

# Subverting Establishment Suppression

**ACT UP & Explosions from the Margins: Against gentrification of the mind**

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The AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power—known by its acronym ACT UP—coalesced in the late 1980s with a simple motivation: the desire to live.

This group is a striking example of the influence marginalized people using radical approaches can have. The ambitious and judicious group, founded in New York City on March 12, 1987, set their initial sights on exposing neglect and falsifications about the AIDS epidemic. They demanded attention and significant action from politicians, Wall Street, and the Catholic church.

In the early 1980s, those afflicted with HIV/AIDS were hated and ignored, with the major government and media systems disregarding the nascent health crisis. The initial sufferers were primarily gay men—the original acronym for HIV/AIDS was GRID: Gay Related Immune Deficiency.

The elites in power were motivated to conceal the suffering and deaths of those they detested and considered disposable.

They didn't want to expose the inadequacies of the U.S. health care system and the disgusting profiteering of pharmaceutical companies. The Reagan-era pretensions about clean living and abstinence led and exacerbated this trend.

Development of treatment drugs was slow, and information related to HIV/AIDS was patchy and partial. Those who fell ill often lost jobs which impacted their ability to pay for health care or housing. As the pandemic expanded and intensified, many people were dying alone, some homeless on the street. Gentrification in New York City ramped up simultaneously with AIDS, resulting in a significant increase in homelessness.

Reporting and media coverage at the time was insufficient to the scale, and inaccurate about the specifics of the situation.

This, along with a lack of research funding, contributed to a popular discourse filled with falsehoods. In his essay, "Do Not Doubt the Dangerousness of the 12-inch Politician," AIDS activist, artist, and writer David Wojnarowicz, asserted, "If you look at newspapers you rarely see a representation of anything you believe to be the world you inhabit."

## **The Incendiary, Inventive Margins**

ACT UP (AU) formed out of many previous, less focused groupings, and utilized direct action, confrontation, disruption, and DIY tactics. The idea of "queering a movement" (i.e., the refusal to stay in the shadows and accept the suppression of establishment norms) originated from AU, but the mantra the group is best known for is "Silence=Death." AU did not require full consensus for participants to engage in actions, so individuals planned and carried out adaptable, rapid mobilizations.

The group's initial action was a march on Wall Street in 1987. But a more notorious engagement occurred inside the New York Stock Exchange a few years later, on September 14, 1989, resulting in the first ever shut down of the trading floor. Succeeding these, AU actions included confronting then-president George H.W. Bush at his vacation home in Maine, and the interruption of future-president Bill Clinton's birthday celebration in Manhattan. Demonstrations, occupations, and interruptions were utilized to shame public figures promoting heteronormativity and delaying assistance to HIV sufferers.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century AU participants also disrupted the functioning of corporations, dumped the ashes of those cremated after dying of AIDS on the steps of government buildings, confronted Center for Disease Control (CDC) representatives, and blocked the doors and roads leading to the National Institute of Health in Washington, DC.

Access to medicine and treatment, and increased housing for those with HIV were some of the reforms achieved early on by AU NY. They also facilitated changes allowing for women with a positive status to receive disability benefits.

During the height of the crisis, care networks were organized to offer emotional support and to bring items to those in need.

From New York, the movement spread to other large U.S. cities, such as Los Angeles and Chicago, as well as the South. It expanded globally to Kenya, France, India and elsewhere. Global consciousness was baked into the foundation of AU and numerous actions took place at the New York consulates of foreign countries. One example was the 2002 action at the Chinese consulate which resulted in the release from prison of China's foremost AIDS activist, Wan Yanhai.

Theatrics, choreography, and approaches designed to deliver a jolt were often applied by AU. A successful 2004 action utilized nude protest in demanding the U.S. suspend the debt owed by poor countries with major AIDS epidemics, so funds could be used to treat and slow the transmission of the disease.

The initial AU manifestations included many highly expressive people, such as artists and sub-culture participants. The rigor and style not only helped with identifying relevant targets and executing effective actions, but also yielded psychological and aesthetic effects due to the magnetism of the cogent, playful, and scrappy outsider methods. Many were influenced by the example of making those impeding progress in treating and managing HIV/AIDS face direct consequences.

As the 21<sup>st</sup> century progressed, the approaches of some AU groups shifted. Participants became more involved with nonprofit work and have aligned more with CDC agendas. This inclination towards working inside of bureaucratic systems is pervasive and is an example of the gentrification of subversion/ activism.

Though gentrification is frequently regarded as a real estate development trend consisting of overpriced, ugly residential buildings, there are also social and ideological components to it. Along with gentrification has come a decrease in awareness of how political and corporate structures affect us, and an increased acceptance of alienation and paranoid security culture. Changes within AU were inevitable as the acute die-off from AIDS subsided, and the CDC made concessions in response to the actions of early AU participants.

Presently, AU still effectively disseminates information on viruses, contributes to the management of viral epidemics and pandemics, and is influential in decreasing the suffering caused by HIV/AIDS and other viruses. Besides expansion nationally and globally AU has also spawned a variety of offshoots including Dyke March, Queer Nation, Housing Works, and numerous other assemblages, movements, and events. Some of these spin-off groups maintain devotion to the original AU spirit, employing a dynamic and confrontational outsider's approach, as do some current branches of AU.

Sarah Schulman is a writer, a participant in and documenter of AU history. In her book *Gentrification of the Mind*, she explains that discomfort caused by being confronted by the truth is necessary to threaten the supremacy of establishment convention. In her view, truth is often marginalized, and even considered anti-social, due to the discomfort it can induce. The artistic, impudent, intellectual structure of early AU didn't coincide agreeably with mass media sterility, triviality, and one-dimensionality.

Schulman is concerned with how the style of LGBTQ discrimination has shifted from the subjection to overt establishment hatred, to internalized self-hate manifesting in efforts to self-sanitize and temper expression and speech. Current tolerance is largely based on this sanitization, on the avoidance of expressing queer consciousness

or aspects of queer culture. For example, the avoidance of discussing gay sex or engaging in displays that could be viewed as too transgressive. In short, she feels that, in our gentrified era, rejection has been turned inward and the presentation of LGBTQ relations cleaned up. She advocates a revival of discussion of the disconcerting and messy passions that constitute reality. In her *Fifth Estate* article, “Fight to Win,” [FE #408, Winter, 2021] Rory Eliot (AU oral history fundraising manager), explains that “the maintenance of the status quo is the crisis.” It is abundantly clear that needs related to healthcare, housing, and viral pandemic management in the present are unmet. As things stand, the marginalized and unrepresented have vast potential for breakthroughs, as the decaying establishment is increasingly vulnerable to radical action and only has superficial and partial solutions to offer.

Bryan Tucker is a frequent contributor to the *Fifth Estate* and has been involved with social equality movements and projects around the San Francisco Bay Area for the past 15 years.

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