

Twenty-One Questions to Consider When Embarking on AIDS-Related Cultural Production

In recent years, there has been a resurgence in the creation and dissemination of AIDS-related culture. Vital testimonies, memories, tactics, and artifacts, previously in danger of being lost, have been shared and preserved; cross-generational dialogue has flourished; and many people who have died with HIV/AIDS have been memorialized. However, there have been persistent problems with the conveyance of this history: gaps in the information that is shared and biases around who is remembered. Artists, curators, and cultural institutions have been put on notice by activists for white-washing the plague, being overly gay-centric, focusing too much on North American coastal metropolises, and ignoring the present by treating the crisis as if it is not ongoing.

In order to think through the current landscape of HIV/AIDS-related culture, Corrine Fitzpatrick, on behalf of Triple Canopy, and Theodore Kerr, of *What Would an HIV Doula Do?*, hosted an open conversation on October 14, 2018, entitled *What Would an HIV-Informed Cultural Worker Do?* The conversation was part of *How We Do Illness*,¹ a day-long symposium that considered how personal narratives shape public perceptions of sickness, and how cultural workers and institutions contribute to the ongoing response to HIV/AIDS. The title was borrowed from the writer Lisa Diedrich, who reminds² us that “illness and how we do illness is political.” The symposium was part of *Risk Pool*,³ an issue of Triple Canopy that asks: how are sickness and wellness defined, and by whom? What are the effects of these definitions, these acts of naming and describing?

Forty artists, administrators, critics, curators, and individuals living with and impacted by HIV/AIDS gathered to share their insights, frustrations, tactics, and experiences with making, seeing, and contemplating AIDS-related culture. Participants included Jordan Arseneault, Shirlene Cooper, Emily Colucci, Lisa Diedrich, Alex Fialho, Johnny Guaylupo, Emma Hedditch, Elizabeth Koke, Carolyn Lazard, Esther McGowan, Fernando Mariscal, Lara Mimosa Montes, Ricardo Montez, Julie Tolentino, and others who chose not to be named.

Below is a non-exhaustive series of questions inspired by the event. These questions are meant to be provocations and are not put forward with the implication that there are correct answers. In reading and making use of this document, please keep in mind that stigma, life experience, and other factors contributed to who was and was not able to attend the event, speak up, and share with authority. The hosts of the symposium and stewards of this document are aware and interested in the biases that occur around public conversations of health, wellness, and culture. We ask ourselves: what does it mean to host an event about HIV where the majority of those in attendance may be assumed to be HIV-negative? What does it mean to make a valuable resource like this one with an awareness that people living with and deeply impacted by HIV are often underemployed in general, and underrepresented in leadership positions at museums, galleries, and other cultural institutions? We hope that readers will consider these questions as well as their own experiences with the virus, and take this document as a litany of queries from which a practice of reflection might emerge; an exhortation to make the best possible work about the intersectional legacy and lived reality of the ongoing response to HIV/AIDS.

¹ <https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/how-we-do-illness/>

² <http://www.full-stop.net/2017/08/02/interviews/jesse-miller/lisa-diedrich/>

³ <https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/issues#24/>

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What Would an HIV Doula Do?

is a collective of artists, activists, academics, chaplains, doulas, health-care practitioners, nurses, filmmakers, AIDS Service Organization employees, dancers, community educators, and others joined in response to the ongoing AIDS crisis. WWHIVDD? understands a doula as someone who holds space for others during times of transition. WWHIVDD? understands HIV as a series of transitions in someone's life that does not begin with testing or diagnosis and does not end with treatment or death. Asking questions is foundational to the collective's process.

Triple Canopy is a magazine based in New York. Since 2007, Triple Canopy has advanced a model for publication that encompasses digital works of art and literature, public conversations, exhibitions, and books. This model hinges on the development of publishing systems that incorporate networked forms of production and circulation. Working closely with artists, writers, technologists, and designers, Triple Canopy produces projects that demand considered reading and viewing. Triple Canopy resists the atomization of culture and, through sustained inquiry and creative research, strives to enrich the public sphere. Triple Canopy is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization and has been certified by W.A.G.E.

1. Are you living with HIV?
2. As cultural producers working on HIV/AIDS, how do we engage with the fact that we are participating in the creation of history?
3. Who are your people? Who are the artists, activists, friends, and lovers that act as both source and recipient of your power, energy, and insight?
4. How do you define inclusion? What does community mean to you?
5. How are we incorporating the ongoingness of HIV/AIDS into our work?
6. How best to honor the labor of activists, artists, and other cultural workers who are living with HIV?
7. How do sex and drugs figure into current representations of HIV/AIDS?
8. How do gender, race, class, sexuality, religion, geography, poverty, disability, and other aspects of who we are, how we live, and how we are perceived impact how we understand and broadcast HIV/AIDS?
9. What is at risk for you, personally, in creating AIDS-related culture? For the audience?
10. How do we make it clear that any expression of AIDS-related culture is just a sliver of a silver of the larger conversations about HIV/AIDS?
11. How do we factor in the politics of our collaborators and partners?
12. How might we unpack the ways in which the state has factored into our understanding of the virus?
13. How do we account for the ways in which HIV/AIDS keeps all of our bodies entangled and vulnerable?
14. How are we relating HIV/AIDS to other illnesses and social conditions? How, if at all, are we educating on HIV/AIDS in relation to other illnesses and social conditions?
15. How does our AIDS-related work relate to the people who were diagnosed today? Last year? Last century?
16. What do we consider an AIDS-related archive to be?
17. Is the cultural production of HIV/AIDS-related content a form of activism? Is it always?
18. What are ways in which we can learn, reclaim, and signify loss? Not just of people, but also of ideas, tactics, ways of being, and experiences of living?
19. How can we keep the physicalness of bodies—such as aging with illness—at the forefront of our theorizing and intellectualizing about AIDS-related cultural production?
20. How are we pushing back against the fact that people living with the virus are often positioned as the content of AIDS-related culture but are less frequently shown as the producers of, or even the audience for, that culture?
21. How do we seek out the perspectives and experiences of people and communities living with and impacted by HIV/AIDS who may not already be part of the conversation?