

ACCELERATING CHANGE: A HISTORY OF ACTUP'S AIDS ACTIVISM

MEREDITH IRISH*

Douglas Crimp, *AIDS Demographics* (Bay Press, 1990)

How does one explain the government's apathy in responding to the AIDS epidemic when the disease claims so many lives each day? How does an individual go about counteracting that kind of ignorance? There now exists a group dedicated to challenging the apathy related to AIDS. In New York City, this group has made lasting impressions on legislators, journalists, and the general public. AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACTUP) is on the forefront of a continuing movement that builds awareness of prominent AIDS issues. Douglas Crimp, a well-known AIDS activist, provides a chronological cataloging of ACTUP's major contributions to AIDS issues by offering organized descriptions of the major events in ACTUP's short history.¹

Crimp presents the shocking, graphic literature that ACTUP has disseminated to the public. Readers may recognize ACTUP's familiar pink triangle with the phrase "SILENCE=DEATH," or may recall the signs created by Gran Fury, an ACTUP activist, hanging on city walls. ACTUP traces its origins to many of these demonstrations, and it continues to use these pieces of art as a means of communication to change the behavior of others. Through Crimp's narration, readers witness the group's arrangement of wide-scale productions of civil disobedience² that are extremely detailed and laborious to organize.

Crimp provides accounts of ACTUP-sponsored demonstrations that take place throughout the nation. He details the narration with examples such as the protests at the Food and Drug Administration Headquarters (Rockville, MD) and the demonstrations at the pharmaceutical company Burroughs Wellcome (Research Triangle Park, NC). In those cases and others, Crimp exposes the mechanisms of the drug approval bureaucracy. The accounts are quite moving, but nonetheless are frustrating because of Crimp's portrayal of the power-hungry leaders who are involved in the decisionmaking process for AIDS policy issues.

Readers will recognize some of the most widely reported ACTUP demonstrations highlighted in Crimp's book, such as the demonstration at New York City's St. Patrick's Cathedral in 1989. A majority of the media portrayed the demonstration as an act of "legions of sacrilegious 'homosexual activists' dese-

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1. The organization originally formed in March 1987. See DOUGLAS CRIMP, *AIDS DEMOGRAPHICS* 13 (1990).

2. One of ACTUP's most recognized forms of civil disobedience involves "die-ins," where activists lay on the ground pretending to die (hindering traffic flow, etc.), thus calling the attention of the public to their cause.

crating the host.”³ In Crimp’s portrayal of the event, readers will align themselves with ACTUP’s perspective—a perspective the media does not always present.

Crimp enables the reader to understand the outlined motives of ACTUP. The group emphasizes that by *not* acting to eviscerate the AIDS epidemic, prominent politicians, business executives, and religious leaders are abusing their positions of power. Crimp demonstrates that ACTUP activism often is the most effective catalyst, and sometimes the only alternative, to change the policies and attitudes underlying the AIDS epidemic.

Before beginning this book, readers may wonder if activism truly makes a difference. Crimp illustrates how ACTUP does in fact make a difference in the way people view the AIDS epidemic. He reports the specific results of each demonstration in the isolated descriptions of his events. His argument, in most cases, generally is successful in showing how ACTUP is an effective means to an important end: dispelling the myths surrounding the AIDS epidemic.⁴ Crimp convincingly shows that ACTUP fears that lives will continue to be lost as long as ignorance about the disease remains widespread.

3. See CRIMP, *supra* note 1, at 138.

4. Common myths surrounding the AIDS epidemic include thinking the disease is curable; assuming that an HIV-positive diagnosis is an immediate “death sentence,” and believing that AIDS is a “gay disease.”