

“Suddenly It Seems Like You Might Know Him, You Might Go Over There”:  
AIDS & the NYC Façades of John Miller’s *Clubs for America*  
and Ira Sachs’ *Last Address*

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on personal interviews with the artists, this thesis looks at two formally similar artworks about HIV and urban space, made almost twenty years apart: John Miller's photographic series *Clubs for America* (1992) and Ira Sachs' short film *Last Address* (2010). Both categorized as New York streetscapes, the works focus on the individual façades of several buildings of understated relevance to the history of AIDS crisis in the city. Miller's *Clubs* photographs the exteriors of ten shut-down gay sex clubs; Sachs documents the last apartments (and one house) of 28 artists who died of AIDS-related causes. Represented mediations of absence and loss therein form the crux interest of this thesis. This research critically positions the works within the cultural archive of HIV and AIDS. An overview of the production and reception of the works is provided. The troubled relationship of bodies to representation within the context of the AIDS crisis is considered for how it opens up a conversation around buildings as substitute for the absent body. The tension between interiors and exteriors is examined in relation to expression of intimacy and embodied experience. The thesis moves into an analysis of the presence of the body of the artist as witness to loss. The works are then situated in relation to a queer tradition of mapping of erotic city sites and considered for their different approaches to their subjects. Ultimately, this thesis speculates about emancipatory possibilities for healing presented within built environment by opening up the cultural archive of HIV and AIDS to the street.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I knew I wanted to go to graduate school in order to write about HIV and AIDS from a critical art historical perspective. I was very influenced by the time I spent working at AIDS Community Care Montreal in 2011, where I was struck by how much of a hub of political ideas the AIDS Service Organization was. I was also marked by the impression I had of being surrounded by living and embodied history, particularly through many of the kind, resilient people I met there.

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Streets are the dwelling place of the collective. The collective is an eternally unquiet, eternally agitated being that—in the space between the building fronts—experiences, learns, understands, and invents as much as individuals do within the privacy of their own four walls.

-Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

All I know for sure is that feelings of loss pervaded my life. I felt overwhelming loss just walking the streets of New York, the city that since the late 1960s had given me my sense of being really alive.

-Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: An Introduction*

Space is the ongoing possibility of a different inhabitation.

-Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside*

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Photo credits: Praz-Delavallade Gallery

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Collection Unknown

Photo credits: The Guardian Pictures of the Week, 14 June 2013

([www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2013/jun/14/marginal-waters-doug-ischar-photography](http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2013/jun/14/marginal-waters-doug-ischar-photography))

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Photo credit: Joshua Heller Rare Books, Inc.

([www.joshuahellerrarebooks.com/real-estate-opportunities-ed-ruscha](http://www.joshuahellerrarebooks.com/real-estate-opportunities-ed-ruscha))

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(Based on the drawing by Daniel Rosza Lang/Levitsky and with illustrations by Buzz Slutzky.)

Photo credit: L.J. Roberts Artist Website

([www.ljroberts.net/index.php?/work/crafts](http://www.ljroberts.net/index.php?/work/crafts))

## INTRODUCTION

I first saw John Miller's *Clubs for America* (1992) at the New Museum in New York City in 2013. Included in the large-scale exhibition *NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash, and No Star*, the piece, comprising ten small photographs, exuded a quiet presence and understated poignancy amongst the other selections in the show. While the exhibition included several well-known artworks bearing some degree of relationship to HIV or AIDS<sup>1</sup>, I had never before heard of or seen *Clubs for America* (Figures 1-5). Its aesthetic form—the straight-on photographic depiction of the exteriors of various New York City buildings—mirrored that of a contemporary short film I had recently become interested in, Ira Sachs's *Last Address* (2010). Miller's photographs, the museum wall text explained, were of the sites of former gay sex clubs shut down by city authorities during the AIDS crisis in New York City; Sachs's film, produced almost twenty years later, visited the last addresses of twenty-eight New York City artists who had died of AIDS-related causes since the 1980s (Figures 6-10).<sup>2</sup> Both pieces dwelled on the exterior façades of the buildings in question, foregoing an exploration of the interiors for a more observational and removed, exteriorized viewpoint. The documentation of the façades presented, in both artworks, an artistic gesture that imbued the sites photographed with a significance beyond the “everyday,” while retaining an enigmatic, if banal, aesthetic.

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<sup>1</sup> AIDS-related pieces included: Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993); Gregg Bordowitz's *Fast Trip Long Drop* (1994); Nan Goldin's *Gilles and Gotscho, Paris* (1992-93); Zoe Leonard's *Wax Anatomical Model, partial view from above* (1990); Frank Moore's *Birth of Venus* (1993); and Felix Gonzales-Torres' *Untitled (Couple)* (1993).

<sup>2</sup> Neither artist knew of the other's artwork .



Despite being impressed by the New Museum’s curatorial decisions—I thoroughly enjoyed *NYC 1993*, which was also well-received by critics<sup>3</sup>—I noted a minor detail in *Clubs for America*’s wall text which presented an interesting philosophical inaccuracy, with possible historical consequences. Contextualizing the relatively unknown artwork, the text read:

At first glance, the photographs in John Miller’s “Clubs for America” depict seemingly uninteresting, nondescript locations in New York City. However, on closer inspection, the significance of these places gradually reveals itself. Each photograph shows the former site of a sex club that was shuttered during police crackdowns in the 1980s in an attempt to curb the growing AIDS epidemic.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Holland Cotter’s review in *The New York Times* “A Time of Danger and Pain, Two Long Decades Ago” (Cotter, 2013)

<sup>4</sup> The text continues : “The public viewed the clubs, primarily “located in rundown neighborhoods and out-of-the-way places, as dens of promiscuity where public sex was condoned. For club-goers, these were the only places they could go to meet people who respected their lifestyles. One of the pictured locations was the Ariston Baths, formerly located on West Fifty-Fifth Street near Broadway, the site of the first bathhouse police raid in 1903. Other notable places include St. Marks Baths, the Anvil and the Mineshaft (two of many clubs in the Meatpacking district), and the Continental Baths (later replaced by Plato’s Retreat in the ornate Ansonia building at Seventy-Fourth and Broadway). Many of these clubs featured live performances on a regular basis. In fact, Bette Midler got her start in singing at the Continental Baths, accompanied by Barry Manilow. When seen together, the photographs in “Clubs for America” portray a marked shift in attitudes towards sexual freedom in New York City’s history.”

An analogy is thus made between the faculty of vision in the statement's opening "At first glance," and a supposed process of obvious reveal (the text identifies with its assertion that "upon closer inspection" a sense of the significance of the sites "gradually reveals itself"). The New Museum's statement, however, is inaccurate to a degree, and might be considered a question of exclusive *a priori* knowledge. Without the information of the wall text, many of Miller's façades would remain unyielding and anonymous to the otherwise unknowing, average viewer.<sup>5</sup> People with their own experiences of the sites, meanwhile, would more likely glean the *invisible* significance that, in turn, made up the link between the façades depicted; in fact, the particular sort of invisibility of the façades was precisely the tension that made Miller's piece work. And yet, in a contemporary period which has largely forgotten about or neglected the losses and trauma of AIDS, and in a city that was both the North American epicenter of the crisis while somehow indicating almost *nothing* of this past in the language of its built environment today, the invisible cultural knowledge to which both works make reference is too easily and tragically lost. This is, I argue, amongst other factors, a political spatial issue—one in which the urban built environment can play a serious role in countering.

In *Last Address* as in *Clubs for America*, it is the artistic gesture that imbues each façade with meaning and signifying potential predicated on the remembrance of subsumed pasts as they are tied to architectural formations and urban structures—

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<sup>5</sup> If anything, a closer visual inspection shows a repeated interest in various urban building façades on the part of the photographer; this is the constant in the ten photographs in contrast to various captures of everyday urban activity and human life.

buildings and streets. Recognizing that both artworks are deeply invested with significance, I analyze their layers of meaning through a considered spatial analysis. I consider particularly the notion of absence by focusing on the presences in the photographs: 1) the façades represented; 2) the typology of the buildings themselves and associated considerations of human activity and; 3) the importance of the embodied position of the artist in the street. I then position the works in relation to a longstanding queer tradition of covert engagement with the city in artistic reproduction as a way to both locate and distinguish them within the larger cultural archive of HIV and AIDS. As I argue, the façades are the urban surfaces onto which the artists project different forms of spatial knowledge and meaning related to AIDS. While both artists represent spaces of missing people in a formally similar manner, their artistic intentions differ: where Miller offers a contemplation of a lost landscape, Sachs treats the buildings more closely akin to something resembling a portrait, while also partaking in a queer tradition of mapping the erotic or intimate city.

## ***Methods***

### ***i. Critical Cultural Production***

We are currently in a cultural moment of AIDS “revisitation.” At the core of my research questions is a critical assessment of art history’s disciplinary engagement with the visual history of HIV and AIDS. Significant work has been done, yet it is clear that the field’s treatment of the history of HIV and AIDS could benefit from greater and

broader engagement.<sup>6</sup> Outside of the discipline of art history, recent critical cultural production centered around HIV and AIDS reveals a multitude of epistemological problems, including the selective privileging, warping, and/or exclusion of narratives at the hands of mainstream works, which tend towards a retelling of history that embraces whiteness, maleness, class privilege, and even heterosexuality (Juhasz, 2013).

More critical and radical engagements with both the vast amounts of historical cultural production tied to HIV and AIDS—what I have termed here the *cultural archive of HIV and AIDS*—as well as new, contemporary art practices and writings on the subject, generate profound and insightful historiographical critiques. Some crucial areas these critiques pivot around include the “deadline” of nostalgia by artist Vincent Chevalier & activist Ian Bradley-Perrin; the crucial distinctions between “ongoing AIDS” and “AIDS of the past” proposed by writer and Act Up activist Sarah Schulman; white supremacy and AIDS, particularly as critiqued in the contributions and collaborations by writers Essex Hemphill and Joseph Beam and filmmaker Marlon Riggs, and writings by activist Che Gossett;<sup>7</sup> the “AIDS Industrial Complex” as defined and resisted by Toronto

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<sup>6</sup> Examples of this include the distinct lack of diverse writings coming out of the discipline currently on the subject (though this is changing), or the ongoing association of “AIDS art” rather exclusively to the oeuvres of Keith Haring and Robert Mapplethorpe (as one general example).

<sup>7</sup> “As Cathy Cohen’s work in *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* [1999] shows, some bodies are simply considered ‘expendable,’ both in mainstream and marginal communities, and the abbreviated life spans of black queers or poor drug users, say, does not inspire the same kind of metaphysical speculation on curtailed futures, intensified presents, or reformulated histories; rather, the premature deaths of poor people and people of color in a nation that pumps drugs into

collective AIDS Action Now! and addressed in the writings of scholar-activist Alex McClelland; trans-women's activism both past and present; AIDS survivors, health and social services access, and undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder; "queer archive activism" as proposed by filmmaker Alexandra Juhasz; poverty and class analyses; decolonization, reproductive justice and land struggles highlighted especially by The Native Youth Sexual Health Network; the "unremembering" of gay liberationist culture in the work of scholars Christopher Reed, Christopher Castiglia, and art historian Douglas Crimp;<sup>8</sup> the Prison Industrial Complex, the criminalization of drug users, and the

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impoverished urban communities and withholds basic health care privileges, is simply business as usual" (Halberstam, p. 6).

<sup>8</sup> Reed and Castiglia propose the term "unremembering," the struggle against it presenting a very real political project: "Paradoxically, then, official memories—in the form of films, education, museum exhibitions, holidays, news reporting, and political speeches—constitute a potent form of forgetting even as they purport to traffic in memory. The assault on gay memory following AIDS took precisely this form, offering "cleaned-up" versions of the past as substitutes for more challenging memories of social struggle. What separates unremembering from such national amnesia, however, is the direct assault on particular memories and on the cultural act of remembering. Such attacks sought not to cohere an imagined national community but to undo the historical basis for communities that once seemed to offer radically new forms of social and sexual engagement. Gay culture has been prey to a particularly intense version of unremembering since the onset in the early 1980s of the AIDS epidemic. We are not saying that AIDS itself did in gay culture, although the very real costs of the syndrome in both human and financial terms has been staggering. Rather, the AIDS crisis became an occasion for a powerful concentration of cultural forces that made (and continue to make) the syndrome an agent of amnesia, wiping out memories not only of everything that came before but of the remarkably vibrant and imaginative ways that gay communities responded to the catastrophe of illness and death and sought to memorialize our losses." (p. 2-3)

carceral state; migration, labour, and border imperialism; and so very much more. The content of this thesis is indebted to the powerful and crucial ideas formulated by all those groups and individuals, with a particular recognition for the variety of unacknowledged ways that community members enact engagement, care, and struggle every day. A significant part of the preliminary research of this thesis has been a prolonged engagement with the materials generated in these types of discussions, serving to continuously reshape and re-inform my own political convictions and beliefs. My hope for this thesis is that it might continue to push dialogue and ideas towards new places and spaces, in service of the ways in which remembering and struggling can be of service across social boundaries and in informing new paradigms for justice and change.

## *ii. Interviews and Conversations*

In 2013 I was fortunate to be granted the opportunity to interview artist, writer and thinker Avram Finkelstein, of the *Silence=Death Collective* and *Gran Fury*. We discussed the contemporary renewal of cultural interest in HIV and AIDS history, including the at-times problematic and troubling nature of the different forms of historiographical construction unfolding currently on movie and television screens particularly. We agreed that underlying many of the larger pop-cultural efforts was a drive towards mainstream success and profit. As Avram maintained, “there is no way out of the fact that history is capital” (McClelland & Trudel).<sup>9</sup> We then discussed how to counter that and asked: what would a process look like that dismantled a hierarchical or skewed canonization of HIV-related art? In turn I reflected that:

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<sup>9</sup> For an in-depth discussion of this complex phenomenon, please see interview with Finkelstein “Silence = \_\_\_\_\_” (McClelland & Trudel, 2013)

In terms of my own practice of art history, I try to look at the ways that history has been misused or abused, and how to counter that. I do think it is possible to do that with integrity. I don't know what happens once things become canonized, but people are constantly deconstructing the canon and that is a crucial process. For myself, what has been most interesting is actually what we are doing right now: talking to people and having conversations. So when I'm looking at art objects or historical objects, my process for writing history differently is finding the conversations that people can have around those.

To which Finkelstein replied: "I agree, that this conversation is the adjunct, is the component piece that is necessary in order to have a more full understanding, and this is part of the reason why I am sort of obsessed with talking about this stuff" (McClelland & Trudel, 2013). This thesis uses the conversation and the interview as a core component of its methodology, recognizing the value of recording and disseminating aspects of the conception and production of the works as articulated by their very producers. My interview process consisted of formulating specific interrogations around the aesthetic decisions, contexts, and receptions of the works. Beyond established interview questions, our sessions often veered towards informal conversation and repeatedly touched on the personal in the cases of both artists. Thus, the information gathered from both interviews served primarily, in intention and outcome, to illuminate aspects of the works that have never been written about, or have so far remained unknown to the public. While the veracity of recounted memory-based histories rightfully remains disputed, the action of

gathering information about the works directly from their makers—hearing their voices—was of tremendous interest to this project.

### ***iii. The Cultural Archive of HIV and AIDS***

The archive has emerged as a highly important modality through which to access and understand AIDS history and its historiographies. It is a structure that facilitates noteworthy creative engagement with the past in the present moment. This thesis recognizes the archive as its touchstone conceptual framework indelibly tied to knowledge production. This arises out of respect for the recognition that the archive is the site around and through which much lively, important debate, theorizing, and artmaking about HIV and AIDS, past and present, occurs today. One especially powerful insight into its role is the theoretical term “queer archive activism,” coined by Alex Juhasz, to denote the “practical and theoretical possibility that might be of good use for people who might be, like me, deeply concerned with the connection between *nostalgia, video [or cultural production] and AIDS*” (Visual AIDS, 2013). The New York organization Visual AIDS, meanwhile, has been instrumental in fostering community dialogue by organizing events such as *What You Don’t Know Could Fill A Museum: AIDS, Art and the Institution* (January 2014) and *Your Nostalgia Is Killing Me* (March 2014). It is precisely this exchange between individuals and groups that grows a sense of community-based historical caretaking and concern, linking the past to the present and the present to the past. This degree of archive-based dialogue is a sign, to me, of tremendous resilience, of communication, and, at times, of social healing and caring.



I have employed the term “the cultural archive of HIV and AIDS” here as a broad concept that regroups cultural and artistic expressions surrounding the events of HIV historically. It is a way to think about visual production generated by the lived experiences of the virus. This is done partly in recognition of how thinking about the past through the archival structure presents a way of doing art history that may not fall subject to the hierarchical and exclusionary tendencies of the canon.<sup>10</sup> A further imperative for adopting an archival analysis of the art generated during the AIDS crisis is, as film theorist Roger Hallas astutely notes, is that “[t]he archive became a central concern for queer AIDS media right from their very beginnings in the mid-1980s” (p. 42). That the archive is an indelible access point of HIV and AIDS history is not a coincidence: AIDS broke across North America at the same time that video technologies were made increasingly accessible to the public. AIDS as a public phenomenon in the 1980s and 1990s was widely documented; the material outcome can be considered an archive. The cultural archive of HIV and AIDS refers to both this genre of documentation as well as other forms of artmaking, mark making, ephemera, and expressions with a visual dimension.

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<sup>10</sup> Of particular relevance to my subject matter are the varying and evolving conceptualizations of the so-called queer archive, which “has emerged from those who both collect new materials and critique existing historical materials across varied modes of public memory work.” It is “characterized by preoccupations with the notion of in/visibility, the identification of LGBT/queer practices, and the question of the LGBT/queer historical and archival subject” (Marshall et al.).

The term *archive* itself connotes a veritable multiplicity of meanings in contemporary discourse. Since the 1990s, a larger Western cultural process has occurred whereby the archive—its structures, functions, usages and possibilities—has gained exponential scholarly and theoretical attention across disciplines (Manoff; Blouin & Rosenberg). This has in turn served to characterize the entity as, paradoxically, difficult to define. Jacques Derrida—whose *Mal d'archive: Une impression Freudienne* (1995) remains widely considered one of the gateway texts in tackling the archive's explosion into interdisciplinary theoretical consideration—famously underlined that “nothing is less clear today than the word ‘archive’” (Manoff, p. 10).<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the richness of emergent theories on the archive allows me to highlight those that are of especial relevance when considering HIV and AIDS visual history, in turn leading to a characterized and function-specific “archive.” Furthermore, I would suggest that it is precisely the archive's polymorphous significance and simultaneously-occurring but distinct theoretical treatments that make it a fertile tool for understanding specific histories and their structures.

Where the human experience of the HIV virus in the crisis years was so viscerally about the fight for life and survival, and where it became too often about death and loss, the archive has in parallel been thought through as a material reaction to deep human drives. Derrida in particular postulated the archive, in a Freudian reading, as the emerging

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<sup>11</sup> Worth noting is how throughout the ongoing period of heightened scholarly interest in the entity, practicing archivists have maintained the distinct nature of their work, arguing for its separateness from multidisciplinary theorization.

tension between the human's pleasure and death drives. Manoff elucidates: "One is a death drive and the other is a conservation or archive drive that is linked to the pleasure principle. In this formulation, the archive affirms the past, present, and future; it preserves the records of the past and it embodies the promise of the present to the future" (Manoff, 11). We might find value in thinking about the cultural archive of HIV and AIDS as both a reaction to loss and an affirmation of life. When a person dies, one global cross-cultural response is that of memorializing through aesthetic gesture, often in order to leave a material trace in place of the corporeal absence death effects. One might consider the 1985 photographic series *Marginal Waters* by Doug Ischar in this light: it is a relatively unknown but important entry in the cultural archive of HIV and AIDS (Figures 11-12). Ischar went about documenting the public gay cruising culture that would gather at Chicago's Belmont Rocks in a period when AIDS was still a relatively new, though already thoroughly devastating, reality of everyday gay life. Ischar articulated that his imperative in taking the photographs of his community was in fact driven by conservation: "Understand that from the get-go I was photographing gay men almost out of a sense of desperation because of AIDS," Ischar says. "I was fearful AIDS would obliterate queer culture. I had this fervid conservationist mission" (Heidemann). What was he conserving? *Marginal Waters* depicts public exchanges of masculine intimacy in an outdoors leisure setting and a queer public space. The material objects surrounding the sunbathing men—their mobile cassette-tape-players and racing bicycles and boom boxes—serve to mark the time period as a label would declare an entry's year in the archive. Ultimately, it was not the queer culture of Ischar's concern that vanished—rather, what has been lost are many of the individual men in his photographs.

The archive as a site of potential pseudo-encounter is also a useful theoretical understanding of the entity in the context of HIV and AIDS history. It understands the archive's structure as a place of possibility where one can happen upon an intimate detail or a materialized moment, triggering a sense of spontaneous discovery that inadvertently recreates the sense of getting-to-know a person. Never was this sensation stronger for me than during the afternoon I spent poring over the journals of David Wojnarowicz at New York University. The details that emerged from the artist's journals, a recording habit he kept up through most of his life, were so profoundly intimate and varied as to simulate the inner landscape of a person, a sort of recreation of the deep knowledge of intimacy. Here, the artist was the archivist of his own life. In the material deposits of his generated writings, markings and collecting habits, the researcher could piece together a distilled and fragmented but highly personal sense of the person. After all, the archive is, as Charles Morris III argues within the context of remembering Act Up, the site of "mnemonic world making" (p. 51).<sup>12</sup> The potential this holds for the historicizing of the lives lost to AIDS is of tremendous interest to this thesis.

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Morris III also proposes the useful notion of "archival queers": "those who individually and collectively perform inventive, disruptive, and critical accumulations, exhibitions, preservations, and transformations of GLBTQ pasts and their presence. Archival queers desire, deconstruct, and deploy copious and contradictory holdings and ostensible detritus from official collections and privileged stacks to the undocumented archive, archive of feelings, talking archives, video remains, sweet tea, and ephemera in pursuit and production of what Jose Muñoz's describes as 'a temporal arrangement in which the past is a field of possibility in which subjects can act in the present in the service of a new futurity'" (p.10).

#### *iv. Reading Space in the Archive*

A space-based analysis of the history of HIV and AIDS seems, paradoxically, to be both necessary and under-addressed.<sup>13</sup> As Michel Foucault wrote in his oft-cited 1967 text *Des Espaces Autres*: “The great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history . . . The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space” (p.1). The experience of looking at representations and their mediations of and dealings with space has been my foremost scholarly interest and attraction to the archive. This analytical approach draws on the importance of the “spatial turn” in theory of the second half of the twentieth century, where analysis of the spatial, and an attention “to buildings in particular, [is seen] in the writings of Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, Gaston Bachelard, Henri Lefebvre, and Michel Foucault’s study of prisons and the Panopticon” (Briganti & Mezei, p.5). Furthermore, demonstrating its relevance, a spatial turn surfaces even in the recent writings of famous AIDS activist writer and art historian Douglas Crimp who, upon looking back at his early years in New York, acknowledges that spatial consideration of past events is of much greater interest to him today (p. 84). In order to talk about space and HIV, I have found it especially useful to refer to key theories put forth by philosophers Mikhail Bakhtin, Elizabeth Grosz, and Henri Lefebvre. As Lefebvre particularly examines in the opening to his seminal book *The Production of Space* (1974), space had historically been thought of in primarily scientific and mathematical terms (p. 3). While an acknowledged shift towards the realm of the social occurred, it is nevertheless useful to apply a type of mathematical rigour to the

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<sup>13</sup> See web gallery & accompanying text on Visual AIDS’ blog in January 2014 : “Some Thoughts / For You” (Trudel)

considerations of spatial dynamics found in the following chapters.<sup>14</sup> Drawing on the idea of mathematical topologies, I have structured the chapters of this thesis in accordance with the spatial consideration of presence and absence in the artworks of Sachs and Miller, in how entities present themselves as one mentally moves across the depth of the streetscape: from building to body. In her seminal essay “Bodies-Cities,” Grosz establishes what I use as my most important unit of spatial measurement: that is, a repeated consideration of the ways in which bodies relate to their built environment. Grosz’s establishment of a template that examines the interrelations of bodies and cities and questions their influence on each other ultimately influenced this project tremendously. And finally, Bakhtin’s elaboration of the “chronotope” as a theoretical tool “to capture the role of place in the constitution of story” is useful for writing about the space created within artworks. In “condensing the dimensionalities of time and space, the chronotope, according to Bakhtin, is the ‘place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied’” (in Wallace, p. 3). As I demonstrate in Section Four, the creation of this “place of narrative’ is of great relevance to AIDS activist art. It is in deeper analysis of the complexities of the street, and the spaces between the body and buildings, especially, that I have found the language to write about art, urban space and HIV—that most bodily of phenomena.

#### ***v. A Specific Space: the Street***

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<sup>14</sup> In his book *A Topography of Constellations*, Teyssot also deploys the topological concept to examine architectural tensions between the exterior and the interior beyond an opposing binary structure. This analytical method has certainly been of use to this thesis.

While the history of the archive is indelibly tied to control of space, imperialism and the colonial empire (Manoff, p. 15), my archival methodology has involved making note of and collecting as many instances or depictions of street-based spatial reference and spatiality as possible. I think here particularly of an important scene in Marlon Riggs' 1989 film *Tongues Untied*, where the filmmaker walks a street in the Castro, clad in a black leather jacket, depicting his everyday experience of being both invisibilized in the street while on the receiving end of hostile white stares—speaking to pervasive exclusionary and discriminatory behaviors of white gay culture and the gay AIDS experience of a man of color. Riggs's insistence on visibility and community, with his counterparts Joseph Beam and Essex Hemphill, are some of the most revolutionary material to come out of the NYC cultural AIDS archive. One might think of the introductory paragraphs of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Tendencies* (1994), in which she describes the “very queer time” in the street of New York City at an Act UP protest—marking an effective emergence into the public of visible queer identity, with its assertive and vocal corporeal presence. I began to think about the political implications of making room for both representations of space and space itself within archival structures, as well as the particular ways in which representations of places of import within a city structure often demonstrated an archival impulse in of themselves. Certainly *Clubs for America* and *Last Address* demonstrated this aesthetic; I turned also to the writings of Cleve Jones, the founder of the AIDS Names Memorial Quilt, who recalled his distress when walking the streets of the Castro at the height of the epidemic. For Jones, the built environment represented the difference between apathy (the privacy and invisibility of the suffering of AIDS) and engagement (a fantasized public that would care). His anecdote is worth

reproducing here, particularly for its imagined visualization of a different-looking city, one more representative of his suffering:

A few days prior to the 1985 [Harvey Milk memorial] march, my friend Joseph Durant and I were walking the Castro handing out leaflets reminding people of the candlelight memorial. We stopped to get a slice at Marcello's Pizza and I picked up a *Chronicle*. The front-page headline was chilling: '1,000 San Franciscans Dead of AIDS.' I'd known most of them from my work with the KS Foundation. Virtually every single one of them had lived within a ten-block radius of where we were standing at Castro and Market. When I walked up Eighteenth Street from Church to Eureka, I knew the ugly stories, behind so many windows. Gregory died behind those blue curtains. Jimmy was diagnosed up that staircase in that office behind the venetian blinds. There was the house Alex got kicked out of when the landlord found an empty bottle of AZT in his trash can: 'I'm sorry, we just can't take any chances.' I wasn't losing just friends, but also all the familiar faces of the neighborhood—the bus drivers, clerks and mailmen, all the people we know in casual yet familiar ways. The entire Castro was populated by ghosts . . . The Castro was a city within the city, an oasis and harbor for thousands who lived there and millions of gay men and lesbian women around the world for whom it symbolized freedom. And now, in what should have been its prime, it was withering. Angrily, I turned to Joseph: 'I wish we had a bulldozer, and if we could just level these buildings, raze Castro . . . If this was just a graveyard with a



thousand corpses lying in the sun, then people would look at it and they would understand and if they were human beings they'd have to respond.' And Joseph, always the acid realist, told me I was the last optimist left standing: 'Nobody cares, Cleve. This thing doesn't touch them at all' (p. 576-577).

Walter Benjamin wrote, "the street is the dwelling place of the collective" (p. 423), locating it as an important site of theory and praxis. The ways in which artists have looked at and represented the street offers a point of entry into the history in question; the street-as-site is certainly of relevance here. In the context of HIV activist history, spatial markings have often manifested on surfaces forming the boundaries that constitute the streets: the exteriors of buildings, walls, fences. Activist-artists repeatedly plastered the streets with posters and stickers, or took to the streets, filling them with protesters and changing the visual landscape even for a few fleeting hours. These protests have not only been reproduced for perpetuity in the archive, they have become the subject of some of the most prominent imagery—and thus, collective memory—of AIDS history. The structural permeability of these boundaries, in the formal visual representations of windows and doors, represent the tension between spaces of privacy and intimacy (spaces of sex, domestic life, sickness) and spaces of publicness: public sex, but also public suffering and, during a considerable duration of the crisis period, public discrimination. Reed and Castiglia critically note that the spatial "phenomena that attract scholarly [...] notice" are "forms of performance (from street demonstrations to practices of cruising)" and "forms of street marking (graffiti and murals)", whereas that "[b]etween these much-

discussed manifestations of urban inhabitation lies a rich culture of spaces marked by sexual minorities, exemplifying neither the dead time of official monuments nor the ephemeral nature of performance, but something both more contingent and more legible than most accounts have acknowledged” (p. 87). I believe that by including streetscapes in the cultural archive of HIV and AIDS, new insightful historiographies are revealed, in which the affect of presence is continually in tension with tremendous awareness of absence and loss.

This thesis looks to *Last Address* and *Clubs for America* as artworks located in the street and categorically about AIDS as a way to understand an important facet of public spatial experience of HIV in New York City. Precisely, the formally similar artworks can be understood as complex modulations and meditations on absence and presence. Ultimately, I argue, while the tension between absence and presence is always at play in the urban embodied experience of HIV, the built environment is characterized by a distinct lack of visual evidence of the traumas of the AIDS crisis as they occurred in that very place. Sachs’ and Miller’s artworks are a testament to their own recognition of this critical absence, and articulate a different experience of visibility in the street, one that cannot unsee what is now gone. A critical spatial consideration of the works goes a considerable way, I am arguing, towards the consideration of the space of the New York City street specifically as seen and experienced by the artists-as-witnesses. Ultimately, it is my belief that a designed articulation of this vision should be largely and continuously incorporated into the urban fabric. Thinking through the street-as-site in this thesis understands it as a place of embodiment, a place of movement and return and therefore of

future promise, of potential—akin to Morris’s “mnemonic world-making”. And as Grosz has noted, “Space is the ongoing possibility of a different inhabitation” (p. 131). This sense of transformative possibility as tied to my aesthetic inquiry is something I must absolutely insist upon; otherwise, the activist side of this work experiences the very real chance of futility.

## SECTION ONE: INTRODUCING THE WORKS

### *John Miller on his work Clubs for America (1992)*

*“I felt, in a way, I was looking at a landscape” –J.M.*

John Miller is an American-born multi-media artist and teacher, based in New York City and Berlin. He is best known for his sculptural works, and teaches at Barnard College today. I met with Miller at his studio in Soho in Spring 2014 to discuss *Clubs for America*. The 1992 work had recently been included in two major museum exhibitions, displaying it to new publics in new contexts.<sup>15</sup> Because so little had been written about

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<sup>15</sup> *Clubs for America* has experienced a new wave of interest after being selected for inclusion in two major exhibitions: at the Reina Sofia Madrid’s Lynn Cooke and Douglas Crimp-curated “*Mixed Use Manhattan: Photography and Related Practices, 1970s to the Present*” (2010), and the Massimiliano Gioni, Gary Carrion-Murayari, Margot Norton and Jenny Moore co-curated “*NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash, and No Star*,” staged at the New Museum from February 13<sup>th</sup> to May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2013. Both major exhibitions made a curatorial proposition that sought to capture an essence of the New York City of the past. It is worth examining the ways in which the two exhibitions assembled their shows in relation to conceptualizations of the city itself, as well as their identification of social, political or economic “issues”. The New Museum explicated its approach as follows: “*NYC 1993 [...] looks at art made and exhibited in New York over the course of one year. Centering on 1993, the exhibition is conceived as a time capsule, an experiment in collective memory that attempts to capture a specific moment at the intersection of art, pop culture, and politics.*” (New Museum Statement, 2013). While neither attempt to recreate a notion of the city itself, *NYC 1993* utilizes the urban formation as a gathering context, a venue, without veering its explorations into its nature, geographically. Nowhere in the exhibition statement do the curators explain their choice of NYC particularly. *Mixed Use Manhattan*, however, selects work that invariably directly portrays the sites and

the work, we went over the details of the piece's conception, production, and public reception in fairly rigorous detail. In particular, I wanted to gain some insight into how the piece had been conceptualized with regards to HIV and AIDS in New York.

Miller made *Clubs for America* in 1992, over a decade after AIDS broke over North American communities “like a tsunami” (McCaskell). The series comprises ten color photographs of the exteriors of New York buildings that housed gay sex spaces shut down by city authorities during the AIDS crisis.<sup>16</sup> In art historical terms, the photographs can be considered streetscapes that capture whatever city life was occurring in front of the camera in that moment, including cyclists, pedestrians, parked cars, and other instances of everyday urban activity. Yet these streetscapes might also be more closely regarded as a sort of portraiture—architectural portraiture—in their undeniable focus on the building as the primary object of visual interest.

*Clubs for America* was made after Miller was invited to partake in a show about the AIDS epidemic, *Getting to kNOw You*, organized by Christoph Tannert and Dean McNeil at Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin in 1992. Miller says he was invited based on the sculptural works for which he was then known, the “Everything is Painted Brown” series (1990). The sculptures, which actively referenced the body, were interpreted by art critic G. Roger Denson as being about AIDS, thus giving them an unintended and

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locations of the urban structure of interest, establishing the relationships between its selected artworks and their environment, and working with concepts falling along the bodies-cities spectrum as articulated in particular by Elizabeth Grosz, as an exploration of various situated art practices.

<sup>16</sup> New Museum exhibition wall text explanation of work

unanticipated reputation. The political climate of the time was inextricably tied to the AIDS crisis, touching the art world especially in terms of funding and censorship. Miller points out that “especially after the controversy around Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano, it reached a point . . . with US aesthetics and politics [where] anything that indexed the body was seen as political . . . sometimes even the most traditional figurative work.” Feeling nevertheless that his *Brown* works were unrelated to the crisis, he produced a new piece for the show—*Clubs*—of which he notes: “I don’t think [they] were what the curators were expecting.” *Clubs for America* was Miller’s first time using a camera to make an artwork and the first explicitly photographic piece he produced.

Despite its date being listed as 1993 in the New Museum’s *NYC 1993* show, *Clubs for America* was made in 1992 and exhibited the late autumn of that same year and the early days of the following one.<sup>17</sup> Each photograph shows a different site where communities of gay men gathered for sex in Manhattan. The places may have been referred to as clubs or bathhouses at the time (St Marks Baths are depicted, for instance), their shared denominator nevertheless being the past occurrence of a plethora of gay sexual activities inside each building. When queried about his choice to forego specific geographical identifiers or indices, he alluded to a desire for cohesiveness of the piece. Worth considering, however, is how Miller’s piece places less importance on informing an unknowing viewer about the precise location of each site; rather, each untitled

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<sup>17</sup> GT: “And was it made in ‘92 or ‘93? I’ve seen both dates attributed to that work.” JM: “It could have been made in . . . I’d have to check the date of *Getting to kNOw You*, because I think I completed it the same year of that show.” See also <http://www.bethanien.de/en/publications/getting-to-know-you/>

photograph plays off the other in reinforcing a sense of urban anonymity—places on the threshold of disappearance, the architectural structures remaining where specific human activity did not.

I asked Miller about his experiences of the AIDS crisis in New York City, where he saw himself in relation to it, and how his artwork might or might not be read as an activist act. Miller is heterosexual, with a wife and daughter, and he recalled his family's friendship with the important artist group General Idea and an anecdote about member Jorge Zontal's migration from New York to Toronto for the Canadian city's advantageous healthcare.<sup>18</sup> For Miller, while “in New York it was impossible not to [feel the impact of AIDS]”, his engaged participation with the crisis took form not in involvement with local activist groups, but in sustained artistic contributions to a dozen or so AIDS benefits occurring at the time.<sup>19</sup> Yet even upon the piece's first showing in

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<sup>18</sup> Miller's anecdote about General Idea offers an interesting piece of informal history: “My wife and I were good friends with the artists in General Idea—AA Bronson still survives, but Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal, who we were closest to, both died from AIDS. They had been living in New York at the height of the epidemic, and they had done those AIDS posters that looked like Robert Indiana's LOVE logo. But it reached a point after Jorge [...] they moved back to Toronto primarily for the health care when Jorge was ill, so it was kind of inescapable. I also remember the outset of the epidemic where people were getting sick and nobody knew why; then there was the phrase “gay cancer” and, you know, there were all these theories and a lot tinged with paranoia of what the disease could be and it took a while for it to be identified.”

<sup>19</sup> For a powerful and incisive critique of the art world's involvements and shortcomings in AIDS activism, particularly centered on the problematic (but necessary) nature of such artworld charity events, see Crimp's essay “A Day Without Gertrude” (1990), p. 165

Berlin, attendees took little interest in it, finding it lacked an activist edge. *Clubs* received, in Miller's words, a "non-response" from attendees, who instead considered it "boring."

The artist affirms that interest in the work has been "almost entirely retrospective" (even this is a recent phenomenon, beginning with *Mixed Use Manhattan* in 2010), yet he opines that the earlier underwhelming public reception was not entirely unintentional:

I wasn't really giving them the tools for it either, what I wanted it to be more was a historically conscious gesture . . . It was included in a show of activist work, so the point of the [other] work was apparent, and with my work there was only the series title, and the photos which are these blank façades and had kind of an anti-documentarian bias.

In seeking to make an artwork where "the subject of the photograph was absent," (ibid) Miller cites four principal conceptual influences on the artwork: Walter Benjamin's work, which he was reading at the time, in particular his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*; Dan Graham's *Homes for America* (1966-67), of which he says that *Clubs*' "title alludes to that, in going from domestic space to the idea of the sex club" (ibid); Robert Smithson's concept of 'non-sites';<sup>20</sup> and Ed Ruscha's 1970 photo-book *Real Estate Opportunities*, a black-and-white documentation of various for-sale properties (Figure 13). *Homes for America*, Smithson's non-sites and *Real Estate Opportunities* are all

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<sup>20</sup> He expounds: "You know, on the one hand this didn't involve geological material or any physical material or displacing it, but I was concerned more with historical displacement and in my work that led to a whole kind of consideration of what is public space? How much does anyone know about any given space?"



about place, and Walter Benjamin's theoretical oeuvre certainly takes great interest in the concept. For Miller, *Homes for America* provided the template by which he could look at a space while questioning, as Graham had, landscapes of the mundane, the banal, and the everyday. Where Graham had visited the suburbs, however, Miller's interest lay strictly in the heart of one of the world's largest urban centers, New York. The tension between the notion of the domestic space (whose exterior fascinated Graham) and the gay sex club was of artistic interest to Miller. The dual nature of his photographs--representing presence (buildings) and absence (interior activity)—parallels with Smithson's writings on his own concept, where he stated: "it is by . . . dimensional metaphor that one site can represent another site which does not resemble it – this is *The Non-Site*" ("A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites"). *Real Estate Opportunities*, finally, emulates a gaze upon place as inextricably tied to property and profit, while simultaneously subverting it. Where Ruscha both enacts and disrupts this real estate gaze, he offered a consideration of space and place as dictated by monetary forces reigning over questions of inhabitation, dwelling, work, relationships, among others. All of these factors were important to the making of *Clubs for America*—their influence in turn informs how the piece might be considered art historically—and where, precisely, it might be accurately positioned within a cultural archive of HIV and AIDS. The opposition of the domestic to the public sex space is something I will further address below.

***Ira Sachs on his work Last Address (2010)***

*"I remember crossing Halston [Street], and having this idea pretty much fully formed that I would make a short film called Last Address about this group of New York artists who have died, and their absence and presence in my life."* –I.S.

I met American filmmaker Ira Sachs in New York City in Spring 2014. A busy and successful filmmaker, Sachs dropped by the Visual AIDS offices in Chelsea where he generously answered some of my questions over the course of an hour. A thoughtful and warm speaker, he was ready to discuss the multifaceted *Last Address*, and open and candid about the personal motivations behind the frankly intimate work.

*Last Address* is a beautiful short color film that visits the last dwelling places of 28 New York City artists who have died of AIDS-related causes since the 1980s. The film contains no voiceover, featuring instead a New York street soundtrack. It pauses for an extended period of time at each address, the camera panning up to focus on the unit within each building where the exact apartment of the artist in question had been. As it visits each site, the name of the artist and the exact address appear at the bottom of the screen. Despite its somber content, the film is animated and full of light and color, featuring secondary action in the form of city bustle or natural phenomena. The film is at once both incredibly still yet alive; serious and sad yet celebratory.

Sachs makes a fairly distinct separation between the website [www.lastaddress.org](http://www.lastaddress.org), the informative platform by which most viewers access the work, and the film as a stand-alone piece (this thesis treats the film itself, as it was initially projected to audiences and is now viewable online). The film's genre, according to Sachs, is experimental documentary, but it simultaneously functions as "an elegy . . . about absence [and] about

loss”. One of Sachs’ preferred artistic techniques is to film from a highly observational position. As he eloquently stated:

I will say that in my narrative work I will often do something where I enter a documentary situation and position my camera in a corner and watch. So that is true for me for watching a world of people, and it was a very natural thing for me to do the same thing in a world without people. To kind of put the camera in a corner and turn a few ways and see what would be there.

*Last Address* was made after Ira Sachs was asked to submit work to a one-night film screening at One Light Industry in New York in 2010. The event aimed to showcase filmmakers producing work about the city they lived in. He imparts that the idea for the film came to him fully formed, as he crossed the street in Manhattan. It was shot over three days, though it has subsequently been edited to simulate the light cycle of a natural day. It runs at just under nine minutes long. The film was well received and has enjoyed a small-scale following through its internet page. For Sachs, the positive feedback has been a surprisingly new form of recognition, garnering a different sort of attention than the full features he traditionally makes. As he said, “in a way the thing that I’d made that was the smallest and most personal suddenly became very well appreciated, well attended to, and that’s actually super significant for artists is to be seen and be heard and have impact” (Sachs, interview). In the summer of 2013 a *Last Address* walking tour of Manhattan was created by Alex Fialho, a young artist; a second staging of it was held in summer 2014.

Participants visit many of the same sites captured by Sachs on film, reading and speaking about the buildings' former occupants, thereby keeping their artistic legacies alive.

## SECTION TWO: BODIES AND BUILDINGS AND REPRESENTATION

Because *Last Address* and *Clubs for America* are both works that make visible bodily absence by casting their photographic gazes on the façades of buildings, the historical and theoretical paradigms of the relationalities between bodies, buildings, and representation are foundational to the works. Yet even these relationalities are transformed by AIDS. The visibly sick queer body inserted into the urban environment challenges socially-enforced notions of public and private queer visibility and space. Grosz writes in “Cities-Bodies”: “The city is one of the crucial factors in the social production of (sexed) corporeality: the built environment provides the context and coordinates for contemporary forms of body” (p. 382). As film theorist Lee Wallace notes of non-straight sexualities in space, “[c]ompletely unremarked, heterosexuality is so hardwired into the spatial practices of modern life that the appearance of any other sexuality on the premises is exceptional if not disruptive” (p. 14). This does not account for the double-disruption of queerness and illness in the urban environment. Little has been written explicitly on the ways in which AIDS historically reconfigured the queer bodily experience as ‘out,’ or ‘public’, or the long-term repercussions of this. Anecdotal narratives, like Sarah Schulman’s recounting of her friend’s attendance at a play, speak to the conditions of urban invisibility usually publicly enforced around sickness and queerness: “It took so much energy for David to get to the theater that night that he slept through the show. This was his direct action for the day, making the audience see what a person with AIDS looked like in the phase when most just disappeared into their apartments until they died” (p. 65). The inhabitation of space then, even if only for the

measured duration of a play, becomes, through AIDS, a newly inscribed act, which in itself reinscribes spaces as sites transformed according to comfort/discomfort, safety, well-being, and/or other factors. The experience of space as transformed by varying embodied states of health is deeply personal and constantly fluctuating, as well as a critical vantage point from which to consider the histories of bodies and cities.

With an interest in the changes to the public and private nature of queer life in relation to the advent of the AIDS crisis, I take up the concept of critical portraiture as a form of representation traditionally associated with the human body, and twist the framework to examine what gets revealed when one substitutes a body (or bodies) for a building as subject. Furthermore, I offer some considerations on how to understand the works in question by Sachs and Miller in relation to this notion. In this chapter, I examine the complex nature of the three-way relationship mentioned above, broken down into sections, which may be summarized as follows: bodies-representation (in the age of AIDS); buildings-representation (in art); and bodies-buildings (in theoretical consideration). The personal, as I show, is an important factor in understanding almost any AIDS art.

### ***Bodies, Representation, and AIDS***

In the public conversation held between himself and Jim Hubbard at the New School in New York City in March of 2013, filmmaker David France made an offhand comment that served, inadvertently, to frame urban street-based visuality and its representations of

visibly sick people during the crisis years of AIDS as a mediated site of historical paradox:<sup>21</sup>

It was harder for me, in my quest, to find footage of sick people,” France said, “You know, there was a real concerted effort to show strength and power, and that made it harder for me, as I was doing my search for footage, to find, for a new audience, the other footage. The footage of sickness, the footage of people in hospitals. I was looking for—for a long time, for like three years—I was trying to find footage of just ordinary plague in New York, the way we remember it looked, the way you would see, you know, just incredibly ill, very young men on the sidewalks [...], trying to hail cabs and gasping for air and the plague was everywhere, it was visually everywhere, and I just never did find any of that footage.

(Youtube video, 29:00-31:00 minute mark)

The anecdote recognizes that archival footage of visibly sick people in the streets from the 1980s and 1990s is of visual and historical value today for conveying the public phenomenon of AIDS—“the way *we* remember it looked” and as one that was “visually everywhere”—to a “new audience”: a form of intergenerational knowledge

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<sup>21</sup> From “Revisiting the AIDS Crisis: A Conversation with David France and Jim Hubbard.” Both men had recently come out with films that dug into the history of Act Up, albeit, as critics pointed out, from radically different narrative positions—with differing political connotations. The films, France’s *How to Survive A Plague*, and Hubbard’s *United In Anger: A History of Act Up*, then marked the two most high-profile efforts at what has become, over the past three years, a widespread cultural engagement with the events and material of the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s in the United States.

transmission.<sup>22</sup> France's comment serves as a useful point of departure for two important conditions of the HIV visual archive: first, that there were political priorities of representation that manifested in little to no documentation of the "everyday plague," leading to a visual archive that is not globally representative and second, that the question of bodily documentary itself, while important, was at times necessarily approached through modes of substitution or alternative representation.

The body's absence and presence was certainly a concern of artists and critics as it manifested in representations of AIDS during the crisis years. As Hallas notes in his work on queer AIDS media:

The photographic image of the body, a sign that consistently exceeds the process of signification, leaves the most important trace of magnitude<sup>23</sup> . . . [I]n relation to documentary representation, magnitude wields 'a relentless demand for habeas corpus' . . . When may the deliberate visual inscription of corporeal absence prove more effective in sustaining that embodied experience than the visual inscription of the body (p. 15)?

The question is not insignificant; it echoes one posed nearly twenty-five years earlier by Douglas Crimp. The cultural writers and critics of the plague knew that representations of

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<sup>22</sup> Worth noting is that while France could not find said footage, this does not necessarily entail that none of it exists.

<sup>23</sup> In his understanding of the term "magnitude," Hallas refers to its meaning put forth in the work of Bill Nichols, "who uses the term to explore the ethical stakes in the documentary representation of traumatic events. Magnitude involves the incommensurable gap experienced by the viewer between the representation of trauma and its referent in the historical world" (ibid).



bodies were a crucial component in the battle over public discourse as it related to the rights of people living with HIV. Crimp's important 1988 essay, "Portraits of People with AIDS," took to task photographer Nicholas Nixon's show "Pictures of People" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, staged the same year. The exhibition included several portraits of people living with AIDS, of which Crimp wrote: "what we see first and foremost in Nixon's photographs is their reiteration of what we have already been told or shown about people with AIDS: that they are ravaged, disfigured, and debilitated by the syndrome; they are generally alone, desperate, but resigned to their "inevitable" deaths" (p 86). Far from being the only one to do so, he articulated a fundamental representation-based argument that posited the necessity of empowered and critical imagery that resisted both the mainstream media's sensationalist, stereotypical and degrading depictions of people living with AIDS, and its liberal counter-part, which, he pointed out, was just as damaging:<sup>24</sup> "the typical liberal position has held, from very early in the epidemic, that one of the central problems of AIDS, one of the things we needed to combat, was bureaucratic abstraction. What was needed was to 'give AIDS a face,' to 'bring AIDS home.' And thus the portrait of the person with AIDS had become

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<sup>24</sup> Crimp's list of stereotypical popular imagery helps to illustrate the discriminatory media climate of the crisis years: "'AIDS Hits Home' nevertheless consists of a veritable catalog of broadcast television's by-then typical portraits of people with AIDS, for example, the generic or collective portraits, portraits of so-called risk groups: gay men in their tight 501s walking arm in arm in the Castro district of San Francisco; impoverished Africans; prostitutes, who apparently always work on streets; and drug addicts, generally shown only metonymically as an arm with a spike seeking its vein. Also included in this category of the generically portrayed in "AIDS Hits Home," however, are "ordinary" heterosexuals—ordinary in the sense that they are white and don't shoot drugs [...]" (p 89).

something of a genre long before a famous photographer like Nicholas Nixon entered the field” (p 88). The small-scale Act Up protest that mobilized around the Nixon MoMA show, meanwhile, formulated their counter-demand simply and succinctly: “Stop Looking At Us” (ibid).

Crimp wrote of his “incredulity” after having seen the Nixon exhibition, pointing out that theorists, including Allan Sekula, had been trying to make the same critical argument against its type of imagery for years: “I had naively assumed that the critique of this sort of [documentary] photography, articulated over and over during the past decade, might have had some effect.” He goes on to cite a passage from Sekula’s seminal essay “Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation),” from 1976:

At the heart of [the] fetishistic cultivation and promotion of the artist’s humanity is a certain disdain for the ‘ordinary’ humanity of those who have been photographed. They become the ‘other,’ exotic creatures, objects of contemplation.... The most intimate, human-scale relationship to suffer mystification in all this is the specific social engagement that results in the image; the negotiation between photographer and subject in the making of a portrait, the seduction, coercion, collaboration, or rip off (in Crimp, p. 98).

Crimp then poses the following key question: “How, then, might this intimate, human-scale relationship that Sekula cautions us about be constructed differently” (p. 99)? The works of Miller and Sachs, I suggest, gesture towards a possible answer: the buildings

depicted therein serve as a visually complex opportunity for the imaged substitution of the body.<sup>25</sup> Representing a building instead of a body certainly serves to attenuate pressing questions of power dynamics and sensationalism. The already gone people, displaced by AIDS and its after-effects and by death, are visualized in their absence in the form of the built environment instead.

The building-body as mode of representation also draws on a long-standing tradition of conceptualizations of the relationship between the two entities. As English scholar Marjorie Garber notes, representing the house “as a human body is a very old idea, one often reinvented in children’s drawings, where the bungalow or cottage frequently comes to resemble a face” (p. 123). The analogies between the body and the building in representation have traditionally demonstrated the associations made between the two by parties interested in reinforcing social norms around “one of three elements: proportion, function, or sex and gender roles” (ibid). Each of these different conceptualizations of the relationship is indicative of profound social assumptions about the social and built environment, but it is the ties between gender, sex, and the home that may be the relationship of highest regulation, with profound implications for queerness. As Garber asserts, this is “architecture as reflecting and producing sexual law and morality, and guarding (or enshrining) female virtue . . . We may note that it is almost impossible to use the metaphor of the woman as house, or to extend the figure, without implying some law about her” (ibid). Architectural theorist Georges Teyssot has furthered work on this concept, writing: “Privacy was (and still is) mainly ruled and

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<sup>25</sup> The task was certainly taken up, prior to Crimp’s essay, by Martha Rosler in her *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (1974-5).

circumscribed by law. It is founded on prohibition and advice: ‘It is forbidden to look or to peep, and please, be discreet.’ Indiscretion determines a highly mutable territory, one that is difficult to map” (p. 258-259). Furthermore, extensive social norms and mores have traditionally been inscribed into the very language of architecture itself, yielding particular relationships between spaces and their inhabitants.

### ***Buildings-Representation: Interiors and the Building Type***

Launching off of Schulman’s characterization of the apartment as a place of ‘disappearance’, a consideration of the “types” of spaces represented in *Clubs for America* and *Last Address* offers a measured degree of contextual insight into the various historical situations that the artworks refer to. Namely, there are two notable elements that are NOT depicted in both series of art works in question: the interiors of the spaces represented, and the human activities that would have taken place inside these spaces. Where Miller’s piece is a contemplation of the former sites of ten gay sex clubs in New York City, Sachs’s gaze is trained on the last dwelling places of twenty-eight queer artists in New York all apartments, save for a few exceptions). Part of the tension explored in the two artworks is the translation of absence and presence onto the built aspects (the façade) of the two types of buildings, which in their basic design and structure offer complex mediations of concealment and revelation. As Teyssot notes, “With the hidden comes the possibility for the intimate, a term derived from the Latin *intimus*, the superlative of interior, which describes what is hidden from the Other’s gaze” (p. 257). The apartment of Schulman’s anecdote was a place of disappearance and can be read as a positive spatial factor—ideas of refuge or safety come to mind—or as one of loss,

isolation, or invisibility. In this section I look at characterizations of the building types found in the two artworks of my interest. I also offer a brief overview of the nature of the spaces and some thoughts on the question of their interiors, in the hopes of contextualizing *Clubs for America* and *Last Address*.

### ***i. Domestic Spaces, Last Addresses, and the Queer Apartment***

The depiction of domestic space tends to be conceived of in the visual language of interiors, yet the depiction of the interior as a genre in its own right did not arise in art until the 1890s (Borzello, p. 97). Cementing notions of comfort, safety and well-being to the domestic interior, architect Witold Rybczynski has studied how the emergence of words in the English and French languages “such as ‘self-confidence,’ ‘self-esteem,’ ‘melancholy,’ and ‘sentimental’” marked an evolution of the social state of the “internal world of the individual, of the self, and of the family” which cannot be detached from the time’s growing association of “the house as a setting for an emerging interior life” (p. 89). That Ira Sachs trains his camera’s eye on the domestic from its exterior speaks, then, to a position of outside-ness: outside of visibility, outside of the spaces in question, and into the street.

While the topic of queer domestic space (Betsky 1997; Potvin, 2014) is entirely too large and multilayered to tackle in this thesis, it would be a mistake to think of the concept as a solidly contained interior. Nan Goldin, whose photographic practice arose in the early 1980s and focused on some of the very same communities most ravaged by AIDS (her friends), pictured largely interior-based human activities and interactions—

from the banal to the dramatic. She spoke in a recent interview of her own fractured relationship to the internal boundaries of the domestic, thereby revealing her motivations to make them transparent, or more permeable: “I wanted so much to know what was going on in the neighbor’s house, and I wanted the neighbors to know what was going on in my house. I thought the wrong things were kept secret.. and I still do” (Goldin). Her words thus trouble the domestic site as both a safe space and a container, especially for queers. The queer boundaries of the domestic—internally and externally—are therefore highly variable, depending upon the situation. Cultural historian Matt Cook notes that “home has become a key symbol and material indicator of queer alienation, belonging, difference, and ‘normalization’” (p. 174). In her discussion of the apartment as a chronotype for twentieth-century lesbian experience in film, Lee Wallace cites Susan Gal’s geometry-influenced concept of “the ‘fractal distinctions’ [between] public and private life” (p. 118), a concept which may be useful for thinking about figurations of the interiors and exteriors of queer domestic space in even their most minute manifestations. The “fractal distinctions” invoke a call for a case-by-case analysis of the spatial phenomenon. Artistic expression is particularly well-suited to exploring the varying mediations of these circumstances.

The insides and outsides of queer space were certainly a topic of increased interest around the time of the production of *Clubs for America*. As Reed and Castiglia outline, the exhibition *Queer Space* took place in 1994, but featured only one work on the queer domestic. Benjamin Gianni and Mark Robbins’ work *Family Values* featured the photographic outcomes of the two artists approaching “gays and lesbians in two small

cities (Columbus, Ohio, and Ottawa, Ontario) to submit snapshots of their homes in order ‘to explore (and explode) stereotypes about the gay community, who we are and where we live’” (p.92). Each submission consisted of two photographs—one of the exterior of the house, the other a view on a room in the interior. The project was meant to explore a possible tension between the exterior of the house, which the artists posited was not visibly a queer domestic site, with the assumedly more revealing interior. While for Reed and Castiglia the main pitfall of the discourse surrounding the show was “the uncritical assumption that the look of queerness in the built environment of the neighborhood must be invisibility” (ibid), for the purposes of my own research, the exhibition offers a degree of proof that the very subjects of interior/exterior, privacy/publicness with regards to queer space continue to be of increasing critical and creative interest. Reed and Castiglia do go on to note that the “theoretical predilection for queer invisibility” as demonstrated in the then-current theory, “emerged in the 1990s at just the time street activists chanting, ‘We’re here! We’re queer! Get used to it!’ made ‘visibility’ the order of the day . . . This form of queerness was not about hiding or masking but about asserting queerness as a superior form of visual sensitivity” (ibid).

For Ira Sachs, the depiction of the domestic exterior distinctly connotes the apartment as a place of queer life and activity, in contrast to the notion, as articulated by Schulman, of the apartment as a site of disappearance. One of the questions I posed Ira in our conversation was “Why the ‘last address’? Why the last place of dwelling?” His answer provides insight and explanation as to the core of the film:

Well, I think there's something about the personal nature of these artists' lives which was also ended by the disease, by the epidemic. So it's a recognition of the familiarity of these people who, if you know them, they're just names, but they actually lived in places and they had sex in places and met friends and they made dinner, and all that kind of stuff is sort of contained.

Sachs is also touching on the particularly prominent social role played by apartments, which, upon their introduction as a new form of domestic, urban structure in Paris in the nineteenth century, were perceived as embodying “urban domesticity that aligned them simultaneously with private homes and with public structures such as monuments, cafés, and streets” (Marcus, p. 108). Certainly the monumental aspect of the apartment buildings in *Last Address* is at play in its cinematography, lending new degrees of monumentality to the quotidian structures.

A brief analysis of the types of domestic spaces of Sachs's focus cannot be detached from his concept of the symbolism of the ultimate address. Historically, apartments presented queers with possibilities of inhabitation that would have been domestically impossible in the earlier decades of the century. The apartment offered a new form of sexual independence for gay men and lesbians, coupled with financial independence of the postwar years. The “apartment has been of interest to social historians because of the way it confounds neat distinctions between public and private space, home life and social interaction. Structured to ensure degrees of personal privacy, the modern apartment house also retains in its architectural layout the potential for



random encounters and contaminations across spatial thresholds that other sole-occupant building forms more successfully maintain” (Wallace, p. 119). The apartment as a living structure is closely tied in with women’s ability to work, furthering its status as a trope for not just gay male but lesbian sexual life, broken out of the restrictive structures of the hetero-normative nuclear family unit. The apartment thus becomes a symbol of sorts, a site of opportunity for queers to live independent, private, and urban lives.

## *ii. Sex Clubs*

It is striking that Reed and Castiglia echo *Clubs for America*’s object of interest by opening their recent book with a present-day anecdote about a shut-down gay club in Tennessee. That the object of aesthetic interest is shared may have been unintentional (nowhere in their book do Reed and Castiglia mention Miller’s artwork), but it is nevertheless significant. They see in the shuttered structure—when active, the Tennessee club’s moniker had been “Amnesia”—a metaphor for the state of “unremembering” of pre-AIDS gay public sex culture actively occurring within the American gay community as a conservative, reactive turn to the losses of AIDS (p. 1).<sup>26</sup> In a dedicated effort to document their history in his 1997 essay on the New York gay bathhouses, artist and architect Ira Tattelman shows how, through the early stages of the AIDS crisis, new

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<sup>26</sup> Several artists documented aspects of thriving gay culture of the late 1970s and into the 1980s ; two noteworthy examples include the photographs of Alvin Baltrop, which document the public sex life of gay men of New York and largely revolving around the west Manhattan site of the piers off Christopher Street. Baltrop’s photographs are both voyeuristic yet participatory: he had access to this world. Meanwhile, Vincent Cianni’s diverse depictions gay cruising culture in New York City in the 1980s and 1990s feature a particularly visible and active gay public.

spaces opened up for gay sex communing even as the “traditional” structures of the bathhouse were shuttered:

Today, out of nostalgia, the possibility of profit, and the desire to reclaim sexual expression, a variety of sex clubs and sex parties have appeared to fill the gap left by the disappearance of bathhouses. Sex clubs are often located in large open warehouses with few amenities. Sex parties often occur in rented spaces or in people’s apartments. Backrooms, darkrooms, and jack-off rooms have also been reintroduced to bars and discos in major cities (p. 396).

These warehouse spaces, along with the more “traditional” bathhouse locations, are what John Miller captured in *Clubs for America*. In his photographs, we see a clear variety of types of building, from the more evident exterior of the traditional bathhouse to a variety of industrial and warehouse-like spaces.

For Tattelman, the gay bathhouse is defined as an “‘interior’ queer space” (p. 391). He remarks that “as a building type, [bathhouses] have historically been adaptable to the changing communities that used them; they are open to the layering of activity and interpretation . . . . The success of this ‘world of pleasure’ may have resulted from the fact that the bathhouse was virtually invisible to those who did not support its practices” (p. 392-4). The author notes the changing conditions of the bathhouses with the omnipresence of HIV in the early 1980s, not only in their operational activities but in their conditions of visibility to the public at large, as the virus gained media coverage and bathhouses became sites of intrigue if not considered to be sites of transmission and, at

worse, contamination. “HIV was transmitted through some of the sexual activities that took place in the bathhouse, and AIDS as a condition formed outside the bathhouse was used to interrupt the activities within the bathhouse” (ibid).<sup>27</sup>

Miller knew about the bathhouses and other sex venues not through his own experience of them; rather, he found out about them from then-ubiquitous ads in the back section of the Village Voice: “I knew the ads from having been a regular Voice reader, but it wasn’t until I was doing the project that I went to those addresses just to see what they looked like” (Miller, interview). His knowledge of the spaces, then, would have been entirely exterior, impersonal, not intimate. Yet for buildings with so thickly established a threshold between public domains—the internal if selective public that would have made use of the sites as contrasted with the rest of the city, the public at large—their calls for patrons in a widely-read newspaper disrupt the notion of the bathhouse as an entirely private site.

While Miller had no firsthand experience inside the sites of his photographs and therefore limited relationships to its occupants, the way in which Tattelman concludes his bathhouses essay speaks to a more personal, insightful relationship with the interiority of

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<sup>27</sup> “In New York City alone, a total of sixteen gay bathhouses operated. Today, six have been torn down. Five have been converted to other uses, including a restaurant, a wholesale market, a dance club, and a personnel office. Two, although closed, still retain the remnant of the bathhouse. Only three remain open, and they operate very differently now as a result of AIDS. Yet even though the bathhouse structures still standing are in disuse, disrepair, or are unoccupied, their sites are not empty of history or meaning. The bathhouse still has something valuable to say.” (Tattelman, p. 399-400)

the sites and their representation. Writing about the internationally renowned St. Mark's Baths, Tattelman describes an interaction he had with their owner, Bruce Mailman. Mailman had unsuccessfully attempted to reopen the Baths after their closure by the City in 1985. Tattelman imparts: "When I asked to photograph the interior, the 'landscape' of the St Marks Baths, Mailman refused. He wanted the baths to be remembered by those who had experienced it. To photograph the empty remnants would destroy those memories" (p. 405-406). The Baths were sold after Mailman's passing in 1994 to a video chain—itsself now a quasi-obsolete form of commerce (ibid). Today their former site is occupied by the NY Tofu House; there could perhaps be no more apt a symbolic reflection of the gentrification of the history of AIDS (Schulman, p. 2) than the literal gentrification of its buildings of import. Where the depiction of bodies were troubled during the AIDS crisis—both by the mainstream media's discriminatory depictions, and by artists' subversive re-interpretations—the building and its type nevertheless offers a fertile point of departure for artistic explorations of embodiment and representation.

### SECTION THREE: CONSIDERING THE FAÇADE

One of my main objectives in speaking to Miller and Sachs was to ask them for in-depth reflections on their aesthetic approaches to the façades they photographed. The manner in which Miller photographed the façades of *Clubs for America* is intrinsically tied to the type of spatial and embodied knowledge he possessed about the places he photographed. Millers' façades are the external impenetrable layer of a gone culture, the buildings landmarks in an urban (AIDS) landscape forever exteriorized. For Sachs, however, the façade is explored in its details and its permeability, their surfaces and their (relative) depths. A different cinematographic approach to each building serves only to enhance an analogy likening the façades of *Last Address* to individual intimate bodies. While the two works bear a strong formal likeness in their depictions of façades, here I wish to explore how they, nevertheless, operate differently.

The architectural structure of the façade emerges as a symbolically rich and complex site for questioning the separations between public and private spaces. The “façade—the aspect of a building that both looks at, and is seen from, the street—erects a philosophically and artistically productive ambivalence . . . As a metaphor, the ambivalence erected by the façade seems to extend to numerous aspects of our engagement with the world” (StonyBrook Philosophy Department). Teyssot has understood the façade as closely akin to the building's equivalent of the human face (p. 263). In the artworks in question, the façade is that which is represented, depicted, reproduced, but always in allusion to deceased or disappeared people. The façade

represents itself in its architectural capacity, while also standing in symbolically for something that it both reveals yet cannot reveal. This is the triple function of the façade in *Last Address* and *Clubs for America*: it separates the street from the interior, the past from the present, and the living from the dead. The façade in these works is used in its capacity as a surface, one upon which significance and meaning is projected while remaining still invisible.

### ***Miller's Clubs***

In the case of the shuttered sex clubs, we might think about the notion of private public space, as explored earlier in this chapter. In his essay on New York's bathhouses, Tattelman wrote how in their original design as community sanitary centers, their architecture was meant to be distinguished from the considerably more drab exteriors of the surrounding tenement houses, a way to elevate sanitation in the built environment.<sup>28</sup> The gay bathhouse, meanwhile, took precautions not to distinguish itself from its surrounding residential architecture—it often had the appearance of a space that, while operational, maintained a closed, muted façade. “The façade acted as a mask, to hide the bathhouse within the neighborhood, providing no external indication of what was happening inside . . . Like a shield keeping out those who were not wanted, the front of the building protected the identity of those who entered” (p. 400).

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<sup>28</sup> “The bathhouse building was designed to contrast with neighboring tenements. It generally had a light colored façade, which separated it from the worn and dark surroundings. Compared to other public buildings, however, the plain exterior of the baths was deliberately modest. Dr. Baruch of the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor recommended quiet styling in 1907 ‘so as not to repel the poor by its architectural pretensions’ (Glassberg 1979, 14).” (Tattelman, p. 400)

An aesthetic question emerges: would one photograph the façades of a building of which one had highly intimate knowledge differently than if one did not? Viewers with the knowledge that Miller had never been inside or participated in the activities of any of the sex clubs he photographed might look at his photographs understanding that their façades were all he himself knew of the sites. His experiential remove from the sites translates visually into a particular formal photographic language. Indeed, Miller's camera does not dwell on the particularities of the façades—there is no visual lingering, no emphasized detail; rather, the focus is on the buildings in their distant entirety.

Furthermore, a significant factor in the execution of the 1992 project came down to pure logistics. As Miller says about photographing the exteriors of the buildings in question: “Well for one thing it was easier . . . I think it was mostly because it was easier just to go to a spot and shoot it . . . I was on the outside looking in quality . . . It was more about being present.” His answer helps to reinforce the piece as resolutely exterior. Miller's façade is not intimate—it remains unyielding; his buildings are more landmark than body, their assemblage a landscape of absence and loss in New York City.

### ***Sachs's Apartments***

By contrast, Sachs's treatments of the façade are suggestive of a loving, attentive, or exploratory physical engagement. Many of the artists named in *Last Address* were people

Sachs knew, knew of, was influenced by, or looked up to and admired.<sup>29</sup> Responding to my queries about the symbolism of the omnipresent façade in the artwork, Sachs recognized that, in collaboration with *Last Address* cinematographer Michael Simons, an acute attention was paid to the surfaces and details of the buildings in an attempt to draw out the most narrative potential from each site:

[We were] interested in shapes and [with] both of us being visual artists, in a way, [were] certainly being attentive to what is beautiful about urban architecture and urban spaces. What is significant is that the buildings are not dead in this film . . . They seem timeless and monolithic . . . while the activity around them seems temporary: the weather, the people, the sounds.

Indeed, the entire film is infused with a sense of the animation of the buildings in question. The imagery of open windows, reflections of clouds and sunshine, the trees blowing in the wind certainly evoke life and movement; it caused me to query if there was an element of the spiritual in his film.<sup>30</sup> Sachs stated:

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<sup>29</sup> Sachs has articulated a facet of the personal impact of their loss through a language of mentorship, speaking about his longing for queer mentorship in a context where AIDS has decimated community structures. His own work on providing mentorship within his current capacities as a queer middle-aged artist, recognizing that he is capable of now being the mentor he simultaneously longs for, informs the admiring approach to the absent human subjects in the film.

<sup>30</sup> Some might be interested in the role of the natural in his film, of which Sachs says : “I think the unexpected was how dramatic the weather was, it didn’t even occur to me. Like night and day, that’s good, but we were like oh weather is so incredibly dramatic and that was because I’m not very attentive to the natural, but was like a luck discovery. That was rolled with and then edited too.”



I would not consider myself a spiritual person, in terms of that's just not language I'm intimate or comfortable with. I'm very grounded in the real. But the real can be poetic and evocative of different times and different experiences and I think that definitely there was an intention to the domestic [...] histories of these buildings, whether it be changing the focus and seeing inside a window, there's one where we see a flower vase..

*[trails off]*.

The glimpses into the internal spaces of the buildings, including the camera's focus on such elements as a doorway swinging open, colorful curtain choices, or a window left ajar add to a sense of the permeability of the façades. In turn, the structures are thus positioned as both locations of loss but also sites of ongoing life.

Sachs draws an interesting analogy between the “narrative” photographs on the walls of his house, and the exterior surfaces of the homes of his artists:

In a way you're working as a photographer and just trying to figure out what simple image can evoke greater feeling and greater history and greater narrative. So there's a lot of interesting narrative. I would say if you came to my house and you looked at a wall at all the photographs that I'm interested in, that would be narrative photography.

Returning to Benjamin's passage on the streets as “the dwelling place of the collective” enacts the exteriorization of the interior. He states that the collective, “in the space between the building fronts—experiences, learns, understands and invents as much as individuals do within the privacy of their own four walls” (p. 423). To carry the analogy

further, the details in Sachs' façades, the ones his camera pauses on and takes in, are akin to the interior's photographs on the walls, among which, surely, some portraits are hung. *Last Address*, then, is Sachs' exploration of the intimacy of the collective, situated in the street.

The differences in Miller and Sachs' approaches to the façade are important to a critical positioning of the works within the structure of the cultural archive of HIV and AIDS. Ultimately, community members may decide how the differences in the works in modulations of intimacy, detail, exploration, and embodied experience affect the works' resonance and value in the long term.

## **SECTION FOUR:**

### **THE BODY PRESENT: THE EMPLACEMENT & EMBODIMENT OF THE ARTISTS**

If one is to adopt the framework that the cultural history and archive of HIV and AIDS is indelibly characterized by absence, and particularly that of the deceased person, “body,” or community, there is nevertheless an important need to recognize its counterpart: embodied presence. While *Clubs for America* and *Last Address* are in many ways profoundly about making absence felt, my own experience of viewing them has repeatedly reinforced the impression that the presence of the artist informs the tension off of which the absence is contrasted, thereby creating a testimonial dynamic.

It is also worth returning to France’s “everyday plague” anecdote, when considering the role of the bodies of Sachs and Miller within their own works, as a way to situate their artistic practice as having occurred in the street—the site of critical interest to this thesis. Where there may not have been the archival footage that France sought for his own film, there nevertheless exist works like *Clubs* and *Address* that recognize the critical spatial dimension that street-situated visual work enacts. As striking to me as the representations of the buildings in these works is the implied presence of the artist himself in the street (behind the camera). If *to look* connotes power or agency within the urban environment, the art made here exemplifies the artists’ personal relationships to the occurrences of HIV as experienced in their city. Their ongoing presence—one so deeply

cognizant of loss suffered in the very place they find themselves—is, in actuality, a key component to each artwork.

Hallas anchors his fundamental argument on the critical concept of witnessing, through which “much of the queer trauma culture of AIDS can be understood” (p. 10). He writes: “The performativity of the [witnessing] act itself, the power of the truth it produces, relies on the condition of an embodied enunciation. The body of the witness thus commands critical importance” (ibid). The phenomenon of the artistic construction of relational space is identified by Hallas as having been a strategy of notable importance to AIDS activist video: “This construction of an imagined spatial relation of copresence between speaker and viewer in direct-address testimony points to the significance of space in AIDS activist video” (p. 90). He also notes the way in which the “use of hand-held cameras” functions “as fellow social actors in the activist body” (ibid). In the case of *Last Address* and *Clubs for America*, the relational space is the one created by the gaze of the artist on the building, which is then reproduced as the works’ viewers’ gaze(s). This thus becomes a social dissemination of visual testimony, a transfer from the individual to the collective or the public, thus furthering the critical occurrence of vision as an embodied witnessing act. I asked Sachs and Miller to speak to the idea of their own radical presence in their works, and was particularly interested in the notable differences in their approaches.

*Ira Sachs*

Queried about whether being outside and at street level had been an intentional decision on his part, Sachs drew a link between exteriority and the dismissal of complex biography. For him, the exterior façades presented an appealing simplicity; what he wanted to stay away from was abundance of personal details, and thus meanings, that one would find in the interior. Despite its obvious ties to the biographical process, staying outside meant, for him, that *Last Address* did not in fact touch the genre. He nevertheless acknowledges that the notion of the embodied action of bearing witness is relevant conceptually to the work. In college, Sachs had taken a course centered on the concept of witnessing in the works of the poet Paul Celan (1920-1970) and in the 1985 film *Shoah*, by Claude Lanzmann, which he cites as having been influential (Sachs, interview).

Yet Sachs' most developed articulation of his own position of embodiment is intensely personal. He states:

I was in psychoanalysis for a long time and had been involved and engaged in the idea of psychoanalytic observation, so I think those are things that are part of who I am, just trying to look closely . . . Particularly when I'm doing my work, you know, maybe in my life too, but really when I'm focusing, I can go to a place that's very observant, and I think that's part of the film, in a way, that's part of the eye.

As we shall see, this understanding of his own positionality stands in stark contrast to Miller's philosophical consideration of the technical disruption to embodiment afforded by the camera apparatus.

***John Miller***

For Miller, the crux gesture of the artwork was one of presence; when I asked him about his knowledge of the clubs, he said that “it wasn’t until I was doing the project that I went to those addresses just to see what they looked like . . . It was important to actually go to these places, and I think that sense of being there in some way is important.”

However, he feels, in hindsight that something of his own embodied presence was in turn mediated and displaced by that of his camera. Miller cites Vilém Flusser’s short book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983) as influential in how it treats the camera as an apparatus paradigmatic of postmodernity. He reflects:

In many respects his critique of photography is negative, although he wrote this book in the ‘80s and he really anticipates what happens with digital technology with astonishing accuracy. But one of the things that his book brought out to me is [that] being somewhere with a camera has a virtual aspect to it, where you’re not there, so it’s a very mediated condition. Before I had a more romantic notion of being there.

Yet at the time of its making in 1992, photography had not yet been so radically altered by the arrival of digital cameras or even the internet. Miller’s photographic act was considerably different in intentions than if it had been executed today, a fact of which he is very aware. Because he drew inspiration from Benjamin’s philosophical notion of history, I pressed him on whether he considered the gesture of making *Clubs for America* one qualifiable as “activist” in nature. Miller confided that, had he not been asked to participate in *Getting to kNOw You, Clubs for America* would simply never have been made. For Sachs, employing the camera as an observational tool was a way of

getting closer to his subjects; by contrast, Miller felt his own presence to have been disrupted by his apparatus. These differing approaches to documenting and photographing have something to reveal about the two men's artistic philosophies, yet the value of both their witnessing presences is still felt strongly. As I will explore in the following section, contemporary re-reads of Miller's artwork are investing it with new significance, recognizing its value as an AIDS-related historical document of worth. Though *Clubs for America* does not fit neatly into the art historical category of "queer art," both works offer important contributions to the cultural archive of HIV and AIDS.

## SECTION FIVE: DESIRE MAPS THE CITY

Although it is possible that neither were making an explicit or intentional gesture towards it, both *Last Address* and *Clubs for America* slot quite neatly into a longstanding historical tradition of artistic engagement with the queer urban environment (and especially that of New York City). This subgenre of art utilizes aspects of the documentary in order to represent multiple sites of queer significance in the urban environment, often within the parameters of one artwork, whereby multiple representations play off each other to form a surrogate sense of place. It is certainly an aesthetic mode taken up repeatedly in the cultural archive of HIV; one might think here of works such as Robert Blanchon's *Untitled* gum stain series (1995), which photographed the discarded gums on the pavement at various gay cruising spots; the REPOhistory's 1994 urban art installation *Queer Space*, marking queer sites of significance in Manhattan with street signs; and more recently, Carlos Motta & Joshua Lubin-Levy's *Petite Mort: Recollections of a Queer Public* (2011), a multi-artist show and publication on participating artists' representations of personal sites of public gay sex, and self-described as an "atlas of queer affection" (p. 7); or L.J. Robert's large-scale textile map piece *The Queer Houses of Brooklyn* (2011), where each domestic space of queer import is demarcated in the form of a pink triangle (Figure 14). These works are characterized by an engagement with urban place (in this case, all of the works refer to New York City) that identifies or highlights multiple places of queer significance to the artist or a community: almost every work named here draws on sexual experience, desire, or an erotic charge to mark and remake place.



The artistic tradition draws on longstanding gay underground processes of knowledge exchange and mapping. In his 1994 tome on the history of gay life in New York City, George Chauncey reconstructed “the way that men drew and passed into shared knowledge a finely calibrated counter-map of the city with certain streets, parks, and public washrooms marked out as places where one could go in the expectation of sex with other men” in the first half of the twentieth century (in Wallace, p. 121). In a similar, if more personal, vein, Crimp’s writings in the exhibition catalogue for *Mixed Use Manhattan* staunchly speak to embodied explorations of the city from a critical queer perspective (his own). Ever the activist art historian, he takes to task Gordon Matta-Clark’s famous 1975 sculptural “cut” *Day’s End (Pier 52)* for how its production occupied a notorious gay cruising grounds in the Christopher Street Piers, literally locking out avid users of the space with little regard for their displacement (“Action Around the Edges,” p. 105). For Crimp, this aspect its making is forever tied to the site-specific work. That Crimp’s writing exposes the incident to the public re-inserts queerness into *Days’s End (Pier 52)*’s art historical narrative. One result of this queer mode of urban engagement, then, is an investment of the erotic into the gaze upon the built environment, including upon the building itself, in esoteric and sometimes productively invisible ways.

If we carry on with the analogy that the buildings in these works might somehow be thought of in relation to the human body, and thinking particularly about the bodily relationship with HIV, I am compelled to return to Crimp’s “Portraits of People with AIDS” essay. After asking how possible different constructions of the documentary

representational relationship might be enacted, Crimp answered himself by putting forth the example of Stashu Kybartas' 1987 video *Danny*. The video, he argued, "constitutes one of the most powerful critiques [of the aforementioned problem of representation] that exists to date," because while it "duplicates . . . the stereotypes of PWA portraiture," it more importantly "reclaims the portrait for the community from which it emerges, the community of gay men" in one key way: through "the formulation of the relationship between artist and subject not as one of empathy or identification, but as one of explicit sexual desire" ("Portraits of People with AIDS," p. 101). The representation of the erotic charge thereby acted as an articulation of affirmation, identification, subversion and/or resistance within queer AIDS media. And it is actually what most distinguishes the formally-similar works of Miller and Sachs from each other: where Miller's gaze upon the buildings is observational yet calculatedly detached, Sachs actively charges his film—and his city—with queer desire. This section looks at queer contemporary readings of the two artworks in question, examining their place in the cultural archive of HIV and AIDS in relation to both the intentions behind the works, and the ways that they are valuable to understandings of the queer city today.

### ***The Intimate City of Ira Sachs***

My initial impression that eroticism charged might Sachs' work needn't have been a queried: for the filmmaker, it was already an entirely assumed, incorporated aspect of his own motivation to make *Last Address*. Upon moving to New York in 1984, he was immediately thrust into the creative downtown gay scene. Sachs can tell an anecdote about every artist included in *Address*: James Lions was his boyfriend, Ron Vaughter

someone he had had a crush on.<sup>31</sup> In recreating some of those attractions and relationships through film, Sachs identifies both a desire for younger queers to be made aware of figures of such import in his own life, as well as an underlying desire to belong. He says of the making of the film that it

speaks to some extent to a community, and how, for me as a queer artist, I feel now having gone through [making] *Last Address* that I'm part of that community. I connect to it historically. [S]ome of the selection process of this very small group is personal. I chose them . . . So there's the charge, the erotic charge I can still remember, from a lot of these people.

Despite his disavowal of the biographical nature of the interior, the conversation repeatedly turned personal in Sachs' own anecdotes of people and the buildings to which they were associated, furthering a consideration of how buildings in the city are often structures charged with the significance of personal memories.

With an interest in the concept of a personal, erotically-charged map of the city and its possibilities, I asked Ira, in closing out our interview, if he saw his film as a tool for people today with regards to their experiences of inhabiting New York; if it had been intended to transform others' experiences of their own place in the city. Sachs noted the influence of director Jacques Tati, on whom he wrote his senior thesis in college. Tati's

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<sup>31</sup> A transcription of Sachs' anecdote is worth, I feel, reproducing here for its candid and touching quality : "And that included James Lions, an editor, [who] was my boyfriend. And Ron Vaughter I used to see, he was in the Wooster Group, and I had a crush on him. [S]omeone like Ron Vaughter was a very big figure for a young queer theater-interested person who came to New York, he was just so charismatic, and nobody.. you guys haven't heard of him?" (Sachs, interview)

films explored the dynamics of urban memory; according to him, “you leave a Tati film and the city feels... wherever you are feels different” (Sachs, interview). After thinking some more, he speculated as to where a post-film transformed experience of the city might possibly lead:

In this film, there’s something which is an awareness of my own temporality. And I think on that level it’s a humbling film, I hope, for audiences. It creates humility, or it encourages humility, because of the fact that history passes . . . If you really watch it and experience it, I think you’re aware not only of the loss of those people but your own eventual loss.

### ***Rereading Miller: Newly Invested with Significance***

*Clubs for America*’s emplacement within the canon of HIV art history rests uneasily somewhere both inside and outside of HIV art. On the one hand, Miller is not a gay or queer-identified photographer and did not frequent the clubs he documented. He knew about them not through firsthand experiential knowledge, but through ads at the back of the *Village Voice*, a city newspaper, and while he was active in AIDS art benefits, Miller’s experience of the epidemic was nevertheless peripheral in comparison with the ways in which it devastated the lives and communities of so many. The artwork is more closely aligned with a queer notion of photography in how it tapped into an urban geographical mapping of desire—though in a mediated, removed manner—as well as in the manner in which it operates and is being reread today.

Sitting with John Miller in his studio, we chatted about *NYC 1993*, and I mentioned I felt that AIDS-related art had a very visible presence in the exhibition. Miller replied:

A couple of things struck me when I saw that show. There was a sense of militancy to the work, to all the work—and there was even a little bit of it in mine, I suppose, that you don't see these days . . . [The curator] was really able to put his finger on a specific set of issues that defined the New York scene for a certain period, and it was interesting for me to see my own work as part of that, because if I had been curating the show I wouldn't have put myself in in that way, but I thought it made sense.”

The question of a present-day renewed interest in *Clubs for America*, as a possible new investment of meaning in it, interests me. A re-staging of the *New Topographics* (a movement to which Ed Ruscha is consistently attached, and whose influence upon Miller is clear) exhibition in 2010 in Los Angeles demonstrated an ongoing, contemporary fascination in the genre of landscape photography that “bored” audiences upon its initial showing in 1975.<sup>32</sup> I suggest that is at least partially due to the fact that as our own surrounding landscapes become increasingly man-transformed and man-made—and clearly not always for the better—a contemporary interest in the then-initial gazes towards the built landscape phenomenon become of renewed cultural interest. Similarly, within this current-day spatial context, *Clubs for America* might occupy something of a unique position in tension between both the *New Topographics*, and the cultural archive

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<sup>32</sup> see “New Topographics: photographs that find beauty in the banal” by Sean O’Hagan,

[www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/feb/08/new-topographics-photographs-american-landscapes](http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/feb/08/new-topographics-photographs-american-landscapes)

of HIV, without ever fitting entirely into either category. While the work adopts much of the aesthetics of Ruscha and the *New Topographics*, it nevertheless structures itself around aspects of queer sex and AIDS. It may just be that, not unlike the footage of France's anecdote, people overwhelmed with the everyday struggles of the AIDS crisis would simply not have had time to make a work like *Clubs*, or would not have seen it as a priority. In this way, however, Miller's work may today be, accidentally, more significant and poignant than anyone could have imagined—this would certainly account for its inclusion in two major museum shows in recent years.

## CONCLUSION: URBAN POSSIBILITIES OF INHABITATION

“The post-traumatic is no longer the exception; it is the global condition”

Charles Rice, Post-Traumatic Urbanism

When Ira Sachs spoke, in our interview, of his prolonged disengagement from the trauma of the AIDS crisis, he did not delve into details, but the sentiment and phenomenon are not unfamiliar to me. My original motivation in writing this thesis came from an admiration of and caring for the older generations of “AIDS survivors” in my own life. They have sometimes seemed to me like people that time and society have forgotten. Yet a sense of history, of stories, and of loss pervade their day-to-day existence. I wrote this for them.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, as critical shifts in conversations occur around this history, it might be time to begin moving beyond the general term of “the body,” without necessarily delving into a full-scale undertaking of the biographical, but to consider stories of individual people who lost their lives. Many seasoned activists, of older generations and younger, make the case for fighting ongoing AIDS, and focusing activist energies there. I see a value in having smart and caring conversations about who was lost, and what legacies went with them. We might not only think of what was lost, then, but also of what was gifted to culture and society and to the arts in general by these individuals and small collectives. For many, it is these narratives of love, friendship, intimacy, family (chosen and/or biological) or otherwise that grant some of the fullest senses of access to the past, now gone. The most material manifestation of the individual scale of lives lived and lost, of course, is the AIDS Quilt, currently largely resting in storage (small portions of the quilt go out to tour educationally year-round). But when one begins looking for it, one quickly finds its traces everywhere. The imperative is to engage in sensitive, respectful and astute ways. Currently, a historiographical turn towards the individuals, the people whose lives were most affected by HIV and AIDS, might offer one of the strongest counters to mainstream, commodifying, single-

*Clubs for America* and *Last Address* affirm a sad reality: ultimately, they are about the absences of both the people who once inhabited the spaces, but also, critically, the absence of acknowledgement of what-came-before on the surfaces of these buildings. There are no plaques, no signs, no integration of the significance of this loss into the built structures at hand. The necessity of critiques of the idea of place-making within a broader context of loss, trauma, healing and respect thus become very important to the inhabitation of urban space. In boldly adopting the idea that AIDS had lasting spatial implications on her New York queer community, Schulman contends that a powerful after-effect of the losses of lives suffered during the epidemic was an acceleration of the gentrification process still so intensely ongoing in Manhattan (Schulman, p.2). Schulman's assertion, however, is one of the very few I have read that cast a more politicized spatial analysis on narratives of the crisis. Making the ties between gentrification and the struggles of the AIDS activist movement demonstrates the understanding that spatial dynamics are political, ongoing and shared.<sup>34</sup>

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narrative histories: human lives, in all their complexities and contradictions, are still the most deeply interesting of stories.

<sup>34</sup> Gentrification is also understood rightly by many as a part in the ongoing process of colonialism. AIDS activists today (like Che Gossett and the Native Youth Sexual Health Network, amongst many others) are making powerful links between global and localized decolonial activisms and HIV and AIDS; because I cannot address these important considerations in greater depth here, I include this important footnote as a recognition of these crucial struggles and their resounding critique of *where* AIDS inflicts the most damage, which necessary includes spatial dimensions and analyses, both global and local..



Furthermore, in closing my conversation with Avram Finkelstein, I asked about what he perceived his generation might need today. He spoke of the “placelessness” of survivors: “The thing about my generation, and I’m not just talking about gay men, I’m talking about all of the dykes and the straight women and the straight men I knew who fought alongside of me; there’s this complete lack of a place for us to be” (McClelland & Trudel, 2013). His illusive but haunting comment has stayed with me. What sort of place could be made or enacted for Avram and his generation, as well as younger and future generations? The “places of AIDS” remain woefully publicly unknown, if acknowledged at all, and particularly vulnerable to gentrification-induced erasure.<sup>35</sup> The crucial question then becomes : how might the urban environment remember differently in its physical structure? Can the notion of the intimate city—one of witnessing, accountability, care, relationships—be translated more deeply into the built environment? Can space be thus activated and enacted towards a future where sufferings are minimized and wellbeing prioritized?

I was initially drawn to John Miller’s *Clubs for America* and Ira Sachs’ *Last Address* for the ways they not only engaged with place, but made and affirmed it, through art. As Rob Shields has noted, there is a potential, through artworks such as theirs, for

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<sup>35</sup> Sarah Schulman draws a correlation between gentrification’s rocketing housing prices in Manhattan with the living spaces left open by the AIDS-related deaths of their occupants ; St Vincent’s Hospital in lower west Manhattan, where thousands of patients with AIDS went for services, for treatment, or to die, was recently closed and converted into luxury condominiums. Gentrification certainly plays a role in invisibilizing AIDS histories in New York City, its sanitizing luxury aesthetic creating an urban uniformity of wealth.

transformative relationships with the urban structure. Shields suggests that:

An ethics of place that responds to the notion of care suggests an affective responsiveness couched in the relational moments of embodied, everyday life. Care is ethical not in a moralizing sense but as a ‘turning toward’ of the material body and its virtual capacities. Properly speaking, ‘care’ describes a social relation, not the attribute of a body. It is aesthesis, part of a ‘shared experience’. As such it is embedded, and as Kant told us, ‘aesthetic’ in the sense of relational judgement. It suggests a flexing, cultural topology that walks with us and takes theory to the street. Sense-making as care is solidarity (p. 16).

Perhaps, beyond the mapping of desire or of the erotic, artworks like *Clubs for America* and *Last Address* might also be seen as the mapping of meaningful communal spaces, ones which can change our collective relationships to our city structures with regards to its past events and future potentials. Both artworks explore and articulate the presence of absence in the city structure. Where desire has mapped the city in queer art, its aesthetic form has tended toward the multiple as a way to express multi-dimensional urban life. Bringing together queer art about the urban, assembling disparate artworks into meaningful structures, in turn offers a recreation of the city itself, understood differently. To draw on historical representations of queer engagement with the urban environment opens up the multiple possibilities of spaces. Perhaps these “possibility[ies of] different inhabitations” (Grosz, p. 131) hold the promise of a city where trauma is represented, acknowledged and treated, rather than forever invisibilized, made absent, and erased.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1.

Miller, John. *Clubs for America* (1992). Color Photographs



Figure 2.

Miller, John. *Clubs for America* (1992). Color Photographs



Figure 3.

Miller, John. *Clubs for America* (1992). Color Photographs



Figure 4.

Miller, John. *Clubs for America* (1992). Color Photographs





Figure 5.

Miller, John. *Clubs for America* (1992). Color Photographs



Figure 6.

Sachs, Ira. *Last Address* (2010). Digital Film Stills





Figure 7.

Sachs, Ira. *Last Address* (2010). Digital Film Stills



Figure 8.

Sachs, Ira. *Last Address* (2010). Digital Film Stills



Figure 9.

Sachs, Ira. *Last Address* (2010). Digital Film Stills



Figure 10.

Sachs, Ira. *Last Address* (2010). Digital Film Stills





Figure 11.

Ischar, Doug. From the series *Marginal Waters* (1985). Colour Photographs



Figure 12.

Ischar, Doug. From the series *Marginal Waters* (1985). Colour Photographs



Figure 13.

Ruscha, Ed. From the series *Real Estate Opportunities* (1970). Black & White Photographs



Figure 14.

L.J. Roberts, *The Queer Houses of Brooklyn and the Three Towns of Boswyck, Breukelen and Midwout in the 41st Year of the Stonewall Era* (2011).

Crank-Knit Yarn, fabric, thread, sequins, poly-fil, 1" pins (free to the public and replenished endlessly).





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