



# SOCIAL

**Technoscience** This special issue, edited by Patricia Ticineto Clough, critically engages contemporary theory, shifting the question of “what matters” from an epistemological domain to an ontological one. Luciana Parisi brings us deeper into debates over evolutionary theory and the potential effects of those debates on bodies and sexuality, while Tiziana Terranova reminds us that information and communication are biotechnologies, ontologically constitutive, materially affective. Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai turn our attention to the South Asian racial formation in which intense policing slides discipline into control yet yields immeasurable “monstrous crossbreeds.” João Biehl traces pharmaceutical governance in the control of AIDS in Brazil as supporting technical solutions to a “biological crisis.” Finally, Amy Villarejo asks how political art commands or develops the capacity for attention, if not critique, in terms of the control exerted by dominant media cultures.

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**Amy Villarejo**

Taking up the work of the online and on-the-ground artist collective Think Again—a collective that extends the work of HIV/AIDS graphic artists into multiple issues and venues—I want to consider a question facing those of us concerned with political art, both those who make it and those who critique it: by what means are political artists addressing the present historical formation of cultural, economic, and political tendencies? More specifically, how does graphic and digital political art command or develop the capacity for attention and critique, reroute control exerted by dominant media cultures, intervene in political practices associated with the globalization of capitalism, such as neoliberalism and structural adjustment, as well as the intensification of militarism and (bio)terrorism? I want to suggest that political artists such as Think Again are working in a tension between a politics of representation concerned with identity, signification, desire, and ideology critique and a politics of affect, which emphasizes the capacity to affect bodies directly in their capacity to mutate, shift focus, attend and display interest, follow flows, and coalesce in assemblages. I want further to underscore and to understand the extent to which the work of Think Again inherits the legacy of HIV/AIDS political graphics of which it is simultaneously critical. In the transformation of that legacy, I read a response to the present in which “queer” contributes anew to social criticism.

### **Think Again**

On-the-ground and cyberspace activist responses in the United States to the effects of globalization and to the Bush administration’s recent practices and policies (attacking civil liberties, pursuing a disastrous unilateralist foreign policy, plundering the environment, dismantling social services) have been as various as the aesthetic and political traditions from which they draw: documentary realism (*Love and Diane*), social satire (*Fahrenheit 9/11*), stand-up comedy (Reno’s performance, “Rebel without a Pause”), and performance art (Yoko Ono’s “Cut Piece”). What unites a number of them—including the billboard, sticker, photographic,

collage, wheat-paste poster, and postcard graphics of Think Again—is that they are undertaken by engaged intellectuals trying to forge multi-front responses to conditions of permanent war and right-wing attacks. Their responses are lodged in unevenly related social movements (feminist, queer, antiracist), under conditions they understand as radically historical. Refusing to identify themselves independently of the context of that struggle is a key element of their project: anonymity and solidarity reign over individual, industrial, or aesthetic forms of identity. Think Again affirms its resistance to the institutional language of the artist’s intentional singularity and the pious exhibition of his or her autonomous artwork; many shoot, many design, many distribute, many invent. One cannot *not* therefore address work such as this contextually, wholly within the fabric of its aesthetic and political commitments.

The work of Think Again is by turns funny, flip, quick, camp, popular, commercial, slick, glossy, tactical, limited, site-specific, of-the-moment, condensed, and inflammatory. Among political artists generating graphic resources for demonstrations and online circulation, the collective is the clearest progeny of the graphic artists of the 1990s. Their work aims to intervene in mediatized environments, whether the World Wide Web or downtown Los Angeles, by hijacking the grammar and image-repertoire of commercial media such as the billboard, the wheat-paste poster, the postcard, or the truck display. Their address is not limited to the global middle class with access to the Internet, but their work circulates and links with others’ work there. They provide signs and stickers for demonstrations, they circulate work on the street, they convert commercial spaces into fora for public commentary. Think Again borrows, for example, in *Hello/Hola* (2002), the format of introductory “Hello My Name Is . . .” labels to comment on the horrific production of anonymous seriality in the murders of young women workers at *maquiladoras* (“golden mills”) in Juarez, Mexico; to take another example, they mimic the “Gap” clothing chain graphic on stickers placed next to automated teller machines to swerve attention, while cash is literally flowing, to the income “gap.” The work reveals, however, a knowledge of the limits of a politics of hybridity and cannibalism in the face of, to paraphrase Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, a society of control, which rules through a politics of difference and which administers hybrid identities in flexible hierarchies.<sup>1</sup> Mobile and alert to the fact that the *nature*, not just the location, of power has changed, the work of Think Again helps us theorize the shift from a politics of representation to a politics of affect at the same time as the collective’s work incompletely stages that shift.

To address explicitly the politics of representation, Think Again investigates the actual situation of current social movements, their necessary

work, and their modes of exclusion. Its members emphasize collaboration as a form of engagement with the complexity of political movements. They provide a commentary to situate their artworks in their deliberately reader-friendly introduction to their first book-length collection, *A Brief History of Outrage*:

THINK AGAIN also converses extensively and collaborates with people doing the difficult work of mobilizing communities, influencing policy, and fashioning concrete political goals. And like our allies, THINK AGAIN makes an effort to reconcile contemporary problems facing progressive and queer organizing efforts. On the one hand, we question progressive initiatives that focus primarily on economic justice, the global marketplace, and civil liberties, but systematically exclude a critique of the cultural logic of homophobia and racism. And although increasingly some non-queer organizations include sexual liberation in their missions, we fear that homophobia and racism become addenda to what these organizations see as the more primary work of establishing, for example, limits to economic imperialism, local control over economies, fair labor practices, and multilateralism.<sup>2</sup>

Think Again continues:

On the other hand, we are concerned about the co-optation of the queer movement by corporate interests and gay assimilationists who argue that to gain concrete political victories homosexuals should use conventional political processes, and appeal to the corporate world. This approach requires that we remain (largely) silent on issues pertaining to class, race, sexual difference and the economy. It also requires that we abide by the same political and self censorship that straight people do (i.e., insist everyone aspires to have a traditional family, refrain from talking explicitly about sex, and ignore anyone living below the poverty line).<sup>3</sup>

The diagnosis is not new but still remains pressing: progressive movements sustain aggressively heteronormative and racist organizations and actions, while queer organizations suppress the interarticulated differences of gender, race, and class while tending also to evade the more radical imperatives of economic justice. What the diagnosis misses, yet as I suggest the artworks themselves reveal, is less symptom than cause: a sense of the important shift from discipline to control involving the wholesale rearrangement of spaces of governance. I do not take that shift as complete or as marking a clean break but as an ongoing and uneven historical process. The crises of contemporary social movements, felt all too keenly by Think Again, owe much to the dispersion of control, the maelstrom that affected the institutions of civil society that were the targets of social movements' previous significant actions. While the important issue for

Think Again remains the production of normalization, the collective faces a society in which the functional mode of interpellation—through ideological apparatuses, through the institutions of civil society (including family and kinship)—has changed, insofar as capital has been invested at an affective level. This is not to isolate the terrain of economy from accompanying shifts: from discipline to control in politics, from representation and meaning to information in culture, from organic to nonorganic life in biophilosophy, and so forth. The labor of the production, circulation, and manipulation of affects, with its emphasis on the corporeal (not simply “the body” but subindividual bodily capacities and also machinic assemblages of bodies), becomes crucial in understanding contemporary networks of biopower; it compels a shift in thinking from the bounded, identitarian body to an intensification of the perception of the body, its capacities and assemblages.

Activist technologies—using the term in a sense that connects taking technoscience as an object of social criticism and action and using the resources of technoscience for a new framework for understanding queer criticism—seek to shape these capacities and assemblages. Political art in the service of social movements seeks to mobilize and to experiment with bodies, yet it is necessary also to rethink how these bodies might be thought to mutate, flow, shift, and respond in refusing servitude and authority. In their focus on a politics of representation, queer movements (even or perhaps especially those slouching toward accommodation) have sought to mobilize collectivities and alliances to resist what Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai have called technologies of heteronormativity, involving the quarantining and disciplining of the racialized and sexualized Other, the monster or “abnormal.”<sup>4</sup> In response to HIV/AIDS, queer movements, like cultural studies of science, extended a critique of scientific methodologies and technologies as value-free or value-neutral, understanding them precisely as constitutive of these technologies of heteronormativity, and they provided especially detailed attacks on forms of capital investment in technoscientific enterprises, primarily in the pharmaceutical industry. Like other social constructionist arguments, however, queer critical assessments of biomedical science render it difficult to distinguish matter, the materiality of bodies or material bases, from the effects of ideology. Paula Treichler’s influential essay on AIDS and biomedical discourse provides an instance of such a constructionist argument: “Our social construction of AIDS (in terms of global devastation, threat to civil rights, emblem of sex and death, the ‘gay plague,’ the postmodern condition, whatever) are based not upon objective, scientifically determined ‘reality’ but upon what we are told about this reality: that is, upon *prior* social constructions

routinely produced within the discourses of medical science.”<sup>5</sup> Moving away from signification and epistemological inquiry, activist technologies engaged with a politics of affect and carrying on the legacy of struggles against HIV/AIDS might constitute bodies and capacities in different ways, since, to take the most obvious example, the subindividual mark of sero-status already is channeled into the flows of global contagion. Recognizing the modes by which affectivity moves as flow but is also subject to control, activist technologies that embrace the multiple histories of “queer” face new challenges under that name.

How might one understand Think Again’s invocation of “queer” within the context of this subsumption of the affective by the economic? First, Think Again aligns its work with a strain of critical thought that queers identity. Here “queer” can be understood as an open, unbounded, yet specific discourse that has asked after affiliation, kinship, relationality, affections, affiliations, and the ties that bind. While this queer discourse has tended to focus on interpellation through the institutions of civil society and regimes of representation that reproduce normalization, it may prove pliant enough to think through crises of alliance that open to affectivity. Second, Think Again aligns its work with the struggles against AIDS, more particularly with that struggle’s political artists. In *A Brief History of Outrage*, Think Again explicitly acknowledges its debt to those collectives that emerged in the late 1980s in struggles against AIDS: they cite Gran Fury, Group Material, and Lesbian Avengers, to which one might add by way of precedent the Silence = Death Project, Little Elvis, Boys with Arms Akimbo, Testing the Limits, and DIVA TV. What follows in the next section is a two-step: an overview of some of this work as precedent to Think Again’s endeavors, but also a reevaluation of its reception during the period of its influence, 1987–93. The work of Douglas Crimp stands at the center of both the overview and the reevaluation, since Crimp provides an unparalleled intellectual, engaged assessment of the cultural politics of HIV/AIDS. I want to argue that the dimensions of the artworks that lend themselves readily to affective politics—such as I find in the Silence = Death Project and in a later poster, “In Honor of Allen R. Schindler” (1993)—are suppressed in identitarian glosses on the epistemological or hermeneutic content. Crimp’s responses to the political art in the struggles against HIV/AIDS shift in important ways in the 1990s, yet as I suggest, his worries about the moralism of radical art, while articulated in the language of feeling, remain within the terms of the politics of representation.

## Political Art against HIV/AIDS

The analysis of political art that battles against HIV/AIDS and its social effects, undertaken largely from the late 1980s through the mid-1990s, has needed to make that work visible to the hostile and phobic art historical establishment by foregrounding its complicated representational politics. Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston's history and compendium of the work of the political artistic collectives from Gran Fury to DIVA TV, in *AIDS Demo Graphics* (1991), distinguishes the work of these collectives from the institutionalized art historical triumphs of critical postmodernism in terms of the base and audience of AIDS activist art:

Social conditions are viewed from the perspective of the movement working to change them. AIDS activist art is grounded in the accumulated knowledge and political analysis of the AIDS crisis produced collectively by the entire movement. The graphics not only reflect that knowledge, but actively contribute to its articulation as well.<sup>6</sup>

Chronicling and charting that movement in *AIDS Demo Graphics*, Crimp and Rolston make abundantly clear the extent to which the political analysis of the AIDS crisis, far from functioning as a "single issue," instead condensed a multifront and multiscale analysis of the period and its crises in their complexity that still remained at the level of representational politics. The analysis of and struggle against AIDS is not, in other words, a concatenation of progressive concerns but a revelation of their modes of interdependency such that representational justice for one extends to all. *AIDS Demo Graphics* takes as its focus the authors' own movement location, the New York chapter of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). From that vantage point, among the many issues that ACT UP seizes on in the intense period from 1987 to 1990 are questions of gay and lesbian history, health care, the pharmaceutical industry, abortion rights, housing, forms of cultural representation, state and federal budget processes, drug use, legacies of racism and discrimination, and poverty. Similarly, the graphics and video works draw on and contribute to an array of traditions and forms of dissemination. They comment on post-modern art and artists in their citationality and their play with tradition (in riffing on Robert Indiana, for example, or Barbara Kruger). They travel with commercial images, wheat-pasted and "sniped" (the surreptitious pasting of graphics alongside commercial images) alongside concert announcements. They pull from activist and demonstration staples: the placard (now reinforced with a foam-core center), the banner, the button, the sticker, the T-shirt. They deploy documentary, experimental,

personal, and radical modes of image production. And they update all of these traditions in their speed of production and dissemination, allowing homogeneity symbolically to unite but never to curtail local variation and production.

From the point of view of the current moment, what seems most important in understanding the graphic and video work of AIDS activism in the late 1980s to early 1990s is that the cleverness, expansiveness, speed, and defiant tone were absolutely enabling in the short run, and ultimately constricting, as the tensions both within the AIDS crisis and within the works themselves gathered momentum. At the time of their production, these critical and artistic interventions responded to the singular demand for, as Crimp puts it in an essay written at the relative beginning of the cultural struggle in 1987, “cultural practices actively participating in the struggle against AIDS.”<sup>7</sup> Against the language of universal feeling and transcendence beloved by the art world, as well as against the relatively benign activities of the charity auction (such as “Art against AIDS”), Crimp insists on the efficacy of such interventions: “We don’t need to transcend the epidemic; we need to end it.”<sup>8</sup>

In his collection of essays published in 2002 in which this essay is reprinted, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*, Crimp revisits his writings on AIDS from the past fifteen years. While he stands by his insistence on direct intervention and participation, his later essays nonetheless develop a tone of impatience with the moralism of radical critique, as he pieces together the effects of unconscious processes on political identifications. Crimp’s later essays are thus invaluable resources for addressing the changes in AIDS activism and in movement alliances, insisting in a Gramscian way on the present moment: “The ways we imagine and address our audiences will be the most important thing we do, and . . . the rhetorics we employ must be faithful to our situation *at this moment* rather than what seemed true and useful the last time we set to work.”<sup>9</sup> One witnesses in Crimp’s ongoing reflections the effects of a crisis of alliance within representational politics, which he seeks to address explicitly. In the most general terms, Crimp endorses the “broadening of alliances rather than an exacerbation of antagonisms” (192). That broadening depends, in his view, on the forging of alliances (coalitions, collectivities) through a kind of graphic and rhetorical bravado including demands, exclamations, and exhortations. It also, importantly, depends on the acknowledgment of a certain vulnerability, a palpable toll exacted in the struggle against AIDS, felt as a deep despair.

By way of example of the need to reckon with vulnerability and the limits of identity politics as the AIDS crisis wore on into the 1990s, Crimp offers the case of ACT UP’s critique of the attention devoted to the cam-

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paigned for gays in the military as a displacement of the AIDS crisis. Three posters developed by ACT UP in 1993 target the promises Clinton made after the 1992 election to lesbians and gay men regarding his commitment to struggles against AIDS and to opening military service to “out” lesbians and gay men. The first poster observes, “Nobody Talks about AIDS Anymore” and explains in small print: “We’ve turned the lives of our missing friends and lovers into pieces of a quilt and our anger and activism into red ribbons. Now more than ever is the time to ACT UP.” The second poster attacks the reduction of activism into the banality of the red ribbon: “You can’t wear a red ribbon if you’re dead,” again continuing in small print, “You can’t serve in the military if you’re dead. You can’t march in the Saint Patrick’s parade if you’re dead. You can’t register as domestic partners if you’re dead.” The third poster asks, “If AIDS is Clinton’s obsession why are so many still dying?”

Crimp’s reading of these posters indicates how AIDS politics have shifted to require the resources of feeling and reflection generated through the analysis of unconscious processes. While clearly responding to the marginalization of AIDS on the 1993 national gay and lesbian movement agenda, the examples cited in the posters might, in other words, reveal ACT UP’s overly narrow identification with lesbian and gay issues (225). By way of illustration, Crimp substitutes, “You can’t get a job if you’re dead.” “You can’t benefit from affirmative action if you’re dead.” “You can’t choose an abortion if you’re dead.” In this observation, Crimp leans toward a self-critical awareness and critique of the extent to which something like “gay identity” provides a ground for activist work against AIDS. But the real objection Crimp wishes to lodge is one of the “implicit moralism” inherent in ACT UP’s allegation of displacement. That is, ACT UP’s position attacks those gay men and lesbians, queer activists, service organizations, and progressives more generally who have turned away from the ravages of AIDS and toward the more placid issue of the military ban and, with pleasure, to the healthy and alluring bodies of the sailors and pilots who formed the core of that issue’s image-repertoire. The address of the posters, in Crimp’s language, “appears to attribute the displacement to apathy, bad faith, selfishness, or cowardice” (226).

Crimp himself appears to be shifting from the language of ideology critique (identification, signification, interpretation) to another register. The ACT UP posters work in the straightforward language of ideology critique, condemning those who are duped. Displacement is thus one way to name the pleasure in healthy bodies or the interest in the military ban on gay service as symptomatic, as a sign of unspeakable despair, a sense of loss that might threaten activist work. The displacement Crimp identifies functions as a defense: one turns one’s attention away from that which is

unbearable toward that which can be accommodated. Yet in Crimp's view, such a defense is historically constituted: at an earlier historical moment in the AIDS crisis, in his essay "Mourning and Militancy" (1989), Crimp had seen the failure to acknowledge the necessity of mourning as the catalyst for activist moralism, while in "Don't Tell" (presented four years later in 1993), the pressing need for mourning yields to a calculation of the depths of despair. The fathomless loss of countless people (lovers, friends, family members, strangers, acquaintances, activists) to death from AIDS is also a loss of belief: "Very few of us still truly believe that the lives of those now infected can be saved by what we do" (228). What he has invoked, then, is considerably more complicated than finger-pointing at an indulgent activist community: Crimp identifies complicity, despair, and belief as contingent, historical, and precarious.

A form of guilt—either being guilty of displacement or being guilty of a kind of activist bad faith—would seem to be the target of the moralism Crimp finds in the ACT UP posters, and it is this form of guilt, not an originary shame but a sense of complicity, which is the lever for Crimp's analysis. Indeed, the *object* of the displacement is equally complicated: the substitution of healthy bodies for sick bodies. Those healthy bodies themselves function as idealizations of, in a phrase Crimp cribbs from Randy Shilts, the "responsible homosexual with impeccable credentials" such as Leonard Matlovich, Miriam Ben-Shalom, Margarethe Cammermeyer (or Glenn Close as Margarethe Cammermeyer), Joseph Steffan, José Zuniga, and others. Such idealizations not only fly above the heads of mere mortal homosexuals but are routinely cleansed of any earthly residue whatsoever, including queer sexualities. What is therefore necessary is, simultaneously, a critique of moralism, a critique of idealizing and desexualizing "positive images," and a way to foreground complexity and ambivalence graphically and artistically.

To summarize, I see Crimp making a crucial turn by confronting the moralistic tone of the posters and summoning the resources of psychoanalytic reflection on identification and guilt to reckon with its implications for action. His insistence on responding to the vicissitudes of history, to the accumulated loss and sense of despair felt by many who have survived two decades of ravages, necessitates a shift in critical approach. Crimp poignantly diagnoses the limits not only of identity politics but also of self-righteousness in the face of loss, asking all of those who would continue in the struggles against HIV/AIDS to proceed with a keener awareness of foreclosure and ambivalence. This is the kind of intellectual work that can recognize the fraying of alliances, that can be alive to cultural, political, and economic change. But it does not, in my view, break significantly with the very politics of representation of which it is critical. I offer

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or “genocide,”  
wrought by AIDS  
is equivalent to  
that wrought by  
the Nazis; what  
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silence now  
also is.

two examples, bookending the period from 1987 to 1993, of alternative routes that emphasize the capacity of corporeal response over the layers of ambivalent meaning, then turn to the work of Think Again to continue with the legacy of political graphic art.

It is possible, for example, to emphasize the affective charge of the pink triangle against conventional interpretations of its meaning. From the outset of activism around the AIDS crisis, the historical legacy of Nazi persecution of lesbians and gay men as represented in the pink triangle (inverted for the AIDS signification) was invoked by the Silence = Death Project for its striking graphic of that equation in 1986, significantly prior to the organization of ACT UP. Historically slippery (as with many if not most comparative invocations of Nazi genocide) and yet situationally grounded in the real threats of forced quarantine in the early years of the epidemic, what is powerful in the graphic that became a ubiquitous symbol of activist rage and defiance is its capacity to carry a charge beyond its putative meaning. The Silence = Death image quickly came and continues to signify a sense of belonging, an atom in a collectivity, a surging mass of affirmation of life and resistance to AIDS. As professionally rendered and reproduced, the Silence = Death graphic signaled a new era of protest image-production and circulation, where the hermeneutic provocation becomes itself a logo risking its own commodification, as it joins the logos spun and recirculated in other graphics (such as Gran Fury’s *Riot* from 1989, a second-order takeoff on the Canadian group General Idea’s takeoff on Robert Indiana’s *Love*). Silence = Death, in other words, carries the charge of a movement’s constitution and force in such a way as to compete with the ambivalence at the heart of the pink triangle. It asks its constituents to shift the focus from whether the “holocaust,” or “genocide,” wrought by AIDS is equivalent to that wrought by the Nazis; what matters is that silence then was intolerable, as silence now also is. Silence = Death therefore compels speech in the face of the threat of its violent silencing and erasure precisely by silencing the antagonisms that emerge at the level of the equation it invokes, and resistance to AIDS compels a certain flattening of history in the name of “community” or gay identity.

The challenge is therefore to understand how this charge carried by the artwork and the simultaneous flattening it compels opens to different ways of thinking about politics. It is not so much that one abandons meaning or the interpretation of the strata of history deposited in the symbol; it is instead a matter of understanding how, on a plane of immanence, capacities for response coalesce into a flow that *is*: we’re *here* (we’re queer, get used to it). It is, if you like, a way to shift attention from the content of the speech commanded by the refusal of silence instead to the capacity

to respond, to be interested, to utter. It is a matter of seeing bodies not as coded by coherent designations that keep separate sexual identity, gender, race, and class but instead as only relational, as forces between bodies that provoke a charge. One should not mistake this capacity for freedom: it is not liberation and it is not an unbounded or pure space of resistance or refusal. To the contrary, these flows of response meet with mechanisms of control and management. But this relational force and affective charge were and are crucial to the formation that comes to be called queer, even if that formation can be stuffed back into the bounds of “sexual identity.”

I see that restrictive countermovement, harnessing the politics of affect onto the identitarian politics of representation, in a reading by Crimp of a poster made at the end of the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, and I want to use that poster as a bridge to the work of *Think Again*, which comes a decade later. Crimp heralds this poster for its fulfillment of his three imperatives (the refusal of moralism, the critique of positive images, the embrace of ambivalence). The poster, “In Honor of Allen R. Schindler,” was circulated in the summer of 1993 and created by a group called Bureau. This piece in fact joined two posters together, one of a portrait of Navy radioman Allen Schindler and the second a portrait of his murderer, Navy apprentice airman Terry Helvey. Both men are in identical uniform, set in portrait circles in the center of each poster. Above Schindler’s portrait are the words “To die for.” In setting graphically equivalent portraits together, the one by the knowing viewer understood to be a frightened gay man in the Navy and the other likewise the homophobic murderer who maimed Schindler’s body beyond recognition, the posters compel a complicated reading of the three words. At one level, they invert the language of patriotism: what or whom exactly is to die for? At another level, the one Crimp finds the most indicative of the posters’ critical ambivalence, is the language of desire, in which “to die for” means “I think he’s hot.” The revelation of secret desire, gay men’s sexual fascination with the man in uniform, provides in his view an alternative to the idealized images and sanitized rhetorics of those opponents of the ban who circulate them in the popular press.<sup>10</sup>

In this reading, a certain fullness of sexual identity inflates to fill the place of that subject whose dissolution he seems to desire.<sup>11</sup> Sexuality, brimming with a kind of meaning on which attachments and political alliances can rest, determines activist agendas *and* critical readings. The hopes Crimp holds for expansive audiences and coalition building must dissolve at the moment that a critical vulnerability indexed by the Schindler posters comes to rest on the recognition of a secret shared desire, and the activist agenda that would follow from such a recognition would seem similarly constricted by the nature of the shared “community” of

those who would make it. “To die for?” Wouldn’t it be possible to see the entanglements of capitalism, technoscience, and sex at work in “gays in the military” flow elsewhere?

A decade later, I’m also stopped short by In Honor of Allen R. Schindler, but not because it reveals a secret (or not-so-secret) phantasmatic world of gay male desire for uniformed men, nor because it charges the images of Schindler and Helvey with a sexuality the mainstream media labors to evacuate from its idealized vocabulary. Now, I’m caught by my awareness of the ubiquity of idealized images of uniformed men and women, from memorials to the losses of September 11 to the National Football League’s opening night “celebration.” I’m caught by how suffused we are in war rhetoric and ethical language, so that the artwork today—if “today” can measure the distance between a reading such as Crimp’s embedded in the identity-driven coalitions of social movements and my own—wrenches me far afield from the politics of gay desire, toward a set of questions about the role that queerness will play in resisting a world order that seizes on and commodifies difference while stoking continual fear. I’m caught by how much I’m pulled toward different identifications and senses of belonging, not all of which align themselves with “queer,” or rather, I’m aware both of how “queer” seems annulled by recent ravages as well as by a certain flattening into sexual identity, and how I want to animate “queer” with a force it seems not to have or to have lost. “Today” also signals the difference between a rhetoric of ideological demystification, wherein that sexual life hidden in the popular representations is revealed, and one of intensity and diffusion that moves in the folds of affect and identification on which the new struggles seem to be emerging. *To die for?* In the spirit of Crimp’s own insistence on the question of audience and working at the present moment, what could that possibly mean *now*? And how will history have shaped our coming to know and to act on queer’s signification and force?

### **Think, Again**

I have invoked Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s argument in *Empire* obliquely throughout this article to understand the shift from discipline to control, from a politics of representation to a politics of affect. They gesture powerfully and importantly, I think, toward the rejection of old forms of solidarity and connection, requiring that we banish nostalgia for old power structures and generate new ways of understanding the eruption of autonomous struggles and forms of protest. On the other hand, there are moments in their argument in which they would seem themselves to rely on a model of ideology critique, whereby the actor in social

struggle is capable of more direct, true, or demystified speech in the face of (readily identifiable and thus readily communicable) violence. To find ourselves on the threshold of Empire is, on the one hand, to be without certain forms of speech and, on the other, to be unable to yield an attachment to some primary tactility, creativity, and productivity identified through common sense as “being-against”: “To us it seems completely obvious that those who are exploited will resist and—given the necessary conditions—rebel” (210). This primary being-against of the new barbarians is crucial to Hardt and Negri’s focus on the ontological, and without spending a great deal of time with their terms, it would be difficult to elaborate responsibly how their version of common sense underwrites their larger arguments about the transition to Empire. What seems to me the primary challenge Hardt and Negri pose for understanding political art is to understand that the tension—between a politics of representation that enlists ideology critique in the conversion of common sense and a politics more concerned with affect—*persists* and that it is indeed difficult to respond to change and to yield to new ways of working.

Think Again works that tension around the conceptual touchstone that is “queer.” On the one hand, the collective inherits and explicitly acknowledges the practice of twinning graphic bravado and direct action from AIDS activism, which bequeaths to Think Again the legacy I discussed above of a politics of representational justice and a focus on the subject. Think Again further retools that subject according to the logic of queer, a term that in its political and intellectual endeavors has sought to open a different analysis of relationality, contact, multiplicity, and polyvocality, but infrequently in direct conversation with anticapitalist social movements:

The starting point for THINK AGAIN emerges from our interest in problems facing queers. . . . As a strategy for shifting away from the identity politics of the Nineties and returning to an activism based on social transformation, we use queer as a conceptual touchstone for our work. We see homophobia as a set of cultural myths about sex and bodies that masquerade as truths about human nature.<sup>12</sup>

On the one hand, then, a strategy of demystification and a continuation of the representational politics of struggles against HIV/AIDS: that legacy bequeaths a form of activism I explore in two further examples. On the other, the Think Again collective marks its confrontation with power explicitly and works with the circulation of affective value: with speed, with the body’s capacity for attention or response. With the force of a more lengthy example of their work along the lines of affective politics, and brief mention of some other routes, I close this article.

The injunction  
to “act like  
it’s a globe”  
may function  
as a direct  
confrontation  
with the imperial  
order, but it is one  
with a distinctly  
queer inflection  
that impels  
movement.

Think Again presents their projects as analyses of issues met with actions that can be transformative. Like Gregg Bordowitz and other AIDS activists who saw media as propaganda, they see their work as capable of persuasion, conversion, awakening. As much of it as possible is distributed in face-to-face encounters with people on the street; they use agitprop to inaugurate conversations, some friendly, some hostile, yet in “every interaction we try to understand what motivates cultural backlash and how people develop their sense of collective justice, humanity, and democracy.” With their project “Act Like It’s a Globe, Not an Empire” (2003), Think Again tackles the issue of the U.S. military invasion of Iraq by gluing sticker “mastheads” over newspaper boxes, wheat-pasting posters on major Los Angeles thoroughfares, and distributing stickers to protesters at antiwar rallies. Seizing on the power of the performative as well as the more mundane register of simulation in everyday behavior, the injunction to “act like it’s a globe” may function as a direct confrontation with the imperial order, but it is one with a distinctly queer inflection that impels movement. “Act Like It’s a Globe” mutates from headline (pasted over a *USA Today* newspaper stand) to poster (pasted on a phone booth adjacent to an advertisement for Camel cigarettes) to body art (worn as a sticker on the back of a jeans jacket at a demonstration); as it changes venue it morphs from simulated authority to political challenge usurping commercial space to a badge of belonging or inclusion.

Insofar as “queer” acts as a conceptual grounding for Think Again, then, their work is full with its lineages: they struggle from a feminist and antiracist perspective against reification, commodity fetishism, gentrification, gay marriage, violence against queers, attacks on welfare, the death penalty, and federal campaigns of disinformation. Think Again wrestles with the question of address nonetheless, trying to make their language at once expansive and specific, with knowing nods to commodity culture that pull in teenagers and analyses that invoke the language of academic post-modernism. Hoping to speak “between the soundbyte and the editorial,” Think Again does not entirely overcome the language of ideology critique whereby their project sheds light on otherwise veiled conditions of violence, labor, and suffering, or restores a sense of scale to distortions. At the same time, to take a second example of work engaged with representational politics, the queer core of their work urges them in their most recent project, the *Samples* series (2003), toward greater reflection on ambivalence, juxtaposition, inversion, and context. In collages that combine unaltered advertisement images with documentary photographs, the *Samples* open questions about shrinking public space and its political content, about how “the polity conceptualizes political life.” In this series, Think Again

reminds its comrades that it is through slick, sophisticated, complicated acts of imagination that consent is won, and it is through dissent, persistent questioning, and similarly complicated acts of image-production and image-action that struggles continue to be forged. One sample, for instance, juxtaposes a photograph of the Immigration and Naturalization Service headquarters in Los Angeles during the “voluntary” registration of Middle Eastern male noncitizens from thirteen countries on 10 January 2003 with advertising images captioned for counterpoint, the first of a suited male model carrying a tabloid newspaper showing an enormous headline “Holy War” with the caption beneath reading “Security . . . the must have for all,” and the second of two young boys, one with a combat helmet and semiautomatic confronting the other, in cowboy gear with six-shooter in his holster with his arms raised, while the female-model-as-mother looks on, captioned with “Gun safety . . . it’s all the rage.” This collage is one of the densest in the series, staging an ambivalent and critical attitude toward representational justice insofar as it inhabits the logic of commodification and the fear it invokes. If “sampling” combines disparate sources to create novel forms of commentary, the practice nonetheless relies on an *epistemological* challenge: how is one to read, understand, and interpret these combinations?

A very different challenge lies at the heart of the work of Think Again that moves toward a politics of affect. In the piece I mentioned by way of example at the beginning of this article, *Hello/Hola*, Think Again scatters its investigation of the serial murders of over three hundred young women in Juarez, Mexico, across the surface of Avery “Hello My Name Is . . .” labels. While the murders have been an occasion for thinking about the more horrific dimensions of globalization, NAFTA, and border culture at the edge of the national body, they have also frequently appeared in Left critiques as figures for globalization’s accompanying logic of fragmentation, repetition, and displacement (in fine films such as Ursula Biemann’s *Performing the Border* [1999] or Lourdes Portillo’s *Señorita extraviada* [2001]). In Think Again’s artwork as in these films, the preoccupation shifts from an inquiry into “why?” to the insertion of bodies within the field of information. Seriality, statistics, data compilation, as well as fragmentation, repetition, and displacement, become the themes of the artwork: a poster and a wall installation of a photograph of labels that have been altered with shards of English and Spanish. “Gangbanged,” “Hello,” “violada par un grupo,” “desaparecidas,” “1, 2, 3, . . . 274, . . . 1993, 1994, . . . 2002,” “and get away with it?” Like Biemann’s film especially, the piece comments on the *production* of bodies within the assemblages that are the *maquiladoras* of Avery itself, RCA, Dupont, and GE and further inserts

the spectator's own anonymity into the dispersed body of the work. New configurations of gender and sexuality therefore emerge in the posthuman combination of bodies and machines, unable to be contained in the fiction of a self-declaration in an identity label. The labels come to signal a crisis of alliance: no single name, whether an individual's or a social movement's such as "queer," is adequate to what *is* on the border. While a representational politics may seek to restore the lost identities, to reconstitute the victims of the serial murders in toto as young women with names and faces and histories, *Hello/Hola* instead focuses on the new communicative, biological, and mechanical technologies that produce these bodies encoded as information, subject to registration and control. The artwork registers the modulations, decomposition, and responses of these bodies directly. *Hello/Hola* thus acknowledges—by scattering all of these across the artwork—the central role played by knowledge, information, affect, and communication in the global economy. *Hello/Hola* speaks at the subindividual level of the body—"work them to the bone, skin them to the bone"—and it is, like other Think Again work, vigilant in insisting that human nature is not separable from nature more generally. Both are inserted into the global hierarchy of production and its deterritorialization but in different ways, whether as cybernetic prostheses central to the low-value assembly work of the high-tech *maquiladoras* or as the networks and transplanted communities produced through the women's affective labor.

The border zone reveals the entanglement of sexuality and capital, where self-expression, survival, and control collide violently. *Hello/Hola* records this collision as synchronous rather than as coalescing in a causal narrative or totalizing explanation: "while trying to escape poverty," "justify murder by calling them prostitutes," "still trafficking." Neither, however, does the artwork invest in the dissolution of identity as a pure practice of resistance or liberation; *Hello/Hola* demonstrates instead that the language of the subject is inadequate to the ontology of the border itself, the stage for the dissolution of identitarian logics. As Biemann suggests in her essay "Performing the Border: On Gender, Transnationality, and Technology," "a discursive reflection on the killings allows [us] to understand them as an urban pathology produced by accelerated industrialization and modernization. It also allows us to recognize how deeply the post-industrial world is implicated in the disturbing changes taking place on the border, which have a significant impact on the lives of Mexican women."<sup>13</sup>

The sense of being implicated does not itself generate new tools for critique, of course, but the work of Think Again sparks political imagination and opens possibility by seizing on the forces and charges of the body: ingestion, proximity, massing, recognizing, responding. "THINK

AGAIN revels in the moment of rupture and awareness when a teenage girl looks down at a plate of bacon and pictures the hog.”<sup>14</sup> These moments of rupture and awareness also come when the streams of commodity culture yield to different currents, when the flows of commodities include protest graphics and subsequently change course, swerve quickly, and jolt us. These actions mine the potential of direct action, but, I want to conclude, they send direct action in a new direction, one that knows neither how to name its enemy nor how to fashion a coherent language for resistance. Instead, these interventions, culled from many, reroute “queer” toward something it has not yet been:

- Holiday cards marketed by a box superstore are replaced with a gilded red version that reads “Peace among Men, Poverty among Women” (1988). Like other stealth substitutions (such as the famous Barbie voice-box switching action by Barbie Nation, in which Ken was made to take on the voice of Barbie and vice versa), the reaction is unpredictable and always subject to fail, but its chilling surprise opens to an awareness of saying “no,” and it joins this buyer to a newly conjured body of consumers, all of whom have been subject to the switch.
- Advertising postcards in a “Go Card” dispenser (the ubiquitous upscale urban marketing device strategically positioned in retail spots, clubs, and restaurants) are replaced with a variety of Think Again commentaries: “Free your ass and your mind will follow: sodomy laws suck,” “How to build a war machine,” “Televising an alternative to retaliation,” “THINK AGAIN’s queer youth manifesto,” “Your body is also a playground.” The form of the postcard is about speed: a quick hello, a quick critique, a quick substitution, a flicker of response. Like the holiday card, it can barely register its difference from what it usurps, but the cards also seek to provoke a sense of nonbelonging to the space the cards occupy. The cards, in other words, have the potential to animate the space with a subjective relation to circulation that can then travel elsewhere. Against a politics that restricts the effect by naming it a local manifestation of queer, Think Again acts to fracture the idea of a coherent space driven by the abstract movement of exchange.

There are other instances similar to these surreptitious substitutions in which Think Again returns to the moral certainty of activist language: “Buy Less, Do More” (1997–98) stickers pasted over Newman products and other ostensibly “socially conscious” commodities. But I think that we can grasp the passage from a common sense of queer activism to something else, here and there within a body of work that continues to grow and to mutate.

Since I find their work exciting, I have the inclination simply to urge readers of this essay to seek out Think Again, not as queer panacea but as

provocation to rethink, at every available opportunity, the common sense on which we rely, in the hopes that their work inspires us toward the differentiated, mobile forms of resistance that our despair requires.

## Notes

1. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).
2. Think Again, *A Brief History of Outrage* (Los Angeles: Politicizing Pictures Press, 2003). See [www.agitart.org](http://www.agitart.org) and [www.protestgraphics.org](http://www.protestgraphics.org) for overviews of Think Again's projects.
3. Ibid.
4. Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai, "Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots," *Social Text*, no. 72 (2002): 117.
5. Paula A. Treichler, "AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification," in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 35.
6. Douglas Crimp with Adam Rolston, *AIDS Demo Graphics* (Seattle: Bay, 1990), 19–20.
7. Douglas Crimp, "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism," in *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 32.
8. Ibid.
9. Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism*, 265; emphasis in original.
10. One could also understand the poster to implicate Helvey in his desire for Schindler: that his murderous homophobia is a translation of "to die for" in different terms. Such a possible reading interestingly complicates Crimp's celebration of what is "hidden" in gay male desire for men in uniform.
11. For a critique of Crimp that emphasizes a similar point from a broadly philosophical perspective, see Alexander García Düttmann, *At Odds with AIDS: Thinking and Talking about a Virus*, trans. Peter Gilgen and Conrad Scott-Curtis (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).
12. Think Again, *A Brief History of Outrage*, no pagination.
13. Ursula Biemann, "Performing the Border: On Gender, Transnationality, and Technology," in *Globalization on the Line: Gender, Nation, and Capital at U.S. Borders*, ed. Claudia Sadowsky (New York: St. Martin's, 2001) and available on Biemann's Web site, [www.geobodies.org](http://www.geobodies.org).
14. Ibid.