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Collective Anonymity in Politicised Art: Gran Fury, AIDS Activism and the Art World

The fragile anonymity Masha Alyokhina and Nadya Tolokonnikova granted by virtue of their brightly coloured Pussy Riot balaclavas was short lived. The women, along with Yekaterina Samutsevich, and two anonymous members of the collective, entered Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in the month prior to Russia's 2012 election to film a performance entitled *Mother of God, Get Rid of Putin*. Convicted of hooliganism and sentenced to two years in a penal colony, the sentencing judge condemned the activists for the 'danger to society caused by the offense committed, as well as the circumstances of the crime and its goals and motives.'¹

Within the context of a political climate that situates incarceration as a demonstrably real consequence of cultural protest, the desire for personal anonymity seems self-explanatory. In many instances of politically motivated cultural and artistic protest however, the decision to remain nameless is one made less from the point of view of safety than as a politicised interrogation of the authority of the signature itself. The concept of individual anonymity, which has been adopted

in many cases in partnership with a collective method of working, has often been utilised to position specific instances of cultural production in opposition to high art conventions.

In order to examine the ways in which activist art collectives have challenged the power of the individual artistic producer, it is vital to first gain an understanding of the representational power held by the authenticating signature. This power developed primarily during the Renaissance when the force of humanism placed the individual firmly at the centre of our worldview. Influenced by Vasari's biographical privileging of the individual artistic genius, the canon of western art has ever since been dominated by the cult of the artist as personality. In his discussion of the history of the discipline of attribution, Roskill argues that we 'tend to see art correspondingly as the aggregate of the work of particular gifted individuals. We want to know about their personalities and assess their careers...it was during the Renaissance that artists themselves began to be aware that art was the expression of personality.'² This attitude

long influenced the dissemination and reception of western artistic production. It was not until the mid-twentieth century, with the broad scale interrogation of the notion of authorial truth occurring in the field of linguistics, that the power granted to the personality of the individual artistic producer began to be questioned.

Barthes, in his seminal 1967 essay *The Death of The Author*, powerfully outlines what had long been the dominant attitude towards the individual creator as the authoritative voice of artistic truth: that artworks are created in part to mediate a personal relationship between the author, and the reader. During the latter half of the twentieth century a critical discourse emerged which engaged with these underlying assumptions, questioning 'notions of authenticity, originals, and origins.'³ Rosalind Krauss argues that:

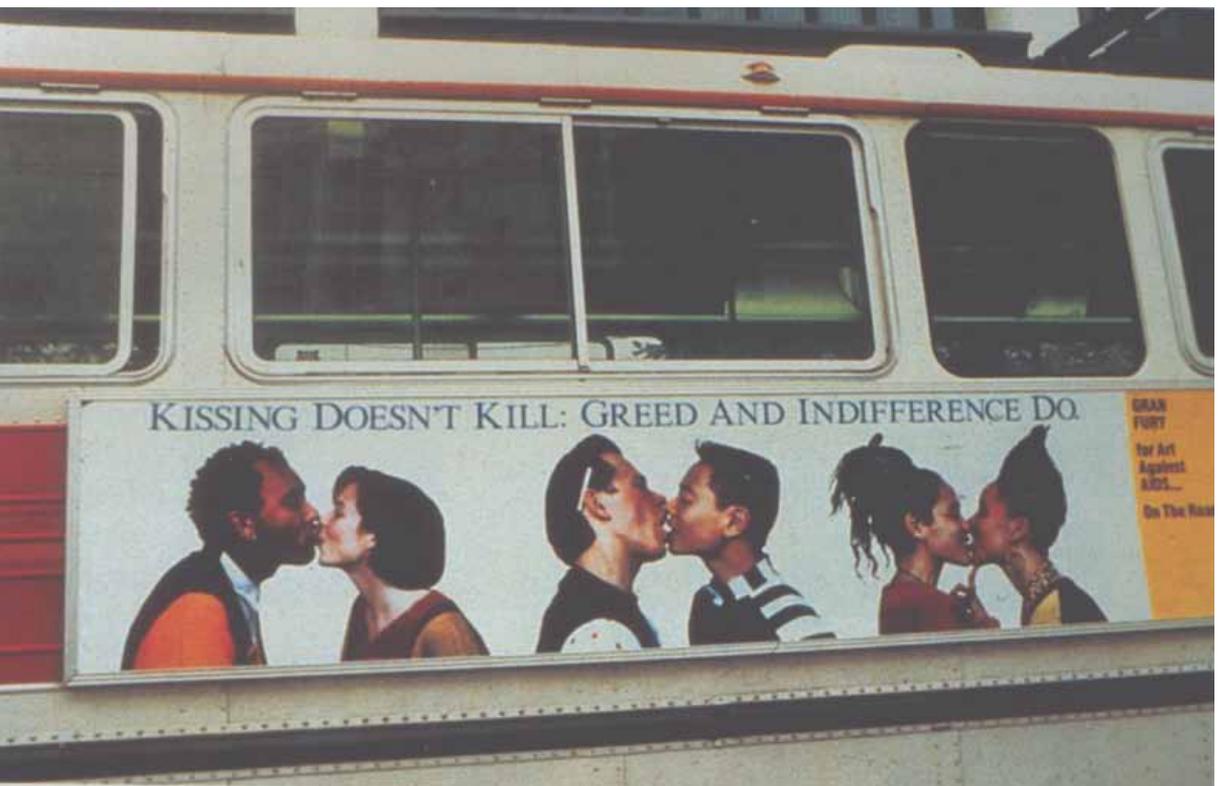
... the avant-garde artist above all claims originality as his right—his birthright so to speak. With his own self as the origin of his work, that production will have the same uniqueness as he; the condition of his own singularity will guarantee the originality of what he makes.⁴

By refusing acceptance of this myth of authorial intention, and proposing instead the notion that 'a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination,'⁵ we can begin to question the privileged place occupied by the concept of the unique artistic genius.

By signing works under an assumed group name, rather than attributing creative production to distinct individuals, artistic collectives have the potential to

subvert the primacy of the authors as outlined by Barthes and Krauss. In 1988 one such collective coalesced around the issue of AIDS awareness in New York. Originating from within the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), a creative group formed to produce a distinctive graphic campaign that sought to take AIDS awareness directly to the streets of New York. Gran Fury named their collective after the specific car used by the New York Police Department; the name also acted as a constant linguistic reminder of the role that anger played in their genesis. 'Outraged by the government's mismanagement of the AIDS crisis'⁶ ACT UP and Gran Fury alike aimed to counter this mismanagement with their own campaign of direct action and visual protest with the primary goals of awareness and education. In creating a published body of visual work, Gran Fury firmly positioned itself as an activist organisation. Like many such organisations their motivation to work collectively can be interpreted in part as a desire to eradicate—through the forging of a democratic organising structure—the dogmatic sense of authority believed to be inherent in traditional hierarchical systems of power. Although they did not opt for anonymity in the strictest sense of the definition, the decision to name Gran Fury as the creator of imagery ensured that the individual identity of each member was subsumed within the whole of the collective.

Loring McAlpin, a member of Gran Fury, explains that at the time of their formation 'AIDS was turning into a huge catastrophe, and there was no adequate public response. So there was a space for some kind of voice to raise questions. None of us had any doubts that we had



Gran Fury, *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, 1989.

to be there.¹⁷ The voice created by Gran Fury was not that of an authoritative individual, but one which found expression through the visual language of mass-media: posters, billboards and bus advertisements. The type of response that these images aimed to provoke was one of direct communication with the viewers who freely encountered them within a public arena. Their content only attained meaning when experienced and interpreted by the viewer—it was the reader, rather than the author, for whom the artwork spoke.

Typical of Gran Fury's direct visual style, and designed to directly engage with the public, was the 1989 work *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, which was disseminated in many openly accessible forms, including on postcards and as bus advertisements. This refusal to bestow originality or priority upon a specific iteration of an image is typical of Gran Fury's practice. As part of a public art project called Art Against AIDS On the Road the image was distributed 'on buses and subway platforms in San Francisco, Chicago, New York, and Washington, DC.'¹⁸ Linguistically the message has been pared back to its most direct form. *Kissing Doesn't Kill* tells the viewer literally that: contrary to rumour and commonly perpetuated misinformation, AIDS cannot be transmitted through the act of kissing.

By consciously adopting the aesthetic of advertising, Gran Fury appropriated a visual style commonly used to sell commodities, in order to distribute information. Their advertising-style aesthetic was so visually distinctive and effective that they claim it was appropriated directly by the multinational clothing company United Colours

of Benetton for their own corporate advertising purposes. In 1995 Gran Fury wrote 'we had been contacted by a researcher from Benetton who asked for examples of our work, saying they would be considered for inclusion in the magazine; instead, they reworked our strategies, skewing them in a surreal direction with little or no context in which to interpret the images or statistics.'¹⁹ Whatever the accuracies may be in this instance, it is clear that by utilising a direct aesthetic that is instantly recognisable to a public fluent in the consumption of mass-media imagery, Gran Fury do share one key aim with such corporations: to reach the largest audience possible.

Kissing Doesn't Kill depicts the head-and-shoulder profiles of three kissing couples, all of whom are dressed in brightly coloured clothes and placed against a blank white background. The lack of any additional visual information prevents the viewer from attempting to impose a narrative upon these figures. Each couple is placed evenly within the picture space, with no compositional disparity to draw attention to any particular couple; there is no hierarchy of size or position indicating to the viewer that any one of these couples is of more importance to us than the other. Gran Fury's decision not to portray a heterosexual white couple within the image, acts to normalise the visibility of both mixed race and same sex partnerships within the public space of everyday life.

If, as Paula Treichler argues, AIDS is in fact an epidemic of signification as much as it is a disease, then works like *Kissing Doesn't Kill* can be read as an acknowledgement of the fact that

'symbolic and social reconceptualizations of AIDS are necessary.'¹⁰ It could be argued that this work was created as part of an effort to symbolically reconceptualise preconceived notions about AIDS transmission that were widely circulating in the early days of the crisis. Treichler's article was roughly contemporaneous with *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, and states that at the time of writing many people believed that 'you can "catch" AIDS through casual contact, such as sitting beside an infected person on a bus.'¹¹ The atmosphere of paranoia and fear that characterised the debate around the illness attached significant connotations of danger to casual acts of everyday contact in public spaces. Gran Fury's work exists as a challenge to the discourse of seriousness and danger surrounding these simple gestures. The kisses represented here are not romanticised grand gestures existing within an imagined or implied narrative; instead they are the spontaneous expression of joy or desire, safe enough to be taken lightly.

As Ann Cvetkovich wrote in her essay *Video, Aids and Activism*:

'Strategies for cultural activism go beyond simply providing information; they include the analysis and critique of how representations and information are produced and attention to the form in which information is presented, not just its content.'¹²

These celebratory representations of mixed race and same sex couples openly engaging in an act many believed to be responsible for disease transmission, alongside bold capitalised information

that directly challenges this assumption, are intended to interrogate many preconceived prejudices the viewer encountering this work may hold. The placement of the image upon buses and subway platforms is, of course, significant. Reproducibility is key to the effectiveness of their work; the concept of the original becomes superfluous when the aim is to insinuate an image as widely into the public consciousness as possible. Display of these images through public transport networks was another example of Gran Fury directing their work at a widespread audience. Established as an activist organisation, the collective initially distributed much of their work in poster form on the city's streets, going so far as to refer to themselves as 'wheat-pasting hooligans.'¹³ Although these guerrilla dissemination techniques were superseded by more coherent and well funded methods relatively quickly, the principle of staging direct visual interventions in public space remained core to their methodology.

As the denial of an authoritative individual signature acts to dispute elements of the value system by which the art world operates, so too does the choice to pass over the gallery as the primary means of display and work instead in public environments. The concept of value attached to a signed authentic original artwork has long dominated our cultural landscape, but for Gran Fury the opposite holds true. Douglas Crimp has acknowledged the restrictions of the art world in relation to raising awareness in specific relation to AIDS. He points out that 'if we think about art in relation to the AIDS epidemic—in relation, that is, to the communities most drastically affected by AIDS, especially

the poor and minority communities where AIDS is spreading much faster than elsewhere – we will realize that no work made within the confines of the art world as it is currently constituted will reach these people.’¹⁴ If Gran Fury’s aim was to provide a voice in order to open a critical dialogue surrounding the representation of AIDS, then it is apparent that a fundamental requirement for the method of display is that it be located in a space allowing the most widespread visibility possible. The specific audience drawn to the gallery network of the conventional art world would seem restrictive enough to rule these environments out. However, this assertion is complicated by the fact that it was an opportunity to display work within this very system that created what perhaps became the most highly visible international platform upon which Gran Fury’s work was ever displayed.

In 1990 Gran Fury participated in the Venice Biennale, showing a piece entitled *The Pope and the Penis*. Initially they had also hoped to create visual interventions in the streets of Venice to be seen by members of the public who did not attend the Biennale; McAlpin explained that:

We had wanted to hang banners in the street, remember? And they said, “No, you can’t do that.” And there was a moment when we wondered whether it was enough for us to just be inside an art institution, but we decided it was a public enough venue to merit doing it.¹⁵

How can their efforts to forge a space for politically engaged activist art outside of the gallery system of signification be reconciled with this inclusion of their work within the art establishment? The public

nature of the venue, and the international press attention that the event inevitably attracts, acted in part as motivation enough for their involvement. It is also clear from even a cursory examination of the provocative work that they created for the event that Gran Fury decided to monopolise upon the particularities of the exhibiting environment to instigate a very specific debate. Displaying their work in Italy, the home of the Catholic Church, Gran Fury used the opportunity to take unequivocal aim at the Pope in relation to condom use and AIDS transmission.

Shunning conventional high art media, Gran Fury produced two billboard sized posters that stylistically would not have appeared out of place on an advertising hoarding. The content, however, was both confrontational and direct, and acted to challenge the pervasive association within AIDS discourse between the disease and immorality. Treichler convincingly argues that part of the ‘appeal of thinking of AIDS as a “gay disease” is that it protects not only the sexual practices of heterosexuality but also its ideological superiority.’¹⁶ *The Pope and The Penis* challenges both the premise that AIDS is a “gay disease” and the moralising ideology that perpetuates this mythology. Emblazoned upon a bright yellow billboard in black capital letters several feet tall reads the text: ‘Sexism rears its unprotected head. Men use condoms or beat it. AIDS kills women.’ Depicted in considerably larger font than the rest of the message are the words ‘men’ and ‘women’, immediately challenging the notion that it is only gay men who exist within the AIDS narrative. At the centre of the billboard, framed within a free floating blue square, is a two foot depiction of an erect, unprotected

penis. The only other pictorial image included within the two billboards is a representation of the Pope, visually reiterating the alliterative pairing explicitly stated in the title of the piece. The intended result appears to suggest that no doubt remains in the mind of the viewer; that in some way or another, there is a link between these images.

The terms of this link are expanded upon within the text of the partnering billboard. Compositionally referencing the triptych format prevalent within religious works, the image is divided into three equally sized panels, yet the content of these panels serve to subvert the traditional connotations of religiosity inherent in this compositional form. The central panel contains a depiction of the Pope with words representative of the Catholic Church's position on the AIDS crisis: 'good morality is good medicine'. The two flanking panels consist of white text upon a blue background, which serve to deconstruct the myth of morality depicted within the central panel:

'By holding medicine hostage to Catholic morality and withholding information which allows people to protect themselves and each other from acquiring the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, the Church seeks to punish all who do not share in its peculiar version of the human experience ... AIDS is caused by a virus and a virus has no morals.'

It is this dismissal of the position expounded by the Church, along with the provision of accurate information relating to the importance of protected sex, that this work seeks to foreground. It is the message, rather than the

medium that takes priority. As can be seen from the photograph taken during the installation process, the work is not treated as a precious object—the strips that remain to be hung are lying on the floor unprotected. This refusal to fetishise the artwork, despite its placement within a gallery environment, can be seen as an essential aspect of Gran Fury's work, exemplified in all aspects of their artistic practice from the mass reproducibility of their images to their collective method of working.

As with many collective endeavours, Gran Fury had a relatively short working life. Seven years after their formation, the social and political landscape surrounding AIDS had altered dramatically. In part due to Gran Fury's efforts to raise awareness about disease transmission and to open up rational dialogue about the crisis, the initial and urgent need to disseminate information was superseded by a more complex discussion surrounding issues such as drug funding and provision. As they themselves admitted 'Gran Fury's original strategies were unable to communicate the complexities of AIDS issues in the mid-1990s.'¹⁷

However, this was not the final chapter for Gran Fury. In 2013 a retrospective exhibition of their work was held at 80 Washington Square East, a gallery within New York University. If the AIDS crisis that Gran Fury worked with such urgency to engage with had ceased to carry the same sense of immediate danger, in what way can a re-presentation of their work be considered timely? It could be argued that the present-day face of public protest is one unified by the notion of collective anonymity. From Pussy Riot, to the Arab



Gran Fury, *The Pope and the Penis*, 1990, installation view, Venice Biennale.

Spring and the #Occupy movement, the challenges being made to structures of power in the early years of this century have been made by the collective, rather than the individual. Gran Fury, whose artistic practice sought to challenge not only the representative construction of AIDS, but also many conventional notions of artistic originality and authorship surely occupy a space within this particular politicised discourse.

1. Masha Gessen, *Words Will Break Cement: The Passion of Pussy Riot* (London: Granta Publications, 2014), 221-2.
2. Mark Roskill, *What is Art History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), 19.
3. Rosalind Krauss, 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde' in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1985), 162.
4. *Ibid.*, 160.
5. Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' in *Image Music Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 148.
6. ACT UP, 'Capsule History 1987', URL: <http://www.actupny.org/documents/cron-87.html> (accessed 31 July 2014).
7. 'Gran Fury, talks to Douglas Crimp', *Artforum*, April 2003, URL: http://www.actupny.org/indexfolder/GRAN%20FURY_on_ARTFORUM.pdf (accessed 28 July 2014).
8. *Ibid.*
9. Gran Fury, 'Good Luck ... Miss You', 1995, URL: <http://www.actupny.org/indexfolder/GranFury1.html> (accessed 1 August 2014).
10. Paula A. Treichler, 'AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification', *October*, Vol. 43, Winter 1987, 31-70, 69.
11. Treichler, 34.
12. Ann Cvetkovich, 'Video, AIDS, and Activism' in ed. Grant H. Kester, *Art, Activism and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 183.
13. 'Gran Fury talks to Douglas Crimp.'
14. Douglas Crimp, 'AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism', *October*, Vol. 43, Winter 1987, 3-16, 12.
15. 'Gran Fury talks to Douglas Crimp.'
16. Treichler, 49.
17. Gran Fury, 'Good Luck ... Miss You.'