

Beyond Mourning

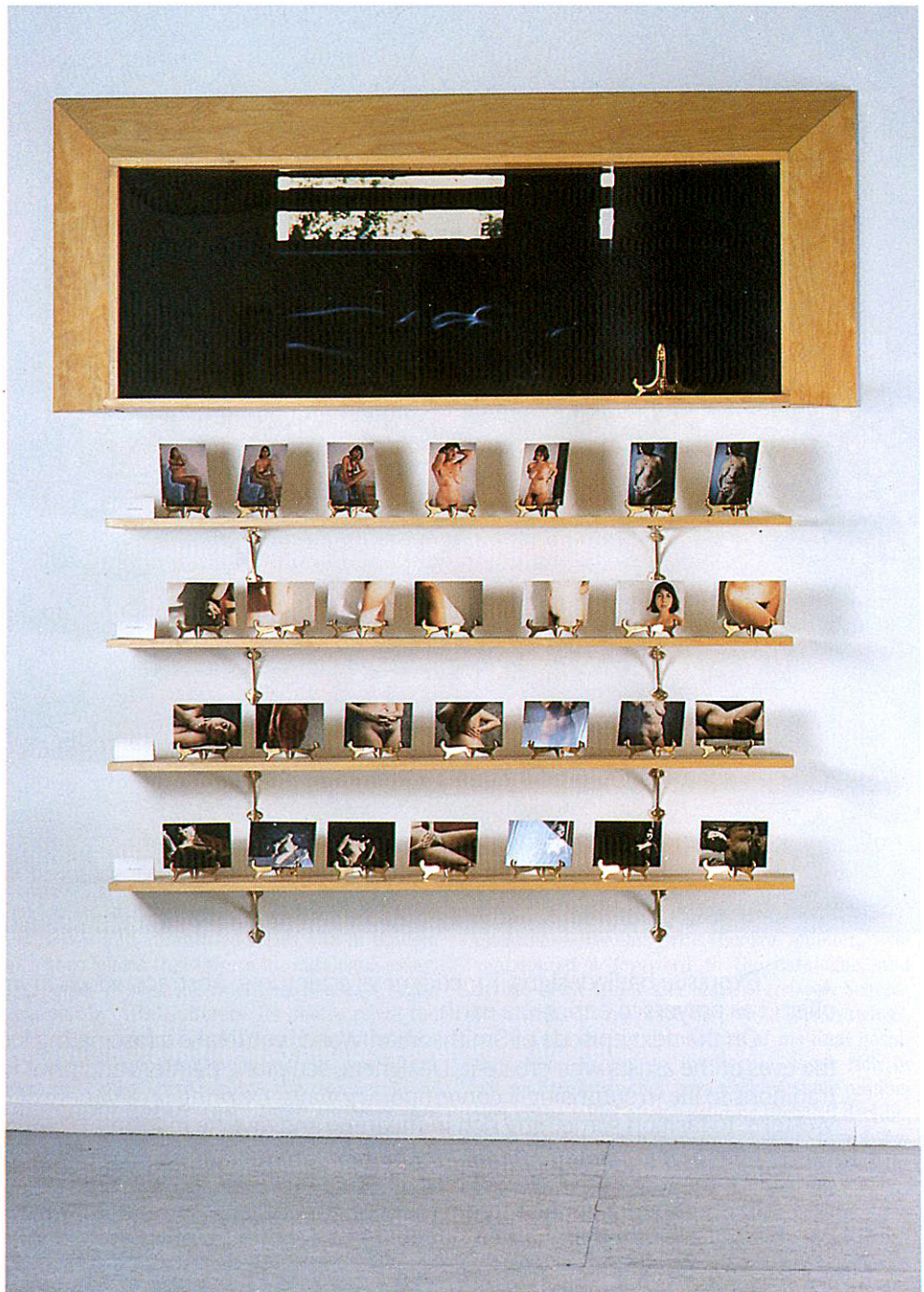
Amidst controversy and attacks by the chairman of the NEA, the Artists Space exhibition "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing" provided a solemn but angry response to the devastating effects of AIDS on the community of artists.

BY CALVIN REID

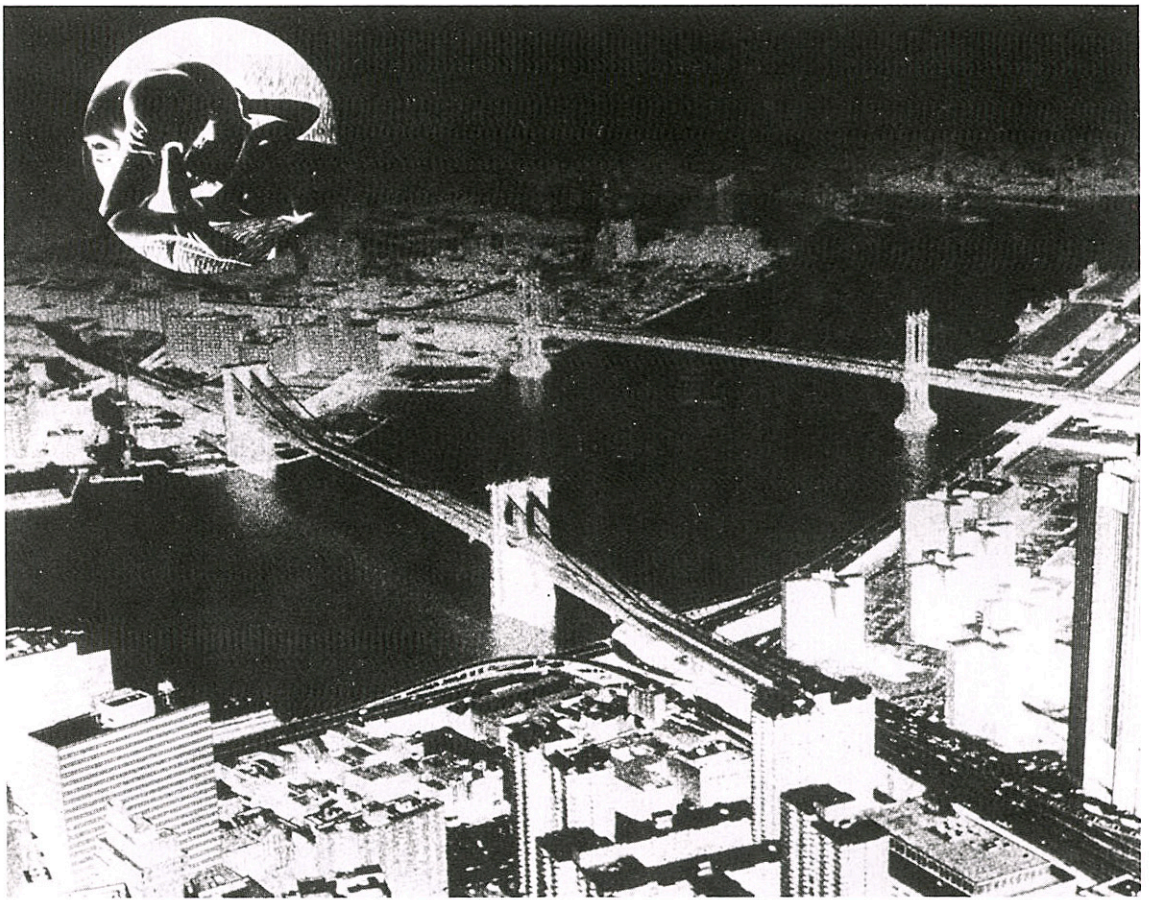
After several days of reading in disbelief one equivocation and rationalization after another from NEA chairman John Frohnmayer, culminating in his now-notorious retraction and then reawarding of a never-quite-relinquished grant, I found myself part of the crowd inching its way up the stairs to the mobbed Artists Space gallery on the night in November that "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing" finally opened. We were in the midst of a rare event. People were milling outside on West Broadway, calling to friends (like me) who were almost in the door. The crowd included the curious and the baffled, and those enraged at Frohnmayer and Jesse Helms. Leonard Bernstein, who had just turned down a White House medal to protest the NEA's action, was suddenly much appreciated by a downtown crowd; for the first time I heard him praised by someone other than a *Times* critic.

The opening-night scene included a demonstration against censorship in front of El Teddy's, complete with one vein-poppingly indignant marcher who seemed as outraged at the mob trying to get into the exhibition as he was at the bureaucrats in Washington, and of course the scavengerlike presence of the media. I recall thinking that the exhibition deserved just this kind of hungry, rampaging attention. For in addition to its invocation of the impact of AIDS on gay men and women and of the plight of all those on the periphery of American society, in addition to the exhibition's sudden status as a battleground in the fight against censorship, and in addition to the justifiable sense of rage and frustration expressed in the exhibition's catalogue, the show's real triumph was its creation of an aura of calm, intensely focused caring. Returning to the gallery a few weeks later, without the contrast provided by a hysterical street scene, I was struck by the cumulative impact of the works on view, by their evocation of feelings that are simple yet powerful and binding: a sense of love and community, of longing, of excruciating absence.

Curator Nan Goldin used this show to document the way that AIDS has shattered the life of a community of artists; and, by extension, she has depicted the morbid dance between the unnecessarily stigmatized community of AIDS sufferers and the often hostile forces entrusted with combating the disease. Goldin and the artists included in the show—some already dead, some HIV-positive, many in mourning—created

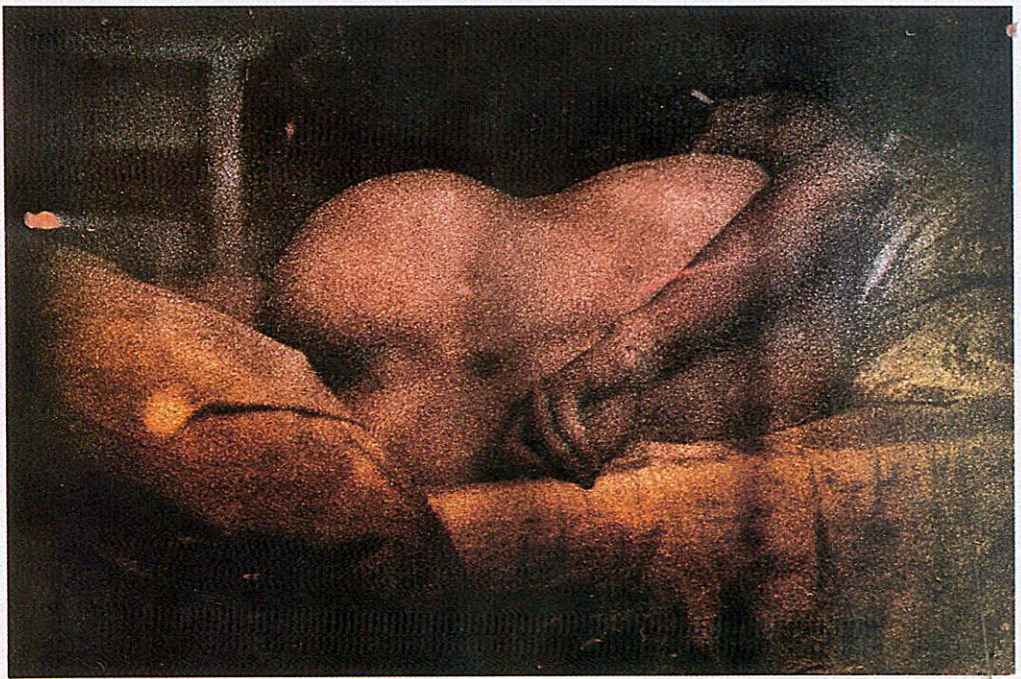


Dorit Cypis: Yield (the body), 1989, mixed mediums including photographs taken by Linda Brooks, Ann Marsden, Lyn Hambrick and Nan Goldin.

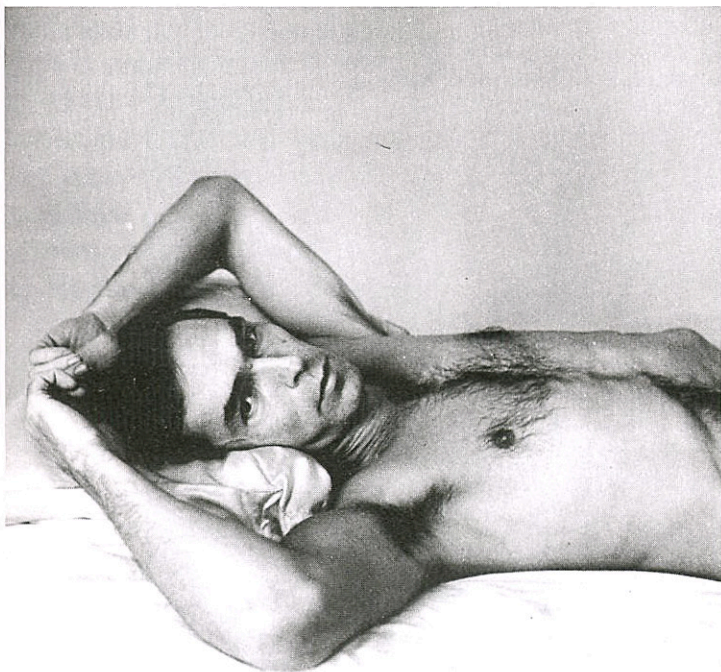


Above, David Wojnarowicz: Sex Series, 1989, one of six black-and-white photographs, each 18¾ by 21¾ inches. Courtesy P.P.O.W.

Below, Mark Morrisroe: In the Home of a Rubber Fetishist, 1982, color photograph, 12 by 18 inches.



Mark Morrisroe
Sept 5, 83 after the scene
(in the home of a London rubber
fetishist, Dec 82)



Peter Hujar: Self-Portrait, Lying Down, 1976, black-and-white photograph, Courtesy Vince Aletti.



David Armstrong: Kevin, 1983, black-and-white photograph, 16 by 20 inches.

not only a harrowing representation of what AIDS has revealed about official policy towards those who differ from the mythical "average American," but also reaffirmed, perhaps unsurprisingly, the transcending power of the human capacity to love. That power is reflected here in

the ability of the community most directly confronting AIDS to regroup and commit itself to regeneration. People who love like this will never allow themselves to go quietly or allow death to obliterate the memories of those for whom they've cared.

The exhibition brought together a wide variety of works. Included were pieces that can be described as memorials, works that explore the representational power of the human body, as well as vehement broadsides aimed at the bigotry that has been the response to AIDS sufferers from most of American society and the U.S. government. These works convey both the rage of those suffering from AIDS and the psychic pain of those who care for them during their agonizing physical decline.

David Wojnarowicz, the artist who wrote the catalogue essay that so terrified the NEA (and who is himself HIV-positive), has always created works of acute analytic and visual power. The photo and photomontage pieces included here, *Sex Series* and an untitled series, ran in tandem with the themes that inform his catalogue essay. *Sex Series* evokes the relentless sense of social siege felt by AIDS sufferers. Its photos recall the bungled government drug experiments, the paucity of available treatment and its exorbitant cost and—most profoundly—the conviction of some public figures that AIDS sufferers are unworthy of compassion and must be made to deny their sexuality, one of the central prerogatives of human existence. The vituperative fantasies that Wojnarowicz indulges in his writing are invoked more indirectly in his images, which candidly depict various modes of sexuality and erotic passion. These images of unapologetic, unbounded sexual expression are played off against texts which reflect the concerns of AIDS

"Witnesses" speaks for a beleaguered community. Frohnmayer's blundering attack on this modest exhibition is part of the repressive social climate that AIDS sufferers must face and resist every day.

sufferers and the violent prejudices of their persecutors. Given that Wojnarowicz is faced not only with the death of his friends but with the possibility of his own death as well, his response—for example, his denunciation of people like Cardinal O'Connor and Jesse Helms, who to my mind have frankly earned their condemnation—seems, if anything, restrained.

Vittorio Scarpati is now dead from AIDS complications—like his wife, Cookie Mueller, who contributed a foreword to the catalogue, and artists Peter Hujar and Mark Morrisroe. Scarpati's extraordinary black-and-white line drawings, carried out during the months of his final hospitalization, display an intellectual vigor rich in wit and transcendent power; given their production in the midst of excruciating physical decline, they can only be described as heroic. In a drawing inscribed "Who's fallen asleep in his soup for the 20th time," the artist depicts himself surrounded by IV tubes, hearts, lungs, arteries—the deteriorating components of a body racked with disease but still suffused with personal memories and a vivid sensibility. Scarpati's work is at once innocently humorous and frightfully knowing; it reveals him as far more coherent in the face of



Greer Lankton: Freddy and Ellen, 1985, mixed mediums, 7 feet high. All photos courtesy Artists Space.

Political outrage aside, these works succeed in their evocations of feelings that are simple yet powerful and binding: a sense of love and community, of longing, of excruciating absence.

the general incoherence surrounding AIDS than most of us could hope to be in the same situation.

Dorit Cypis's *Yield (the body)* focuses on the body prior to its assault by either disease or the equally debilitating effects of prejudice. In an exhibition that must inevitably make reference to physical decline, she reasserts the vivacious physicality of the body unmarked by disease and unfettered by social inhibition. The piece takes the form of four shelves on which are arrayed 28 photographs of the artist's nude body taken by photographers Linda Brooks, Ann Marsden, Lyn Hambrick and Nan Goldin. These pictures are placed under a much larger nude self-portrait, shown as a backlit transparency. Cypis's work is clearly meant as a counterweight to the aura of physical deterioration that so often surrounds AIDS in the public mind. In it she reaffirms the prerogatives of the body considered as the source of sheer physical pleasure.

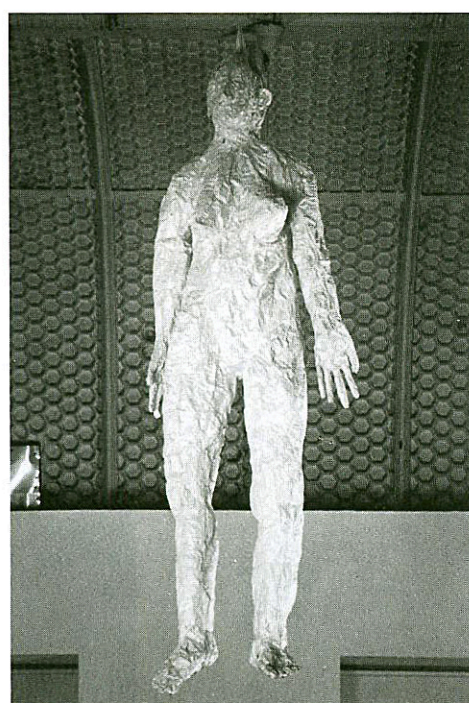
Allen Frame presented a series of paired photographs that suggest the issues of gay identity and gay intimacy. In one pairing, a group portrait from the 1950s is matched with a contemporary

group picture so as to highlight the continuity of gay identity across generations. Frame's works underscore the crucial role that personal relations and friendship networks play in giving meaning to all our lives. Kiki Smith's *All Our Sisters*, a banner covered with silk-screened images of women and children, quietly emphasizes that there is no sector of the population exempt from the ravages of AIDS. On the banner, the pictured groups of women and children are accented by a small, heart-shaped piece of bright-red fabric. Suspended from the ceiling above the banner is a sculpted paper figure—a symbol of the body's former wholeness as well as a reminder of what the artist calls the absent "souls of my community dead from AIDS, alive in me."

It's impossible to view Ramsey McPhillips's work about the late artist Mark Morrisroe without being overwhelmed by the installation's piercing evocation of pain, anguish and imminent death. Over a wall-mounted, glass-topped receptacle we found an excerpt from Morrisroe's autobiography, *Am I Dead Yet?*

They have stopped listening to me, so I wrote down everything in a note; who was trying to murder me and how, and then smashed the vase of flowers Pat Hearn sent me so I would have something to mutilate myself with by carving in my leg, "evening nurses murdered me"; and I took the phone receiver and pummeled my face over and over and sprayed blood all over the walls and on this book; and then I took the butter pat from my dinner tray and greased up the note and stuffed it up my asshole so they would find it during my autopsy. . . .

In the receptacle below were facsimiles of the book, broken glass and blood-spattered sheets; these dismal items testify to Morrisroe's helplessness



Kiki Smith: Untitled, 1989, paper, 5 feet high.

ness and rage in the face of slow obliteration.

Of course it's dismaying that an exhibition so modest and personal, so given over to gestures of remembrance and embrace, should have become caught in the cross fire of the Bush

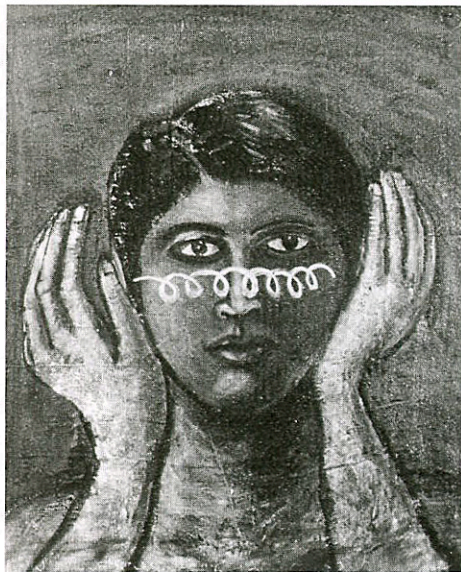


My friend Leon Koenig photographed a group of his gay friends in New Jersey sometime during the 50's.



I called him up the other night in Mississippi where he's lived since then. He was reading Plato and the Tibetan Book of the Dead.

Allen Frame: Group Portrait, 1989, color and black-and-white photographs, 14 by 27 inches.



Ken Tisa: Why Not Now?, 1986,
acrylic on cotton, 28 by 30 inches.
Courtesy Alexander Wood Gallery.

administration's ideological maneuverings. NEA chairman Frohnmayer's blundering attack on a socially charged exhibition, like Jesse Helms's earlier attack on the NEA itself, is part of the repressive social climate that AIDS sufferers must every day face and resist. Considering the

shroud of right-wing politics that seems to be settling on the NEA, the bureaucratic panic that the show provoked may also provide a morbid prelude to what lies ahead. For the NEA has the power not only to support creative efforts, but also, by doing so selectively, to indicate the parameters within which "serious" art can fall and the issues it can address.

It's clear to the arts community that the attempt to withhold grant money from a previously approved project was a serious violation of the NEA's own procedures as well as a stunning betrayal of the agency's real constituency. Frohnmayer's subsequent decision to withdraw the funding of the show's catalogue—which included Wojnarowicz's impassioned (and constitutionally protected) denunciation of public figures—while restoring the exhibition's funding was a clear case of bureaucratic duplicity. With it, the NEA appears to have drawn a wavering line with itself and a variety of conservative interests on the one side and its true constituency (the individual artists and art communities that have chosen to passionately engage American social reality) on the other.

Curator Nan Goldin set out to signal the enduring presence of a beleaguered community. The works in the exhibition commemorated a moment when the dead were still among us and we cared for them. Above all, the exhibition provided a much-needed reminder of the power that springs from personal networks animated by a very ordinary, yet very binding, sense of love; and it proclaims the right to love fiercely. No one

will ever succeed in censoring that right. □

"Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing" was on view at Artists Space from Nov. 16, 1989, to Jan. 6, 1990.

Author: Calvin Reid is an artist and writer and a member of the recently formed ACFE (Artists' Coalition for Freedom of Expression).



Vittorio Scarpati: Untitled, 1989,
black marker on paper, one of six drawings,
each 8 by 6 inches. Courtesy Bill Stelling.