

MARTOS GALLERY

HYPERALLERGIC

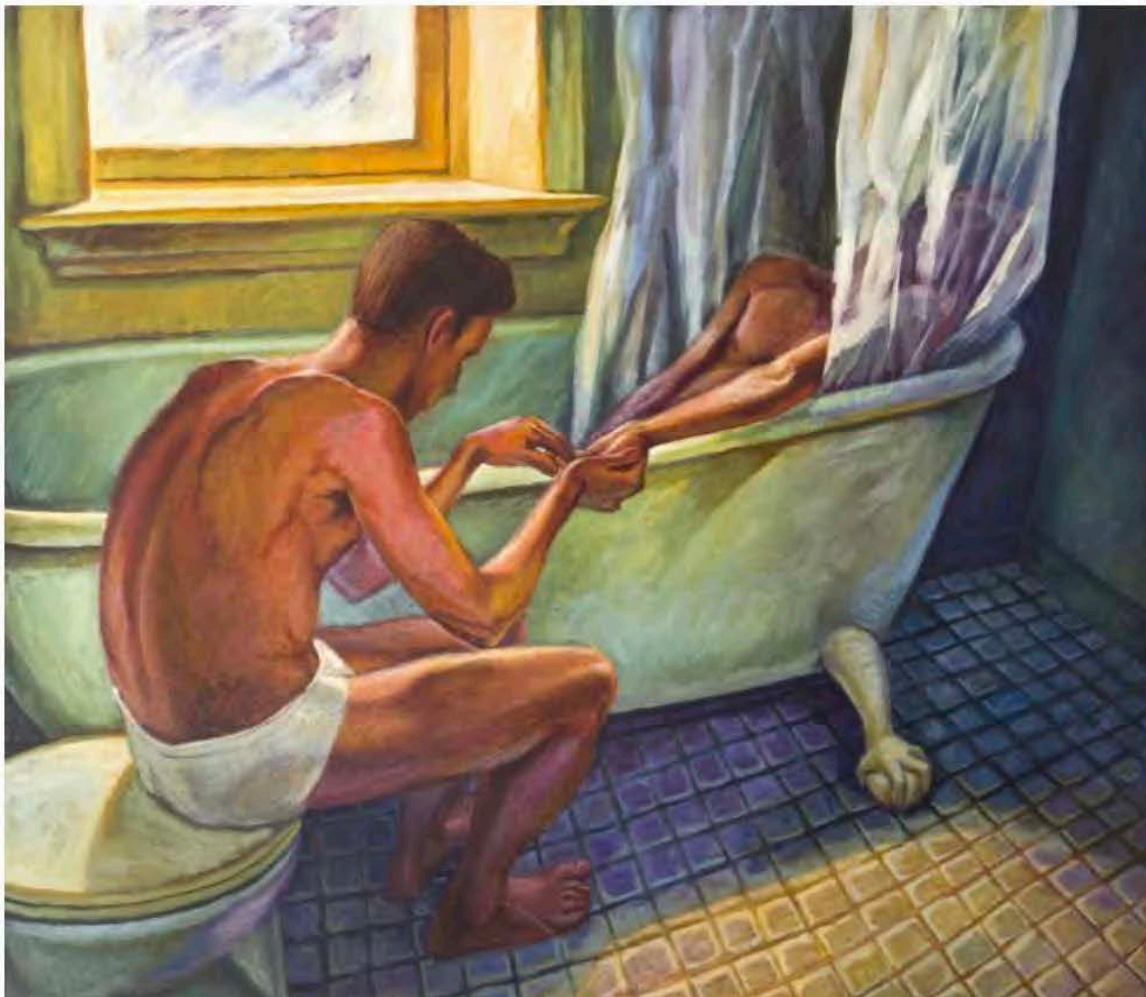
ART

The Tender Gravity of Domestic Spaces Haunted by AIDS

A multimedia exhibit at Museum of the City of New York looks back at the domesticity of the AIDS crisis.

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Hugh Steers, "Bath Curtain" (1992) (all images courtesy of Museum of the City of New York, © 2017 Estate of Hugh Steers/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

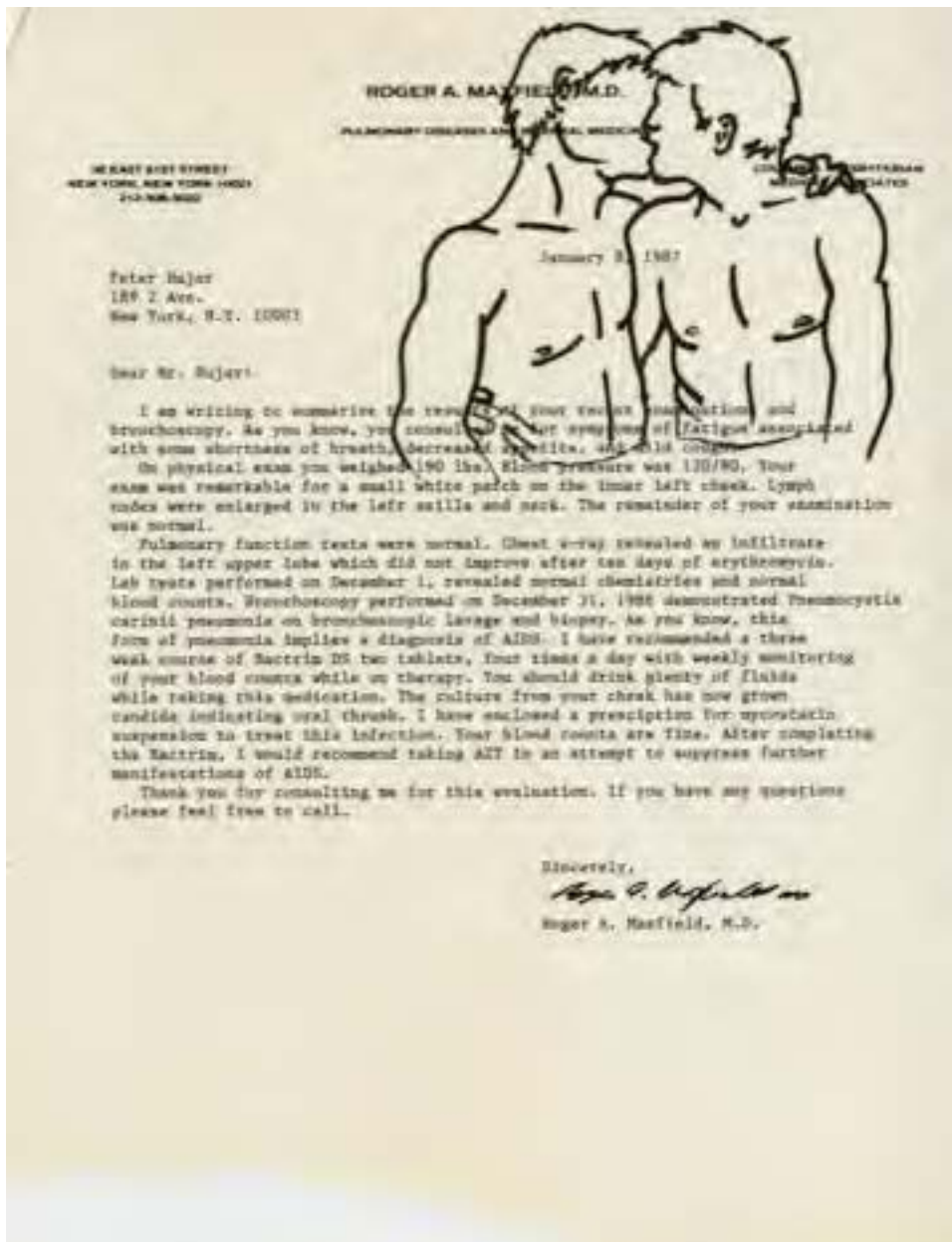
The Museum of the City of New York's exhibition *AIDS at Home: Art and Everyday Activism* depicts its titular setting as one fraught with anxiety. Here, "home" (or something like it) is not an end to a means. Instead, it embodies a place of decades-long and continued uncertainty around healthcare and housing policy, mourning and survival. During an artist panel co-organized by Visual AIDS, Avram Finkelstein, founding member of the activist group Gran Fury, softly disclosed "how haunted the streets of New York are" to him. Haunted too, as the exhibition makes clear, are the private interiors in which suffering played out among lovers and friends and efforts were made to secure housing for HIV+ individuals. Set against the fragile line between public outcry and personal anguish, the home emerged as a humble symbol for the inescapability of LGBTQ oppression.



Susan Kuklin, "Kachin and Michael at Michael's Apartment" (1987)

Select moments in the exhibition treat "home" as a sacred and stable site, most notably in the opening gallery, which is dedicated to caretaking and the quotidian terms of survival. Quiet photographs by Susan Kuklin from 1987 capture the Gay Men's Health Crisis' early efforts to garner volunteer-driven support for those living with HIV/AIDS. These images are offset by a far more evocative series from Nan Goldin (1994–95), in which the photographic gaze shifts from a woman in hospice to the dove-embroidered curtains that breathe strange life into her surroundings.

In the same room, Hugh Steers's arresting 1992 painting "Bath Curtain" weighs heavy as ever. A young couple — one man perched on the edge of a toilet seat, the other reclined in a claw-foot tub — tenderly cup hands. A plastic curtain obscures the latter figure's face, resting over it like a veil or a gilded funerary mask. It's a heartbreaking image, and one that underscores the urgent need for systemic medical attention at a time when, as the exhibition astutely points out, healthcare and traditional models of caregiving were rigged against queer communities.



David Wojnarowicz, Peter Hujar's diagnostic letter (1987)

An equal sense of gravity, though differently framed, electrifies a framed ink drawing by David Wojnarowicz. The surface itself is a doctor's letter to Peter Hujar, Wojnarowicz's partner and fellow artist, detailing his AIDS diagnosis in January of 1987. Wojnarowicz, in an act of quiet resistance, has overlain an image of two men, mouths locked, arms around each other in a deep embrace. This image is paired with an archival document from November of the same year, which details the home-care plan for Hujar, in hopes of sustaining his degenerative health. One is left to imagine what life was like during the mere handful of months separating diagnosis, instructions for home care, and Hujar's death just 10 days later. Perhaps the couple saw their vision of "home" slip gradually into a macabre backdrop for an unwelcome reality.

The remaining galleries deepen this wash of sorrow to explore themes of homelessness, housing discrimination, and the unrecognized legal status of queer families. The exhibition's curator Stephen Vider has again deployed archival ephemera alongside artistic interpretations to carry complex historical narratives. A [1994 blueprint](#), for example, describes plans for the nonprofit AIDS advocacy

organization Housing Works' space in the East Village, containing a mix of apartment units and a treatment center. Nearby, a series of drawings from 2008 by Chloe Dzubilo chronicle years of hardship in modest pursuit of stable housing as a transgender, HIV+ woman.

One prominent feature of the exhibition, which can at times feel a bit heavy-handed, is the inclusion of architectural and residential leitmotifs — curatorial interventions threaded throughout the space. Crown molding, curtains, and wallpaper serve as facile symbols of domesticity, though these latter two elements, interestingly, host a collection of decorative patterns by a relatively more international crop of artists. Examples by Americans Carl George and Avram Finkelstein, who caricatures the pharmaceutical industry's grip on self-care, are complemented by designs from Cuban-born Rafael Sánchez, Canadian-born Anthea Black, and South Korean-born Yeonjune Jung. Jung's printed wallpaper from 2014, for example, camouflages acts of anti-LGBTQ violence and policing within otherwise bucolic vignettes — an approach conceptually reminiscent of Robert Gober's "Hanging Man / Sleeping Man" (1989).



Avram Finkelstein, "Peace Through Chemistry" (2013), wallpaper adapted from Worker's Apartment



Lee Snider, ACT UP Rally at City Hall Park (1988)

One unfortunate shortcoming of *AIDS at Home* lies in its virtual omission of the intersection between sexual orientation and a national health epidemic on one hand, and race and non-normative gender identities on the other. The fact that people of color and both transgender and other queer-identified individuals experienced disproportionately greater prejudice in their fight against HIV/AIDS is largely overlooked here. As writer and activist Sarah Schulman reminded the audience during the aforementioned panel discussion, the HIV/AIDS crisis came to national attention at a time when a certain class of white gay men exhibited symptoms to be studied, supplanting a longer, preexistent history of the disease's spread throughout other communities. This point finds little momentum within the exhibition itself, yet the underlying inequity and its present-day dangers beg for more sustained attention.

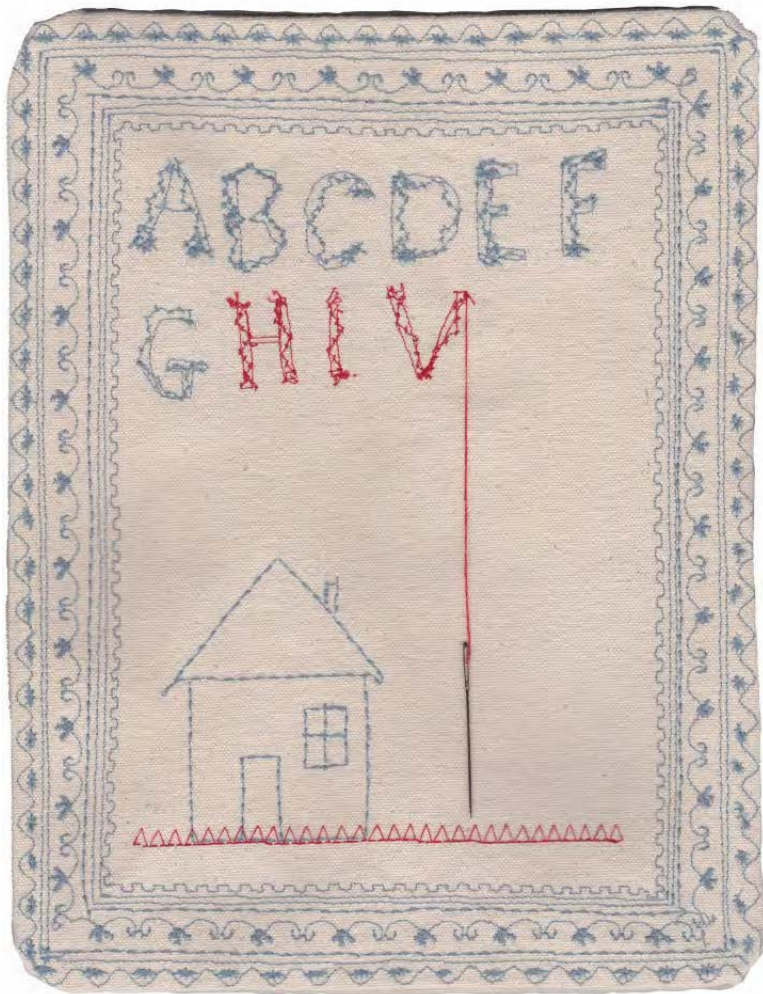


Luna Luis Ortiz, "Self-portrait (Reality Sets In)" (1996)

AIDS at Home concludes in its determination that, thanks to so much of the personal, political, and organizational activism archived in the galleries, the transmission and threat of HIV/AIDS today has been tempered by significant medical advances and wide-scale advocacy. And yet, the reality of HIV/AIDS persists. In the final gallery, Ben Cuevas riffs on both the primacy and (for many) unattainability of medication, Kia LaBeija unveils the emotional toll placed on those born HIV+, and Jeffrey Scott Wilson exposes how, to this day, the disease can immediately interrupt the course of one's livelihood. Perhaps these disjointed concluding narratives argue that HIV/AIDS will not leave a singular legacy — somewhat fitting for a disease that snakes its way into so many lives and calls for the dismantling of dominant power structures in the name of survival.



Kia Labeija, "The First Ten Years" (2014)



Jeffrey Scott Wilson, HIV Sampler (2013)

AIDS at Home: Art and Everyday Activism continues at Museum of the City of New York (1220 Fifth Avenue) through October 22, 2017.