

When Art Catalyzed Both Community and Treatment

Ivy Kwan Arce is a Chinese American activist and artist. Diagnosed as HIV positive in 1990, she has fought for HIV/AIDS causes with AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), Treatment Action Group, People With AIDS Health Group, Asian Pacific Islander Coalition on HIV/AIDS, and God's Love We Deliver. She fought for access to medication, clinical trials, and prevention measures such as pre-exposure prophylaxis, or PrEP. As a federal HIV and AIDS Planning Council member from 1995 to 1999, she distributed Ryan White Title I funds to patients. A Whitney Biennial 2022 featured artist, she is married with two HIV-negative children.

Kwan Arce was invited to curate a collection from the archives of Visual AIDS, an organization that uses art as a “catalyst to engage public response, dialogue, and scholarship around HIV/AIDS.” The following is an excerpt from her statement accompanying that collection, named 最初, lxs primerxs, 第一, the firsts.



ANTONIO LOPEZ, *Tina Chow Wearing Fortuny*, 1975, Kodak Instamatics. Courtesy of the estate of Antonio Lopez and Juan Ramos.



KEITH HARING, *Ignorance = Fear*, 1989, offset lithograph, 24 x 43.25 inches. Keith Haring artwork © Keith Haring Foundation.



My HIV-positive diagnosis was in 1990. I was infected in 1989. I am documenting my experience by focusing on the first wave of people with AIDS (PWA)—my guiding lights—who became the first public servants by choice, courage, and destiny. They fought for survival and expanded solutions for AIDS as well as other diseases like cancer and COVID-19. Here is the work of some of the individuals I knew and those I didn't, but whose lives and work shaped my odds.

The PWAs who were part of the first wave formed organizations and support groups such as ACT UP and Treatment Action Group. These organizations brought people together, provided a sense of community and empowerment, and pushed government and science to develop solutions for long-term survival and prevention.

The invitation to curate for Visual AIDS gave me an opportunity to dissect that period of my life. Although early public and government messages around AIDS said that only a few people were being affected and were generally in the gay male community, there were other first responders doing work that saved lives, prevented infections, and created new pathways to change science. In sharing those connections, I am extending the footprint of their unique, brave legacies.

The first HIV-positive person I met was Antonio Lopez, when he did an illustration workshop at ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena, California, where I was a student. I had heard during the workshop that Antonio had AIDS—"that thing that Rock Hudson had." I did not really know what that meant because Antonio looked "normal" and in good health.

In late November 1989, Keith Haring came to ArtCenter to paint a mural for "A Day Without Art." He spoke about running out of time and said he purposely chose art schools as the locations for his last works. The mural was commemorated on December 1, the second annual World AIDS Day. He told the *Los Angeles Times*, "My life is my art, it's intertwined. When AIDS became a reality in terms of my life, it started becoming a subject in my paintings. The more it affected my life the more it affected my work."



THE NAME OF THE GAME

HIV is the name of the game, to beat this thing you got to do your part, have a strong will and love in your heart.

Make your doctor get on down, don't let anyone push you around! Don't stress out, it will mess up your T-cell count.

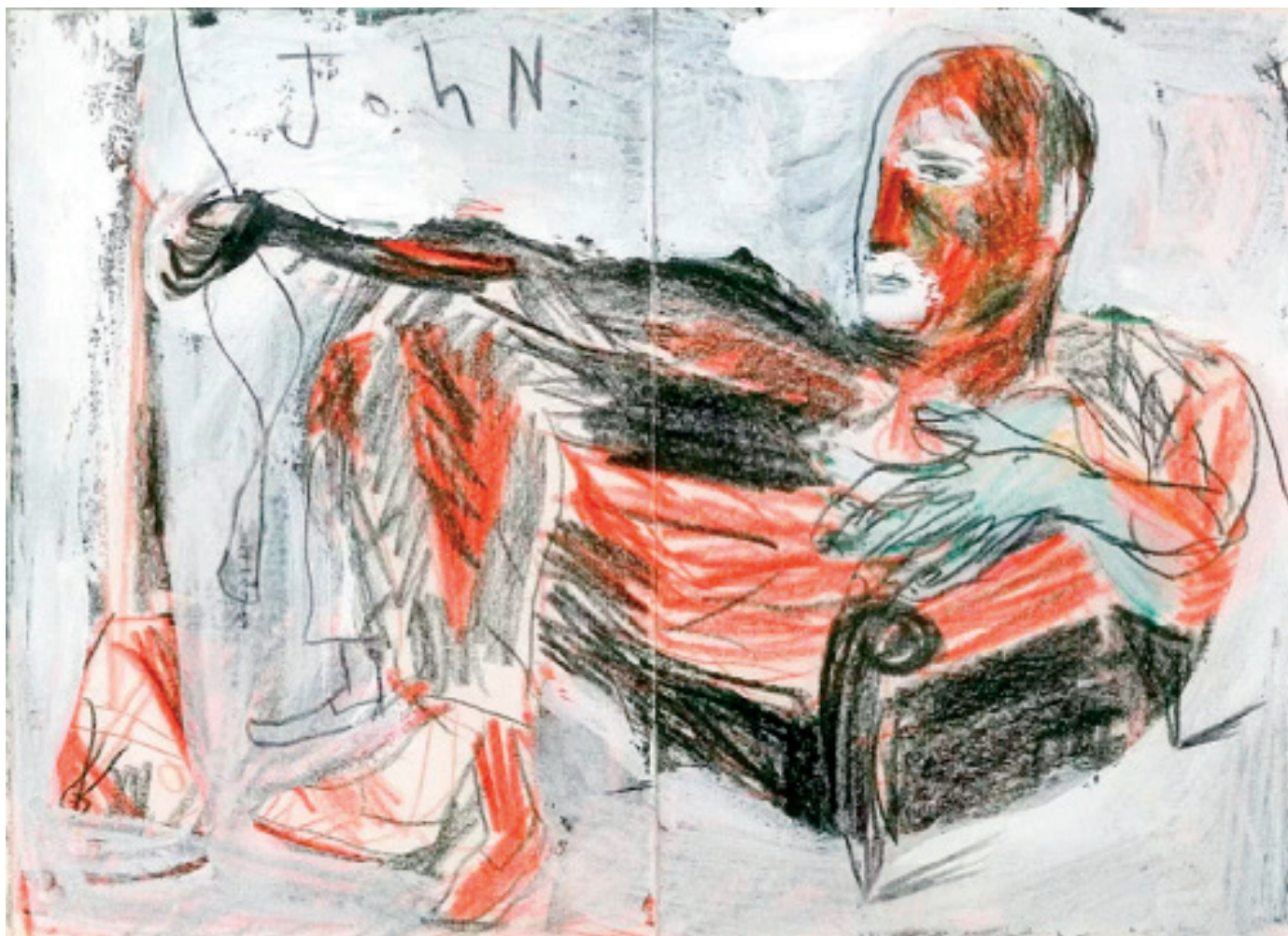
Stress is the number one killer for people like you and me. From stress we must be free.

Take care of yourself, get plenty of exercise, don't you ever think of dying.

This is not a death sentence so clear your head. The meaning of HIV, is not dead!

Joann Walker
Chowchilla, California

JOANN WALKER, *The Name of the Game*, early 1990s, Coalition to Support Women Prisoners at Chowchilla flyer. Drawing and design unknown, text by Joann Walker. Courtesy of the Judy Greenspan Papers, The LGBT Community Center National History Archive.



JUAN SUÁREZ BOTAS, *Untitled (notebook drawing)*, early 1990s, mixed media on paper. Drawing of a friend at a HIV treatment center. Museo Casa Natal de Jovellanos collection, Gijón, Spain.

After my diagnosis, I went to the Manhattan Center for Living, a safe gathering place for people diagnosed with HIV. I met Tina Chow there, the first HIV-positive woman I had met who was also Asian and straight. She happened to be Antonio Lopez's muse and she was also friends with Keith Haring. In her own right she was a model, jewelry designer, and style icon. At the end of Antonio's life, Tina took care of him.

Another person I crossed paths in the early days was Juan Suárez Botas, a freelance illustrator and designer from Spain, who was my coworker at graphic designer Milton Glaser's design firm. In this tight web, Tina, Juan and I were patients of Dr. Paul Bellman, an internist who cared for thousands of HIV-positive people from 1986 onward. But after losing Tina and Juan, I could not shake the thought that if Dr. Bellman could not save them, he definitely would not save me. When they passed away, I left immediately. It's a hard thing to share because a lot of people loved Dr. Bellman.



Together, many communities modeled a pathway for mutual care. In Chowchilla, California, the Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) was an exclusively female prison. Due to the absence of HIV/AIDS treatment and inadequate health care, women were dying from easily treatable health conditions.

Joann Walker, an advocate for the compassionate release of Betty Jo Ross, who was dying of AIDS at the CCWF, worked with the Coalition to Support Women Prisoners at Chowchilla. They collaborated with Judy Greenspan and other members of the ACT UP San Francisco's Prison Issues Committee to hold prison officials accountable. The graphics they created to mobilize were self-distributed.

DAVID MCDIARMID, *HIV+*, c. 1991, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 74.2 x 56.5 inches. Courtesy of the estate of David McDiarmid.

GIN LOUIE, *untitled 2* (*Physicians' Desk Reference*), 1993, book with brass plumb bob, glass disks, watch face, tin compass, glass bottles with miniature boats and shell, glass marbles, and plastic magnifying glass. Collection of Eve Sinaiko, New York.





FELICIANO CENTURIÓN, *Luz divina del alma* [Divine Light of the Soul], c. 1996, hand-embroidered pillow, 8.75 x 14.94 x 2.875 inches. Courtesy Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, museum purchase with funds provided by Donald R. Mullins Jr., 2004.174.

Ivy Kwan Arce's words and curation for Visual AIDS describe how a community of activists and patients used art as an organizing tool to create a political movement that advocated for new treatments and new policies that changed the trajectory of the AIDS epidemic. Her statement underscores the ways that art can be a catalyst for community connections and can provide a platform for initiating change in science, medicine, and society at large. Visual AIDS was founded to continue and enhance the advocacy developed by the community to address the related issues exacerbated by the epidemic, including poverty, racism, and homophobia.