



Jeanne Vaccaro on Steven Evans: *Songs for a Memorial*

The notion of a time *before AIDS* seems to contain within the permeability of timescales and the impossibility of distinctions like before and after. In *Songs for a Memorial*, artist Steven Evans presses play on the infinite track of cultural memory as the sounds and sensations of history blink bright neon.

Songs for a Memorial is a public offering, a site-specific artwork made for the city space designated the New York City AIDS Memorial at St. Vincent's Triangle, a corner of the West Village that instantly summons an inflection point—the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion, raucous ACT UP demonstrations, cruising, racist and transphobic policing and surveillance, and gentrification. Whose space is this ultimately, and whose history does it reflect? Evans receives the potential overwhelm of an infinite and anonymous audience and transforms it into abundance, crafting a public artwork that begins from the premise that St. Vincent's Triangle is a psychic landscape as much as it is a physical geography. The community conjured and invited here is both vast and unknowable, and as a memorial to AIDS no demographic container can withstand its multitudes of history and experience.

A loving and public arrangement of feelings, times, and places, *Songs for a Memorial* explores the collision and crescendo of gay liberation, disco fever, and the early years of the ongoing AIDS epidemic. Evans wrangles this unwieldy range of historical encounters and felt memories and illuminates them, expanding his longstanding practice of working with lyric as gay iconography. As a temporary monument, *Songs for a Memorial* is an enclosure open to the sky and to interpretation. It weaves language and memory, text and feeling, in LED sculptures that function as “concrete poetry.”

The monument generates a playlist for public contemplation of AIDS histories, evoking the amorous chaos of a dancefloor. Appropriating iconic song titles like Sylvester's “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real),” Evans insists on memory as an embodied practice—leaning into the kinetic and sometimes sweaty working-it-out that happens after dark. Once judged an unworthy object of scholarship, queer of color theory insisted on recognizing nightlife as a form of survival, or what the late queer theorist José Muñoz called *worldmaking*. While ephemeral, Muñoz saw nightlife as an exuberant and ecstatic instance of belonging in resistance, a psychic and affective space to undo racist, homophobic, and transphobic culture while reimagining social connectivity. Theorist and DJ Madison Moore has identified the sonic and spatial experiences on the dancefloor as expressions of Black queer survival, encouraging us to turn up the volume on somatic knowledge in both the club and the classroom.

In *Songs for a Memorial*, ghosts of nightlife past cohabitate with the present as a favorite disco track or pop anthem lays the connective tissue for intergenerational memory. The installation defamiliarizes heteronormative associations of love and romance, installing in its place a cultural memorial to collective and public feelings and emotions of mass mourning.

Take, for example, Thelma Houston's 1977 Motown hit *Don't Leave Me This Way*.

*Don't leave me this way
I can't survive
I can't stay alive
Without your love
Oh baby
Don't...leave me this way*

The letters d—o—n—t release slowly, crystalizing into the word *don't*. The intensity of the command—*don't!*—amplifies into a mournful rage at a public health crisis and government neglect. The words “I can't stay alive without your love,” no longer signify a romantic entanglement, but gesture to the lack of government response to a pandemic.

I was not born at the right time to recall—from *actual* memory—the emotional geography that *Songs for a Memorial* puts on display. I was born within days of the Center for Disease Control's first published account of what would come to be called AIDS. (The June 5, 1981 issue of the CDC's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly* reported five cases of *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia among “previously healthy young men in Los Angeles.” All of the men were described as “homosexuals,” and two had already died.) Because I have aged in parallel with this epidemic, it is difficult to untangle what's mine and what's historical.

This heady phenomenon is what queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman calls *erotohistoriography*, proposing that “contact with historical materials can be precipitated by particular bodily dispositions, and that these connections may elicit bodily responses, even pleasurable ones, that are themselves a form of understanding.” *Songs for a Memorial* insists that the work of *remembering* AIDS is not a backward-looking endeavor. By emphasizing the felt register of memory, its plasticity, how it swerves and misses, how accuracy is neither its aim nor within its reach, the demarcation of before and after fades, feels false. Memory is less like a printed image than the cloudy liquid bath that fixes a picture into focus. The process that unfolds in the darkroom, the intermediary space between the camera's capture and the production of an image, is infinitely more technical than memory which is far too fluid to be reproducible.

For many queers of many different generations, the history of AIDS is embedded in our memory, its history stitched to our own. With *Songs for a Memorial*, Evans collages and collapses the senses and sensations that generate memory. His is an embodied and collective feeling—one that makes expansive and democratic the notion of having been there.

Jeanne Vacarro is a scholar-curator at the ONE Archives, and faculty in the Department of Gender and Sexuality Studies at the University of Southern California. She received her Ph.D. in Performance Studies at New York University under the mentorship of José Muñoz. Her book in process, *Handmade: Feelings and Textures of Transgender*, considers the felt labor of making identity and was awarded the Arts Writers Grant by Creative Capital | the Andy Warhol Foundation. She is also the recipient of the Alan Bérubé prize for outstanding LGBT public history awarded by the American Historical Association. Jeanne is co-editor, with Joan Lubin, of a special issue of *Social Text* on the afterlives of American sexology, and she has published scholarly writing and art criticism in *GLQ*, *Radical History Review*, *Trap Door*, *BOMB Magazine*, among other venues. She was a *Queer | Art* curatorial fellow, and serves on the advisory board of NYC LGBT Center's archive. With AJ Lewis she co-founded and co-organizes the New York City Trans Oral History Project, a community archive partnership with the New York Public Library.

Steven Evans: *Songs for a Memorial* is on view at the New York City AIDS Memorial from June 1 – September 6, 2022. For more information, visit www.nycaidsmemorial.org/songs.