

Forgetting: A Critical Examination of AIDS Memorials

Shawn Diamond

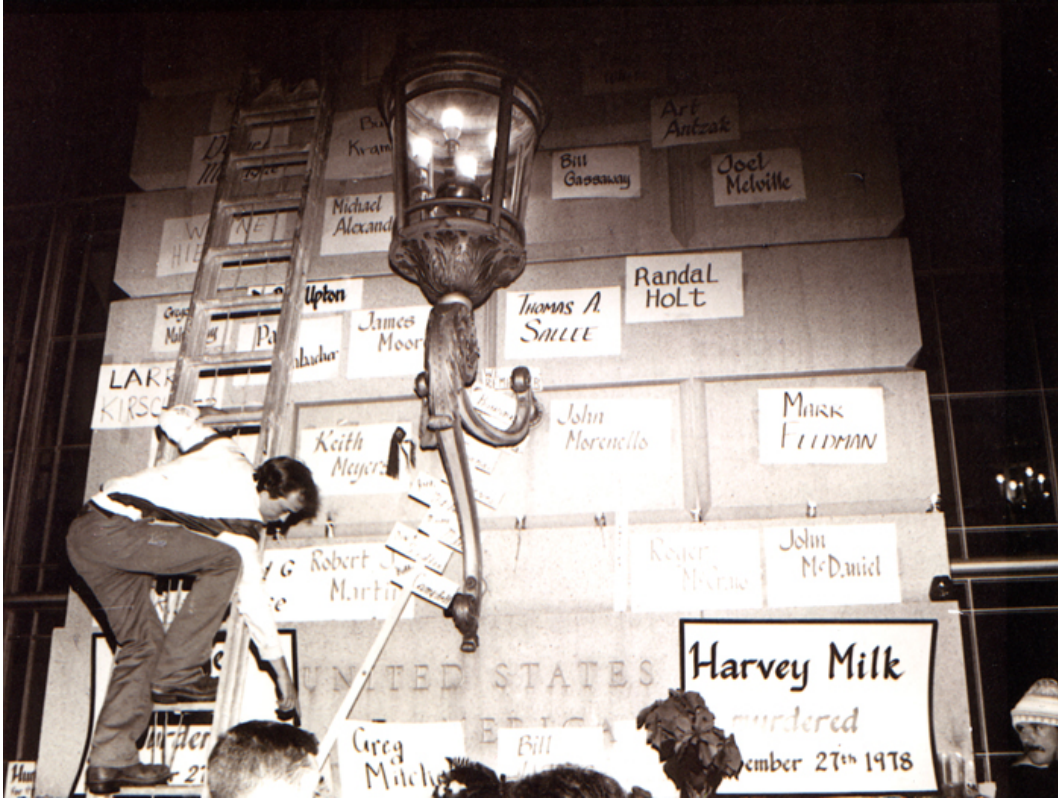


Figure 1. Placards posted during the 1985 San Francisco Candlelight Vigil to Harvey Milk, 1985. Photo credit: The NAMES Project.

There have been *hundreds* of AIDS memorials produced around the world.¹ For this assessment I offer a critical look at three of the most famous and diverse memorial projects. The first is The NAMES Project—an ongoing quilting project that was one of the earliest AIDS memorials. The second is Day Without Art, an event initialized by Visual AIDS and later renamed Day With(out) Art, and its shorter-lived complimentary occurrence, Night without Lights. Finally, I will offer a critique of the newest large-

scale HIV/AIDS memorial, the recent structure outside of New York City's St. Vincent's Hospital, The New York City AIDS Memorial.

By exploring these disparate memorial projects, I evaluate the significance of each piece in terms of what it asserts in terms of remembrance or forgetting by posing the following questions: Why was the memorial created?, Who or what does it memorialize?, and What is it meant to achieve? In short, I offer a study situated in relation to what ideologies

underlie the representational strategies of HIV/AIDS memorials through the framework of Paula Treichler's argument about the power of "sites of knowledge . . . and regimes of credibility in terms of the right to define the reality of HIV and AIDS."² I do not attempt to entirely celebrate or disparage the importance of any of these memorials, for each in their own way has affected someone, thereby making it successful. My intention is instead to critically examine the way in which they exist and thereby what histories and futures of an ongoing disease they project.

Memorials are most often seen as ways in which one can create structures of remembering. The idea therein lies that if one were to see a memorial they would remember the deaths/atrocities/damage caused by an event. In his book, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, James E. Young posits that being forced to remember is perhaps not the true objective of memorials and monuments: "To the extent that we encourage monuments to do our memory-work for us, we become that much more forgetful. In effect, the initial impulse to memorialize events like the Holocaust may actually spring from an opposite and equal desire to forget them."³ Here, Young argues that the idea of 'constructed remembrance' allows us a possible scapegoat in the form of amnesia. We can become desensitized to what we pass every day, thereby fulfilling our humane duty of remembering while also fulfilling our ideological agendas.

HIV/AIDS memorials risk becoming a mechanism which offer forms of pacification and manipulation when they should work to mourn or agitate. We are told the era of AIDS has passed, and now we can safely forget the proximity of the situation and experience that people still

face day to day, having lost their lovers. It is impressed upon us that HIV/AIDS is a thing of the past and is restricted to a fragment of *queer* American history. Yet, HIV/AIDS is far from over. With adamant and tragically misinformed campaigns to end AIDS by 2030, there seems little hope for an ending at all. We already face what so many feared: absences. According to the 2016 Global AIDS Update published by the World Health Organization and UNAIDS, the number of people living with HIV has increased by 3.4 million between 2010 and 2015. The number of AIDS-related deaths, in contrast, has only decreased by 400,000 people globally in the same span of time.⁴ Amongst these statistics we must ask what purpose a memorial has. Are they an attempt to sweep America's genocidal involvement in the spread of AIDS under a rug woven of nationalism and protestant ideals, and if so, are we playing into this ruse? In his activism Gore Vidal goes so far as to call the country "The United States of Amnesia," describing our freedom as Americans to consciously forget elements of history that trouble our nationalistic pride.⁵

The conception of The NAMES Project has its roots in the 1985 candlelight vigil for slain gay rights activist Harvey Milk. During the vigil the historical successes of the queer community were celebrated while contemporary issues, such as HIV/AIDS, were acknowledged. Those in the procession attached placards to San Francisco's old Federal Building with the names of family and friends who had passed from AIDS-related causes (fig. 1). Activist Cleve Jones claims this collage of names, as both memory and expression of the agony still suffered by the living, was the genesis of the project's quilt: "Let's take all of the individual experiences and stitch them together to make something

that has strength and beauty.”⁶ Just two years later the first forty patches were displayed in June at San Francisco’s Lesbian and Gay Freedom Day Parade.⁷

Today the quilt has over forty-eight thousand patches that are no longer exhibited together due to the magnitude of their composite dimensions (fig. 2).⁸ Individually, these patches are three feet by six feet—reminiscent of the size of a coffin.⁹ There are no precise regulations one must abide by when making a patch for the deceased, as evidenced by the inclusion of personal materials, ranging from clothes to stuffed animals, among the already-existing works. While names of the deceased are often included on the patch, some patches remain anonymous through the use of nicknames or a desire for privacy.



Figure 2. Quilt squares from the AIDS Memorial Quilt fill the National Mall, Washington D.C., National Institutes of Health (Public Domain; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aids_Quilt.jpg).

This quilt gained great momentum in its early years. It provided a place for the living to grieve and reflect. While the quilt presents the names of those who have passed, mourning is for the living. The mission of The NAMES Project

Foundation is “to preserve, care for and use The AIDS Memorial Quilt to foster healing, advance social justice and inspire action in the age of AIDS and beyond.”¹⁰ Its effectiveness in its early years is immeasurable. The quilt has garnered vast amounts of attention and has raised incalculable donations to HIV/AIDS charities. Families and friends of the deceased have been comforted by the space provided to mourn, free of stigma, as well as the very personal act of creating and “letting go” of a patch. My reservations about the project lie not in its past success, but in its future.

The NAMES Project still continues to grow, with the foundation receiving an average of one new patch a day, but does it only gain attention from those willing to listen?¹¹ The quilt can be called gentle, if not passive, in its design; it is a warm soft material meant to comfort. When shown as a single quilt, it is often displayed on the ground—flat and weight-bearing despite interfering with a viewer’s space.¹² In our contemporary society of radical upheaval that parallels the Reagan years, many would admonish this memorial as flimsy and utopian when

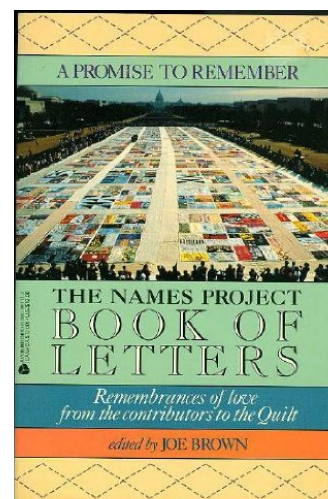


Figure 3. Tom Alleman, Cover of *A Promise To Remember: The NAMES Project Book of Letters* (New York: Avon Books, 1992).

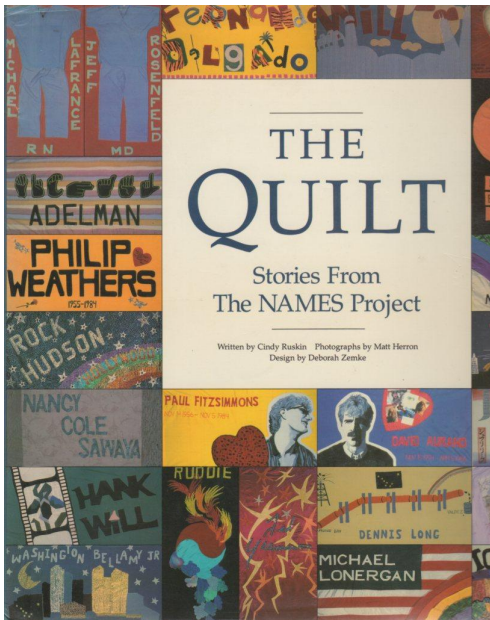


Figure 4. Matt Herron, Cover of *The Quilt: Stories from The NAMES Project* (New York: Pocket Books, 1988).

more aggressive and active forms of activism may be necessary as the disease continues to spread at alarming rates.

In its conception, a quilt can be read as dated, or, as belonging to a certain period of HIV/AIDS history, especially in contemporary times. Even the covers of books concerning the quilt, such as *The Names Project: Book of Letters*, features a flesh-colored background with faded pastels of pink, blue, and turquoise (figs. 3, 4). It may seem unwise, if not unfair, to analyze the covers of books *about* the project, but for the everyday person—the person unable to experience the quilt firsthand—these are the documents in which they encounter the quilt. From its original conception little has changed regarding how the quilt functions. This inability to transform itself in reaction to the changing political discourses around the disease allows one to disregard the quilt as dated and makes it easier to forget the urgency and action needed as the disease continues to spread.

While it is necessary to note that aggression is *not* the point of the quilt, the persistence of the epidemic seems to suggest a need for—at the least—an additional call to arms that a quilt cannot offer. The quilt was never made to be a radical activist project but is instead a liberal project aspiring to offer a way in which those whose grief was forbidden by social taboos could mourn. Whether current AIDS activism carries the same weight it previously held is a matter of debate. While The NAMES Project Foundation receives thousands of student visitors every year, the quilt admittedly is often used as a launchpad to other social issues.¹³ Perhaps it is the lack of taboo which allows us to discount the reality of AIDS and treat it as something of the past through passivity afforded by years of desensitizing. I do not suggest we need to reassociate HIV/AIDS with queer or racial stereotypes; that has proved destructive and dangerous. I *do* insist that we need to revitalize the public's disdain for the disease. The faltering perspectives of the pandemic's severity is surely in part due to the idea that a person can live a full lifetime with cART (combination antiretroviral treatment, or “the cocktail”). This view ignores the dangers, sickness, and obstacles a person with HIV still faces daily, despite being on medicine. The disease is far from being over, with many throughout the world continuing to be infected and experiencing compromised lives as a result of this infection.

A more politically charged form of an HIV/AIDS memorial that confronts and forces one to remember is Day With(out) Art. Day With(out) Art has transitioned with the times in a way The NAMES Project has struggled to do. Originally titled Day Without Art, the event was first observed in 1989. It was an event

organized by an HIV-positive artists' collective, Visual AIDS, on December first, the second annual World AIDS Day.

The concern of the initial meeting between Visual AIDS cofounder Robert Atkins and the National Endowment of the Arts was "the AIDS crisis and how we can better inform the public of this disease . . . and how I [Robert Atkins] and the [NEA's] AIDS working group can be more effective in addressing the crisis."¹⁴ It was decided the best mode in which attention could be brought to the quickly growing infection rates was to veil and remove artwork from museums. The gaps made present were meant to accentuate what would be lost should the disease continue to spread. In its first iteration, between seven hundred and one thousand institutions would strive to bring attention to the absences that were taking place in the arts just as thousands of people whose possible future contributions to the world would never be realized were being "forgotten" and dying from AIDS.



Figure 5. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum as veiled December 1, 1989, Commission of Gabellini Sheppard Associates. Photo credit: Paul Warchol.

The first Day Without Art set forth an extravagant precedent for future years. The Metropolitan Museum of Art removed Picasso's famed portrait of Gertrude Stein and put up a simple placard about AIDS in its place. Ambitiously, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York attempted to drape the Frank Lloyd Wright structure with an eighteen-by-ninety-foot black veil (fig. 5).¹⁵ By 1992 the number of participants had skyrocketed, with 5,400 museums, galleries, and public spaces observing Day Without Art.¹⁶

To complement Day Without Art, Visual AIDS also initiated Night Without Light in 1990—a night wherein the New York City skyline was dimmed from 7:45 to 8:00 p.m. Iconic buildings and sites, including the Empire State Building fell into temporary darkness. Soon other cities, and eventually other countries, would participate. Patrick O'Connell, the director of Visual AIDS during this time, remarked on the new endeavor, "The Manhattan skyline has always been considered a symbol of the city's creative energy. The dimming will involve the entire city in AIDS activism."¹⁷ Whether the citizens of New York were compliant or not, it was hard to ignore the darkness that cascaded across the city. Equally affective was the relighting of the lights fifteen minutes later. Often remarked upon as a comment on hope, the lights would again invigorate the city with energy and life.

From this first iteration of Day Without Art, the absences were not entirely the focus. Whether disagreeing with the intrinsic concept of removing art, or the methodological approach of understanding AIDS through absence, the motives of some involved groups quickly countered the initial idea of withdrawing artworks for Day Without Art. Art—

including broadsides, exhibitions, and other responsive art—was instead created and exhibited to comment on the rapidly accelerating pandemic. Embracing this, Day Without Art transfigured itself, along with its mission, on its tenth anniversary in 1999 when it changed its name to Day With(out) Art.¹⁸ It was then that the annual event began to focus most specifically on art created about HIV/AIDS advocacy. Visual AIDS now annually commissions a video for Day With(out) Art, but in 2015 the video was shown in fewer than one hundred locations. After just sixteen years, only a fraction of the event's initial participants contribute to the memorial/action that first carried so much passion and momentum.



Figure 6. Studio ai and Jenny Holzer, The New York City AIDS Memorial, 2016, New York City, NY. Photo by the author.

In 2016 a very traditional memorial (fig. 6) was constructed in New York City. It was erected just outside of the former St. Vincent's Hospital and, as *The New Yorker* journalist Alexandra Schwartz observes, stands over the tunnels in which the corpses of those dead from AIDS-related complications were

removed from the hospital.¹⁹ The shape is reminiscent of an unfolded pyramid that dips and rises into the sky at the farthest point while reflecting the projection of the pavement below and, as Schwartz points out in a haunting parallel to her former observation, harks back to the pink triangle used by Nazis to mark homosexuals which was later rotated and appropriated by the gay community in the now-iconic Silence=Death poster, “drawing a parallel between the two catastrophes while positing the triangle as a symbol of pride and defiance”.²⁰ The monument's triangular panels are composed of parallel bars, giving the false illusion of shelter while subjecting those in the park to the weather. The eighteen-foot structure was designed by Studio ai and gracefully looms over granite pavers designed by Jenny Holzer. The granite pavers are engraved with selections of Walt Whitman's “Song of Myself” and encircle a fountain (fig. 7). Encapsulated under the projecting arms of the triangle sit granite benches which feature the names of the donors on the back in categories such as steward, champion, guardian, advocate, and friend.



Figure 7. Jenny Holzer, Pavers at The New York City AIDS Memorial, 2016, New York City, NY. Photo by the author.

"I celebrate myself," reads the first engraved line upon the spiraling pavement. *Celebrate* myself. The words of Walt Whitman were clearly chosen for the poet's homosexuality, not for any similar lived experience shared with those who sought care at St. Vincent's when no one else would take in an AIDS patient. The Whitman quote remains a most peculiar choice—not for whom they chose but for whom they did not. Jenny Holzer, famed contemporary artist, did not choose the radical words of Larry Kramer, "And history will record that [the war against AIDS] was lost because two US presidents and the entire federal government surrendered."²¹ Nor does it read, "There are no gods here, no ghosts and spirits in America, there are no angels in America, no spiritual past, no racial past, there's only the political," from the celebrated and prize-winning play *Angels in America*.²² It does not entertain the feelings of an everyman, such as those expressed by author Mark Doty, articulating and honoring the unfaltering dependence between persons experiencing AIDS:

Shit is a new fact of life, and one I find myself thinking about; . . . I think I'm going to be sick, though I don't want to show how I feel. And then the feeling passes as quickly as it came. It's just Wally here in front of me, needing cleaning up, and he's easy to help.²³

These words of accusation, these calls to arms, these lines of intimacy that so captured enduring love in the time of the disease, are not used. These harsh, profane, profound, accusatory sentences that hold the power to shock and revitalize, unabashedly, the reality of the disease through their unrestrained honesty are passed over in favor of one of

America's most beloved poems. Whitman's "Song to Myself" is a beautifully lyrical poem and unproblematic—and this is the precise problem. Words *from* the pandemic are passed over in favor of a passive passage celebrating homosexuality. It is as if the people who experienced this disease firsthand, who faced the foreshadowing of their own fates in the lives of those they loved, is not an accurate summation of the time period. Instead we are offered a "celebration of ourselves" as expressed by one of the country's most prolific homosexuals who has been socially accepted through over one hundred years of study in classrooms.²⁴

When noting the meaning offered in the words *I celebrate myself*, the memorial transforms to a monument of *specifically* gay pride and restigmatizes the disease, therefore making lives susceptible to the necropolitics associated with issues of homophobia in critical AIDS studies. Were this a memorial specifically devoted to the queer lives lost to AIDS, the words of Whitman celebrating body and flesh—political and sexual stances still incredibly significant to homosexual identity—the refusal of words directly associated with the disease could be somewhat forgiven. This is not the case; it is The New York City AIDS Memorial, not specifically the LGBTQ+ AIDS Memorial, and by "celebrating" we are left satisfied, as though the disease is over, whereas instead the ongoing crises must be agitated and acted upon.

Equally disturbing in the design are the inscriptions of donor names on the benches surrounding the memorial. This recognition of donors is a common practice for parks and other undedicated public spaces, but it is entirely distasteful in regard to a memorial. There are no other names on this memorial besides

those of the donors, designers, and engineers. *They* are the ones who get their names inscribed. Failing where The NAMES Project best succeeds, people who have suffered are forgotten and effectively dismissed by the New York AIDS Memorial. By utilizing categories such as *advocate*, *friend*, et cetera, we are led astray to think that these are the names of people who actually did something to combat the issues revolving around the disease. It must be remembered that these are not the doctors and nurses who cared for the patients and fought for their rights at the hospital, nor are they the activists who fought for the attention of the government when no one was looking. The names belong to people with money donating to a memory and are assigned based solely on the size of their donation.²⁵ An AIDS memorial that in no way indexes those who *experienced* AIDS thus becomes a memorial *to* AIDS, literally memorializing the disease.

While The NAMES Project appears passive and nonaggressive in its conception, it has garnered attention and money and helped to comfort the grieving families and friends. It has positioned itself as a growing and reasonably accessible reminder of individual experiences. Day With(out) AIDS obstructs our lives and brings attention to what we have lost and may continue to lose as the pandemic spreads. The recent New York AIDS Memorial offers a momentary halt in the history of the disease to remember the disease, seemingly a disease without faces. It is passive and encourages forgetting in a time when education and the revitalization of activism are what are crucial as HIV/AIDS continues to impact and take lives. The disease has been in America for over thirty years and in other

countries for far longer. Still, there is no cure because of stigmatization, racial intolerance, homophobia, and most importantly a lack of education. This is a time when the disease needs to be confronted and people need to be reminded that AIDS is still ongoing and it has no boundaries on whom it affects.

¹ Aidsmemorial.info is a website that works to keep track of the permanent AIDS memorials around the world and features a map clustered with red ribbons signifying sites of memorials.

² Paula A. Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 8.

³ James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 5.

⁴ World Health Organization and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, *Global AIDS Update: 2016* (Geneva: UNAIDS, 2016), 2.

⁵ Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed, *If Memory Serves: Gay Men, AIDS, and the Promise of the Queer Past* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 2.

⁶ Cindy Ruskin, *The Quilt: Stories from the NAMES Project* (New York: Pocket Books, 1988), 9.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ The NAMES Project Foundation, "About the Quilt." The AIDS Memorial Quilt, last modified 2016, <http://aidsquilt.org> (accessed February 1, 2018).

⁹ Ruskin, *The Quilt*, 319.

¹⁰ The NAMES Project Foundation, "Missions, Goals, Values, and History." The AIDS Memorial Quilt. <https://www.aidsquilt.org/about/the-names-project-foundation> (accessed February 1, 2018).

¹¹ The NAMES Project Foundation, email message to author, March 21, 2018.

¹² While one of the stipulations of loaning the quilt is that it be hung on a wall, often exceptions are made depending on the event and/or space.

¹³ The NAMES Project Foundation, email message to author, March 21, 2018.

¹⁴ Robert Atkins, "Scene and Heard: Day Without Art," *Village Voice*, December 1989, accessed February 3, 2018, <http://www.thebody.com/visualaids/dwa/atkins.html#voice>. The original "call" was for "mourning and action in response to the AIDS crisis." See "Day Without Art," VisualAIDS (website), accessed March 18, 2018, <https://www.visualaids.org/projects/detail/day-without-art>.

¹⁵ Andrew L. Yarrow, "Artists Offer 'Day Without Art' to Focus on AIDS," *New York Times*, December 2, 1989, accessed February 3, 2018, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/12/02/us/artists-offer-day-without-art-to-focus-on-aids.html>. ; Due to inclement weather the veiling of the architecture did not last all day, yet a photograph captures the haunting image.

¹⁶ Box 6, Day With(out) Art, Visual AIDS' Day With(out) Art Archive, Visual AIDS, New York City. Now housed at Fales Library and Special Collections, New York City.

¹⁷ Box 3, Day With(out) Art, Visual AIDS' Day With(out) Art Archive, Visual AIDS, New York City. Now housed at Fales Library and Special Collections, New York City.

¹⁸ "Day Without Art," accessed March 18, 2018, <https://www.visualaids.org/projects/detail/day-without-art>.

¹⁹ Alexandra Schwartz, "New York's Necessary New AIDS Memorial," *New Yorker*, December 8, 2016.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Larry Kramer, "A Manhattan Project for AIDS," in *While the World Sleeps: Writing from the First Twenty Years of the Global AIDS Plague*, ed. Chris Bull (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003), 164.

²² Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia*

on National Themes, Part 1, *Millennium Approaches*, act 3, scene 2.

²³ Mark Doty, *Heaven's Coast: A Memoir* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 253.

²⁴ The legitimacy that can be cited through the exploration and appreciation of biology and relationships in Whitman's writing falls short when compared to what could be offered by a more thoughtful selection.

²⁵ "Donor Plaque," NYC AIDS Memorial Organization (website), accessed March 18, 2018, available through <https://nycaidsmemorial.org/design/>; This is a very similar issue to the National AIDS Memorial Grove's *Circle of Friends*.