Public Disclosures of Private Realities
HIV/AIDS and the Domestic Archive

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ABSTRACT: AIDS at Home: Art and Everyday Activism, presented at the Museum of the City of New York from May to October 2017, aimed to complement and complicate popular narratives about the history of HIV/AIDS by examining how HIV/AIDS played out in the everyday lives of diverse communities in New York. The exhibition placed works of art alongside documentary photography, film, and archival materials in unique ways to ask visitors to rethink what counts as activism and to reconsider home as a crucial political space. This paper reflects on the ways the curator sought to activate the domestic archive—the everyday ephemera and affects of illness, caretaking, and family life.

KEY WORDS: LGBTQ history, HIV/AIDS, domesticity, activism, archives

The photograph, “Kachin and Michael at Michael’s Apartment,” was originally taken in 1987 as part of a book project by photojournalist Susan Kuklin. Over the course of a year, Kuklin followed a team of volunteers from the Buddy Program, a pioneering caregiving program operated by Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) from 1983 to the early 2000s. The program was started by GMHC in New York in response to an urgent need for caregiving for people living with AIDS and was quickly replicated in cities across the country, including Boston; Los Angeles; Cleveland; Washington, DC; Atlanta; Cedar Rapids, Iowa; Greensboro, North Carolina; Mobile, Alabama; and Topeka, Kansas, to name only a handful. The proliferation of volunteer caregiving programs for people with AIDS speaks both to the success of the model as well as the dire need they aimed to address: throughout the United States, cases of HIV/AIDS multiplied exponentially yet local, state, and federal governments were slow to respond. In this photograph, Kuklin captures a moment between a volunteer, Kachin, and, in the language of GMHC, her client, Michael. The photograph is remarkable not only for the sense of emotional intimacy between Kachin and Michael but also their physical intimacy. Scientific knowledge about HIV had expanded, but stigma against people
with HIV/AIDS and fear of transmission continued, even among healthcare providers.¹

The context of HIV/AIDS could be easily lost, if not for a single detail: Michael is wearing a black t-shirt featuring the image of a pink triangle and the text, “Silence = Death.” The Silence = Death image was created in 1986 by a collective of six activist-artists in New York City, where it was first printed on posters wheat-pasted on construction barriers. Within a year, it came to be associated with the direct action group ACT UP, founded in March 1987. Indeed, the Silence = Death image was made familiar through photographs and news footage of ACT UP protests, first in New York, and later across the United States.² The sight of Michael wearing an ACT UP t-shirt at home, in bed, challenges us to

rethink the boundaries of HIV/AIDS activism: what happens when activism and the activist go home?

This was one of the primary questions raised for visitors of AIDS at Home: Art and Everyday Activism, an exhibition I curated at the Museum of the City of New York (MCNY) in 2017. Kuklin’s photograph of Kachin and Michael was prominently featured alongside four other photographs from her project never before exhibited in a museum or gallery. Since the mid-2000s, diverse filmmakers and curators have contributed to what Ted Kerr has called “the AIDS Crisis Revisitaiton”—a range of works and exhibitions looking back on responses to HIV/AIDS in the 1980s and early ’90s. These works have tended to focus on public protest and public representation, aligning the politics of AIDS with a politics of visibility. Kuklin’s photograph of Kachin and Michael was emblematic of the intervention AIDS at Home aimed to make: recentering domestic space as a primary site in the ongoing history of HIV/AIDS and healthcare more broadly.

This essay reports on the process of curating AIDS at Home in order to consider why public histories of HIV/AIDS in the last ten years have largely overlooked everyday private life as a locus of healthcare activism, and why a reorientation to home in histories of HIV/AIDS and activism matters for audiences in the present. A focus on domestic space shifts popular and academic understandings of the impact of and response to HIV/AIDS and reshapes conceptions of what constitutes activism, what constitutes healthcare, and how public scholars uncover and tell those histories.

More broadly the essay considers how historians, curators, and archivists can uncover, activate, and preserve what I am calling the “domestic archive.” Archives and museums have long worked to preserve and display material domestic culture. In the 1920s and ’30s, for example, art museums in the United States increasingly began designing American period rooms—reconstructing or reproducing historic rooms to arrange decorative art in the style of their place and time. The preservation of historic houses as museums dates back further, to the 1850s, with the movement to preserve George Washington’s plantation home, Mount Vernon.

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3 The exhibition was curated under the guidance of curatorial director Sarah M. Henry, in collaboration with exhibition designer Marissa Martonyi and curatorial assistant Becky Laughner.


Still, the domestic archive is not only an archive of the home’s objects and architecture, but also its practices, relationships, and affects—the ephemeral and embodied as well as the material. Homemaking might, in this sense, be understood like gender in terms of performance—scripted onto space and the body but not stable: domestic norms are constantly made and remade through imperfect, and sometimes subversive, repetition. To uncover these more ordinary, private, and transitory expressions of domestic performance, scholars must turn back to the archives for artifacts of social history—letters, diaries, organizational records, personal photographs, and home movies. Yet these materials are not often ordered or identified in finding aids in terms of domestic life. Rather, finding the domestic in the archive often entails reading for the everyday.

The domestic archive can be particularly challenging to uncover for groups that rejected, dramatically rewrote, or simply failed to conform to dominant domestic scripts, precisely because their home lives were often unrecognized at the time as properly “domestic” at all. Whose domestic life gets represented, saved, and preserved is already a reflection of social capital and legibility. For many queer people, surviving family members often failed, or chose not, to preserve the material ephemera of their everyday domestic lives. Since the 1970s and ’80s, the rise of LGBT archives and special collections has helped to counteract this archival bias, yet many LGBT collections privilege white gay men, who have been more likely to be in leadership positions and have typically had more social and economic resources than women, queer people of color, and transgender people. Uncovering the domestic archive then also means remaining aware of the absences in institutional and community archives, and looking beyond formal collections, to reach out and work with individuals where archives don’t yet exist. I present AIDS at Home as a potential model for future exhibitions and projects that seek to work with communities to tell their stories, highlighting the domestic archive as an overlooked source for understanding the ways individuals shape and understand their everyday lives in the face of oppression and marginalization.


Recentering Home and Care

AIDS at Home initially emerged out of the larger approach and questions of my ongoing research on queer domesticities. My forthcoming book, *Queer Belongings: Gender, Sexuality, and the American Home After World War II*, examines how domestic practices and ideals shaped LGBT relationships and politics in the United States from 1945 to the present. Following World War II, government officials, mental health experts, and popular media depicted the marital, reproductive household as a unique source of personal and national stability, casting suspicion on those who deviated from the male breadwinner/female homemaker ideal. Far from simply rejecting such discourses, LGBT people elaborated new domestic styles and intimacies as a primary means of negotiating their relationship to post-war sexual and gender norms. *Queer Belongings* traces these alternative forms of home life both to reveal the place of the home in LGBT history and to better understand the persistent power of domesticity in shaping American culture and politics more broadly. From the 1940s through the present, domestic space became increasingly central in LGBT politics as a means of demonstrating and interrogating the place of LGBT people in their communities and the nation. These queer adaptations and interrogations encompass a range of domestic forms, from debates around gay and lesbian marriage in the 1950s to LGBT homeless shelters in the 1970s to group residences for LGBT seniors today.

This project joins a small but growing body of scholarship looking at the historical intersections of queer life, family, and home. Nevertheless the history of homemaking has been, and remains, largely absent in histories of LGBT life, culture, and politics. The long absence of home in queer historiography stems from a larger tendency in LGBT history—and histories of social and political activism more broadly—to prioritize public and commercial spaces over private ones as the major sites of LGBT community and political formation. In his foundational 1983 book, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, John D’Emilio, for example,

specifically situated the emergence of gay bars as the most important precondition for the development of gay social and political identity in the postwar period.\(^{12}\) The tendency to discount private space, in opposition to public space, stems from the origins of LGBT history in the larger visibility politics of gay liberation. Throughout the 1970s, many LGBT activists did, in fact, build on feminist theory to argue for the social and political significance of home as a space to resist and reshape gender, sexual, racial, and class norms, for example, through the creation of lesbian and gay communes. (D’Emilio himself has written about how the Gay Academic Union—the first LGBT academic group—held many of its early meetings in his New York City apartment.\(^{13}\)) At the same time, gay liberation groups, gay media, as well as later gay and lesbian rights groups increasingly emphasized public visibility and assembly as the crucial means of combatting LGBT oppression—as the popular slogan framed it, “Out of the closet, into the streets.” Activists and historians of LGBT life since then have tended to reiterate uncritically a traditional “separate spheres” ideology: the home is presented as a safe, static, and lonely space removed from public life, labor, and politics.\(^{14}\)

Feminist scholars have long questioned readings of the home as removed from the public world of politics and labor. Dolores Hayden, for example, examines the work of “material feminists” of the nineteenth century—women who sought to reimagine what the home should and could be, in its architecture as well as its affiliations. bell hooks uses the term “homeplace” to capture the ways African American women turned the home into a haven and site of resistance against racial oppression. And Alice Kessler-Harris’s essay on labor history, “Treating the Male as ‘Other,’” considers the continuities between the household and the world outside.\(^{15}\) More recently, Teresa Anne Murphy has used the term “domestic citizenship” to understand how late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women writers made claims for the political significance of domesticity centered on motherhood and

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Queer Belongings builds on this work to argue for the continued and expanding significance of domesticity as a mode and measure of belonging at multiple scales—the intimate, the communal, and the national. Domestic citizenship, as I frame it in my project, is the political meaning attached to domestic ideals and practices—the rights, benefits, obligations, and recognition associated with normative homemaking.

The social and political stakes of domestic citizenship in the late twentieth century became especially clear in responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The earliest cases of AIDS were diagnosed among gay men and typically blamed on promiscuity or the so-called “gay lifestyle,” sexual and social patterns that deviated from the norms of heterosexuality, reproduction, and monogamy—precisely those norms tied to middle-class domesticity. Many early television and cinematic representations of HIV/AIDS specifically sought to reintegrate people with AIDS into the heterosexual family, often through the image of the good gay son, as in the 1985 TV movie An Early Frost, or the 1993 film Philadelphia. These portrayals suggested that belonging within the family constitutes belonging within the nation. Other films, television representations, books, and plays specifically sought to make claims for alternative forms of family, or at least to complicate or complement the heterosexual reproductive family, for example the 1986 film Parting Glances or the 1994 musical Rent. Christopher Capozzola has also shown how the AIDS Memorial Quilt, first displayed on the National Mall in 1987, engaged with traditional American domestic practices and new conservative discourses of family values. And yet today, home as an emotional and analytic frame has largely disappeared from public representations and discussions of HIV/AIDS.

The ongoing elision of home in histories of HIV/AIDS stems from a similar splitting of public and private life in histories of LGBT activism. Recent documentaries on HIV/AIDS such as United in Anger (2012) or How to Survive a Plague (2012) prioritize direct action groups like ACT UP, which emerged six years after AIDS was first identified. Direct action and public protest are presented as the core movers in HIV/AIDS activism, and although these stories are crucial, they can also obscure the impact of responses that were less visible. This tendency to prioritize direct action and protest over more private responses—particularly caregiving—in fact reflects a longstanding, intracommunal debate about the social and political strategies activists should take in response to HIV/AIDS. Novelist Larry Kramer, for


example, pushed for the creation of ACT UP largely by denigrating the work of GMHC as timid and inadequate, even though Kramer himself had been a key founder of GMHC. In Kramer’s autobiographical play *The Normal Heart*, Kramer’s stand-in Ned Weeks puts it this way: “I thought I was starting with a bunch of Ralph Naders and Green Berets, and . . . almost in front of my eyes they turn into a bunch of nurses’ aides.” Kramer distinctly decries caregiving work as feminine, calling instead for more assertive, public, and presumably masculine action.

This splitting between the “timid” activism of early AIDS responses and later “militant” responses can be seen even in some of the best scholarship on HIV/AIDS. Deborah Gould’s 2009 book *Moving Politics*, for example, examines the emotional structures of ACT UP New York in the late 1980s. Gould provides a nuanced frame for conceiving how social movements harness and transform affect and emotion, particularly how ACT UP transformed grief into anger and action. Gould, however, largely disregards the work of the social service organizations and caretaking strategies that emerged before and continued through the rise of ACT UP, and in many cases, still operate today. The tendency to disregard care as labor stems from a more general tendency to dismiss labor that happens in private as genuine work.

Recent exhibitions on art and activism in response to HIV/AIDS have also tended to reiterate this public/private divide. *AIDS in New York: The First Five Years* (New-York Historical Society, 2013); *Why We Fight: Remembering AIDS Activism* (New York Public Library, 2013–14); and *Art AIDS America* (Tacoma Art Museum, Washington; Bronx Museum of Art, New York; Zuckerman Museum, Kennesaw, Georgia; and Alphawood Gallery, Chicago, Illinois, 2015–17) have tended to place an emphasis on public protest, public health, medical interventions, public representations, and the art world. An important exception is the exhibition *Everyday* (Visual AIDS/La Mama Galleria, 2016), curated by Jean Carlomusto, Alexandra Juhasz, and Hugh Ryan. Through a range of artworks, *Everyday* specifically sought to examine the meanings of daily routine for people living with HIV/AIDS.

*AIDS at Home* aimed to re-present the landscape of HIV/AIDS, art, activism, and healthcare; explore how HIV/AIDS has played out in domestic space; and examine how HIV/AIDS altered experiences and conceptions of home and family for LGBT


people and other communities impacted by HIV/AIDS. As I began to develop the exhibition, there were several decisions that were ultimately key to the exhibition’s arc. The first decision was to include artwork alongside archival material. Place-based and multidisciplinary museums like the MCNY can be particularly suited to blurring the line between history and art exhibitions. Many exhibits at the MCNY, such as *New York at Its Core*, a three gallery, four-hundred-year history of New York City, integrate works of visual and decorative art as historic artifacts to tell the social and political history of both the city’s communities and its built environment. Other exhibits, such as *Gay Gotham: Art and Underground Culture in New York* (2016–17), or *Art in the Open: Fifty Years of Public Art in New York* (2017–18), mixed artwork with archival materials to highlight the cultural history of the city and the people behind it. Even with these precedents, however, artwork still played a unique role in *AIDS at Home*. Archival documents from organizations such as GMHC could provide important details about responses to HIV/AIDS, but artwork became an essential means of evoking the history of emotional experiences of HIV/AIDS and capturing day-to-day and repeated practices of caregiving.

One artist whose work was central for me in thinking about how art might figure into a history exhibition was Hugh Steers. The large painting *Bath Curtain* was one of two works by Steers that was ultimately included in *AIDS at Home*. Drawing inspiration from American figurative painters such as Edward Hopper and French post-impressionists, Steers’ work, painted at the height of the AIDS epidemic, focused almost exclusively on gay men in domestic settings, often in caregiving relationships. In the gallery, the figures in the painting appeared essentially life-size, drawing the viewer into the private space of the bathroom. Steers’ work captured the social history of HIV/AIDS—it conveyed the affective and material worlds of HIV/AIDS, and why domestic space was central to those experiences. The work of over twenty artists was eventually included in the exhibition, representing a range of media (painting, photography, fiber arts, drawings, and sculpture) and a range of personal backgrounds and experiences. Some of the artists were well-known and represented by galleries, such as David Wojnarowicz and Nan Goldin, but many others were less well-known outside of New York.

The second decision was to move thematically rather than strictly chronologically. The exhibition was divided into three room-like sections: caretaking, housing, and family. Part I, “Caretaking,” focused on the variety of caregiving relationships that emerged out of the HIV/AIDS epidemic—caregiving among partners and friends, as well as volunteers. That included, for example, work by

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Hugh Steers, Susan Kuklin’s photographs of the Buddy Program, as well as materials from the organization God’s Love We Deliver, the first group in New York City to provide meals to people living with HIV/AIDS who were homebound.

Part II, “Housing,” focused on activism in response to rising rates of homelessness among people with HIV and the experiences of people who lived in supportive housing. That included, for example, photographs of a protest by the ACT UP Housing Committee at Trump Tower (which gained new meaning during my research after the 2016 presidential election), as well as architectural plans for the first supportive residence constructed by the nonprofit advocacy and service organization Housing Works.26 It also included artwork by artists reflecting on their own experiences living in supportive housing, including work

Part III, “Family,” explored the various ways that HIV/AIDS led activists and artists to rethink and redefine what family meant. That included, for example, documents related to the 1986 legal case of Miguel Braschi. Braschi had lived for ten years with his partner, Leslie Blanchard, but when Blanchard died from complications related to AIDS, the landlord tried to evict Braschi, whose name was not on the lease. Braschi sued and the case resulted in a major reinterpretation of New York City rent law that would recognize gay couples as functional families. The section also highlighted chosen families, for example, Luna Luis Ortiz’s photographs from the 1990s of his friends at the Neutral Zone, an LGBTQ youth space near the Christopher Street Piers.

The final section of the exhibition, titled “HIV/AIDS at Home Today,” reflected another choice—the exhibition would not have an end date. Each section of the exhibition moved towards the present, but the final section was intended to highlight how HIV/AIDS is experienced today, particularly how a sense that the epidemic is over can lead to continuing stigma. This section of the exhibition included A Place in the City, a short film I codirected with Nate Lavey for the exhibition.

27 On Braschi v. Stahl and Associates, see Carlos A. Ball, From the Closet to the Courtroom: Five LGBT Rights Lawsuits That Have Changed Our Nation (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010).
following three activists and artists working on HIV/AIDS today, focusing on the same three themes—caretaking, housing, and family. 

My own research on home as a built environment also led me to think about the affects and emotions people experience in domestic space—the ways home elicits and contains intimacy and feeling. The exhibition design, created in collaboration with the museum’s graphic and exhibition designer Marissa

28 A Place in the City can be viewed online at https://vimeo.com/303736782.

View of “Housing” section, *AIDS at Home*. (Photograph by Brad Farwell, courtesy of MCNY)

View of “Family” section, *AIDS at Home*. (Photograph by Brad Farwell, courtesy of MCNY)
Martonyi, was intentionally evocative of domestic spaces. We recognized that the material of an exhibition on HIV/AIDS could bring up strong feelings and memories for many visitors who had first-hand experiences living with or caring for someone with HIV/AIDS, as well as anyone who had experiences caring for someone or living with other serious illnesses. With this in mind, we hoped to create a home-like space within the museum, to help to make people feel more comfortable experiencing whatever emotions came up. We built internal walls, to allow visitors a sense of relative privacy at various points in the gallery, and we provided places to stop and sit throughout the exhibition. We were especially inspired by railroad apartments of the East Village—of the kind in which many artists of the 1980s lived—with windows leading into the next room. We also picked up design elements from some of the artwork. For example, the wall molding in Susan Kuklin’s photograph of Michael and Kachin inspired ceiling moldings throughout the gallery as well as frame moldings on the title wall—broken to suggest something amiss. Finally, we worked with five artists to develop wallpapers for each room that would tie to the themes and stories of each section: for example, “Caretaking” was decorated by wallpaper by Carl George, who was close friends with painter Hugh Steers. These details came together to produce a deeply personal view of the history of HIV/AIDS. Working
on the exhibition was not only a process of curating a history but curating emotion as well.

The process of selecting works for the exhibition was also an act of community engagement—of cultivating what Michael Frisch has influentially called a “shared authority” between historians and the artists, activists, and community groups whose stories they seek to tell. Over the course of a year, I visited nearly all of the living artists in the show, in their homes or their studios, to discuss the exhibition and to think with them about what works would connect best to its themes. I met with partners and siblings and friends. Those conversations also functioned as informal oral histories, which resulted in a selection of work and the writing of wall texts that stayed very close to the experiences of the people represented. I felt a particular responsibility to amplify the voices of people whose stories had been less heard in histories and narratives of HIV/AIDS: not only white gay men whose experiences are most closely associated with HIV/AIDS, but also people of color, women, transgender people, and people who had experienced homelessness. I worked especially with Visual AIDS, a thirty-year-old organization that works to preserve the legacy of artists lost to AIDS and to support artists living with HIV/AIDS today. In many cases Visual AIDS made the first introductions, helping me to gain the confidence and trust of artists in the exhibition.

This engaged process of curating the exhibition, I later realized, reflected the history I was tracking. In many cases, the relative privacy of the home—and the continuing shame, silence, and stigma around HIV—was precisely what had kept this work and these stories out of public sight for so long. Much of the artwork and video in the show had rarely if ever been displayed in an exhibition. Some of the photographs existed only as negatives and test prints, many of the artists were not represented by commercial galleries, and many of the organizations had no formal archives, in large part because they were still in operation. All of the materials from Housing Works and God’s Love We Deliver, for example, came from their offices. There were also personal elements in the more “public” histories that were difficult to uncover. Although Miguel Braschi’s eviction case, for example, has been widely discussed and documented, there are no published photographs of Braschi himself. Hoping to center Miguel Braschi more directly, I eventually tracked down his sister, who shared her photographs and stories of Miguel with me. In many cases, artists felt a sense of urgency about sharing these works and stories. Photographer Gail Thacker approached me after an event at the museum for Gay Gotham and said simply that she had some work she needed to show me. I visited with Thacker a week later and selected two items to include in the exhibition—a strip of photographs she took in a photo booth with her friend, the photographer and artist Mark Morrisroe, and a portrait she took just a few years later of Morrisroe in bed, shortly

before his death. Morrisroe, known for his punk style, took his own Polaroid photographs documenting the effects of HIV/AIDS on his body. Thacker’s photograph is subtler, gentler, and more elusive: Morrisroe peers at her from beneath and behind a blanket, bringing the viewer into an intimate moment between friends.

The experiences of visiting with artists and activists, and our conversations, brought home for me how deeply personal the stories I was hoping to share were, and the incredible trust that all these artists and activists, friends and family, were putting in me to tell their stories. It also helped me see how little space there is in public and in most people’s everyday lives to talk about illness, loss, and grief—how the silence and silencing around HIV, health, and healthcare more broadly continues. Home protects, but it also hides. Here, I want to turn to think more about the connections between home, privacy, and the public, and how these connections relate to art and the archive.

Privacy and Counterpublics

The work of the exhibition, to reveal personal and private experience, places it in line with a longer history of AIDS activism and art that specifically sought to bridge
the divide between the public and private. In 1989, photographer Nan Goldin curated the exhibition *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* at Artists Space in downtown Manhattan—one of the earliest group art shows about AIDS. The accompanying catalog included an essay by writer and artist David Wojnarowicz, at the time thirty-five years old and living with AIDS. Wojnarowicz reflected in the essay:

> To make the *private* into something *public* is an action that has terrific repercussions in the pre-invented world. The government has the job of maintaining the day to day illusion of the ONE TRIBE NATION. Each public disclosure of a private reality becomes something of a magnet that can attract others with a similar frame of reference; thus each public disclosure of a fragment of private reality serves as a dismantling tool against the illusion of ONE TRIBE NATION; it lifts the curtains for a brief peek and reveals the possible existence of literally millions of tribes, the term GENERAL PUBLIC disintegrates.31

Wojnarowicz used the term “pre-invented world” here and in other writings to invoke a sense of an inherited reality—the vision of normal American life that circulated in popular culture and public life. Wojnarowicz saw instead how an artist’s or activist’s public revelation of their private experience could essentially disrupt and make space for those whose experiences did not align with the “general public.” Wojnarowicz’s conception of a ONE TRIBE NATION and GENERAL PUBLIC came at a moment of heightened censorship. The year 1989 was a turning point in the culture wars of the 1980s, as politicians like Jesse Helms began pushing for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) to withdraw funding from controversial works—including *The Perfect Moment*, a traveling exhibition of the work of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. In fact, Wojnarowicz’s criticism of Helms, among others, in the essay led the NEA to revoke a $10,000 grant to Artists Space.32

Wojnarowicz’s call for artwork that might reveal “literally millions of tribes” suggests the creation of communities of feeling akin to a counterpublic—an alternative civic and social network.33 For Wojnarowicz, public expressions of private experience disrupted a sense of American uniformity. Grief for Wojnarowicz was key. Instead of private memorial services, he called for activists to drive to

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Washington, DC, and throw the bodies of their loved ones on the steps of the White House. By the early 1990s, political funerals would indeed become a major mode of ACT UP resistance. But Wojnarowicz also pointed to the simple power of representations to counter the norm. He continued, “I find that when I witness diverse representations of ‘Reality’ on a gallery wall or in a book or a movie or in the spoken word or performance, that the more diverse the representations, the more I feel there is room in the environment for my existence; that not the entire environment is hostile.” Wojnarowicz’s essay itself performs this kind of public revelation of private realities: the essay begins with an extended anecdote that takes place at his kitchen table. A friend comes over for an unexpected visit, and then sits down to ask, “What is left of life?” Wojnarowicz describes the papers and pill bottles on the table. His essay models the very unveiling he hopes can happen, located here in his home.

At the same time, I want to complicate Wojnarowicz’s rendering of the private and public by pointing to the instability of those categories. The domestic is not naturally or imminently private; rather it is a stage of performance, variably private and public. Scholar Susan Gal has described the public/private divide not as a simple binary but fractal: the public-private divide reproduces itself within itself. Gal gives the example of a house: when you are standing at the door, the yard is public, and the inside is private. But once you enter a house, the living room is public, but the bedroom is private. You go into the bedroom, perhaps to put down your coat—now the bedroom is public, but the closet is private. Reading home as fractal reveals the performative or strategic dimensions of domesticity as a site that is neither perfectly private or public, but porous. When we recognize home as porous, what appear at first “private” acts or private realities can be more easily seen for their political meanings.

In *AIDS at Home*, the political dimensions of the domestic were made visible from the start. The exhibition opened with two documents from Wojnarowicz’s collection at Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University, which together brought visitors into the domestic life Wojnarowicz shared with his friend and lover, photographer Peter Hujar. The first document was the letter Hujar received from his doctor in early 1987 to tell him he had tested positive for AIDS. Wojnarowicz took the letter and drew a stencil of two men kissing on top of it. The stencil image, which Wojnarowicz previously used in a work titled, “Fuck You Faggot Fucker,” is transformative, turning the letter into a work of art and signaling defiance in the face of illness. The stencil image acts as a labor of caregiving in itself—reaffirming same-sex male desire and sexuality and love at the moment of its...
stigmatization. The second document from Wojnarowicz’s papers was Hujar’s home care plan from the last few weeks of his life, less than a year later. The plan evokes a visceral sense of Hujar’s body, detailing daily care needs: bathing, toileting, medication, walking, safety supervision. It asks the visitor to relate to the artist as a person, through the body. It also reveals the name of the home-care nurse, reminding visitors once again of the invisible and often forgotten labor of care. In *AIDS at Home*, the two documents were framed side by side in precisely the same fashion, in an attempt to level the divide between art and personal archive. Art as an act of caregiving matters as much as material care. Placing the letter, from January 1987, next to the home care plan, from November that same year, also hinted at Hujar’s rapid decline, and invited visitors to consider time as a crucial element in the exhibition. Together, the two pieces from Hujar’s archive push towards a more expansive understanding of healthcare, one that moves beyond medicine to take interpersonal relationships into account.

The pairing of these two works at the opening of the exhibition also provided viewers a key to how the exhibition worked overall: by making the domestic archive visible. The exhibition aimed to unpack and activate the materials, relationships, affects, and emotions of everyday domestic life in the context of illness. Even more than the objects, the domestic archive should be understood in terms of the feelings it carries and evokes. That is to say, the domestic archive is not only a material archive, but in Ann Cvetkovich’s phrase, an archive of feelings—an archive of grief, loss, trauma, isolation, as well as intimacy, community, joy, and love.  

_AIDS at Home_ activated this domestic archive in several key ways. One was through the prominent display of representational works, including paintings, photographs, and sculptures—which together repeatedly returned to and elevated domestic spaces as sites of care, family, and resilience. One of the three works in the exhibition by artist and activist Chloe Dzubilo, for example, chronicled her experience as a transwoman with HIV living in city-funded supportive housing, and the challenges she encountered, including bed bugs, lost or stolen belongings, and sexual violence. The cartoon-like drawing centers on an item of furniture, a hospital bed in Dzubilo’s apartment, suggesting the ways illness can blur the boundary between domestic space and medical space. The exhibition also included a drawing of Dzubilo’s daily medications, created by her partner T De Long. Here the exhibition again troubled the boundary between art and archive: the drawing was, in fact, created as a guide to help De Long keep track of Dzubilo’s medications; it was hung inside a cabinet in Dzubilo’s apartment.

Video was also an essential element in the exhibition. Camcorders first became commercially available in the 1980s and allowed activist filmmakers to document spaces and experiences that were often underrepresented in mainstream media. One crucial example of this was the work by Juanita Mohammed Szczepanski. Szczepanski started as a filmmaker in the collective WAVE—Women’s AIDS Video Enterprise, founded in 1989 by then-graduate student Alexandra Juhasz. Szczepanski was soon after hired by GMHC’s media department to produce videos for the organization’s *Living With AIDS* public access TV program. Many of Szczepanski’s films focused on caregiving and the nontraditional families that HIV/AIDS spurred. “Two Men and a Baby” originally aired in 1993 and focused on a gay African American couple, Ray and Tyrone, who adopted Eric, the son of Ray’s sister, who was born HIV positive. The film has the feeling of a home video, which masks the art of its construction. The original video files at the New York Public Library include footage Szczepanski took of the social worker who helped Ray and Tyrone formalize the adoption—though this material is not included in the final

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film. If the film skirts over the formal, bureaucratic mechanisms by which families are recognized, it does so in service of a larger goal—to make the queer family relatable and ordinary.

A second way AIDS at Home activated the domestic archive was by juxtaposing archival materials with representational images. In the case of the buddy program, for example, I paired Susan Kuklin’s photographs of BuddyTeam 7 with documents from the files of Team 7, archived at the New York Public Library. If the photographs bring us into the feeling and space of the Buddy Program—Kachin and Michael on Michael’s bed, Michael’s nightstand—then the documents bring us into

Chloé Dzubilo, HIV Housing, c. 2008. (Chloé Dzubilo Papers, Fales Library & Special Collections, New York University. Estate of Chloé Dzubilo)
the more mundane, repeated, and often challenging experience of being a caregiver. The minutes from one meeting, for example, revealed the discussions of the team members, while a timesheet showed how many hours volunteers worked in a single month as well as their diverse professional backgrounds—teacher, nurse, hairdresser, actress. The documents alongside the photographs helped to expand visitors’ conceptions of who counts as an activist.

Another artist featured in the exhibition, Kia LaBeija, reflects in her work on her own experiences as a young woman of color born with HIV, and on the loss of her mother, Kwan Bennett, to HIV/AIDS-related illness when LaBeija was only fourteen. LaBeija composed *The First Ten Years* (2014) on the ten-year anniversary of her mother’s death: she emptied out her mother’s dresser and put on her mother’s wedding dress. In the exhibition, I paired the photograph with a video recently uncovered and digitized by LaBeija’s brother: a video message from Bennett to her sister about the family’s new apartment. At the end of the message, Bennett opens a garment bag to show off her wedding dress. This juxtaposition demonstrates how
historical ephemera from a personal archive can complement and expand on the world and experience of a work of art. LaBeija’s work is so much about her mother’s absence, and yet the video makes her mother present.

A third way the exhibition engaged the domestic archive was through the display of works of fiber art that play upon traditional domestic craft. Jeffrey Scott Wilson’s *HIV Sampler* (2013), for example, remakes a traditional needlepoint sampler, where new learners practice their letters and forms (Wilson himself learned needlepoint from his grandmother). The house is a repeated image in conventional needlepoint, but here that image and text is interrupted—ABCDEFGHIV—with the needle left hanging. This play with domestic craft also appears in Hunter Reynolds’s work, *Quilt of Names* (1992), where Reynolds takes photographs of the AIDS Memorial Quilt and threads them together, bringing the AIDS Memorial Quilt down to a domestic and personal scale.

The exhibition’s final and major intervention into the history and art of HIV/AIDS was the way it prioritized works that transform personal or archival materials into art—as Wojnarowicz did with Hujar’s diagnosis letter. Examples of these transformative works appeared in every section of the exhibition, moving from the 1980s and ’90s to the present. The largest work in the exhibition, and the work
that best represents this transformative approach, was Lori Grinker’s installation *Six Days from Forty*, which occupied a small room at the center of the gallery. The installation reflected on Lori’s relationship with her brother, Marc Grinker, a law professor who died from complications related to AIDS in 1996. The installation was planned as a separate space within the gallery. Visitors were invited to sit down on a bench, to sit with Lori in the role of caregiver. The installation was composed of three parts. On one wall appeared a grid of nine photographs, printed on metal, of materials from Lori and Marc’s personal archive (a photograph of Marc and Lori as teenagers, Marc’s medical records and letters from his doctor, notes for a paper Marc was preparing on antigay discrimination). These were mounted above and alongside cases displaying three books, including the diary where Lori kept a record of her conversations with Marc in his apartment during the last weeks of his life. That diary was in turn the basis for a short video hanging on the adjoining wall: visitors heard Lori’s voice speaking to Marc but only saw his reply, written out, in Lori’s handwriting. The final component of the installation was an additional video, projected onto a screen of the shadow of the tree outside Marc’s window as the light changes and the leaves rustle. The installation brings us into Marc’s domestic space, but it again reminds us that home is as much an affective space as a material one. *Six Days from Forty* is about the archive of objects and feelings we are left with when we lose someone.
Grinker’s installation also raises a key question about what makes the domestic archive different from other kinds of archives, and what makes the home different from other spaces. The answer Grinker’s work suggests is accumulation—of objects, of feeling, of memory. The term “accumulation” may bring to mind Marx’s concept of capital accumulation, yet the value of the domestic archive resists commodification. Rather the value of the domestic remains distinctly, stubbornly personal; to attempt to convey the meaning of the domestic archive is to invite new modes of intimacy, new forms of social connection. This motif of accumulation ran throughout AIDS at Home but was most visible in Frederick Weston’s Searching and Fearless Moral Inventory (2015). The photocollage depicts the boxes in Weston’s apartment—boxes accumulated and kept over many years of unstable housing—and each is marked with a label connected to Weston’s life and identity (actor, flaneur, feisty, virus). Hanging above these are Weston’s clothing. The image invites us into Weston’s home, and into his life, but it does so precisely through accumulation and multiplicity. Weston’s inventory, like the domestic archive, is at once contained and uncontainable.

Curating the domestic archive ultimately requires more than simply displaying domestic life. Rather, tracing the history of everyday domestic life calls on curators to attend to affect and relationality—to look for, highlight, and analyze emotion and intimacy, both as they were experienced in the past and as they play out in the present for visitors. In another recent exhibit, Imagining Home (2015–2018) at the Baltimore Museum of Art, curators drew together representations and material culture from the collection focusing on home as a site of identity-making, belonging, rest, and movement, with objects ranging from a Central Asian prayer rug to a modern toaster and images from Walter Henry William’s 1952 painting A Quick Nap, depicting a young African American girl on her family’s fire escape, to Susan Harbage Page’s photographs documenting temporary shelters of undocumented

immigrants on the Mexico/Texas border. The curators also integrated various forms of community engagement. For “Home Stories,” community members were invited to keep a reproduction of a work from the exhibition in their own homes for four months, and then reflect on what the work came to mean for them. A series of local artists were also invited to curate community-based installations in the adjoining gallery. One of these installations, Queer Interiors, created by Rahne Alexander and Jaimes Mayhew, similarly sought to make LGBT private life public. A small quilt hung upon the wall and served as a screen for projections of videos and photographs shared by community members; visitors were also invited to sit upon a large oversized bed. At the same time, the installation was suffused with references to the history of HIV/AIDS in queer culture: the quilt itself subtly reimagined the AIDS Memorial Quilt, while the pillows and bedspread referenced work by Félix González-Torres and AA Bronson.41 Both Imagining Home and Queer Interiors drew upon emotion as a resource for connecting visitors to art and history and for leading visitors to think about the meanings of home and community in their own lives.

Museums and archives may also work to reconsider the value of the domestic and the everyday in their collecting. College, university, community, and library collections have already begun to archive and preserve more artifacts of everyday LGBT life, including photograph albums and home movies.42 Yet libraries and special collections can still be more proactive in inviting and pursuing archival materials from LGBT people, particularly trans people and LGBT people of color. Oral history projects could also seek to document the domestic spaces of their interview participants and to establish contact between individuals and special collections for future acquisition and preservation.43 In the case of AIDS at Home, I worked to place the MCNY’s curator of photography in touch with several photographers in the exhibition, to add their work to the museum’s permanent collection.


43 For an example of a project that combines queer oral history and photography to capture everyday life, see Rebecka Taves Sheffield, “The Bedside Table Archives: Archive Intervention and Lesbian Intimate Domestic Culture,” Radical History Review 120 (Fall 2014): 108–20.
Curating the domestic archive ultimately undoes our conceptualizations of domesticity itself and can also lead us to rethink where, how, and when history happens. Histories of HIV/AIDS are often written through the lens of medical progress—the first cases of AIDS diagnosed, the underlying virus discovered, new treatments made available. This is a compelling narrative because it is a narrative of change. Reorienting the history of HIV/AIDS to the history of home focuses our attention on narratives of continuity: to the day-to-day acts of caregiving and family-making, the need for home, and the ongoing impact of stigma and silence. These are private realities that have never disappeared and still need activating.

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