Girard, "Undetectable?: Looking for Urban Traces of HIV/AIDS in Montréal's Gay Village," *Medicine Anthropology Theory* 3, no. 3 (June 2020), <https://doi.org/10.17157/mat.3.3.395>, 79.

⁹² Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 8, 2021.

⁹³ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 8, 2021.

⁹⁴ Finkelstein, *After Silence*, 75.

The wonderful thing about those theatrical demonstrations is that the people who were the most resistant were the most changed, or the most impacted. Because of the theatrics it really made it real. It wasn't some superficial concept or idea, or it wasn't a bunch of words or a bunch of numbers. Instead of putting up how many people have died in numbers or putting up a bunch of words of how we feel, those images was what was embedded in their minds and stayed with them when they walked away from that theatrical demonstration. I think that was the most effective and critically different approach that worked so well because it really opened peoples' eyes to the truth and also to the core of what and why we were upset and angry.⁹⁵

One of the group's most indelible actions used pitch-dark humour in response to the high rate of AIDS infections in Québec's prison populations, demanding the distribution of condoms, clean needles, educational material, and anonymous testing for incarcerated persons.⁹⁶ Held in front of Laberge-Ferron's offices at the Centre Québécois de coordination sur le SIDA at 3655 rue St-Urbain on August 10, 1992, Hendricks performed a mock hanging from a tree dressed in prisoner stripes (using a leather harness loaned by a member of the leather community for the purpose), while other ACT UP Montréal members dug a mass grave where "she could put the bodies of all the people who had died of HIV infection" (see fig. 3.26).⁹⁷ Faced with continued institutional stonewalling in increasing HIV awareness within the prison system, Sypnowich considered this prisoner-related work highly important (see fig. 3.27):

We tried getting condoms in prison, and I thought we were making no headway there. I don't know if it succeeded but you know that no matter what, we don't have capital punishment here so that's essentially what they were doing here by not allowing condoms.⁹⁸

Again, despite the universality of messaging on HIV/AIDS issues affecting prison inmates, ACT UP Montréal's focus remained sharply on *in-province* prison conditions, their aim unswerving from raising awareness of Québec's HIV/AIDS affected population to fellow Quebecers.

⁹⁵ Interview with Blane Charles, March 19, 2022.

⁹⁶ Paul Waldie, "Inmates face high AIDS risk: group," *Montréal Gazette* (Montréal, QC), Aug. 11, 1992.

⁹⁷ Hendricks, in conversation with the author, December 8, 2021.

⁹⁸ Interview with Paula Sypnowich, May 6, 2024.

Hendricks often took a leading role in these performances (including as the prisoner hanged from a tree) and at the head of marches, his face more and more familiar in media coverage (see fig. 3.28, fig. 3.29, and fig. 3.30). He recalls:

Nobody wanted to be associated with HIV, because it was then presumed. One day the doorbell rang and I went to the front door and it was the postman who I knew and he said, ‘take a look at *Le Devoir*, you’re on the cover.’ It was a photo of us in a demonstration, we’re throwing condoms at the Cardinal Turcotte. And it says ‘*sidatique* throws condom at ...’ and there was my photo, clearly identified as a person living with HIV [...] Being associated with ACT UP was tantamount to saying one you were homosexual, two you were infected, and three you were on your way to die. That wasn’t really the intention, but that’s what happened.⁹⁹

ACT UP Montréal’s final major action came on July 28, 1993, in response to the threatened deportation of Elizabeth Palacio and her three-year-old son Jimmy. The pair immigrated from El Salvador to Canada with assistance from traffickers in Mexico, where Elizabeth was raped and infected with the HIV virus. Upon discovery of her status, Immigration Canada threatened their deportation and once alerted to this injustice, ACT UP Montréal responded with a march featuring two caskets, one each for mother and son (see fig. 3.31 and fig. 3.32). These were marched directly to the immigration offices, at that time housed in the gay Village. As a dramatic piece of theatrical activism, it was another triumph, and one which achieved its goals as Hendricks recalls:

[We] went down [to the Immigration offices] with the parade, pallbearers carrying the coffins, and when we got there they suddenly realized as Douglas [Buckley-Couvrette] was going through the door with the coffins trailing behind him that something was going on. But it was too late. We had already penetrated their building, and it made for great television. And Madam Palacios was permitted to stay. She unfortunately did later die, but she had a sister who was already here and Jimmy was taken by her, so it worked out. As best as it could under those circumstances. But for us it was a major victory because for once we got immediate [results]. You never knew whether your demonstrations had an effect. And when you’re demonstrating to get a vaccine, good lord, it will be 10 years from the

⁹⁹ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 8, 2021. LeBoeuf added, “When we were parading on the street, everybody thought we were sick and about to die.”

demonstration to the actual test for the vaccine. But here, Madame Palacios actually got to stay in Canada and got free medical care as an immigrant. And Jimmy got to live.¹⁰⁰

As mentioned previously, this performative streak within ACT UP Montréal's public manifestations included costuming—as *Bonhomme Carnaval*, in full drag, as 7-foot-tall walking penis, the devil, and a bottle of bleach and hypodermic needle (see figure 3.33 and fig. 3.34).¹⁰¹ These costumes were used often, lending a characteristic sense of humour and comedy to the serious work of HIV/AIDS activist work. Hendricks expands on the group's thinking behind this use of comedic mascots:

It seems silly and stupid, but the problem was that our government was doing nothing in the area of prevention. At the very same time as we're doing that little theatre piece, we were also publishing our safe sex guidelines, which had also brought humour to the question. It's true that French Canadians laugh a lot, and they make fun of everything. So we thought that humour would probably be the only way you could pass the message without rejection. There was a strong reaction to the public health message, because it was felt to be anti-sex. We had to try to make sex and the condom walk hand in hand.¹⁰²

For Sypnowich, this blend of comedy and dramatics, flair and costume was a natural fit. “Well if there's one thing our community is good at, it's costumes,” she laughs. “We know how to dress up!”¹⁰³

These performative appearances earned ACT UP Montréal extensive press coverage, highlighting the group's media savvy as remembered by Hendricks:

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 26, 2022. Footage of this action and many others can be seen on the Earl Pinchuk Tape in the collections of the Archives gaies du Québec. Himself a member of ACT UP Montréal, Pinchuk's personal library is a near-complete archive of the group's televised media coverage.

¹⁰¹ All costumes were hand-made by members of ACT UP Montréal, save for *Bonhomme Carnaval* which was rented from a costume shop in Montréal. Of the penis, Hendricks recalls: “I would run around and try to protect the penis with the condom from the devil who was here trying to kill him. And of course, I always won, and the devil would try to get him with the pitchfork and then I would cover his head. It was a repeat little thing of 30 seconds and we did it over and over again. We should've made it longer because it was very tiring doing it every 30 seconds. We would do those things for anybody, and we did it mostly for money to pay for the costumes. It costs money to make that stuff!”—Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 8, 2021.

¹⁰² Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 28, 2022.

¹⁰³ Interview with Paula Sypnowich, May 6, 2024.

Our objective was to get page A3. Front page was great, but it was real hard to get. But if you get A3, everybody looks at it. It was always our objective [...] Using them as an amplifier of your message. And to get multiple messages going. None of us had any formal communications training, we just made it up as we went along. But we learned pretty quickly because they lead you, and they shape you and shape the message too.¹⁰⁴

While courting all local publications equally, LeBoeuf and Hendricks remember surprising allies from traditionally right-leaning print sources:

RLB: At *Journal de Montréal*, there was a journalist named Claire Harding. She was a very good one. She was very nice with us, and she wrote excellent articles on [what we were doing]. It was surprising because *Journal de Montréal*, it's... *Journal de Montréal*!

MH: She wrote with a Mont Blanc [pen], and she wrote in a little pad and she wrote it out long hand. But everything she recorded was exact. But we also had very good coverage from *La Presse*. The journalists were very, very, very positive to everything we were doing, and we were lucky.

RLB: [As for the English language *The Gazette*] Sometimes they were good. But there was one journalist, he was very angry about us. It was strange. To a few of them we were like their *bête noire*.¹⁰⁵

While the majority of media attention was focused on ACT UP Montréal's manifestations, the act of producing items for dissemination and posterizing took on a particularly vital role for members. Many were drawn into the ranks due to sadness or fear, and were put to work on the assembly line, often in the name of at least doing *something*. Hendricks recalls new members arriving and telling him, "'All of my friends are dead, and I don't know what to do.' Well, you've come here, you're going to make signs with us. I mean, it was all we could do."¹⁰⁶ For those in mourning either due to the loss of a loved one or in fear of their own status, the simple act of producing and disseminating materials became a vital piece of simply moving forward. The blanket posterizing and stickering of Montréal also gave the useful impression of an activist

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 8, 2021.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 26, 2022.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 21, 2022.

movement far bigger than it actually was. LeBoeuf remarks, “it looked like we were thousands of people, but it was just a little group. Less than 10 were doing the postering because nobody wanted to do that. It’s complicated. It’s messy!”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 8, 2021.

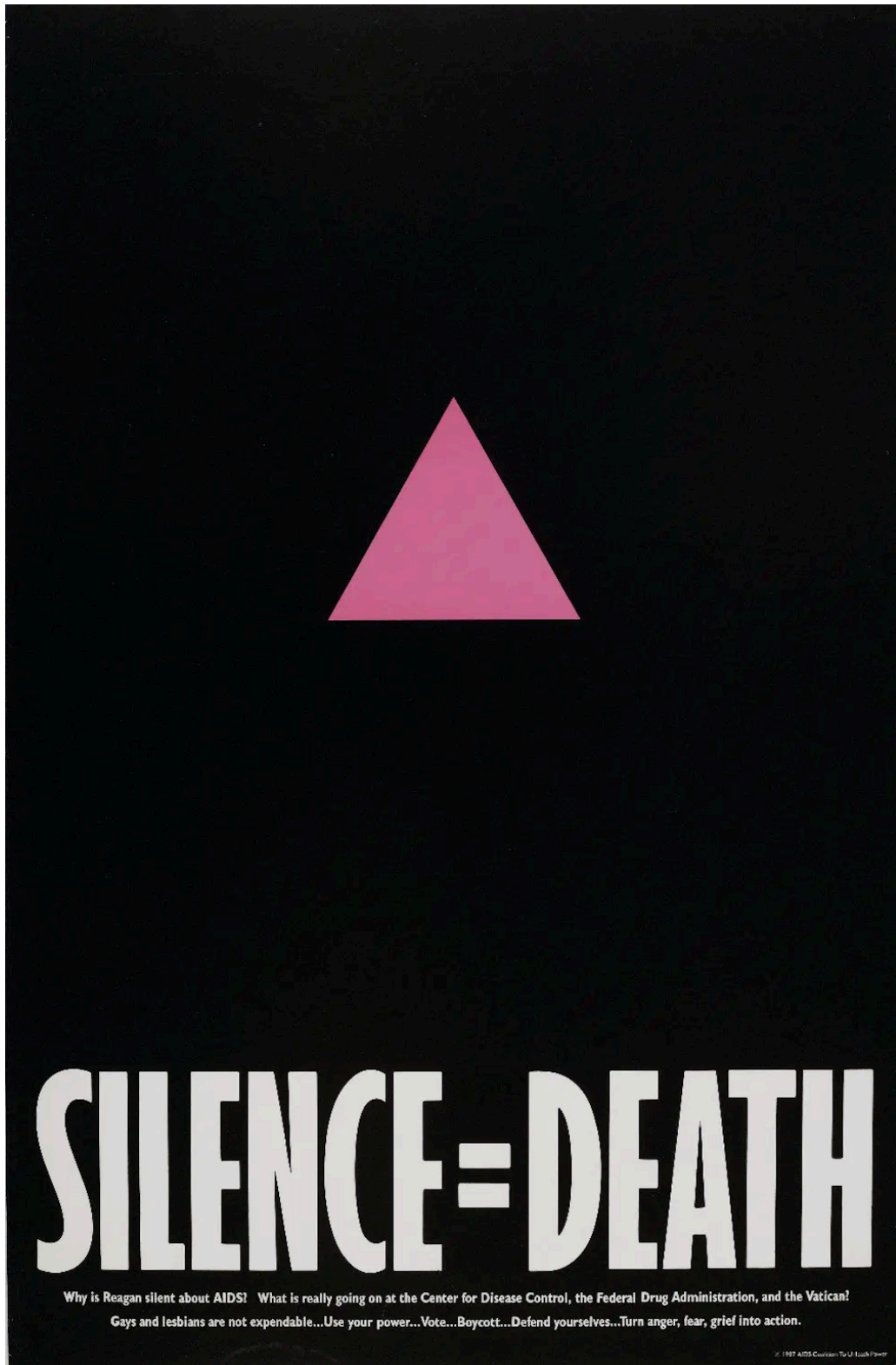


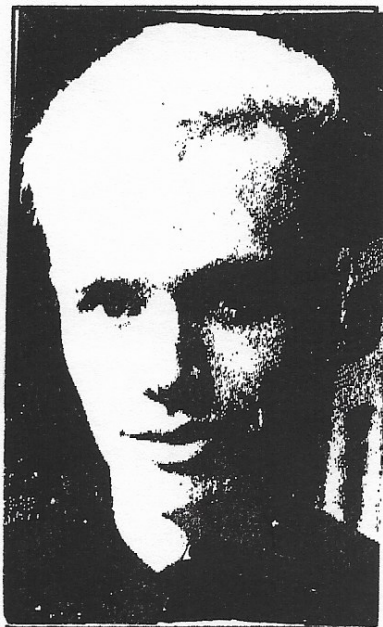
Figure 3.1 Silence=Death Collective, "SILENCE=DEATH," *The Brooklyn Museum*, accessed July 17, 2025, <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/objects/159258>.

UNE MANIF POUR JOE ROSE

3 ans après ce tragique
MEURTRE HOMOPHOB

LE JEUDI 19 MARS 17 h
au Complexe Desjardins rue Ste-Catherine

COMBATTONS
L'HOMOPHOBIE A
MONTREAL



LET'S FIGHT
HOMOPHOBIA IN
MONTREAL

A DEMO FOR JOE ROSE

3 years after this tragic
HOMOPHOBIC MURDER

THURS. MARCH 19 17 h
at Complexe Desjardins on Ste-Catherine

QUEER NATION ROSE



et / and

LUTTONS
CONTRE LE
VIH/SIDA

ACT UP
M T L

COALITION
D'ACTION
DIRECTE
CONTRE
LE SIDA



(514) 527 • 2423

FAX

(514) 598 • 8378

Figure 3.2 ACT UP Montréal and Queer Nation Rose, "ACT UP Montréal & Queer Nation Rose—Une Manif pour Joe Rose," AIDS Activist History Project, accessed July 17, 2025, <https://aidsactivisthistory.omeka.net/items/show/736>.



Figure 3.3 René LeBoeuf, "Manif No. 1 19-3-90," Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.



Figure 3.4 René LeBoeuf, Photograph of multiple ACT UP Montréal posters wheatpasted over advertising posters, Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.



Figure 3.5 René LeBoeuf, Photograph of World AIDS Day 1990 March, December 1, 1990, Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.



Figure 3.6 René LeBoeuf, Photograph of World AIDS Day 1990 March, December 1, 1990, Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.



GAZETTE, DAVE SIDAWAY

Marchers walk in silence along St. Catherine St. yesterday to mark World AIDS Day.

Death-mask rally delivers AIDS message

AARON DERFEL 01 12 90
THE GAZETTE

They walked in single file down the middle of St. Catherine St. yesterday afternoon — 93 women and men each holding white death masks in front of their faces.

They marched silently, baffling many Christmas shoppers. But their message was clear: 93 women in Quebec have died of AIDS.

Dominique Bourque, 28, walked slowly at the head of the line.

She said she decided to join the march because two women friends have tested positive for the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) believed to cause acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

"It makes me mad that all these women have died," Bourque said. "Did you know that more than

1,000 women in Quebec are now infected with the AIDS virus?"

The march, organized by the AIDS activist group ACT UP, was one of a dozen activities held throughout the city yesterday to mark World AIDS Day 1990.

The theme of the international event was "Women and AIDS."

In Montreal, hundreds of people participated in activities ranging from a service for people with AIDS at Sanctuaire St. Jude church to free condom handouts at Alexis Nihon Plaza and the Faubourg St. Catherine.

Jean Roy, a community health worker, said he distributed about 5,000 condoms at the Faubourg. "It was just crazy," he said. "Some people were asking for more than one condom."

At a community centre on east-

end Beaudry St., more than 30 people sewed colorful quilts in memory of friends or relatives who have died of AIDS.

Michael Hendricks, an organizer of the downtown march, said women from all walks of life are becoming increasingly susceptible to AIDS.

"We realize that few people in Quebec know that so many women are dying of AIDS," he said. "These are plain old ordinary women — housewives even."

In Quebec, the number of people with AIDS has risen to 1,505, Health Minister Marc-Yvan Côté said. Of those, 140 cases are female. It is estimated that an additional 800 to 1,300 Quebec women are infected with HIV. Seventy per cent of them live in the Montreal area.

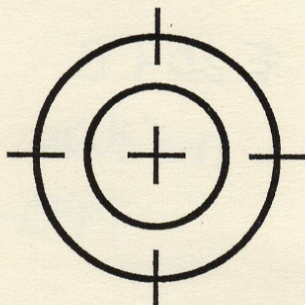
Worldwide, an estimated 8 million to 10 million people are infected. Contrary to the popular North American view that AIDS is mainly a disease of gay men and drug addicts, at least a third of the victims around the world are women.

AIDS is caused by a virus that weakens the immune system, leaving people vulnerable to fatal infections. The virus is found in blood, semen or vaginal fluids of infected people and is most often spread through sexual intercourse or by sharing needles. An infected mother also can pass it on to her unborn child.

Dr. Dominique Tessier, an AIDS specialist, told a seminar at the Université du Québec à Montréal that one-third of Quebec women infected with HIV have passed the virus to their children. □

Figure 3.7 Aaron Derfel, "Death-mask rally delivers AIDS message," *The Gazette*, December 2, 1990, scan found in Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.

IL N'Y A PAS QUE LES SEMI-AUTOMATIQUES QUI TUENT LES FEMMES AU QUÉBEC



SAMEDI 1^{ER} DÉCEMBRE • JOURNÉE MONDIALE DU SIDA

PROCESSION DE MASQUES • RUE STE-CATHERINE

**PROCESSION
DÉPART**

12 h 30

**CARRÉ DORCHESTER (CARRÉ DOMINION)
STATION DE MÉTRO PEEL**

**ASSEMBLÉE
POPULAIRE**

14 h 00

**PAVILLON JUDITH JASMIN, UQAM
STATION DE MÉTRO BERRI-UQAM**

ACT UP

M T L

COALITION D'ACTION DIRECTE CONTRE LE SIDA • 527 24 23

Figure 3.8 ACT UP Montréal, *IL N'Y A PAS QUE LES SEMI-AUTOMATIQUES QUI TUENT LES FEMMES AU QUÉBEC* flyer designed by Paula Synnowich or Pierre-Marc Pelletier, Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.



Figure 3.9 René LeBoeuf, Photograph of the World AIDS Day 1991 march, Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.



Figure 3.10 René LeBoeuf, photos of ACT UP button and T-shirt, Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.

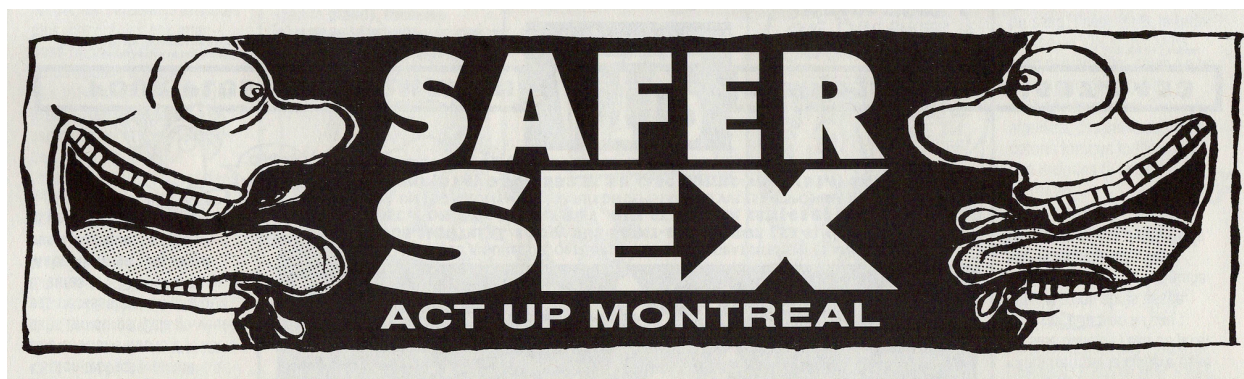


Figure 3.11 ACT UP Montréal, *SÉCURITÉ SEXE / SAFER SEX*, Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.



Figure 3.12 Pierre Durand, Illustration from *SÉCURITÉ SEXE / SAFER SEXE*, Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.



Figure 3.13 Pierre Durand, Illustration from *SÉCURITÉ SEXE / SAFER SEXE*, Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.

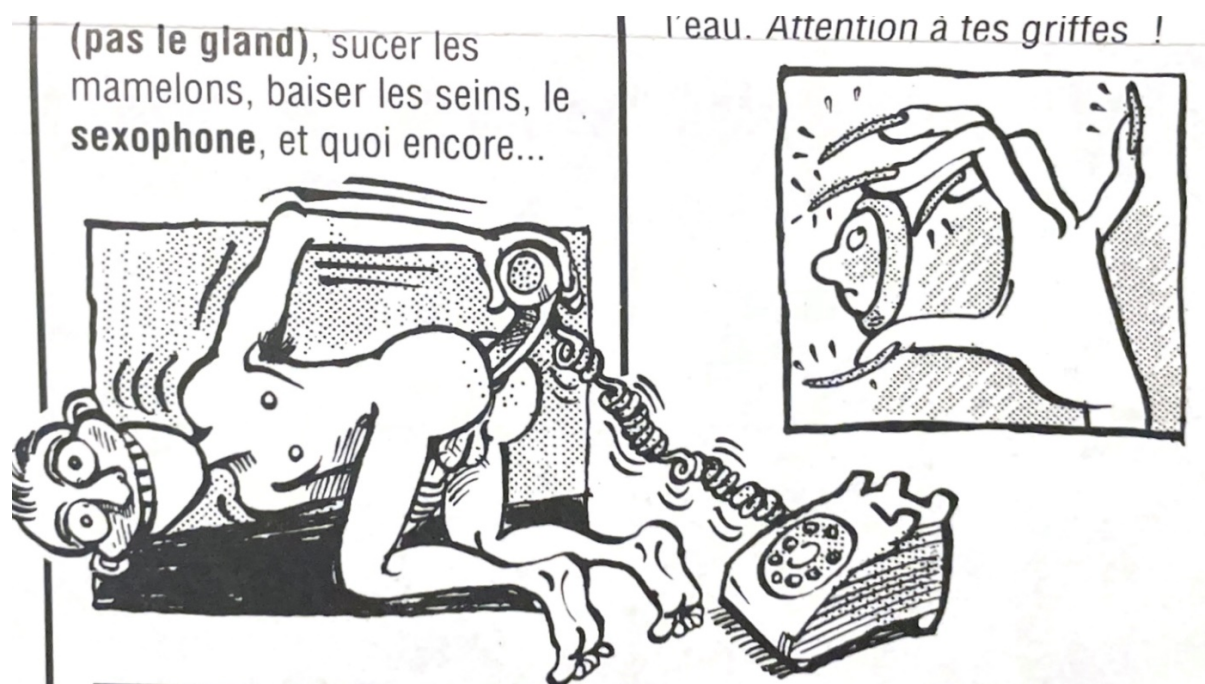


Figure 3.14 Pierre Durand, Illustration from *SÉCURITÉ SEXE / SAFER SEXE*, Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.



Figure 3.15 René LeBoeuf, Photograph of Pierre Durand's caricature placards of Marc-Yvan Côté and Denise Laberge Ferron, Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.



Figure 3.16 Marc Pageau, *Marc-Yvan Côté et le SIDA* poster, original mock-up, Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.



Figure 3.17 René LeBoeuf, Photograph of *le Bonhomme Carnaval* action in Québec City, February 1992, Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.

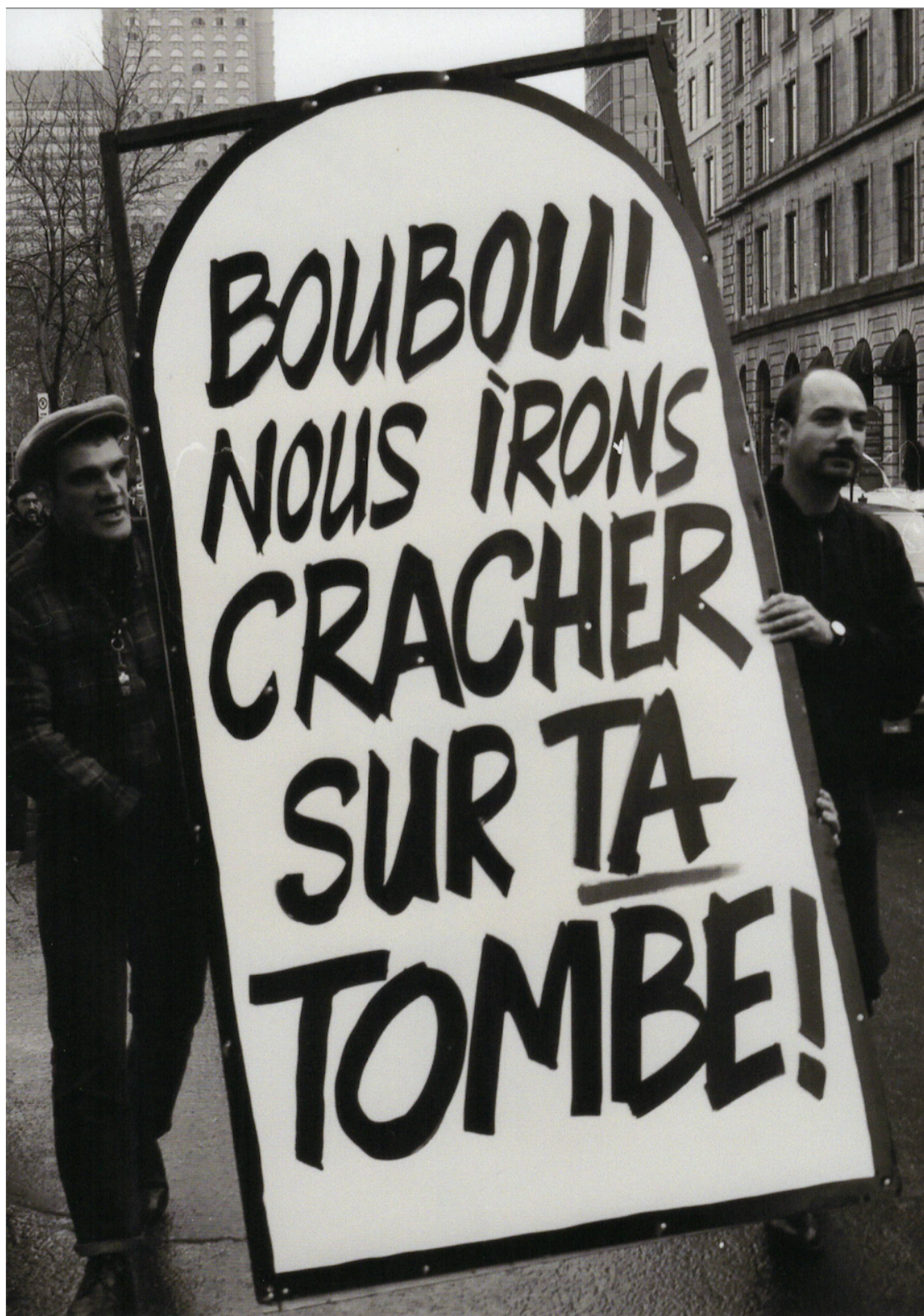


Figure 3.18 René LeBoeuf, Photo of Pierre Durand's *BOU BOU! NOUS IRONS CRACHER SUR TA TOMBE !* tombstone placard, Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.



Figure 3.19 Pierre Durand, illustration of Marc-Yvan Côté and Bourassa for *le Bonhomme Carnaval* action in Québec City, February 1992, Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.

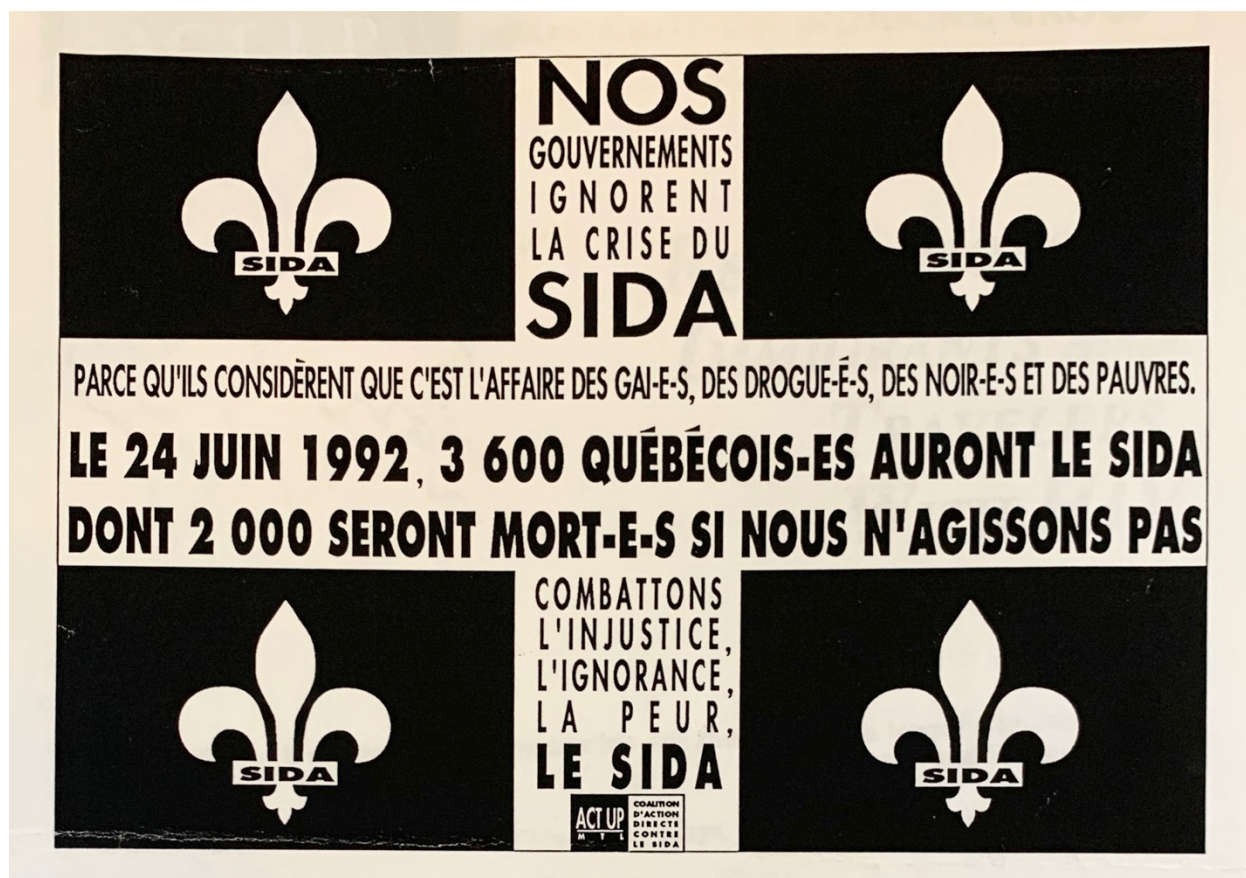


Figure 3.20 Marc Pageau, *Fleurdelisé* poster, Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.



Figure 3.21 René LeBoeuf, Photograph of Claude Péloquin quotation banner, Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.



Figure 3.22 Jordi Bonet, Photo of the *VOUS ÊTES PAS ÉCOEURÉS DE MOURIR, BANDE DE CAVES ? C'EST ASSEZ !* sculpture at the Grand Théâtre de Québec, Jordi Bonet : *de Taüll au Grand Théâtre*, accessed July 17, 2025, <https://ccquebec.cat/taull/vous-etes-pas-ecoeures-de-mourir-bande-de-caves-cest-assez/>.



Figure 3.23 René LeBoeuf, Photograph of the initial sign at Parc de l'Espoir, Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec



Figure 3.24 René LeBoeuf, Photograph of black ribbons in the initial park seizure action, December 1, 1991, Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.



Figure 3.25 René LeBoeuf, Photograph of reconciliatory multi-coloured ribbons in a subsequent park action in 1992, Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.



Figure 3.26 René LeBoeuf, Photograph of mocking hanging action on August 10, 1992, Fonds Michael Hendricks et René Le-Boeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.

COMMUNIQUÉ DE PRESSE/ PRESS RELEASE

SI VOUS CROYEZ QU'IL N'Y A PLUS DE PEINE CAPITALE AU CANADA VOUS VOUS TROMPEZ. ÊTRE ATTEINT DU VIH N'EST PEUT-ÊTRE PAS UNE PEINE À MORT MAIS ÊTRE SÉROPOSITIF-VES DANS UNE PRISON AU QUÉBEC POURRAIT BIEN ÊTRE VOTRE CONDAMNATION À MORT.

IF YOU THINK THAT THERE IS NO CAPITAL PUNISHMENT IN CANADA , YOU ARE WRONG. BEING INFECTED WITH HIV IS NOT AN AUTOMATICALLY DEATH SENTENCE. BEING INCARCERATED WITH HIV IN QUÉBEC COULD WELL BE.

Afin de dénoncer cette réalité ACT UP MTL présenteras
To demonstrate this reality, ACT UP MTL will present

UNE PENDAISON PUBLIQUE A PUBLIC HANGING

pour LA JOURNÉE COMMÉMORATIVE DES on PRISONERS' JUSTICE DAY
PERSONNES DÉCÉDÉES EN PRISON

DEVANT LE / IN FRONT OF
CENTRE QUÉBÉCOIS DE COORDINATION SUR LE SIDA
3655 ST URBAIN

EN CAS DE PROBLÈMES DURANT LA RÉCEPTION DE CETTE TRANSMISSION,
COMMUNIQUER AVEC MICHAEL AU (514) 527-2423

Figure 3.27 ACT UP Montréal, Press release in advance of the mock hanging held on August 10, 1992, Fonds Douglas Buckley-Couvrette, AGQ-F0077/S1/SS1/SSS4/D05 Communiqués de presse, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.

Inmates face high AIDS risk: group

*5 per cent of Quebec prisoners have HIV, study says
Provincial officials say they are working on a program*

PAUL WALDIE
THE GAZETTE

The Gazette
11 AUG 92

A group of AIDS activists say the provincial government isn't doing enough to fight AIDS in prisons.

"If you are sent to a prison in Quebec right now, you may as well be sentenced to death," said Doug Buckley of ACT UP Montreal. "There is no way of preventing the spread of HIV infection in prisons."

Members of ACT UP staged a mock hanging in front of the office of the Quebec AIDS Coordination Centre yesterday to symbolize what the group says is a growing problem.

Buckley said about 5 per cent of the roughly 3,400 inmates in provincial jails are HIV positive, the virus linked to AIDS. That figure is based on a 1989 study of two provincial jails by Dr. Catherine Hankins of the Montreal General Hospital.

"There are no condoms in provincial jails and no education about AIDS," said Buckley.

He added that the AIDS coordination centre should distribute condoms as well as needles to prisoners along with educational material about AIDS. Prisoners should also be allowed anonymous AIDS testing, Buckley said.

Provincial health and prison officials say they are working on an AIDS education program for prisoners.

"Obviously we have a high-risk population," said public security official Michel Roberge.

"We have had a committee in place for the past year to examine the situation. And we will announce a new program in October."

Roberge added that the province is considering distributing condoms in prisons. Condoms have been available in all federal prisons since January.



GAZETTE, DAVE SIDAWAY

Activists stage mock hanging to dramatize AIDS problem in prisons.

Figure 3.28 Paul Waldie, "Inmates face high AIDS risk: group," *The Montreal Gazette*, August 11, 1992, scan found in Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.



Figure 3.29 ACT UP on the cover of *Le Journal de Montréal*, December 2, 1992, scan found in Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.



PHOTO JACQUES NADEAU

Des manifestants séropositifs se sont regroupés devant l'archevêché de Montréal hier pour dénoncer les positions de l'Église sur l'homosexualité et la contraception. À l'arrière-plan, Mgr Jean-Claude Turcotte, archevêque de Montréal. Devant lui, portant le chandail avec l'inscription «Silence de mort», Douglas Buckley.

Des séropositifs manifestent contre les positions de l'Église

Jean Doré dénonce la décision de la CECM sur les distributrices de condoms dans les écoles

Caroline Montpetit

Le Devoir, 12/12/92

TOUT DE SUITE après qu'un groupe de personnes séropositives se soient violemment attaquées à l'archevêque de Montréal, Mgr Jean-Claude Turcotte, au sujet des positions de l'Église sur la contraception et sur l'homosexualité, le maire de Montréal, M. Jean Doré, a qualifié d'«irresponsable» la récente déci-

sion de la Commission des écoles catholiques de Montréal (CECM) de ne pas installer de distributrices à condoms dans les écoles secondaires de son territoire.

À la clôture des Journées internationales du sida, qui se déroulaient cette semaine au Palais des congrès de Montréal, le maire Doré a tout de suite ajouté qu'il s'engageait pour sa part à ce que des distributrices à condoms soient installées

dans tous les établissements relevant de l'administration de la Ville de Montréal.

Relevant que 84% des cas québécois d'infection au VIH se trouvaient sur le territoire de Montréal, le maire a souligné que la principale préoccupation du public devait être dorénavant le nombre croissant de cas déclarés chez les personnes de tout sexe et de tout âge et a ajouté

Voir page A-4 : Séropositifs

Figure 3.30 Caroline Montpetit, «Des séropositifs manifestent contre les positions de l'Église», *Le Devoir*, December 12, 1992, scan found in Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.



Figure 3.31 and 3.32 René LeBoeuf, Photographs of the casket action in support of the Palacio family featuring Douglas Buckley-Couvrette at the head of the procession, July 28, 1993, Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.



Figure 3.33 René LeBoeuf, Photograph of penis, bleach, needle, and devil costumes in action, Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.



Figure 3.34 René LeBoeuf, Photograph of penis, bleach, needle, and devil costumes in action, Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.

Conclusion

Many of the goals set out by ACT UP Montréal were left unachieved when the group disbanded in late 1993. But there were multiple successes of which the remaining members remain justifiably proud. Hendricks says:

This was a flea calling for a cure. If ACT UP/NY couldn't do it, 30 of us in Montréal weren't going to do it. But we could do things within the bounds of what was acceptable here. So we started *Malades sur pied*, and as you saw it was mostly composed of radicalizing the political people at the front of politics. And when the PQ was elected in '95, they had seen this went on endlessly, it dogged the poor Liberals, and the first thing they did was announce that they were going to open *Malade sur pied* and create another program that would include other people with chronic illnesses. [...] The second thing we won, was once we published the safe sex guide in French then it was no longer taboo. They had to do something so they did some reasonably good stuff. It wasn't as good as ACT UP's. It wasn't as honest. It certainly wasn't as funny. They changed, they improved, and there was a big shift in personnel. All of these people that were so proud of how much they had fought against AIDS, of course, were pretty much discredited by the corruption. It was obvious to everyone that we were right and they weren't.¹

However many of their initiatives were successful, their impact has doubtlessly played a part in creating concrete change and strengthened community in Montréal. For Charles, ACT UP Montréal acted as the perfect opportunity to face the dark realities of the times head-on:

Getting ACT UP off the ground and running was very satisfying and rewarding. And I think that was a very painful time for many of us. Losing loved ones, not feeling that we were appreciated or valued in the world and society, and so we had to really roll up our sleeves and change the negative paradigm.²

One major accomplishment for Desaulniers remains the gay community's collective organizing against the local police following the Sex Garage raid:

There was a movement that was created [...] David [Shannon], Michael [Hendricks], and Douglas [Buckley-Couvrette] had a meeting with the city, and there

¹ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 8, 2021. *Malade sur pied* determined which ailments were considered treatable outside of a hospital setting, and previous to HIV/AIDS' addition to the program, those requiring medication were only given their dosages if in a hospital bed. For many, this requirement of hospitalization for treatment required the cessation of work and was both financially and socially devastating. Additionally the PQ was voted in in 1994, not 1995.

² Interview with Blane Charles, March 19, 2022.

was something building there and what came out of that is the gay community were invited to be a part of the table of the city. So that was big. Yeah, that was pretty big.³

Sypnowich also credits a shift in Montréal in the wake of their protest work, while also noting the difference in media reaction along linguistic lines:

I think it really made a difference. I didn't have that sense then, but it takes a while. I mean, not that many people knew about it at first, though I did realize how well it was covered in the French media. They covered it a lot better and a lot more sympathetically than the anglo media, which is ironic given it was the anglos who were more radical. I knew the guy who was a CBC reporter and he had no sympathy for us. I went back and started looking at stuff and was amazed how sympathetic the French media was compared to the English. A lot more sympathetic.⁴

On a deeper level, ACT UP Montréal was also instrumental in forcing change in Québec's healthcare system, in particular through the adaptation of *Malades sur pied* to include AIDS patients.

Involvement in ACT UP Montréal left positive, meaningful, and lasting marks on its members, despite the hard work and defeating tragedies of the era. Smith considers his time with the group as altogether formative and character-defining:

When you're first coming out and you're accepting who you are and you have to face up to your family and your friends who didn't know, you need this outlet to feel accepted somewhere. I think ACT UP gave me that when I was in my early 20s. And I thought, with these people who were so in your face like Blane, they gave me courage. Not to do the same thing, because I'm not that flamboyant, but it made me feel a little more secure. If they could do it, then why should I be afraid? I really looked up to these people. They were a little older than me, but not so much older, and they seemed so confident. The confidence of David and Douglas and Blane was astounding. And I was quite an introvert, as all writers are, and they were very much extroverted so they gave me some courage to talk about these things and to write about them.⁵

³ Interview with Luc Desaulniers, June 22, 2023.

⁴ Paula Sypnowich, May 6, 2024.

⁵ Interview with Neil Smith, March 19, 2024.

This confidence boost even allowed Smith to wear an ACT UP/NY *Read My Lips* T-shirt featuring two men dressed as sailors kissing, out and about publicly in Montréal. “I remember wearing that on the *métro* and being both proud and terrified that something would happen, but continuing to wear it anyway,” he recalls. “The looks I would get at the time!”⁶ Hendricks echoes this element of pride emerging in the wake of ACT UP Montréal:

If there was something very odd but, oh, so uplifting and moving in the ACT UP movement *et al* (fronted by General Idea and its successors and imitators), it was that we finally were all coming out and showing what WE (fags and dykes) could say and do. The closet was started by the Emperor Justin in around 800 AD but the door got kicked open in 1981-82 with the identification of HIV as the « gay cancer » plague. It was like thousands of Clark Kents suddenly pulling off their nerdy glasses and stepping out of the dark, all at once.⁷

While the ending of ACT UP Montréal still prompts an emotional response, Pageau also reflects on the passing of a torch, which may indeed even have been a necessary transition needed to continue AIDS activism on the right foot:

There comes a point where you think that you might be an impostor, and there were more and more peer groups like Séro Zéro and other groups that were coming. I hope that we were an inspiration for some of those groups, even if we were shit disturbers. I think at one point we came to a certain equilibrium and it made sense that these groups would take the flame of being the official lobbyists *vis à vis* the government [...] We had to move on to other more officially organized groups than just a guerrilla-type of action [...] There’s different ways of attaining the same goal—we worship disturbers!⁸

Participation in ACT UP Montréal also emboldened its members to partake in subsequent activist movements in the city, and to which direct credit for major changes can be given. Hendricks and LeBeouf remained active thorns in the side of the Québec government, primary players in the fight for same sex marriage during which they used several tactics similar to those used by ACT UP Montréal. After challenging the province’s definition of marriage as solely between a

⁶ Interview with Neil Smith, March 19, 2024.

⁷ Michael Hendricks, e-mail message to author, November 16, 2022.

⁸ Interview with Marc Pageau, April 5, 2023.

man and a woman as discriminatory in 2001, the Québec Court of Appeal ruled in their favour on March 19, 2004. Thirteen days later, on April 1, 2004, they became the first legally married same sex couple in Québec after 31 years together.⁹ As a producer at the National Film Board of Canada, Hendricks also acted as producer on the film *Healthy Eating Makes a Difference*, released in 1993 accompanied by a 200-page book. The film promoted healthy food choices amongst those living with HIV/AIDS, along with tips for dealing with side effects including nausea and diarrhea.¹⁰

The years in which ACT UP Montréal were active represent a period of street activism which is still remembered and commemorated today as one of heightened presence and media attention for the LGBTQ+ community and other activist concerns in the city. Hendricks highlights the skill with which ACT UP Montréal courted the media, who were always invited for a front row seat at their demonstrations and activities:

We gave them colourful footage—that we guaranteed. The media knew that if they came, they would get something visual. They’d get the cartoons and the artwork and they would get speakers that were really up to the job, who knew what they were talking about and had something to say.¹¹

Similarly, Charles views these years as a period in which multiple groups managed to band together to work in service of a common goal:

Québécois have a really different religious rooting than an American queer black man who’s an ex-Jehovah’s Witness. And then your Anglophone Canadian. I

⁹ “In fact, the PQ invented something called ‘union civil’ (known as CU) which they said was marriage; they promulgated CU all during the legal battle for marriage in Canada as some kind of GIFT the PQ was giving fags/dykes in Québec. But CU (or ‘*Marriage Lite*’ as we call it) is only recognized in law from the Ottawa River to Percé so it isn’t marriage altho’ the PQ and their homosexual flunkies said it is. In fact, all the people who denounced « gay marriage » as ‘*something only gay men would think up*’ have since paid a second time (250\$ +) to be legally married in Canada and the world — you have to if you have kids and want to travel out of Canada.” — Personal e-mail to the author from Michael Hendricks, 17 December 2021. See also Pop Tart, “Quebec’s first married gay couple celebrates 10th anniversary of legal victory and wedding,” *The Gazette*, March 27, 2014, <https://www.montrealgazette.com/entertainment-life/article353829.html>.

¹⁰ National Film Board of Canada, “Healthy Eating Makes a Difference,” NFB Collection, NFB, accessed December 20, 2024, <https://collection.nfb.ca/film/healthy-eating-makes-a-difference>.

¹¹ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 28, 2022.

think that's where the friction would come up, but then we always saw the bigger picture. That's the thing that I think was also magical about ACT UP is that at the end of the day, it's the issues that are important, not our egos and not our personal agendas. And so sometimes those egos and personal agendas would pop up in conversations, but then we would identify and recognize them and keep moving forward.¹²

As the years followed after ACT UP Montréal's demise and the members' dissemination into different and separate paths, the continued losses brought group members back into one another's orbits for shared goodbyes. And while the actual shuttering of ACT UP Montréal was less remembered in clear specifics, the deaths of some of its primary members remains a sharp memory of the most devastating years of the crisis. Desaulniers recalls, "I remember more when Douglas [Buckley-Couvrette] died. I remember more when David [Shannon] died. These broke my heart."¹³ On several occasions throughout the interview process for this project, I found myself taking on an unexpected role of messenger regarding the deaths of other members. Paula Synnowich suggested speaking to Jaime Malois who had passed away due to brain cancer, and Douglas Buckley-Couvrette who had died in 2002. Blane Charles suggested I look up David Shannon not realizing he had also passed away in 2018. And Neil Smith was unaware Kalpesh Oza had died in 1995 just two years following ACT UP Montréal's end.¹⁴ Acting as transmitter of this sort of news and experiencing the immediate emotional response can be a difficult role to take on as a researcher.

There is a strong value in activist groups being actively remembered, as part of community knowledge transfer and commemoration. In undertaking this oral history collection, I too

¹² Interview with Blane Charles, April 28, 2023.

¹³ Interview with Luc Desaulniers, June 22, 2023.

¹⁴ "David SHANNON," *The Gazette | Obituaries* online, February 8, 2018, <https://montrealgazette.remembering.ca/obituary/david-shannon-1066370825>; "Douglas Buckley-Couvrette Memorial Card," *AIDS Activist History Project*, accessed July 19, 2024, <https://aidsactivisthistory.omeka.net/items/show/740>; Punam Khosla and Datejje, "An obituary for Kalpesh Narendra Oza," *SAADA: South Asian American Digital Archive*, accessed July 19, 2024, <https://www.saada.org/item/20210625-6662>.

have experienced the building of bridges between myself and a previous generation, a relationship I had long felt a distinct lack in my own life. One of the primary effects of the AIDS crisis is a missing generation of queer elders, a lack that Pageau himself feels despite his direct involvement on the front lines. He says:

I have to create a bit, because I didn't see anything of anyone getting older except maybe Michael and René. I don't have many people to look at because most of my friends all died, so I don't have any reference myself. And I realize also that I'm the closest reference to a younger generation. So it's kind of this awkward thing where I have to invent it at the same time. And I think people are realizing that more and more.¹⁵

For those who sat for this series of interviews and e-mail follow-ups, there has also been a distinctly positive impact and demonstrations of gratitude for this exploration and excavation, or what Charles terms, “the critical importance of documenting.”¹⁶ When asked what he felt was the highest point of his personal ACT UP Montréal experience, Desaulniers responded:

This is one of them. It's 30 years later. And hello! So it's kind of nice. Not expected. But, I mean, World Ball fucking good waves. Yeah, really big emotionally, you know. It's like a hockey game. When you feel the wave is high, you go ‘Oh, yay! These are good!’¹⁷

For Hendricks, the importance of this short period in both his and LeBoeuf's shared histories remains incredibly vital. He says, “When asked during the marriage battle what was the best part of our lives, we always said it was ACT UP. It was fun. Less fun to attend the funerals.”¹⁸

The *Parc de l'Espoir* stands as a physical monument to ACT UP Montréal and acts as a place of gathering on World AIDS Day and for other events of remembrance for the LGBTQ+ community.¹⁹ Following its initial seizure as part of the group's World AIDS Day activities in

¹⁵ Interview with Marc Pageau, April 5, 2023.

¹⁶ Interview with Blane Charles, March 19, 2022.

¹⁷ Interview with Luc Desaulniers, June 22, 2023.

¹⁸ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 8, 2021.

¹⁹ The original name of *Parc commémoratif des personnes mortes du SIDA au Québec* was rejected by the city of Montréal, and replaced with *Parc de l'Espoir* upon official recognition in 1994. It seems the city would prefer to not name a public space after a lethal pandemic.

1991, the space was officially designated as a municipal park in 1994 and renovated extensively in 2020 and 2021. A short informational dedication placard installed by the *Ville de Montréal* reads:

Le cénotaphe du Parc de l’Espoir

Le parc de l’Espoir a été fondé par ACT UP MONTRÉAL le 1er décembre 1991. Sa création voulait commémorer la vie des femmes et des hommes décédés du SIDA, en témoignage de l’indifférence des gouvernements et du danger que représentait le VIH. Après une lutte politique menée par le militant Douglas Buckley-Couvrette, le Parc de l’Espoir dans sa forme présente a été inauguré en 1997. Le parc de l’Espoir s’inscrivait dans un mouvement international qui voyait naître de tels lieux de recueillement dans plusieurs des grandes villes occidentales.

Le partie minérale à l’avant du parc représente la mort, symbolisée par les blocs de granit noir et le béton. La partie jardin en arrière reflète la vie.

Leading up to the recent renovations, Pageau reiterated the importance of the park’s location at the heart of the gay village, while also addressing some of the push-back for the park’s existence:

This guy phoned me and he said, ‘this shouldn’t belong here, it should be on the Mount Royal where the tombstones are. It’s always reminding people in their face.’ He said that it should be like a mausoleum, and I kept on telling him, ‘It still is where it happened and this is still where there’s the most cases.’ Why hide it elsewhere? The neighbourhood is still part of that reality. It still makes sense to have it there.²⁰

Much of what remains of ACT UP Montréal—including full planning schematics for multiple versions of the Parc de l’Espoir—exists in the Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf at the *Archives gaies du Québec*. When asked for his wishes as to how the remaining materials and accomplishments of ACT UP Montréal should live on, Hendricks put it simply, “Anywhere but in a drawer.”²¹ At the end of our fifth and final extensive interview together, Hendricks summarized the role of ACT UP Montréal in both his and husband LeBoeuf’s lives:

With all the sadness and the pain, it was still the best moments of our lives. Up to then, anyway, because we were a part of something. A social movement we thought was really important, and that I still do think was important. What ACT

²⁰ Interview with Marc Pageau, April 5, 2023.

²¹ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 8, 2021.

UP did changed the trajectory of gay life in the world. And I mean, we had nothing to do with it. We were just a little bitty piece over here in Montréal. But ACT UP New York was blazing the trail, and we knew it would never go back to the way it was. And it never did.²²

In *VIRAL CULTURES: Activist Archiving in the Age of AIDS*, Marika Cifor states, “curation and archiving are practices of care enacted in activist archiving and archiving activism,” an important part of processing and mourning real world experiences.²³ Yet the act of post-dissolution collecting in the case of ACT UP Montréal seems less a conscious archival gathering than a hopeful amassing of materials useful to future activists. The extensive ACT UP Montréal holdings at the *Archives gaies du Québec* are housed primarily in the Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, whose home storage was stuffed to the brim with placards, banners, and other ephemera following the cessation of the group as an active concern. But rather than collected with the intention of documentation, Hendricks and LeBoeuf recall the initial assembling of these materials for reasons other than remembrance:

MH: We thought we’d use it again. When ACT UP fell apart because we no longer had a leadership group that was living with HIV because they were all too sick to proceed, we kept everything in case somebody wanted to start again. We knew the value of what we had, but it wasn’t for historical purposes. No-one cared.

RLB: We just went into oblivion. We disappeared on the surface.²⁴

That Hendricks and LeBoeuf not only stored much of what ACT UP Montréal produced, but then years later upon the sale of their home donated these items *en masse* to the *Archives gaies du Québec* offers researchers such as myself a rare tangible connection to this past, upholding

²² Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 26, 2022.

²³ Marika Cifor, *Viral Cultures*, 5.

²⁴ Interview with Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, November 28, 2022.

Cifor's suggestion that, "archives are becoming as important to understanding AIDS as the biomedical event of HIV/AIDS itself."²⁵

At the outset of my research in the *Archives Gaies du Québec* in search of the scattered remains of ACT UP Montréal, I was struck by both the vibrancy of the materials I found paired with an intense emotional response. Some original examples of pamphlets, T-shirts, and other items are missing from the archives, visible only on activist bodies, half-obstructed, and atop information tables in photographs. Given the passage of time and the realities of HIV/AIDS, many of those who participated in these events or appear in these photographs are no longer alive. Referencing Lucas Hilderbrand, Jason Crawford refers to a *retroactivist* nostalgia for the queer collectivism exercised in previous activist movements, and in particular "this longing for the activism of the 1990s, while admittedly not based on his own personal experience, is triggered by his imagination or impression of the queer world at that time."²⁶ The further I sorted through the fonds of ACT UP Montréal members, I experienced growing feelings of what can only be described as a secondary mourning both for a movement I was too young to be a part of, and for ephemeral objects now tucked away in an archive. For Finkelstein, "once these posters are isolated from the environment they were created for, they become oddly mute [...] their social proportion can't be approximated on a gallery wall with any degree of accuracy [...] [it works only] as lived experience rather than as archival material."²⁷ Yet, in my explorations and attempts to examine and piece together a specific part of Montréal's queer history through these ephemeral items, I find it hard to agree with Finkelstein's ideas. Weighted as they are with local experience

²⁵ Marika Cifor, *Viral Cultures*, 5.

²⁶ Marika Cifor, *VIRAL CULTURES*, 113.

²⁷ Avram Finkelstein, *After Silence*, 5.

of HIV/AIDS, these flyers, shirts, and posters all but leap out and demand attention from the manila folders in which they are kept. And despite my intention to view these items as first and foremost objects of design and protest communication, the further I dug into these archives, the deeper my emotional response to them grew.

Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* examines links from the queer archive to emotional and traumatic memory, in part through compiling interviews with past lesbian members of ACT UP chapters across America (she herself was an active member of ACT UP Austin). Her impulse was driven in "watching ACT UP's history become prone to disappearance and misrepresentation [making] me wonder about how other activism have been (mis)represented. And I have also pondered how best to document AIDS activism both in its time and for the future since its preservation makes the claim that it mattered, that it made a difference."²⁸ Describing the end of ACT UP Montréal after its final action on November 12, 1993, blindsided by the realization that the group's seropositive membership were by that point debilitated by dementia or already gone, Hendricks explains:

It became impossible to operate ACT UP under the circumstances, and it was irrational to have seronegative people running it so we had to give it up. It was very painful.²⁹

This devastating loss of inertia due to the simple lack of able-bodied seropositive activists echoes Cvetkovich's claim that "gay and lesbian archives address the traumatic loss of history that has accompanied sexual life and the formation of sexual publics, and they assert the role of memory and affect in compensating for institutional neglect."³⁰

²⁸ Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 159.

²⁹ Interview with Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 8, 2021.

³⁰ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 241.

Still, traces of ACT UP Montréal's unique history outside of the archives remain in both physical and aesthetic forms, reflected in Montréal's healthcare, public space, design, and public memory. Following the 1994 election of the Parti Québécois to the National Assembly, the definition of *Malades sur pied* was expanded to AIDS as a recognized chronic illness covering medical treatments for PWAs ("Of course we knew what that was. That we'd won").³¹ Thirty-three years after ACT UP/NY activists stormed the stage at *AIDS V*, the conference's 24th edition *AIDS 2022* returned to the Palais des congrès de Montréal on July 29-August 2, 2022.³² And recognized as a living commemoration of ACT UP Montréal's activism, the Parc de l'Espoir was officially sanctioned by the City of Montréal in 1997 and re-opened following remodelling in August 2021. The park's renovation includes the addition of a large red ribbon inlaid in the park's stonework, and the rededication ceremony led by mayor Valérie Plante featured a ribbon-tying photo-op of historically inaccurate red ribbons on the park's flagpoles—in the end, it seems Charles and Desaulniers prevailed in getting their red ribbons into the park after all.³³ The park's most important features, however, are its pair of plaques. The first outlines ACT UP Montréal's battle against "*l'indifférence des gouvernements et du danger que le représentait de VIH,*" and backdates *Le cénotaphe du Parc de l'Espoir*'s founding to December 1, 1991. The second is the large, rusting Pageau-designed plaque at its centre whose dedication "*À LA MÉMOIRE DES*

³¹ Interview with Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, December 8, 2021.

³² "Palais Des Congrès De Montréal to Host AIDS 2022 - the 24th International AIDS Conference - in July 2022," *Cision Canada*, May 25, 2021, accessed December 2, 2021, <https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/palais-des-congres-de-montreal-to-host-aids-2022-the-24th-international-aids-conference-in-july-2022-829999023.html>.

³³ Yves Lafontaine, "Le Nouveau Parc De L'Espoir : Plus Vaste, plus Vert Et plus Accessible," *Fugues*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.fugues.com/2021/08/17/le-nouveau-parc-de-l'Espoir-plus-vaste-plus-vert-et-plus-accessible/>.

PERSONNES MORTES DU SIDA AU QUÉBEC,” is cut in bold block letters through thick Corten steel intentionally selected for the dried blood colouring in which it rusts (see fig. 4.1). As a final piece in the ACT UP Montréal catalogue, it makes for powerful punctuation.³⁴

ACT UP Montréal’s stubborn aesthetic adherence and regional individuality also lives on in two recent graphic arts works by Montréal-based designers. Riffing on *SILENCE=DEATH*, performance artist and co-founder of the SéroSyndicat collective formed in protest of HIV-criminalization, the punchline of Jordan Arseneault’s 2012 poster *The New Equation* recalculates ACT UP/NY’s most iconic tagline as *SILENCE=SEX*, its text reading, “disclosure is required by law but often leads to immediate rejection [...] overcome stigma and get laid!” (see fig. 4.2).³⁵ Another of his works reads simply *SILENCE=SHUTTHEFUCKUP*, and his brilliant drag persona Peaches LePoz brings this pointed activist throughline to the stage. This repurposing of the *de facto* sacred text of the AIDS movement echoes ACT UP Montréal’s repurposing of designs created by ACT UP/NY to suit their own needs two decades earlier within a localized context.

The 2013 poster *YOUR NOSTALGIA IS KILLING ME!* by artists Vincent Chevalier and Ian Bradley-Perrin was created at a workshop event guided by Avram Finkelstein at Concordia University, and caused particular dissent amongst the living members of ACT UP/NY when posted on their alumni Facebook page (see fig. 4.3). Composed of a room covered in graphics and artworks created in the 1990s with the title in glowing yellow block capitals, reaction was strongly negative amongst, “an older generation of activists [who] saw the poster as an assault on losses only they could truly understand—of friends, lovers, family, and the whole generation of

³⁴ At one point, the monument was painted with shiny aluminum paint by someone who thought the rust was unintentional.

³⁵ Arseneault in *Up Against the Wall*, 202.

people who died of AIDS and took with them the gifts they could have offered to the future.”³⁶

In response, Finkelstein also argued, “whereas the ACT UP alums were arguing on behalf of work that had already been completed, the activists in Canada were prepared to forge new work and transcend strategic disagreements to do it, opening themselves up to the productive potential of a project-based affinity about an issue they saw as urgent.”³⁷ However, both of these readings disregard the narrative and lineage created by ACT UP Montréal in which American AIDS activism iconography was from the start recast and readapted to suit Montréal’s cultural specificity. Indeed both *SILENCE=SEX* and *YOUR NOSTALGIA IS KILLING ME!* inherit ACT UP Montréal’s consistent reconsideration and transformation of outside messaging and iconography in their creation of a Montréal-based approach to AIDS activism built distinctly upon local character, culture, and identity.

³⁶ Ian Bradley-Perrin, “Your Nostalgia is Killing Me,” in *Up Against the Wall: Art, Activism and the AIDS Poster*, ed. Donald Albrecht, Jessica Lacher-Feldman, and William M. Valenti (Rochester, NY: RIT Press, 2021), pp. 196-197, 196.

³⁷ Avram Finkelstein, *After Silence: A History of AIDS Through Its Images*, 214.

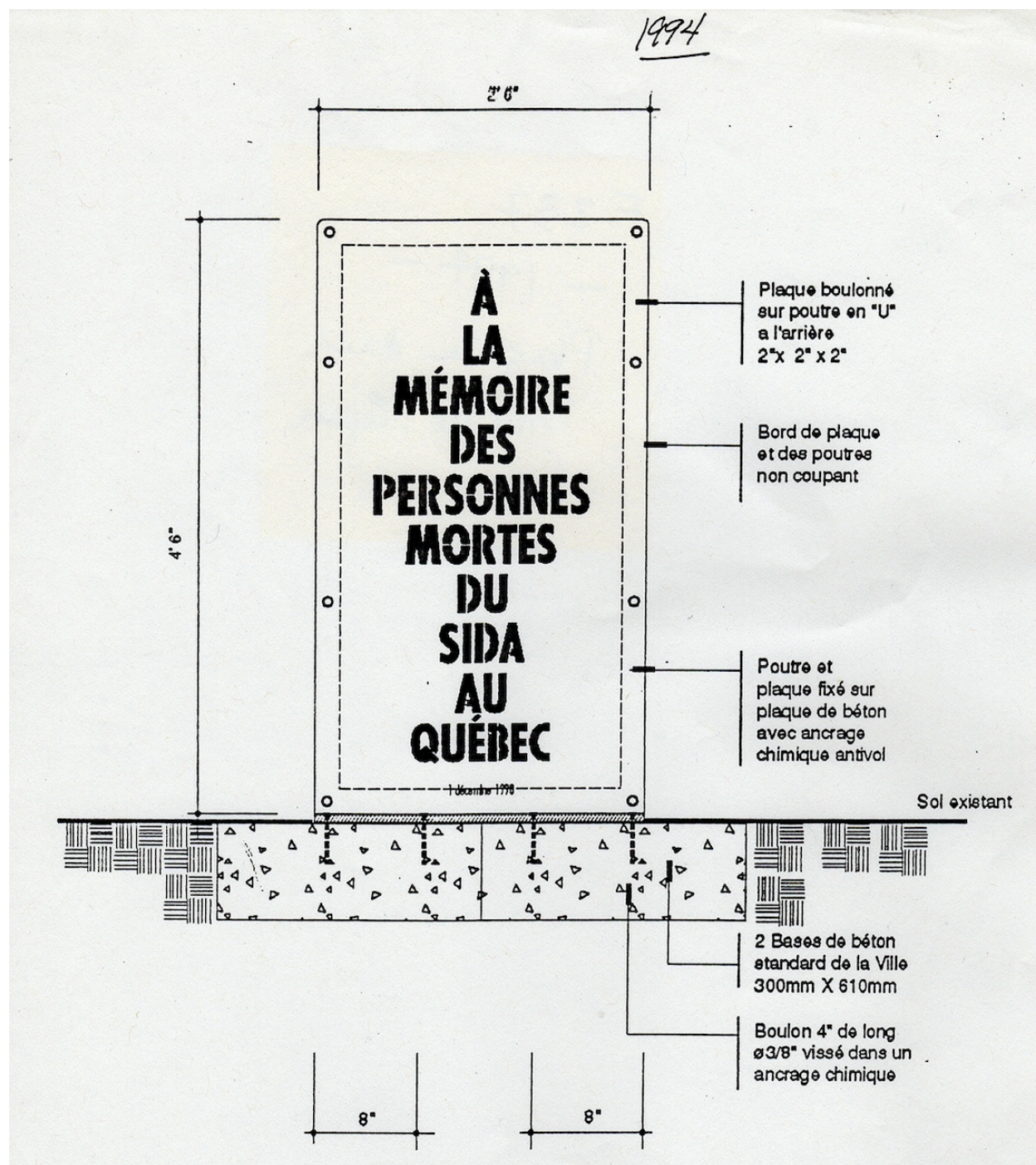


Figure 4.1 Marc Pageau, original design for the monument in Parc de l'Espoir, Fonds Michael Hendricks et René LeBoeuf, Archives gaies du Québec, Montréal, Québec.



Figure 4.2 Jordan Arseneault, *The New Equation*, photograph, *Visual AIDS*, accessed July 17, 2025, <https://visualaids.org/blog/poster-virus-silence-sex>.

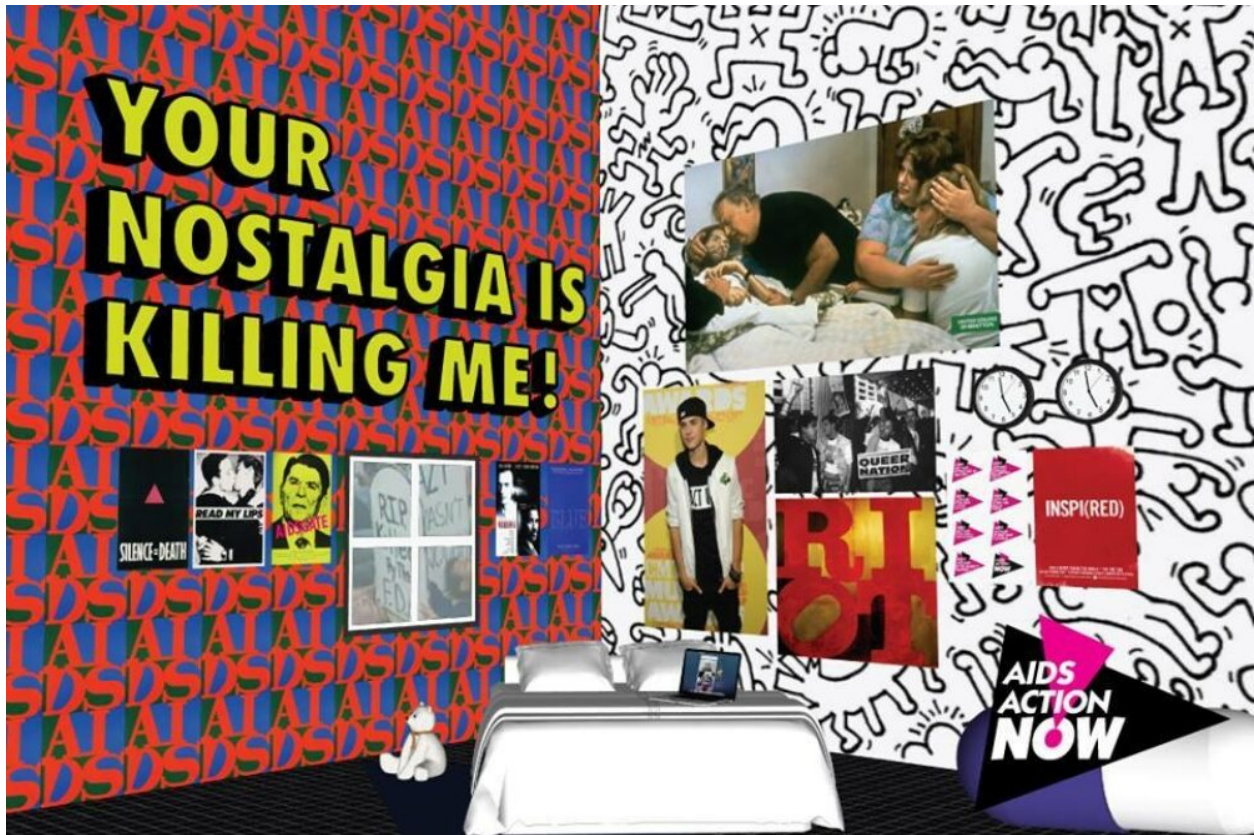


Figure 4.3 Vincent Chevalier and Ian Bradley-Perrin, *Your Nostalgia is Killing Me!*, poster, *Visual AIDS*, accessed July 17, 2025, <https://visualaids.org/events/detail/your-nostalgia-is-killing-me-a-catalyst-for-conversation-about-aids-and-vis>.

Coda: Active Remembrance

Attaining an MA the field of history was not something I'd ever imagined I would do. I often feel mildly unprepared in academic spaces—I'm sharp, sure, but not particularly *academic* in nature—and thesis writing was not something which came easily for me. Going through this process as a musician and artist, what emerged in parallel throughout the process of researching and writing was finding alternate ways in which to disseminate the information I'd spent over three years gathering. A thesis is intended for a specific audience, yet public activist histories deserve wider appreciation, and alongside a team of collaborators also engaged in local activisms, the associated projects outlined here make up my personal attempt at active remembrances of ACT UP Montréal.

During the AIDS 2022 conference held at the Palais des congrès de Montréal, I was involved in two projects which were included as part of the conference's official programming. The first was the AIDS 2022 Ball on July 30, 2022, a voguing event I co-produced with Mother Elle Barbara held in the former cruising zone the Parc Charles-S.-Campbell in the gay Village (see fig. 5.1). Montréal-based trans fundraising organization Taking What We Need and Ballroom4Community acted as co-presenters, and the park was filled to its edges with local spectators and conference attendees. Each category in the ball was based on research for this thesis, including calls for competitors ("walkers") to dress as 1989-era protestors (some even re-making placards and posters from the period, several including bloody handprints), medical researchers, and even the HIV-virus itself. We invited original members of the House of Pride drag dynasty Jacques Besner and Kiet Ha to help open the ball, former participants in the World Ball for Unity events produced by Blane Charles and Luc Desaulniers in the 1990s. Footage from the ball will

form part of a documentary short presently under edit with David Fortin of the *Cinémathèque québécoise*.

On the following day, the Parc de l'Espoir was re-dedicated by figures including long-time HIV/AIDS activist Roger LeClerc and officials from the AIDS Conference. To promote this event, I worked with graphic designer Asad Pervaiz in the creation of 10 new ACT UP Montréal pamphlets made in similar style to the original works examined in this thesis. A print run of 10,000 copies was produced by the Mémoire vivante du parc de l'Espoir and distributed at the conference and throughout the gay village (see fig. 5.2). On the day of the event, a stack of these flyers were distributed to passersby by Michael Hendricks and René LeBoeuf, who later commented that they've been pamphleteering in Montréal for over 50 years (see fig. 5.3).

Presented at the Archives gaies du Québec in the summer of 2023, the exhibition *L'activisme esthétique d'ACT UP Montréal : une histoire en photos et en affiches*, co-curated by myself with René LeBoeuf with assistance from AGQ archivist Simone Beaudry-Pilotte, Jonathan Proulx-Guimond, and Pierre Pilotte welcomed over 2,000 visitors and was subsequently re-mounted at the office spaces of the Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN) that following autumn (see fig. 5.4).¹ This exhibition was also listed by the National Trust for Canada's Historic Places Days and received media coverage in *CULT MTL*, *Métro*, *Fugues*, *La Presse*, and the *AIDS Activist History Project* and was documented by Concordia University's HIV/AIDS project under the direction of Réaction SIDA co-founder Karen Herland.² This exhibition will also

¹ "L'activisme esthétique d'ACT UP Montréal : une histoire en photos et en affiches," *Fierté Montréal*, accessed April 16, 2025, <https://fiertemontreal.com/fr/evenements/lactivisme-esthetique-dact-up-montreal-une-histoire-en-photos-et-en-affiches>.

² "The Aesthetic Activism of ACT UP Montréal: a history in photos and posters," *Historic Places Days*, accessed April 16, 2025, <https://historicplacesdays.ca/events/the-aesthetic-activism-of-act-up-montreal-a-history-in-photos-and-posters-quebec-gay-archives>; Savannah Stewart, "The ACT UP Montréal photo exhibition captures a critical moment in queer history," *CULT MTL*, June 20, 2023, <https://cultmtl.com/2023/06/the-act-up-montreal-photo-exhibition-captures-a-critical-moment-in-queer-history>; Constance Cazzaniga, "Revivre Act up Montréal et la crise du

be expanded and re-mounted at the MEM—Centre des mémoires montréalaises from July to December 2026.

Working once again in collaboration with the Mémoire vivante du parc de l’Espoir and funded in-part by the government of Québec, the Ville de Montréal and the l’Entente de développement culturel de Montréal, Beaudry-Pilotte and I also edited a 26-minute loop blending archival material from the AGQ, a new recording of LeClerc reading from the Manifeste de Montréal produced by ACT UP/NY and AIDS ACTION NOW! for the 1989 AIDS conference, a series of posters created in Québec during the HIV/AIDS crisis and beyond, and quotations from the interviews gathered for this thesis. Projected on the large outdoor screen at Parc de l’Espoir during Fierté Montréal 2024, the resulting piece entitled *Le sida en 4 volets* was seen by passersby and audiences who would gather in the park to watch.

Engaging with the narrators of this thesis has also had a direct impact on the debut album by my musical project Brittle Dreams, close to completion at the time of writing. Entitled *An Army of Lovers*, the record includes several lyrical references to local activist groups including ACT UP Montréal, and a full-song tribute entitled ‘Men I’ve Never Met’ inspired by my archival research at the AGQ and the experience of forming an acquaintance with long-gone individuals involved in the history this thesis attempts to document. Recorded with Montréal-based reed quintet 5ilience, the track is planned as the closing song of the album. Working with this material musically feels most comfortable for me, and I hope to do the members of ACT UP Montréal justice with it.

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'Men I've Never Met,' lyrics by Mark Andrew Hamilton

*Men I've never met
But who I can't forget
And who I've come to see as leading me*

*From the boxes wept
And in the photos kept
Still you say to me the things we need*

*To be alive
Is to be tried
And oh, what a thing to be*

*And in utmost respect
We can fuck without regret
Because there was a fight in you for those who'd come next
Because there was a fight in you for those who'd come next
Because there was a fight in you for those who'd come next*

[a tolling bell, 6 times]

*David Shannon's dead
And Kalpesh Oza said
"I don't need your silence, I just need to scream"*

*Keith Lowther rests
And Buckley-Couvrette
Made of stone and steel but then of only flesh*



Figure 5.1 poster for Mother Elle Barbara's AIDS 2022 Vogue Ball, from author's personal collection.



**OÙ
SERONS-
NOUS
DANS
20
ANS?**



**UNE
SOIRÉE
AU
PARC**

**Parc de l'Espoir,
coin des rues
Panet et Sainte-
Catherine, Montréal,
métro Beaudry**

**31 juillet,
de 19 à 20 heures**

Hommage aux
personnes déci-
dées et vivant
avec le VIH

Prise de parole
de Madame
Valérie Plante,
Maireesse de
Montréal et du
Dr Jean Pierre
Routy, organi-
sateur montréalais
de la 29e
Conférence in-
ternationale sur
le sida tenue à
Montréal

Courte vidéo
racontant l'his-
toire des luttes
ayant mené à
la création du
Parc de l'Espoir
par ACT UP
Montréal

Sans eux, rien n'aurait été possible... Robert Rasmussen, Ville de Montréal, Jean Pierre Routy, Directeur du Réseau SIDA et autres infections de l'ACT UP et Coprésident de la Conférence internationale sur le sida 2022, Compagnie pharmaceutique GILEAD HIV.

GILEAD | HIV



**OÙ
SERONS-
NOUS
DANS
20
ANS?**

**UNE SOIRÉE
AU PARC**

**Parc de l'Espoir, coin des
rues Panet et Sainte-Catherine,
Montréal, métro Beaudry**

31 juillet, de 19 à 20 heures

Hommage aux
personnes déci-
dées et vivant
avec le VIH

Prise de parole
de Madame
Valérie Plante,
Maireesse de
Montréal et du
Dr Jean Pierre
Routy, organi-
sateur montréalais
de la 29e
Conférence in-
ternationale sur
le sida tenue à
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Courte vidéo
racontant l'his-
toire des luttes
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Sans eux, rien n'aurait été possible... Robert Rasmussen, Ville de Montréal, Jean Pierre Routy, Directeur du Réseau SIDA et autres infections de l'ACT UP et Coprésident de la Conférence internationale sur le sida 2022, Compagnie pharmaceutique GILEAD HIV.

GILEAD | HIV

**OÙ SERONS-
NOUS DANS
20 ANS?**

ACT UP

M T L

UNE SOIRÉE AU PARC

**PARC DE L'ESPOIR, COIN DES
RUES PANET ET SAINTÉ-CATHERINE,
MONTREAL, METRO BEAUDRY**

**31 JUILLET,
DE 19 À 20 HEURES**

Hommage aux personnes
décidées et vivant avec
le VIH

Prise de parole de
Madame Valérie Plante,
Maireesse de Montréal et
du Dr Jean Pierre Routy,
organisateur montréalais
de la 29e Conférence
internationale sur le sida
tenue à Montréal

Courte vidéo racontant
l'histoire des luttes ayant
mené à la création du
Parc de l'Espoir par ACT
UP Montréal

Sans eux, rien n'aurait été possible... Robert Rasmussen, Ville de Montréal, Jean Pierre Routy, Directeur du Réseau SIDA et autres infections de l'ACT UP et Coprésident de la Conférence internationale sur le sida 2022, Compagnie pharmaceutique GILEAD HIV.

GILEAD | HIV

**OÙ SERONS-
NOUS DANS
20 ANS?**

ACT UP MTL

UNE SOIRÉE AU PARC

**PARC DE L'ESPOIR, COIN
DES RUES PANET ET SAINTÉ-
CATHERINE, MONTREAL,
METRO BEAUDRY**

**31 JUILLET,
DE 19 À 20 HEURES**

Hommage aux per-
sonnes décidées et
vivant avec le VIH

Prise de parole de
Madame Valérie Plante,
Maireesse de Montréal
et du Dr Jean Pierre
Routy, organisateur
montréalais de la 29e
Conférence interna-
tionale sur le sida tenue à
Montréal

Courte vidéo racontant
l'histoire des luttes
ayant mené à la créa-
tion du Parc de l'Espoir
par ACT UP Montréal

Sans eux, rien n'aurait été possible... Robert Rasmussen, Ville de Montréal, Jean Pierre Routy, Directeur du Réseau SIDA et autres infections de l'ACT UP et Coprésident de la Conférence internationale sur le sida 2022, Compagnie pharmaceutique GILEAD HIV.

Sans eux, rien n'aurait été possible... Robert Rasmussen, Ville de Montréal, Jean Pierre Routy, Directeur du Réseau SIDA et autres infections de l'ACT UP et Coprésident de la Conférence internationale sur le sida 2022, Compagnie pharmaceutique GILEAD HIV.

GILEAD | HIV

Figure 5.2 Asad Pervaiz, four flyer designs for Parc de l'Espoir rededication ceremony during the 2022 AIDS Conference, author's personal collection.



Figure 5.3 Michael Hendricks handing out flyers at the AIDS Conference 2022 re-dedication of Parc de l'Espoir, photo taken by author.

L'Activisme esthétique d'ACT UP Montréal : une histoire en photos et en affiches

**The Aesthetic Activism of ACT UP Montréal:
a history in photos and posters**

13 juin — 13 août 2023

Archives gaies du Québec

Commissaire : Mark Andrew Hamilton

Co-commissaire : René LeBoeuf

Soutien archivistique : Simone Beaudry-Pilote

Figure 5.4 Asad Pervaiz, L'Activisme esthétique d'ACT UP Montréal : une histoire en photos et en affiches poster, author's personal collection.

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CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY
FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

Name of Applicant: Mark Andrew Hamilton
Department: Faculty of Arts and Science\History
Agency: N/A
Title of Project: Posters, Pamphlets, and Protest Signs: ACT UP
MONTRÉAL Graphics During the HIV/AIDS Crisis
Certification Number: 30016025

Valid From: February 19, 2024 To: February 18, 2025

The members of the University Human Research Ethics Committee have examined the application for a grant to support the above-named project, and consider the experimental procedures, as outlined by the applicant, to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Richard DeMont".

Dr. Richard DeMont, Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee