

Rear View: August 2021

Monthly spotlight on an item from the HIV/AIDS Graphic Communication Archive

August Guest Curator

Chase Ledin is a PhD researcher in the Centre for Biomedicine, Self and Society at the University of Edinburgh. His work explores the social and cultural dimensions of “post-AIDS” health promotion in the UK and US. He is on Twitter (@chaseledin).

Chosen by Chase Ledin:

“What it means to “be an AIDS activist” has changed since the 1980s. The early history of AIDS activism – located first in care-work organisations (such as buddy programmes, which linked people living with HIV (PLWH) with volunteers who would assist with daily tasks and provide emotional support, especially for some PLWH dispossessed by family and friends) – has tended to coalesce around grassroots intervention groups like ACT UP New York and Outrage. AIDS activism, in this case, included high-profile confrontations between government officials, scientists, and community members to gain access to healthcare, insurance and state support, and to decriminalise HIV transmission.

But the forms of activism transformed significantly during the 1990s. Many AIDS service organisations closed their doors or restructured in the late 1990s into charitable bodies or private organisations – as more people in high-income countries (e.g. US and UK) began receiving effective treatment. The cultures of AIDS activism, then, started to include institutional actions and partnerships between service organisations and businesses. Such “activism” raised funds for advocacy work in local communities and to build awareness of inequalities related to HIV/AIDS, including anti-stigma education and marketing.

The selected example raises an interesting question about how activism is shaped by the interplay between institutional bodies and grassroots initiatives. Do these partnerships disrupt the determinants of illness that underlie ongoing HIV transmissions? How might high-profile advocacy work (e.g. via UNAIDS, a global policy intervention initiative seeking to end new HIV transmissions by 2030) entrench the uneven socioeconomic distribution of health inequalities related to HIV/AIDS? Attending to representations of AIDS activism might help us to reflect on these questions – to interrogate how institutional players, state bodies, healthcare systems, and community coalitions employ conventional and new forms of “activist” strategies to end new HIV transmissions by 2030.”



5. Be An Activist

Digital Poster: Body Shop with UNAIDS, campaign 2010. Photography: Rankin.