

GRAB ART

GRAB sat down with Dr Daniel Berger to discuss his new book and Art Exhibit

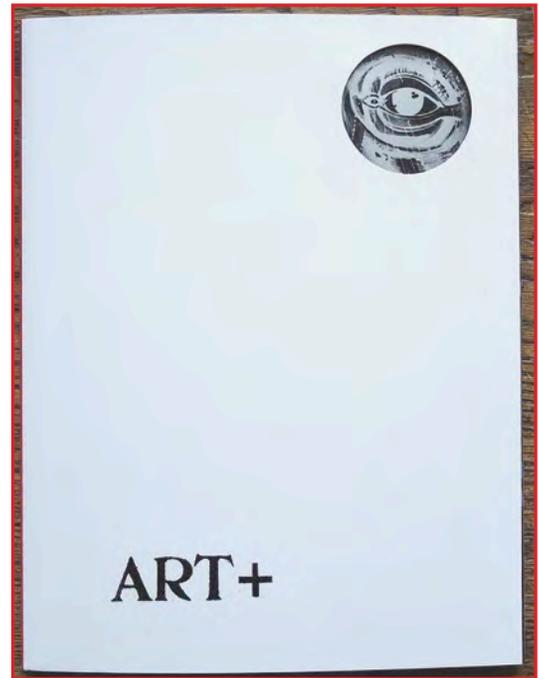
By Mark Nagel

Mark Nagel: *What is Art+Positive and how did it get started?*

Dr. Dan Berger: Some members of ACT UP New York, many who were artists, and/or HIV-positive, formed an independent action group out of ACT UP and called themselves Art +Positive. These types of groups, known as affinity groups or collectives, were common in ACT UP because certain members wanted to address agendas in their own unique and particular ways. So they worked independently and also at times together with ACT UP New York. Sometimes ACT UP members were part of several affinity groups at the same time, being incestuous like we queers often are. Art+Positive focused on censorship that was occurring in both AIDS treatment and in the arts; censorship was due not only due to HIV/AIDS, but also class, gender, disability, race and sexuality. So Art+Positive staged their own political actions and also participated

in larger demonstrations of ACT UP. Their art had a characteristically queer, raw, in-your-face, humorous but serious quality.

They began when there wasn't a government policy to fund AIDS treatment and research, and government did nothing to educate to prevent or stop the spread of HIV in our community. At the time, the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) was funding exhibitions by Robert Mapplethorpe, David Wojnarowicz and Andrea Serano. But being queer artists who were speaking out against the establishment, they were becoming censored by senators Jesse Helms and Alfonse D'Amato who worked with Right Wing political groups. Helms proposed an amendment on the Senate floor to withhold funding for the NEA. Finally, the famous artist Mark Kostabi, was given a platform interview in Vanity



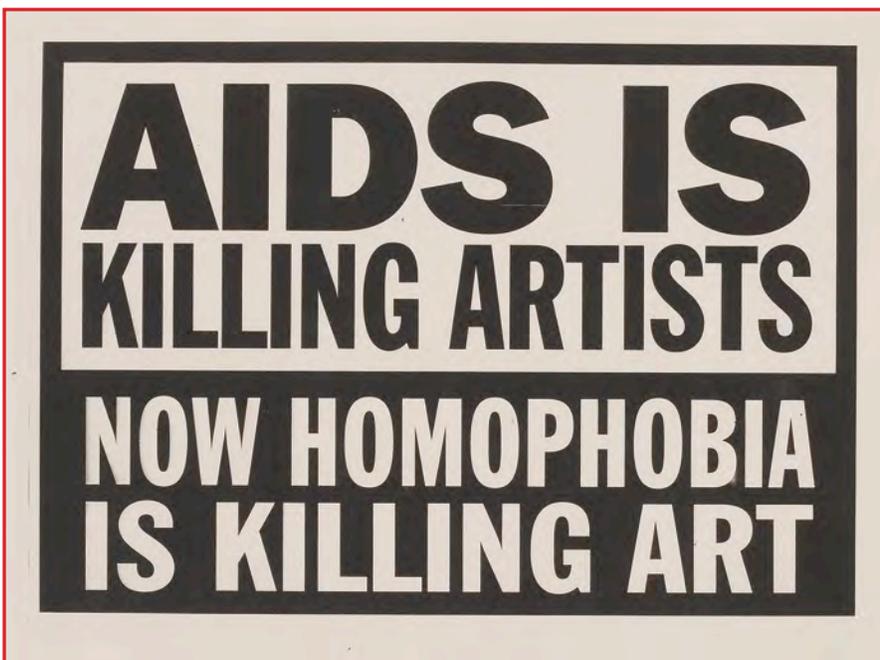
Fair and in a shocking statement, was quoted "These museum curators, for the most part homosexual, control the art world. Now they're all dying of AIDS, and although I think it's sad, I know it's for the better."

This censorship now targeting artists and their work was the last straw and the founders mobilized and formed Art+Positive.

MN: *ART+Positive has not been seen in a while. Why are you bringing it back now?*

DB: The work of Art+Positive and activism during the height of the AIDS crisis is historically significant. The younger members of our community do not really know our history. We owe a debt to activists like ACT UP and Art+Positive who taught us how to mobilize and organize. We now have political savvy, and the human rights as we know it today and marriage equality, which without the instruction about getting our voices heard, given by AIDS activists, may not have happened. Today, with Trump in the oval office, it's becoming clear that we are threatened and need to keep fighting and challenging conservative norms, fight for equality and equality for gender queer. So bringing this to the public was personally important to me.

MN: *In March of 2015, you purchased the ART+Positive Militant Eroticism work and had the first exhibit of the work in 20 years. I have*



to ask, why did you purchase this work?

DB: The value of the archives is immense, as having a legacy. The archives were held by someone living in Dayton, Ohio collecting dust, languishing in some basement storage for more than 25 years. Somehow, I was able to convince him to let me acquire them. As an HIV/AIDS doctor and activist, I knew of their importance and historic value and I'm always thinking about our legacy, and wanted to give our public the access to Art+Positive's accomplishments and for us to be able to learn from them, while continuing these conversations.

MN: You and John Neff worked together for the first exhibit, but why have you worked together on the new book?

DB: John Neff and I share the same furor and passion about queer history in the arts and activism. We seem to be a good pairing with different skill sets that complement each other, so working together on the book was an easy decision.

MN: What do you hope people will get out of reading this book?



DB: I hope people continue with renewed interest in our gay/queer and AIDS history. We're not living in the past but our history helps us look forward, seeing parallels and challenges that we need to confront with the current establishment. They are still trying to censor us; our rights are still often threatened. I also hope that individuals understand that sometimes we should be thinking

outside the box and finding new ways to advance and help the community, as Art +Positive did.

MN: When did you start collecting art?

DB: I began while in medical school.

MN: Do you have certain artists you collect and why?

DB: I collect art from queer artists, especially those involved during the AIDS crisis and artists of African American descent. Both African Americans and gays and queers have similar concerns: Fighting bigotry, prejudice, racism, homophobia and AIDS phobia. These artists speak to me and provide

meaningful messages that parallel my own life as an AIDS activist physician, going against the current during the early days of the crisis when our partners, family members and patients needed to have the chance of survival. Some of these artists include David Wojnarowicz, Robert Mapplethorpe, Nan Goldin and Cathy Opie.

MN: When is the ART+Positive book launch and signing at the Rhona Hoffman Gallery?

DB: It will be held on Tuesday December 19 at 6 p.m.

MN: Location of the Rhona Hoffman Gallery?

DB: It is located at 118 N. Peoria Street in the West Loop.

MN: If I can't make it on December 19, how can I get the book?

DB: It is already available on Amazon.com. Local bookstores should have it soon. Also, one can contact Sternberg-Press in Berlin, the publisher.

MN: Anything else we need to talk about?

DB: Perhaps mentioning about the other contents of the book, including an AIDS timeline that uniquely focuses on AIDS activism and that among several featured writings, I've written an interesting essay on how my life in medicine dovetailed with AIDS activism. The book in general is quite beautiful packed with full colored, lavish art and imagery. Thanks so much to you and Grab for your interest.

