

REBELS REBEL.
AIDS, ART AND ACTIVISM
IN NEW YORK, 1979–1989

A new book on the history
of anti–AIDS art activism
in New York in the 1980s.

Written by Tommaso
Speretta, published by MER
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REBELS REBEL is a chronological survey of **activist art** in New York from 1979 to 1989, reviewing the radical responses artists gave to **social problems, especially the AIDS crisis**, in the conservative political climate of their day. It presents activist art as a potent manifestation of public art, through which **artists and art practice can shape and change society**.

REBELS REBEL brings a new narrative to the history of **art as a means of social change**, combining analysis of the meaning of public art with reflections on the

works' political, historical and critical context. The book is a tribute to art collectives who confronted society's problems and what they saw as threats to the basic principles of democracy. United by their refusal of traditional aesthetic criteria and their desire to exploit artistic strategies and commercial advertising to create propaganda, their story still stands today as an example of how a collective voice can rise above prejudice and inequality, overthrow injustice and make itself heard.

Conceived and written by art writer Tommaso Speretta, *REBELS REBEL* has an historic yet activist-based approach, combining an examination of art history, with social, political and curatorial reflections. Thanks to the direct collaboration of artists and photographers, the book presents **more than 100 images and illustrations**, most of which rarely circulated in public after their initial appearance, and includes **a text titled "The Social Body Electric" by Loring McAlpin**, former founding member of the Gran Fury collective; as well as a visual essay, in part unpublished before, by photographers Ellen Neipris and Tom McKitterick. The book is accompanied by an original poster designed by graphic-design duo Tankboys (www.tankboys.biz), conceived together with the author as **a timeline of the most effective demonstrations carried on between 1987 and 1989 by ACT UP** to protest against the governments' inaction in ending the AIDS crisis.

CONTENT

REBELS REBEL examines the range of art collectives in New York during the 1970s, which embraced cultural activism as their principal practice and served as example for future developments of activist art in the 1980s. These include the **Art Workers' Coalition** (1969–1971), **Artists Meeting for Cultural Change** (1975–1978), **Collaborative Projects Inc.** (1977–1986) and **Political Art Documentation and Distribution** (1980–1988), and guerilla art exhibitions such as "**The Real Estate Show**" (1980) or "**The Times Square Show**" (1980).

Additionally, the book investigates in depth the **history of AIDS activism in New York** and the art of once controversial, now lauded, artists' collectives **Group Material**, **Gran Fury**, **Silence = Death Project** and the AIDS activist movement **ACT UP**, born and acting in America during the years of the Ronald Reagan presidency (1981–1989). Together, they redefined the responsibilities of politics and civil society in general in facing the AIDS crisis.

The **first part of *REBELS REBEL*** discusses the explosive outbreak of **society-shaping activist art** traced back to 1980s USA, where it arose in direct response to an overwhelmingly conservative political climate. Through the study of original sources such as press releases and archival materials, including original images, this first part of the book chronologically revisits **over forty art projects and exhibitions realized by Group Material**. Prominent significance is given to those projects that addressed the state of US democracy during the Reagan presidency and the political crisis brought about by the AIDS epidemic.

The **second part** of the book analyzes in depth how the **emergence of AIDS** in the early 1980s sparked an increasingly urgent need within the US art world for it to orient itself further toward cultural activism and engagement with radical protest. Starting from the birth of activist organization **AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power (ACT UP)** in 1987 New York, it examines how the engagement of the art community helped make ACT UP one of the most successful protest organizations in America.

After a chronological survey of ACT UP's history and its public demonstrations from 1987 to the early 1990s, *REBELS REBEL* considers the contributions of the art collectives **Silence=Death Project** and **Gran Fury**, and of many art institutions that gave a voice to the emergence of AIDS. Focusing on issues of **political identity**, **cultural activism**, **agitprop**, **appropriation**, and **censorship**, it demonstrates how the visual campaigns created by these art collectives generated responses from society and the government.

The history of the Gran Fury is examined in detail, from the very first graphic art projects produced for ACT UP's public actions, to those commissioned for and by museums and institutions such as the Venice Biennale (1990) and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Montreal (1992), right up to the final Gran Fury projects, such as *The Four Questions* (1993) and the group's farewell manifesto *Good Luck... Miss You* (1995), which is entirely reproduced in the book.

RESEARCH MATERIAL

GROUP MATERIAL, GRAN FURY, SILENCE = DEATH PROJECT, ACT UP

Group Material forced the art establishment to reconsider its political role and influence within the wider context of civil society, and investigated the hidden relationships between politics and culture – including the collapse of the basic principles of American democracy. An example of Group Material's approach to the problem of society is the widely known *AIDS Timeline*. Realized for various prestigious museums in America and re-adapted for the most important art magazines worldwide, the *AIDS Timeline* project traces the political and social reasons behind the AIDS crisis.

Gran Fury created, through the use of graphic design and their appropriation of art world and advertising techniques, some of the finest and most effective anti-AIDS campaigns ever realized – such as the today widely-known *Kissing Doesn't Kill* poster for the buses in New York, San Francisco, Chicago and Washington, D.C., and the same-name short clip to be broadcast on MTV; or the big billboards presented at the 1990 Venice Biennale which, juxtaposing the Pope and his anti-contraception stance with a two-foot high penis, scandalized the whole country.

Silence = Death Project appropriated and inverted the pink triangle, with which the homosexual prisoners were identified in the Nazi's camps, and used the slogan "Silence = Death" to highlight the American government's prejudices and inaction

in facing the AIDS crisis. In doing so, the Silence = Death Project collective transformed the pink triangle (already a symbol of the gay liberation movement) into the symbol for an entire community's struggle for survival.

ACT UP reinvented the way social movements act in the realm of the public space and carried on a real battle against homophobia, racism and the general conservatism of Ronald Reagan's America in the late 80's, facing down the apparatus of the State control. ACT UP has to be credited for having promoted a social imperative – that of a cure needed to be found, immediately. In doing so, it has publicly discussed the responsibilities of the government, the mass media, the pharmaceutical industries, with such an intensity, efficiency and discipline to achieve tangible solutions.

MORE INFORMATION

The book can be ordered through bookstores and museum bookshops worldwide from September 2014. In **Europe**, *REBELS REBEL* is distributed through **Anagram** (UK, France), **Vice Versa Distribution** (Germany, Austria and Switzerland) and **Exhibitions International** (Benelux, and the rest of Europe). The book is also available for purchase through the **webshop of MER. Paper Kunsthalle**: <http://shop.merpaperkunsthalle.org>. In **America**, *REBELS REBEL* is distributed by **D.A.P. (Distributed Art Publishers, NY)**, and through the following website: www.artbook.com.

TECHNICAL DETAILS

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Tommaso Speretta

Tommaso Speretta, based in Venice, worked for many international art institutions, such as the Venice Biennale and the Office for Contemporary Art Norway. He has published a long critical essay on the art and history of Sister Corita Kent and a contribution on the role of graphic design today for the exhibition catalogue *It's Graphics Now! The Words Of The Future* at Pitti Immagine 2012. In 2011 he worked with Bjarne Melgaard to organize the MA program *Beyond Death: Viral Discontents and Contemporary Notion About AIDS* at the IUAV University in Venice, and co-curated the exhibition *Baton Sinister*, as part of Norway's contribution at the 2011 Art Biennale. *REBELS REBEL* is his first book published by MER. Paper Kunsthalle.

MER. Paper Kunsthalle

MER. Paper Kunsthalle is a Ghent-based independent publishing house founded by internationally acclaimed graphic designer Luc Derycke. Established in 2005, MER. examines the possibilities and position of books as places to exhibit art. MER. Paper Kunsthalle's main focus is to provide an alternative exhibiting space to artists by creating an institutional platform that publishes art books in a different fashion. MER. calls itself a "Paper Kunsthalle", because it initiates, develops and supports art exhibiting within the medium book. Well-known publications made in this spirit are amongst others the catalogues of the exhibitions organized by the Axel Vervoordt Foundation at Palazzo Fortuny in Venice ("Artempo", "In-Finitum", "TRA", "Antoni Tàpies"), as well as the books "Luciano Fabro: From Contratto Sociale to Colonna di Genk" and "The Great Subtraction" by Gabriele Guercio.