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Keith Haring, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Wolfgang Tillmans, and the AIDS Epidemic: The Use of Visual Art in a Health Humanities Course

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Abstract Contemporary art can be a powerful pedagogical tool in the health humanities. Students in an undergraduate course in the health humanities explore the subjective experience of illness and develop their empathy by studying three artists in the context of the AIDS epidemic: Keith Haring, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and Wolfgang Tillmans. Using assignments based in narrative pedagogy, students expand their empathic response to pain and suffering. The role of visual art in health humanities pedagogy is discussed.

Keywords Pedagogy · AIDS · Visual art · Narrative pedagogy · Empathy

Introduction

This essay discusses the use of contemporary art in an undergraduate health humanities course as a tool to develop empathy.[1] Teaching this through visual art provides a way for students to explore the affective component of empathy though their reactions to the artworks. In a field dominated by literature, participating in the larger project of health humanities can be difficult for some learners, particularly undergraduates. This mode of instruction, combining narrative pedagogical techniques and visual art, can be applied to other diseases, conditions, and epidemics and has been employed in instruction in health care (Freeman and Bays 2007).

In the course, my students explore the experience of gay communities and the AIDS epidemic to understand how the experience of epidemic or plague can shape communities as well as social and individual reactions to disease. The goal of the course is to have students use visual art to explore the personal and subjective experience of an epidemic and, in turn, to consider how these subjective experiences influence public perceptions of diseases and

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epidemics. The larger class goal is to help students to understand that disease, illness, suffering and death are phenomena that are as much social and cultural as they are natural and scientific.

While the subject of the discussion is visual art and the AIDS epidemic, I do not hope and do not intend to add substantively to the already impressive literature on AIDS and art. Victoria Harden's *AIDS at 30* and David France's *How to Survive a Plague* provide outstanding background on the epidemic generally (Harden 2012; France 2016). Douglas Crimp's work, particularly his edited volume, *AIDS: Cultural Analysis and Cultural Activism* and Jonathan David Katz's new collection of essays, *Art AIDS America,* provide much more detailed discussions of this period and art's role in it (Crimp and Bersani 1988; Jonathan D. Katz et al. 2015).

Pedagogy in the health humanities and empathy

My course uses art as a visual and historical record of an historic period and of a community's experience of an epidemic. Using visual art as a narrative coupled with other historic sources can improve students ability to understand and interpret the illness experience and reflect on their own experiences (Wikström 2011). Using the works of art discussed in class, students are asked to explore their own experiences as well their classmates' and to learn to describe the experience of gay men during the AIDS epidemic using affective and emotional terms. This type of self-reflection can be particularly useful in the development of empathy and the skills necessary to implement and support patient centered care (Moore and Hallenbeck 2010). The development of empathy should play a central role in medical education and in the delivery of patient-centered care (Institute of Medicine 2001; Moore and Hallenbeck 2010; Frampton, Guastello, and Lepore 2013), and the benefits of empathy have been well-documented: reduction of caregiver burn-out, improved patient satisfaction, increased adherence to medical treatment, and reduction of malpractice suits (Moore and Hallenbeck 2010). In addition to improving quality of care, empathy is associated with maintaining physician professionalism (Marcum 2013).

Empathy is "the act of feeling oneself into the experience of another person in order to understand it as fully as possible" (Pembroke 2006); or "an affective and a mental reaction to another's suffering in which a person enters into that suffering, with an ability to assess what is required to relieve it" (Marcum 2013, 3). Empathy has both a cognitive and affective component (Pembroke 2006; Marcum 2013). To foster empathy, a course in health humanities must give students both a cognitive understanding of the context of the person suffering as well as the ability to share that suffering in order to relieve it. This dual approach to improving students' empathy can be strengthened through visual art. The appraisal theory of emotions provides a framework for the class to introduce students to visual art. Individuals' enjoyment of art and emotional response to it is improved with their ability to evaluate the context of the art and to make it comprehensible (Silvia 2005). I focus on both the cognitive and affective responses to art in the course by the choice of materials and assignments. Before exploring any individual pieces of art or artists, students are given a number of background materials to help them understand and learn more about the social and political context of the 1980s and the early AIDS epidemic—focusing on the cognitive aspect of empathy development and improving comprehensibility of the works. Harden's *AIDS at 30* provides the historical background for students in addition to two films: *How to Survive a Plague* and *We Were Here* (Harden 2012; France 2013; Weissman and Weber 2011). These materials and historical discussions give students an intellectual understanding of the epidemic, gay men's experiences, and the discrimination and

homophobia of the period. Visual art then provides a means for students to explore the affective component of empathy though their reactions to the artworks.

Illness, disease and society

Students must learn to see illness and epidemics as subjective experiences rather than strictly objective biomedical phenomenon. This class is one of the first to introduce students to the concept of illness as a subjective experience distinct from disease. That disease and illness are synonymous is entrenched in Western medical discourse (Cassell 1976) and Eric Cassell first introduced the distinction between the two in 1976 and continued to explore these concepts in later work (Cassell 1976; Cassell 2013). Exploring the subjective experience of illness in the context of the AIDS epidemic is a central focus of class. Students come to understand that the experience of having AIDS varied depending on age, sex, sexuality and class.

Cassell also emphasizes the role of meaning-making in understanding illness and suffering, "symptoms, perhaps especially pain, are not simple brute facts of nature; they are actively influenced by preexisting meanings of the persons in whom they occur" (Cassell 2013, 209). Reading about the social, cultural and political context of the gay community gives students insight as to how members of that community might react to symptoms experienced, and, relatedly, how those not experiencing symptoms might react to those infected (Risse 2012). The epidemic itself is described, following Cassell's analysis of clinical practice, as a state of being, and representing a community's attempts to make meaning of disease (Kavey 2014). This particular line of analysis of the AIDS epidemic is supported by work in the field (Fee and Krieger 1993). Following the model for the class, I couple more discursive readings with literature, art or film. Along with Cassell, students view Todd Haynes' film *Safe* before viewing any art or being introduced to the epidemic (1995). *Safe* tells the story of Carol, a housewife in Southern California, experiencing symptoms of an unknown disease. The film is both a meditation on illness and social control as well as a metaphor about AIDS (Christian 2005) and provides an excellent transition from theoretical discussions of subjectivity and illness to the AIDS epidemic, visual art and gay culture.

Understanding AIDS through visual art

The AIDS epidemic was more than a biomedical phenomenon; it was a "battleground of meaning." (Bordowitz 2010, 14). The term itself was and remains contested, and to experience the epidemic either as a person living with AIDS or not is to experience a contestation of political, cultural and religious meanings played out through culture, including visual art. In the early epidemic, concepts related to contamination, the virus, replication and the media were very much at the fore. Paula Treichler captured this crisis of meaning, "the AIDS epidemic—with its genuine potential for global devastation—is simultaneously an epidemic of a transmissible lethal disease and an epidemic of meanings or signification. Both epidemics are equally crucial for us to understand, for, try as we may to treat AIDS as 'an infectious disease' and nothing more, meanings continue to multiply wildly and at an extraordinary rate" (1988, 32).

I divide the epidemic roughly into three periods in an attempt to organize the class discussions: the early epidemic and reaction to it leading up to early 1990s; the on-going

epidemic, roughly from the development of AZT to the development of HAART (highly active antiretroviral therapy); and the latter, post-HAART epidemic, from 1997 forward. Using the art of Keith Haring, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and Wolfgang Tillmans, students explore the changing experience of the disease with each artist roughly associated with each period. Starting with Haring, students explore the initial outbreak in the gay community, the anger, loss, and sense of crisis and catastrophe. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, the same generation of Haring, creates work that focuses on dying, identity, loss, and regeneration; students are invited to explore the personal implications of HIV and AIDS and the feelings of loss and intimacy that provide a contrast to the more political and explicit nature of Haring's work. Finally, students are introduced to the work of Wolfgang Tillmans. Tillmans is of a different generation and came of age as a gay man when HIV and AIDS were the norm; gay life, gay culture, and gay sexuality were linked in many ways inextricably to death and dying.

Before proceeding, I want to note that using gay artists' work as a text to be explored as a visual representation of the experiences of gay men during an epidemic may be a theoretically problematic approach or at least raise theoretically complex problems of identity, representation, and culture. I rely here on the work of David Halperin who has spent time exploring the concept of *gay subjectivity* and argues persuasively from a perspective of queer theory that it is possible and appropriate to theorize a *gay culture* and a gay subjective experience (Halperin 2012). I have also relied on gay artists who foremost and primarily identify as *artists* and who are open about their own status as being HIV positive. These are not gay men who happen to express themselves visually; rather these are artists who are gay and who, given their theorized culture experiences, convey and possess some level of gay subjectivity in their work (Deitcher 1998; Rounthwaite 2010; M.H. de Young Memorial Museum 2014). As artists, each also engages in work with a belief in the larger vision and purpose of artistic expression. This assumption of gay subjectivity may be both particularly problematic and revealing for Felix Gonzalez-Torres. While his work has been removed, in some instances, from an explicit connection to his sexuality and AIDS, it has been argued that this removal and "cold theory" approach to Felix Gonzalez-Torres may be more a function of his estate than the artist himself (Ledesma 2009). This "cold theory" approach to Felix Gonzalez-Torres can also be read, as itself, part of a larger theoretical approach that was loathe to read any queer readings or intent into works by gay artists (Jonathan David Katz 2015, 36–37). I emphasize with students that these artists should be considered in a larger cultural context and that the expressions of one artist are not necessarily an expression of an interior individual experience, either the artist's or the viewers.

Keith Haring: grief, anger and doubt

The early AIDS epidemic was characterized by shock, horror, and grief, as the gay community reacted not only to the mounting number of deaths and illnesses but also to the rise in anti-Gay and conservative politics in the U.S. that placed blame for the epidemic squarely on the shoulders of the community (Harden 2012; France 2016). Before introducing Haring, I show students, *We Were Here* and *How to Survive a Plague,* providing a context for the early epidemic and the gay community's response to it (Weissman and Weber 2011; France 2013).

Following the films, students are introduced to the work of Keith Haring. Haring was a prolific and well-regarded figure in contemporary American art before the AIDS epidemic, and, while Haring was an openly gay man, his early work was not particularly associated with themes of gay identity (M.H. de Young Memorial Museum 2014). Haring provides an

excellent entry point for students as his work relies on the creation of an "iconic language…a language consisting of a concrete visual communication through non-verbal symbols…He (Haring) was concerned with communication more than with anything else" (Kolossa and Haring 2009, 18). Haring's images, the dog, the flying saucer, the stick, the baby, etc., were signs that Haring would configure and re-configure in his work to convey meaning (Kolossa and Haring 2009, 27). Haring himself said, "I try to make images that are universally 'readable' and self-explanatory…An artist is a spokesman for a society at any given point in history. His language is determined by his perception of the world we all live in" (Haring 1996, 117). The readability of Haring's work makes him an excellent introduction to the topic in class.

Keith Haring was "a regular at ACT UP meetings" (France 2016, 407), and the politically charged atmosphere certainly had an impact on him (Haring 1996, 162–163). ACT UP, AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, was founded following a now famous speech by Larry Kramer at the Gay and Lesbian Center in New York (France 2016). In his speech, Kramer had two-thirds of the room stand, telling them they would be dead in five years. He then exhorted them to action, and "the presentation morphed into a Capraesque town hall meeting" (2016). Two days later ACT UP was founded and, in its history, would go on to be a major force in transforming the government and society's reaction to the epidemic. Its first action was to protest the pricing of the newly approved treatment, AZT. At its founding, artists and graphic designers were a key part of the movement. The Silence=Death project members who had created the powerful posters with pink triangles and "SILENCE=DEATH" along the bottom were at the first meeting donating their work to the planned protests (2016).

The *Let the Record Show* exhibit in the window of the New Museum, organized by a member of ACT UP, carried this political message and link between visual art, AIDS, and politics further and was held the same year as ACT UP's founding (Crimp and Rolston 1990, 15). The artists responsible for *Let the Record Show* went on to launch Gran Fury, a collective of artists that served as "ACT UP's unofficial propaganda ministry and guerrilla graphic designers" (1990). These artists and designers had a profound impact on how the epidemic was understood and discussed (Burk 2015).

As the AIDS epidemic unfolded, Haring's work began to include themes of sex, sexuality, contagion and sickness. This early shock, horror, grief and trauma of the AIDS epidemic in the gay community is often difficult for students to grasp. Haring's works are evocative of this trauma. In *Untitled,* 1985, (Fig. 1) the epidemic is figured in the center of the painting as a large mass, spreading tentacles, disfigured and grotesque genitalia. On the right and left, male figures are hung upside down by their genitalia. The image is terrifying and visually evokes for students the epidemic (Bucchart 2014). Haring discussed both the expectations and burdens of living in the epidemic in his journal: "I'm not really scared of AIDS. Not for myself. I'm scared of having to watch more people die in front of me. Watching Martin Burgoyne or Bobby die was pure agony. I refuse to die like that. If the time comes, I think suicide is much more dignified and much easier on friends and loved ones. Nobody to deserves to watch this kind of *slow death*" (Emphasis original, Haring 163).

The epidemic also exacerbated or amplified gay men's complex relationship to their bodies, sexuality and sex. It began to link sexuality to death and illness. In a series of images from 1988, the black horned sperm, a representational sign for Haring of epidemic and disease and AIDS, is seen bursting from an egg strapped to the back of the figure struggling up the stairs (Fig. 2). Sex and sexuality become linked to death and apocalypse in Haring's work (Phillips 2007). The black horned sperm becomes a burden and source of

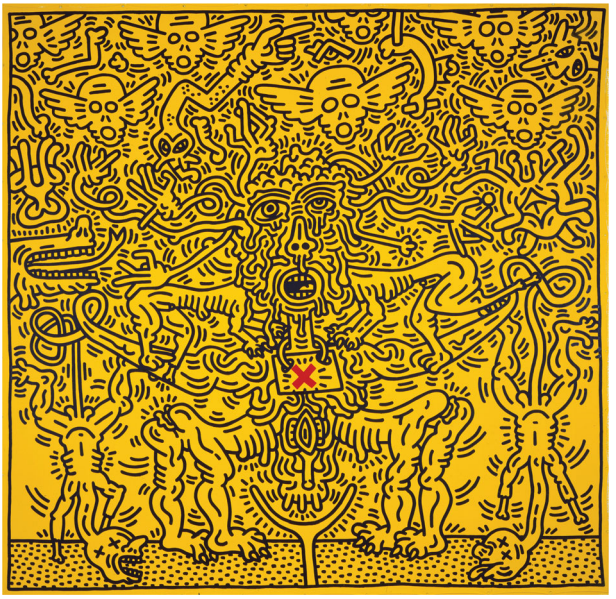

Fig. 1 Untitled, 1985 by Keith Haring

contagion spreading through communities. These images along with other images from Haring's work give students a visual entry into the feeling of horror, fear, grief, and self-doubt that characterized much of the early epidemic. While much of this fear and anger was internal and private, it had a very real expression in activism and political activity in this period. The early epidemic was characterized by profound loss and, at the same time, the birth of a profound political activism that sought to transform the narrative of the AIDS epidemic through political protest and through art.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres: mourning

As the epidemic raged on, even after the development of AZT, the toll of epidemic was being felt by the gay community. The loss of life and deaths were staggering. While the political activism of the period was claiming victories on the political front, the deaths continued (Takemoto 2003, 87). Gay culture, gay relationships were being systemically hidden and erased. The effect on individual and collective mourning was profound,

> during the AIDS crisis there is an all but inevitable connection between the memories and hopes associated with our lost friends and the daily assaults on our consciousness. Seldom has a society so savaged people during their hour of loss […] The violence we encounter is relentless, the violence of silence and omission almost as impossible to endure as the violence of unleased hatred and outright murder. (Crimp 2002, 129)

The stress on gay culture and gay men increased and remained a persistent background to social life. Felix Gonzalez-Torres' work provides an entry for students to explore mourning in the community both at the individual and personal level.

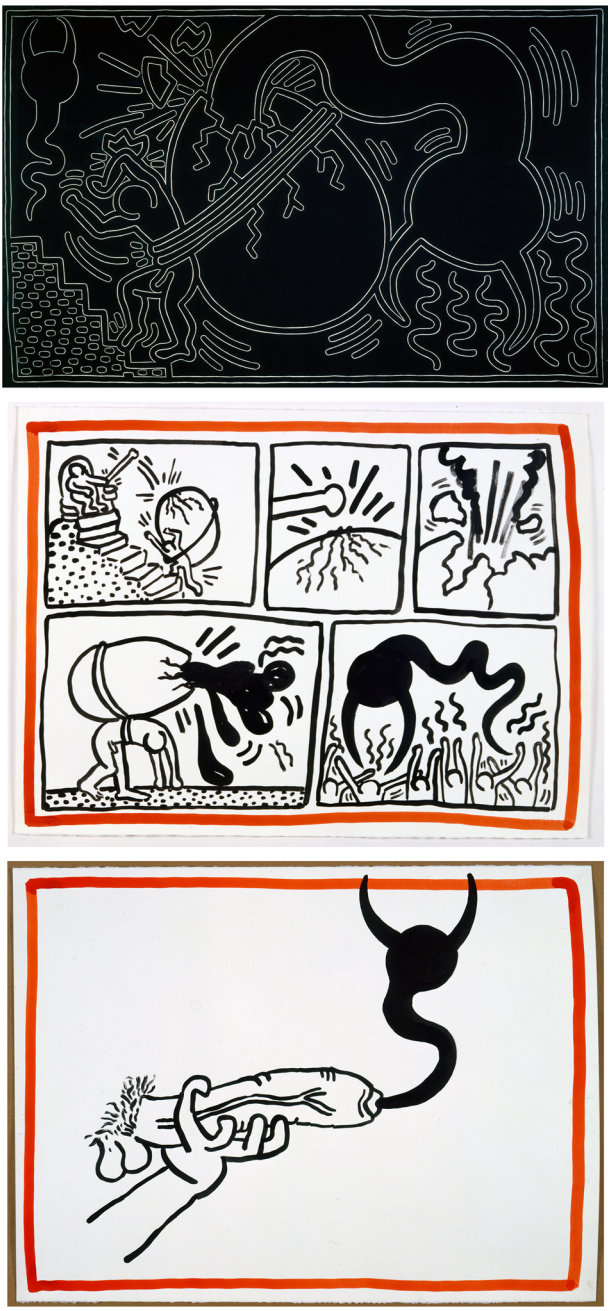

Fig. 2 Untitled, 1988; Untitled, 1988; Untitled, May 7, 1988 by Keith Haring

Felix Gonzalez-Torres was born in Cuba in 1957 and lived and worked primarily in the U.S. as an artist. He was a process artist active in Group Material (Group Material Firm: New York, N.Y. and Ault 2010). His work is minimal, understated, and is often interpreted as focusing on the inevitability of death, on regeneration, and on loss (Gonzalez-Torres and Ault

2006). His relationship with his lover Ross and Ross' illness and death have also been a key to understanding his work and his themes (Ledesma 2009). Felix Gonzalez-Torres work is also an entry point for students to understand the contestation of gay identities and readings of his work that are aligned with the epidemic or his relation to it. The discussions of Gonzalez-Torres' work by Storr, Arning and Katz provide contrasting views. Storr seems to minimize the relationship of the work to the epidemic, Arning and Katz move it to the fore (Storr 2016; Jonathan David Katz 2015; Arning 2015).

In "Untitled" (Perfect Lovers), 1987-1990, the theme of loss and the inevitability of separation and death are emphasized. Using two simple office clocks, placed next to each other, both started at the same time, the viewer becomes aware of the inevitability of separation as one clock slow or becomes faster than the other, and, over time, the two clocks, which started at the same time, slowly fall into separate time keeping. (Fig. 3). In "Untitled" (Orpheus, Twice), 1991 Felix Gonzalez-Torres places two full length mirrors next to each other. The viewer can only see himself fully in one mirror and attempts by the viewer to see himself in both mirrors result in a fractured representation. Felix Gonzalez-Torres work can be interpreted to emphasize the importance of the loving pair, the couple. In this work, one person is missing, and the viewer is left alone and whole in one mirror or fractured and split in two mirrors (Spector and Gonzalez-Torres 2007, 140–142). This theme of union and loss is found throughout Felix Gonzalez-Torres work.

For many students, the most moving work is Felix Gonzalez-Torres' "Untitled" (Go-Go Dancing Platform), 1991. In this work, one of the only performance pieces by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, a stage with lights is set up in the gallery. At randomly identified times, a go-go boy enters the gallery and dances on the stage to music he alone hears through headphones.[2] After he dances, the stage is left lit and empty. The effect is haunting. The go-go boy, symbol of gay desire and bar culture, dances alone and to music no one else hears. Even when he is present and dancing, he is ostracized, excluded. Much of the time he is absent, the stage alone the last testament to his culture and existence like a long abandoned ruin. The sense of loss and exclusion is palpable in the work (Fig. 4).

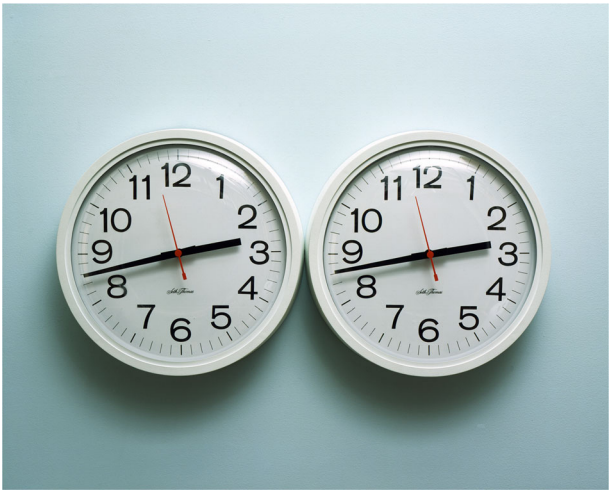

Fig. 3 Felix Gonzalez-Torres "Untitled" (Perfect Lovers), 1987-1990. Wall clocks 13 1/2 x 27 x 1 1/4 in. overall. Two parts: 13 1/2 in. diameter each Edition of 3, 1 AP. © The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

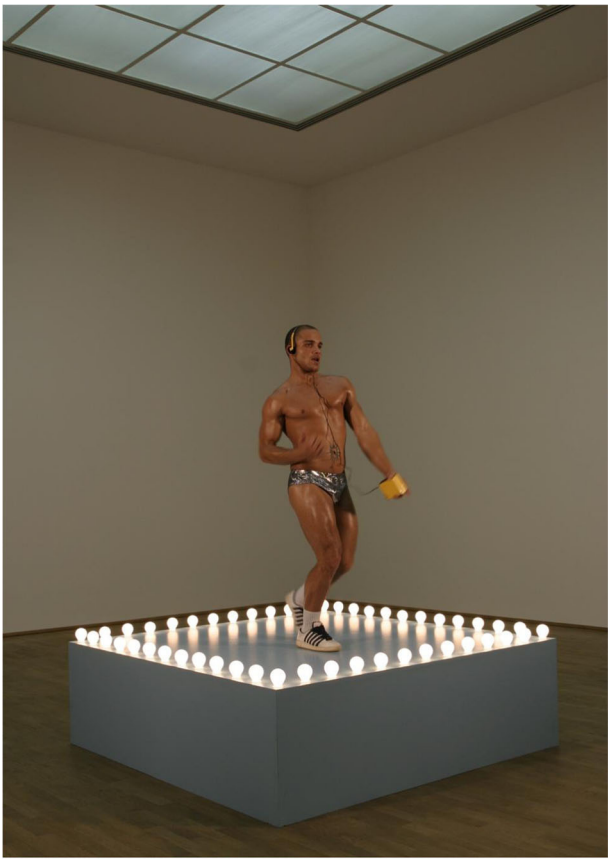

Fig. 4 Felix Gonzalez-Torres "Untitled" (Go-Go Dancing Platform), 1991. Wood, lightbulbs, acrylic paint and Go-Go dancer in silver lamé bathing suit, sneakers and personal listening device. Overall dimensions vary with installation. Platform: 21 1/2 x 72 x 72 in. (54.6 x 182.9 x 182.9 cm). © The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

Felix Gonzalez-Torres also provides a link for students to the concept to meaning-making in illness. Unlike Haring's work, Felix Gonzalez-Torres' work invites the viewer's participation in the work either physically or emotionally. This participation in the work also invites the viewer to participate in the mourning process. Felix Gonzalez-Torres' art is deeply personal and is linked to his relationship with his lover Ross and Ross' death from AIDS (Ledesma 2009). Felix Gonzalez-Torres attempts to understand and make meaning of the loss he experienced with the death of Ross gives students an opportunity to engage empathetically. In "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), 1991, brightly colored wrapped candies are piled in the corner (Fig. 5). The candies are portioned out to weigh 175 lbs. This has been interpreted to be Ross' ideal weight. The piles of candy are not simply for the viewer to examine and to consider from a distance, rather the viewer can take the candy and eat it. Perhaps we can view the symbolic representation of his lover's body made real in the pile of candy. Viewers may participate and to ingest the work. As the viewers ingest the candy, the pile disappears just as Felix Gonzalez-Torres watched as his lover slowly wasted away from the disease. The piece also invites students in class to discuss issues of the viral, contamination and meaning.

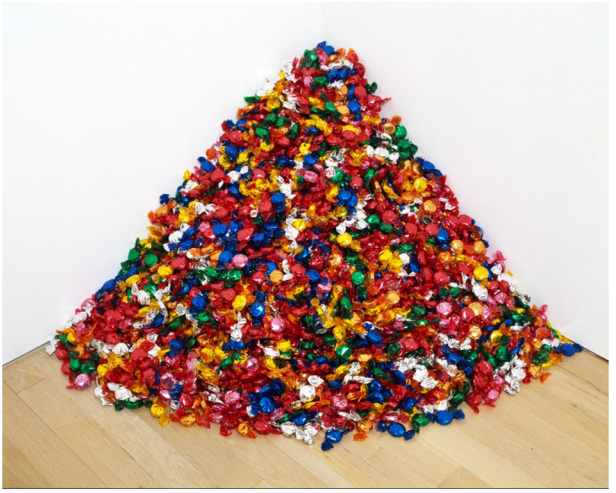

Fig. 5 Felix Gonzalez-Torres "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), 1991. Candies individually wrapped in multicolored cellophane, endless supply. Overall dimensions vary with installation Ideal weight: 175 lbs. © The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

Exposed to Felix Gonzalez-Torres students, explore how an epidemic can begin to impact social norms and vice-versa. While Haring and Felix Gonzalez-Torres are of the same generation of gay men, their works are markedly different. In the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, students began to explore HIV and AIDS less as a plague and more of a background feeling, an on-going state of being. In the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, AIDS has been transformed from merely disease and illness to discrimination and the repression of gay men. He saw AIDS everywhere, "When people think about AIDS, they think of hospital beds, medicine, needles, and all such garish things. That's not AIDS. That's part of it, but AIDS also, unfortunately, includes discrimination, fear, shame, desperation, and political repression" (Spector and Gonzalez-Torres 2007, 166). The mourning loss, fragmentation and poignancy of Felix Gonzalez-Torres is an excellent transition to more modern gay perspectives explored in the work of Wolfgang Tillmans.

Wolfgang Tillmans: a lost culture and queer subjectivity

Following the development of HAART and the approval of the therapies in 1996, the number of death from AIDS began to decline. There were claims that the epidemic was over (Harden 2012, 149–157). ACT UP wound down from its earlier period, and AIDS moved toward becoming a chronic manageable infection. Wolfgang Tillmans, a German artist born in 1968, entered adolescence as a young gay man in a gay culture that was already dealing with the trauma of HIV and AIDS. Tillmans did not know a gay community before the epidemic. In class, we contrast Tillmans' work to that of Haring and Gonzalez-Torres. Unlike Haring, Tillmans' work is not explicit in its representations of sex and sexuality; rather, the gay male gaze is hidden (Deitcher 1998). Unlike Gonzalez-Torres, there is no explicit mourning or connection to the epidemic. I have students explore Tillmans' work to consider the impact of HIV and AIDS on the gay community in the longer term. Tillmans provides an entry for students to consider the effect of AIDS on gay culture when it had shifted from an epidemic, a

plague, to a chronic disease (Fee and Krieger 1993). Tillmans captures this shifting perception of the epidemic: "my connection to the AIDS phenomenon is really along the lines of enhancing perception, noticing the white noise that accompanies life. When does this white noise develop into something concrete?" (Tillmans and Obrist 2009). I ask my students to consider what Tillmans might mean here. What does it mean for something like the AIDS epidemic to be "white noise"? Throughout class, students have been asked to explore the idea of something perceived. When does it become concrete? Tillmans' work brings the students back to a central question of perception and illness, and he is keenly focused on this issue, "We might possess more absolute knowledge than ever before, but everything is fragmented—the same way hard drives save "fragmented" files. There is no longer a view of the totality of the whole" (Tillmans and Ruf 2012). Tillmans' work is avenue for students to broaden their notions of perception and of empathy by focusing on the quotidian pieces of life: car headlights, fabrics, planes, cars, markets, etc. What does it mean for an epidemic to be reduced to chronic illness? For Tillmans, this focus on everyday things is a means to expand empathy (Tillmans and Ruf 2012).

Two sets of images are particularly powerful. First, the images associated with his lover and lover's death. The image of Tillmans, cleaning out his lover's empty studio after his death, stands in stark contrast to Felix Gonzalez-Torres's candy spills. It is a plain image and remarkably common with no hints of loss or mourning (Figs. 6 and 7). The image of his lover Jochen taking a bath is everyday and affectionate. Only after understanding the context does the work become something more (Halley 2002). In many ways, the works only become works about HIV and AIDS with sufficient background knowledge of their production. How do we learn to "enhance perception," to borrow Tillmans' phrase, to derive meaning from the experience of others? Tillmans emphasizes this fragmentation in his exhibitions where his works are displayed in differing formats and orders, often mixing older and new pieces on the gallery walls or on tables set up in the gallery.

Tillman's photographs are of clothes strewn on the floor, on a banister, or across a radiator (Fig. 8). *Turnhose (Sandalen), 1992* and *Sportflecken,* 1996 are also powerful for students. In *Turnhose (Sandalen), 1992* the Adidas gym shorts and sandals are staged on the chair evoking the memory of the absent wearer. Loss and the missing body are strongly suggested in *Sportflecken*, the stained and rumpled t-shirt with its evocation of Felix Gonzalez-Torres' billboard installations of the empty bed (Deitcher 1998) (Fig. 6). Male bodies in Tillmans' work are often represented as both sexual objects but also fractured or missing ones. The body is represented in items of clothing set to the side, discarded (jeans on a pole) or in close up images of particular body parts, disconnected from each other in the image but only making sense in the context of the exhibition or the book or catalogue (Deitcher 1998). The object of desire has become furtive, mournful. One of my students described his work as "burdened by memory." The raucous exuberance of gay liberation had become the anger of ACT-UP; this morphed into diffuse and omnipresent mourning and reflection, which now manifests itself as unremarkable background noise.

Class exercise

Students are asked to write short narratives in the first week of class outlining their own experiences with sickness, health, and the healthcare system. Students are asked to write these personal narratives anonymously and to write in the first person with an emphasis on

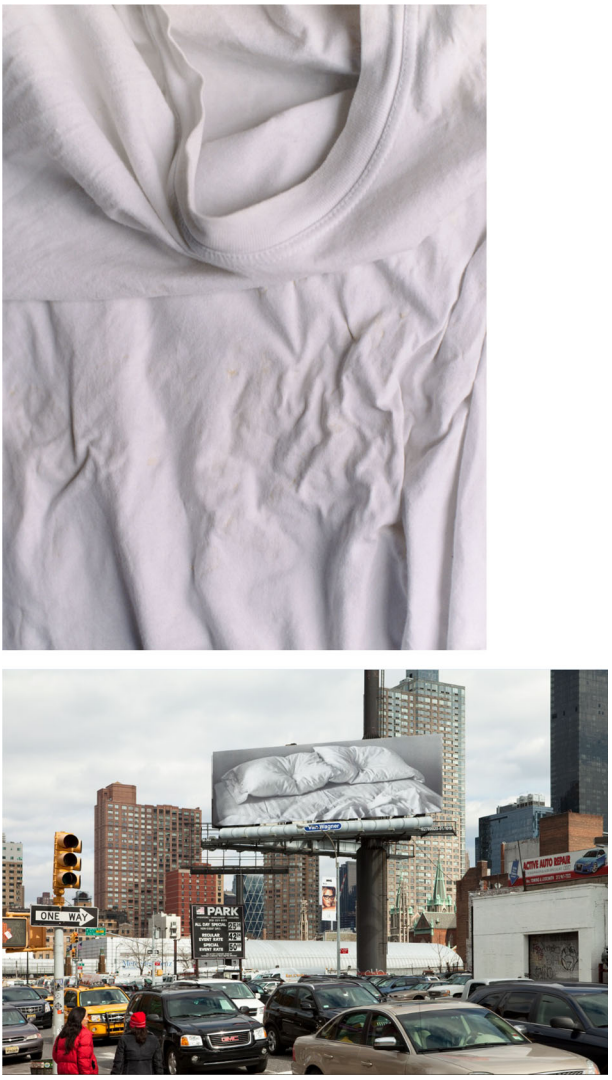

Fig. 6 Sportflecken, 1996 by Wolfgang Tillmans, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres "Untitled", 1991 Billboard. Dimensions vary with installation © The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

describing their experience so that it can be easily imagined in the mind of the reader. These experiences become the texts that students return to in class to explore their feelings, judgments, and empathy in a clinical setting. This technique is inspired by the techniques of narrative pedagogy in nursing education (Ironside 2014; Diekelmann 2001). Narrative pedagogy seeks to interrogate the experience of teachers and learners and the curriculum to derive shared meaning and experience. It is a process rather than outcome-based approach to education (Diekelmann 2001).

The class follows the same pattern. The students are introduced briefly to a work of art and asked to discuss it. In following sessions, the class explores the history of the epidemic and

Fig. 7 o.M., 1997 by Wolfgang Tillmans, Jochen taking a bath, 1997 by Wolfgang Tillmans

social and political context of the artist. Finally, the class returns to an in-depth exploration of the artist. Students are asked to note how their perceptions and reactions to the work change before and after the discussion of the social and political context. The emphasis in class is on self-reflection, empathy and skills necessary for clinical practice. Following the class discussion of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, students are then asked to write a short essay based on a classmate's narrative discussing the feelings of illness in order to place themselves in someone else's position. These essays are written in third person. Following the discussion of Wolfgang Tillmans, students are asked to return to their own narratives and to repeat the exercise, writing about themselves in the third person. The exploration of the artists' work gives students practice experiencing a piece of art, exploring the context, and returning to the art.

I believe that students can greatly expand their empathy and ability to project themselves into the experiences of others through this process. Student responses in this exercise are extraordinary. Informally comparing their responses in the first instance to those in the latter assignments, I noted an expansion of depth of experience and an ability to connect their and their classmates' experiences to the experiences of the artists and to use those experiences to increase their own empathy with other's experiences.

Finally, students were also asked to write a short paper (no more than 3000 words) or to complete a class project on the topic and to pick an artist (in any medium) who was affected by or whose work commented on the AIDS epidemic to explore in greater depth. Students

Fig. 8 Turnhose (Sandalen), 1992 and Grey jeans over stairpost, 1991 by Woflgang Tillmans

explored a range of artists in their papers including David Wojnarowicz, Robert Mapplethorpe, Gran Fury, and Derek Jarman. Students applied their analysis to examine and elaborate on the work of these other artists in the context of the AIDS epidemic.

A smaller number of students choose to complete a project. Many students paint or take photographs, some students have cooked meals; one student choreographed a dance to a song by Queen about the AIDS epidemic in gay culture. Another student programmed a 3D printer

to produce reproductions of Keith Haring's art and interleaved episodes from Haring's life into the code to produce the reproductions (Fig. 9). Students' empathy and engagement in the material has been superior.

For many of my students and for many students in this demographic, accessing material textually can be difficult. My course is offered in a public university in California on one the most ethnically and racially diverse campuses in the continental U.S. Students represent myriad communities, perspectives, interests and languages. For many of them, English is a second language, and visual material provides an access to those students to the key issues and materials in the course. Many of the students are also the first in their families to attend university, often without the preparation and resources afforded to their peers. Visual art provides a powerful means of entry to these students and allows them to access their inner feelings and to develop their empathy in a way that is not common for them and in a way that is not easily obtained through reading.

Conclusion

Visual art in this course gives students access to a wide range of material and offers them a way to strengthen their empathy. All of the artwork has an affective quality that engages students in the work and the time in which it was produced. This use of art coupled with historic documents provides an effective tool for an undergraduate course in the health humanities.

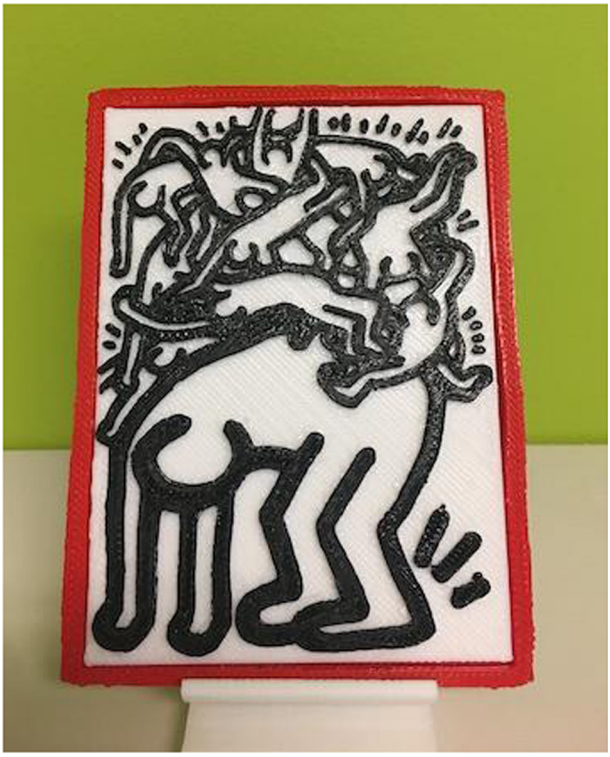

Fig. 9 Submitted student project. 3D printing

Contemporary art provides an immediate and accessible way for students to grapple with the issues and to develop their empathy. I also found that introducing the material through visual art and discussion gives students a confidence in the material that they can then take into the writing project, improving their writing and the writing experience. Using visual art provides a pathway for diverse learners. Many students currently have a facility with visual communication that they do not have with written communications. The shifting approaches to communication, attention span, and modes of expression make visual art a particularly compelling approach for teaching undergraduate students in the medical humanities.

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Endnotes

[1] In this essay, I use the term health humanities as opposed to medical humanities. I use the term health humanities so as to engage with a broader audience and understanding of the field that has been previously known solely as medical humanities. As an instructor in an undergraduate program that focuses on students entering nursing, physical therapy, and laboratory technician programs as well as medical schools, a strong grounding in the humanities is just as critical in the development of empathy and patient-centered or patient-focused healthcare.

[2] The go-go boy is a fixture of gay clubs and nightlife. Hired to dance, usually on the bar, he represents the "fantasy and the fantastic" and is an icon of gay nightlife (Perry 2007).

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