

The Impact of Socially Conscious Art Exhibitions: A Case Study of *Art AIDS America*

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Abstract

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Art has an unspoken power that can connect people through emotion. It changes the way one thinks about the world, can spark a conversation, and create awareness about a social issue. By transparently addressing social issues, art has the power to present a topic in a different visual lens that you cannot get from an exhibition at a history museum or science center. Rooted in the history of the AIDS epidemic, *Art AIDS America* tells the story of loss, grief, and pain, but it also tells the story of hope, change, and love. The purpose of this research is to highlight art museums that transparently address social issues through exhibitions and bring attention as to how art can educate, create awareness and possible social change. This research study examined the social, institutional, and community context behind the process of creating *Art AIDS America*, the expectations and reactions to *Art AIDS America*, and the impact the exhibition had on the institutions or communities. Through document analysis and conducting interviews with seven museum staff members and community members this study found that it is imperative to understand the historical and social context, and community outreach is crucial for an exhibition of this magnitude.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Art has an unspoken power that can connect people through emotion. It changes the way one thinks about the world; it has the potential to spark a conversation between individuals on a topic a museum is shining a new light on or heralding an issue that has not previously been discussed at length (Koke and Schwarzer 2007; Tacoma Art Museum, 2015). Art museums can create awareness about a social issue, and if executed well, it has the potential to make the visitors become active in organizations supporting the social issue.

Art museums have a history of showcasing artists whose artwork has overt political, socio-economical, gender and race issues as their major theme. The Guggenheim showcased a selection of artworks by feminist artist Carrie Mae Weems in 2014. In 2013, the Art Institute of Chicago had an exhibit by artist Kara Walker titled *Rise Up Ye Mighty Race!*, which featured child-like paper silhouettes that addressed gender, race, sexuality, and power. What is not showcased in art museums, the majority of the time, are exhibitions organized around a specific social issue. For example, an online review of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2014 exhibitions suggested that out of the ninety-one exhibitions none of them appeared to transparently address a social issue or topic. However, there are some art museums that are discussing social issues as a key theme in their exhibitions. The Tacoma Art Museum's (TAM) exhibition *Art AIDS America* discusses the AIDs crisis in America and how it forever changed the American art movement (Katz and Hushka, 2015). TAM's vision is "to be a national model for regional museums by creating a dynamic museum that engages, inspires, and builds community through art" (Tacoma Art Museum, 2015). Additionally, the first line of the museum's mission statement claims that their purpose is to "connect people through art" (Tacoma Art Museum, 2015).

Very little information is available about the public perception on these types of exhibitions. There is some evidence that the public wants museums to address social issues, but other evidence contradicts that (BritainThinks, 2012). For example, a study conducted by the British consulting firm, Britain Thinks in 2012, found that people do not believe museums are the right platform to discuss social issues and the majority of people will go to a library or other organization to learn more about a social issue. However, UK-based organization, Museums Association, asked the public in a poll on their website if museums should promote social justice issues and a staggering 81 percent believe that museums should in fact be promoting social justice issues (Atkinson, 2013). Other professional organizations such as the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) and the National Art Education Association (NAEA) have dedicated conferences to the entire subject—the former in 2015 and 2016 and the latter in 2010. The NAEA conference theme in 2010 was titled “Art and Social Justice.” In 2015, AAM’s annual meeting theme was the “Social Value of Museums: Inspiring Change”, and the 2016 annual meeting theme will be on “Power, Influence and Responsibility.”

Tacoma Art Museum’s *Art AIDS America* is an example of a museum not shying away from a controversial topic, in this case HIV/AIDS. In the 1980s a large number of people in the gay community contracted and died from acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) in large metropolitan areas. Curated by TAM’s Chief Curator Rock Hushka and Art Historian Jonathan Katz, the exhibition discusses the political context surrounding HIV/AIDS, the issues of sexuality, and the context around the disease itself and the staggering number of lives lost due to the disease. It “demonstrates the importance that art plays in giving a voice to what is still a stigmatizing and silent epidemic” (Hushka and Katz, 2015). Currently, there are more than 1.2 million people in the United States living with HIV and AIDS and approximately 12%, or 1 in 8

individuals are unaware they are infected (CDC, 2015). The exhibition opened in October 2015 and featured 107 artists, 23 whom have died from AIDS-related causes. The exhibition featured art created by professional artists that transparently or subversively addressed the AIDS crisis in America. Working collaboratively with the Bronx Museum of the Arts, and the Bernard A. Zuckerman Museum of Art at Kennesaw State University, these institutions “demonstrate how art may affect positive social change” (Hushka and Katz, 21). This study focuses on *Art AIDS America* closely from its beginning point at the Tacoma Art Museum and its second destination, the Zuckerman Museum of Art in Kennesaw, Georgia.

The purpose of this research was to understand the impact, social context and expectations and reactions when an art museum transparently addresses a social issue through an exhibition. The specific goals of this research were to describe the social, institutional and community context behind the decision in creating the exhibition; describe the expectations and reactions from museum staff and/or the local communities; and describe the range of ways the exhibition impacted or influenced the institutions and local communities.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to understand the impact, social context and expectations and reactions when an art museum transparently addresses a social issue through an exhibition. The specific goals of this research were to describe the social, institutional and community context behind the decision in creating the exhibition; describe the expectations and reactions from museum staff and/or the local communities; and describe the range of ways the exhibition impacted or influenced the institutions and local communities.

This chapter discusses three topics that was pertinent to this research study. The first topic, social issues in art museums, discusses some examples art museums are doing to address social issues and what museum professionals are saying about museums addressing social issues. The second topic, the culture wars, discusses the political involvement in the art world in the late 1980s and 1990s, and how it has affected artists then and now. The final topic, poetic postmodernism, a term fashioned by *Art AIDS America* co-curator Jonathan Katz brings to light art created during the AIDS crisis that was a way for artists to subversively address the AIDS in museum setting.

Social Issues in Art Museums

Addressing social issues through exhibitions gives museums and art museums specifically, a way to promote social change. Social change is described as a way to “indicate the changes that take place in human interactions and interrelations” (Feehan, 29). Social change can refer to “changes in nature, social behavior of a society, and acts of advocacy for the cause changing society in a normative way” (Feehan, 29). However, it is not well known if the public

wants to see an exhibition surrounding social issues. There have been some studies that suggest the public does not want to see museums discuss social issues (BritainThinks, 2012).

In a recent poll, UK-based organization, Museums Association, asked the public if museums should promote social justice issues. A staggering 81 percent believe that museums should in fact be promoting social justice issues (Atkinson, 2013). According to recent research, museums can “exist as sites of public consciousness” and are part of the “dynamics of cultural change that intersect with both formal and informal spheres of political action, which have led to debates about whether museums have an ethical obligation to contribute to social justice issues” (Message, 22).

Art museum exhibitions, especially contemporary art exhibitions have the ability to “create a relationship between art and the viewer by provoking thought and enlarge world perceptions” (Feehan, 32). By creating this relationship with the viewer, art exhibitions have the potential to make a difference in the viewer’s life. Historically, art museums have been assigned a more aesthetic role and sometimes considered elitist and therefore belonged to the bourgeois culture and not the general public. This sense of elitism might make the general public intimidated by the “imposing facades of most of the art museums and galleries” (Mortaki, 134).

The social role of museums has been discussed at length in the past few years. The social role of art museums is trickier to discuss because art museums traditionally have neither focused on the community nor “on the national or civic identity of its members” (Mortaki, 136). As the art museum has moved into the 21st century, it has tried to become more responsive to different social challenges of the public. To do this, art museums have designed more exhibitions that require visitors to engage both cognitively and psychologically with the artwork (Mortaki, 2012).

When art is presented to the viewer in a way that connects the visitors to societal issues, a better understanding of art and society can be gained from the exhibition. If these exhibitions are successful, they can provide a place for public change and growth (Feehan, 2010). However, if museums and art museums specifically it must first begin within the institution. If art museums want to become effective agents of social change for their community, they have to be willing to “radically rethink their purposes and goals” within the community (Sandell, 45). They have the potential to promote “tolerance, inter-community respect, and challenge stereotypes” (Sandell, 45).

Art museums who choose to address social issues through exhibitions push the envelope of artistic and curatorial expression. They provide to the public topics that in some cases might be considered against the viewpoints of social and political arbiters who believe the public should be protected from what they see as unacceptable material (Smithsonian, 2002). This arises potential conflict for public art museums who obtain funding from private and governmental entities. Authors Marjorie Schwarzer and Judy Koke explain in their article, “Talking the Talk: A Call to Action that “a lot of museums do not discuss social issues for a fear of losing funding.” Additionally, museums are often deep-rooted in their values, traditions, and routine that the idea of moving in a different direction can bring up resistance from museum staff (Sandell, 2003). The museum prefers to position themselves as a “neutral space” in order to raise public awareness (Koke and Schwarzer, 153). Schwarzer and Koke emphasize that the idea of being a neutral space simply cannot be the case anymore, and museums need to not just ‘talk the talk’ but also ‘walk the walk’ (Koke and Schwarzer, 153).

In a 2009 speech at the Meadows Museum in Dallas, Texas, artist and writer Gregg Bordowitz discussed the importance of art and the potential it has in museums. He stated

I believe that art can change the world. And I believe there is a great amount of evidence that it cannot. Perhaps we shouldn't expect art to be a magic bullet; it will not change everyone's behavior or politics. The alchemy of art is not in the image or object itself, but in its capacity to *provoke* thoughts, feelings, and actions. If art can help build a sense of community, foster understanding, allow individuals to express themselves even in disagreement, then art can be a catalyst for change (Kerr, Sadao, & Santos, 73).

The discussion around museums addressing social change and social justice issues is becoming more accepted within the museum field. In 2014, at the AAM Annual Meeting in Seattle, Washington, David Fleming spoke about the role museums have when it comes to addressing social issues. He stated that the word social justice is “contested” and that the word social justice has a different meaning to different individuals. However, Fleming believes the relationship between social justice and museums can mean either how “museums provide equality of access” or how “museums address social ills” and then potentially campaigning to right them (Fleming, 33). He believes that all people “should be able to benefit from museums” and they are “entitled to access to museums and to seeing themselves represented in museums” (Fleming, 34).

Over the past 30 years, art museums have had to make an institutional shift to make themselves more socially relevant. Every art museum is different from one another, and will offer different experiences for their visitors. However, art museums that choose to be socially responsible and address social issues will let their community and the museum field know they have the passion to create social value (Fleming, 34).

The Culture Wars

In the 1980s a division of culture was brewing between the Christian Right and the art world. A large number of people in the gay community contracted and died from acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) in large metropolitan areas such as New York City and San Francisco. The art community in New York specifically was drastically affected by the epidemic (Mesch, 2013). As the AIDS crisis was mounting and more people were becoming infected, artists began to address their feelings towards the lack of government response and funding of AIDS in their artwork. American conservatives used art that was deemed “homoerotic” in their eyes to “position homosexuality itself as a form of sickness and public threat” (Meyer, 226). Artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe, David Wojnarowicz, and Andres Serrano became the main targets by the Christian Right and to this day are considered some of the most controversial artists who engaged with gay and political issues in the 1980s (Mesch, 2013).

The events that led up to what is termed the Culture Wars came from a variety of issues. However, the main issues surrounded Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* and Robert Mapplethorpe’s homoerotic work. In 1989, the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., pulled the retrospective *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*, comprising of approximately 150 works, for fear of triggering a “political storm.” The National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) partially funded the show, giving a grant of \$30,000 (Wicker, 1989). The Corcoran’s decision to pull the retrospective was part political pressure and part thinking about the Gallery’s future. Chairman of the Board, David Lloyd Kreeger said, “It was a close call...if you went ahead you could say you were upholding freedom of artistic expression...but you have to consider the larger picture” (Wicker, 1989).

In 1987, American photographer Andres Serrano created *Piss Christ*, which features a 13-inch plastic and wood crucifix in a jar of the artist's urine (Sutton, 2015). The photograph was part of Winston-Salem's Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art's *Awards in the Visual Arts 7* (Sutton, 2015). The exhibitions traveled to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and the Carnegie-Mellon University Art Gallery before making an appearance at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia. A few months after the exhibition left Richmond in 1989, an open letter to the museum was posted in the local newspaper. The letter spoke out against the museum's decision to show *Piss Christ* stating, "The museum should not be in business of promoting and subsidizing hatred and intolerance...has Christianity become fair game in our society for any kind of blasphemy and slander" (Sutton, 2015)? The previous year, the NEA awarded Serrano a \$5,000 grant which he used to create *Piss Christ* (Sutton, 2015).

During this time period, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) allowed individual artists to apply for federally funded grants that would allow them to create work plus a small living stipend (Scully, 2009). The controversy surrounding *Piss Christ* came to the attention of Congressmen Donald E. Wildmon, founder of the American Family Association (AFA), that the NEA was funding outrageous art that was "clearly designed to poison our culture" (Bolton, 4). Wildmon began a campaign to address his outrage against the NEA by sending every congressman a copy of *Piss Christ*. The following year, the NEA saw a \$45,000 cut in funding by the federal government (Bolton, 1992). Senator Alphonse D'Amato, one of the lawmakers for the defunding of the NEA, went so far as to suggest that if Congress allowed this "so-called group of art experts to get away with this...then we do not deserve to be in office" (Bolton, 3).

One could argue that the most outspoken individual during the Culture Wars was Republican Senator from North Carolina, Jesse Helms. In a letter to Jerry Falwell, a Southern

Baptist pastor from Virginia, Helms wrote a warning saying “the homosexual community...and many other fringe political groups are more active than ever in promoting their dangerous anti-family and anti-American agendas” (Bolton, 10). In his proposal for the original Helms Amendment, Helms wanted to deny funding to “indecent art depicting sadomasochism, homoeroticism, children, or the sex act itself” as well as art belittling “any person’s religion, non-religion, race, creed, sex, handicap, age, or national religion.” If this amendment would have passed in its entirety, it would have allowed the U.S. government to withhold any sort of funding to virtually any form of art (Bolton, 1992).

Jesse Helm’s amendment was passed in the 1989, but only a portion of it was passed. In the end, Public Law 101-121— the official title—pleased no one (Bolton, 1992). Conservative lawmakers called it “diluted” and pushed for harsher policies while the artists and more liberal lawmakers were angry that the law was put into place. To make matters worse the NEA then began asking grantees to “sign statements promising not to produce obscene works with government funds” (Bolton, 5). This deterred a lot of artists, museums, galleries and nonprofit organizations from accepting NEA funds. A year later a court ruled that the agreement would be dropped from future grant requirements. However, to artists and other organizations the point had been made: “government officials, when pressured by conservative activists, were indeed willing to harass artists” and did not want to be a “partner to social change” (Bolton, 20).

Artist David Wojnarowicz, an artist featured in *Art AIDS America*, was one of the most outspoken artists during the Culture Wars. In 1989, the exhibition *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* scheduled for the New York Gallery Artists Space was cancelled after NEA chairman John Frohnmayer received an advanced copy of the exhibition catalog. The main reason for the

cancellation according to Frohnmayer, was Wojnarowicz's essay in the catalog entitled "Post Cards from America: X-Rays from Hell" (Meyer, 2002). In his essay, Wojnarowicz criticized the Catholic church, the federal government, and issues he had surrounding AIDS policies. The main point of the essay was to counter the "censorship of safer sex information and public policing of same sex desire and fantasy" (Meyer, 244). The passage that was appropriated by reporters and lawmakers who were for the cancellation of the exhibition stated

I'm beginning to believe that one of the last frontiers left for radical gesture is the imagination...Helms with a bucket of gasoline and set his putrid ass on fire or throw representative William Dannemeyer off the empire state building. These fantasies give me distance from my outrage for a few seconds. They give me momentary comfort (Meyer, 245).

Frohnmayer wanted the money that the NEA had granted Artists Space of \$10,000 to be rescinded. In a statement to the *Los Angeles Times* Frohnmayer stated the exhibition had become too "politicized and no longer met artistic criteria." He further stated that while he understood the "frustration and huge sense of loss and abandonment that people with AIDS felt" he believed it was inappropriate for the "national endowment to fund political statements" (Meyer, 244).

While some of Wojnarowicz's statements were purposefully obscene and "strategically incendiary," he was commenting on the opinions of the conservative lawmakers he opposed. He argued that if his statements were incendiary, so too were the statements of conservative lawmakers on the AIDS crisis (Meyer, 2002). For example, politician Patrick Buchanan wrote an article in 1989 for the *Washington Times* criticizing the *Witnesses* exhibition. In his article he described Wojnarowicz has a "victim of AIDS" and that these victims deserved no sympathy from the public. He stated

The gays yearly die by the thousands of AIDS, crying out in rage for what they cannot have: respect for a lifestyle Americans simply do not respect; billions for medical research to save them from the consequences of their own suicidal self-indulgence. Truly, these are lost souls, fighting a war against the Author of human nature, a war that no man can win (Meyer, 247).

Without using the strong language or expletives that Wojnarowicz used in his essay, Buchanan and other conservative lawmakers made their antigay opinions very clear.

Wojnarowicz continued to be criticized as an artist even after *Witnesses* was cancelled. In 1990, Donald Wildmon of AFA attacked Wojnarowicz's *Sex Series*, calling it "homosexual obscenity" (Meyer, 247). Wildmon sent out 200,000 flyers denouncing Wojnarowicz's work to other church leaders, politicians, and radio and television stations. The headline of the flyer said "Your Tax Dollars Helped Pay for These 'Works of Art' and included fourteen Wojnarowicz images (Meyer, 2002). Wildmon appropriated Wojnarowicz's work, and Wojnarowicz decided to sue Wildmon and the AFA for copyright infringement. Wojnarowicz won his case, and was awarded \$1 by the court.

Some have argued that the NEA dispute was not just an argument about funding or free speech, but an argument of how the public realm should be organized. The dispute should have called attention the many "ensorious silences" that existed in American society. Instead, the NEA dispute was an all-out battle of power between the cultural elite and the religious conservative elite (Bolton, 1992). The conservative elite wanted to "silence the arts as part of a larger effort to create conformity" and the artists and organizations wanted to keep their artistic freedom (Bolton, 24).

Poetic Postmodernism

Generally, AIDS art can be categorized in two basic themes. The first theme is the overt, political, activist work that is seen in works by art activist groups such as ACT UP! and Gran Fury. Their posters were often combined, in post-modernist fashion, with a simple text that included an amended or appropriated image. The resulting composition would urge the public to take action, by means of protest, against the governmental neglect of the spread of AIDS (Mesch, 2013). Their best example, or best-known work is *Let the Record Show...*, which is featured in the *Art AIDS America* exhibition.

Created as a site specific work for the New Museum of Contemporary Art, *Let the Record Show...* featured a large neon sign spelling out the words ‘silence = death’, a pink triangle—the symbol used to designate gay men during the Holocaust, a photomural of the Nuremburg trials, and a series of six cardboard cutouts representing public figures that were very outspoken against the AIDS crisis (Meyer, 2002). One of the cardboard cutouts were of William Buckley, a conservative journalist, who famously said that, “Everyone detected with AIDS should be tattooed in the upper forearm, to protect common-needle users, and on the buttocks, to prevent the victimization of other homosexuals” (Meyer, 225).

Instead of presenting individuals with AIDS as threats, ACT UP! portrayed Buckley and other public individuals as “the social and political disaster that AIDS had become” (Meyer, 226). They presented the problem to the crisis as not the gay man, but the politicians, surgeons, Christian fundamentalists, health commissioners, and even President Ronald Reagan. ACT UP presented statistics and facts instead of the “prevailing AIDS victim portrayal of the time” with the image of the wheelchair bound, withering man (Meyer, 2002).

Another art form that arose during the AIDS epidemic was an aesthetic termed “Poetic Postmodernism.” It operated “strategically and stealthily to suggest meanings it knew never to declare openly” (Katz, 37). Poetic Postmodernism gave artists ‘poetic justice’ and was an art form that was open-ended. Sexuality was a dangerous subject to address in the art world, and for some artists it was not worth their career. Instead, according to Katz, these artists worked through a sense of obeisance that artists could create works “ripe with meanings that coalesced in the viewer’s imagination.” This sense of “obeisance to the pervasive constraints both political and art critical” (Katz, 37).

Artists such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Andres Serrano, and David Wojnarowicz were among some of the artists working in the area of Poetic Postmodernism. These artists featured with everyday objects, like clocks, stacks of paper, pillows, and drains and exploited the gap “between their denotative and connotative significance,” where clocks were no longer just clocks and stacks of paper were no longer stacks of paper. The message of the work would only make sense to the viewer if they knew what to look for. It opened a “dialogue with the viewer” all of the while pushing the viewer to “come to terms with it while never telling the viewer what to think or how to feel” (Katz, 38).

Katz explains there is no correct way to read Poetic Postmodernism as it does not “hold up an ideal viewer.” Instead, it is meant to mean multiple meanings to multiple viewers, with all meanings being valid. The art “engenders a productive state of doubt that denaturalizes the appearance of things and instead ponders what lies beneath them.” Thus, Poetic Postmodernism “continuously ramifies and cannot be contained” (Katz, 38). When asked about his art form Gonzalez-Torres stated

I don’t want to be the enemy anymore. The enemy is too easy to dismiss and to attack. The thing that I want to do

sometimes with some of these pieces about homosexual desire is to be more inclusive. Every time they [politicians] see a clock or a stack of paper or a curtain, I want them to think twice. I want them to be like the protagonist in *Repulsion* by Polanski where everything becomes a threat...everything has a sexual mission to the walls, the pavement, everything (Katz, 38).

David Wojnarowicz would use his artwork to convey his feelings and thoughts about his life with AIDS, but he also expressed his thoughts through essays. In 1992, he wrote a series of essays titled *Memories That Smell Like Gasoline*. In the final essay titled "10," Wojnarowicz's pain and anger that were felt through his artwork and earlier essays was replaced by the realization of one's mortality

The person I was just one year ago no longer exists; drifts spinning slowly into the ether somewhere way back there. I'm a Xerox of my former self. I can't abstract my own dying any longer...I am a glass human disappearing in rain. I am standing among all of you waving my invisible arms and hands. I am shouting my invisible words. I am getting so weary. I am growing tired...I am signaling that the volume of all this is too high. I am waving. I am waving my hands. I am disappearing. I am disappearing but not fast enough (Wojnarowicz, 55-56).

David Wojnarowicz died from AIDS later that year. Felix Gonzalez-Torres would succumb to the disease in 1996. These two artists were among a group of artists that chose to use art as a way to deal with the high volume of death and disease they were surrounded by. They used their art to express their anger and hurt towards politicians and pharmaceutical companies that refused to help as people were dying by the thousands. They used their art to subversively send messages to others in the community to say we get it, we understand. And finally, they used their art to seek poetic justice.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this research is to understand the social context, expectations and reactions, and impact when an art museum transparently addresses a social issue through an exhibition.

The specific goals of this research are:

- Describe the social, institutional and community context behind the decision in creating *Art AIDS America*.
- Describe the expectations and reactions from museum staff and/or the local communities.
- Describe the range of ways the exhibition impacted or influenced the institutions and local communities.

The *Art AIDS America* exhibition was the focus of this study. The exhibition began at the Tacoma Art Museum (TAM) in Tacoma, Washington in October 2015 and ended in January 2016 before moving on to the Zuckerman Museum of Art (ZMA) at Kennesaw State University in Kennesaw, Georgia. The exhibition will be on display at ZMA until May 2016, and the Bronx Museum of the Arts beginning in July 2016. The curators of *Art AIDS America* are in the final stages of an agreement with a museum in Chicago to host the exhibition in December 2016.

Case Study Methodology

This research used a qualitative case study approach including interviews and analysis of exhibition reviews. A case study is used when a researcher is asking the “how” and “why” questions, while “taking into consideration how a phenomenon is influenced by the context

within it is situated” (Baxter & Jack, 556). The type of case study that was chosen for this specific research project was a descriptive case study. A descriptive case study is "used to describe an intervention or phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred” (Yin, 111). One of the common mistakes that happen in a case study research is the tendency for researchers to attempt to answer a question that is too broad or a topic that has too many objectives for one study. To prevent this from happening it’s important to bind a descriptive case study by time and place, time and activity, and by definition and context (Creswell, 2003, Stake 1995, Miles & Huberman, 1994).

A single case study allows the researcher to delve into a particular topic, and take the time to understand it thoroughly. Robert Donmoyer (2009) believes that one of the reason social scientists refuse to address less traditional types of case studies like a single case study, is the absence of an alternative language. He believes that a lack of alternative language “has inhibited our rethinking the notion of generalizability and, consequently, our valuing of single-case studies” (Donmoyer, 13). Single case studies are rare and some researchers believe the specificness of the focus of a single case study hinders the possibility to generalize. While that may be true, the purpose of a single case study is to not generalize but to study one phenomenon from all areas in order to obtain a thorough knowledge of the phenomenon.

Site Selection

The search for sites began by doing a Google search of art museums by state. The majority of institutions that were viewed would usually address a social issue through the lens of one artist like the *Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic* at the Brooklyn Museum, which “raised questions about race, gender, and the politics of representation by portraying contemporary

African American men and women using the conventions of traditional European portraiture” (Brooklyn Museum, 2015) in 2015 or *Hard Truths: The Art of Thornton Dial* exhibition at the High Museum of Art in 2012, which was a survey of the artist’s work “depicting the tragedies and triumphs of humanity” (High Museum of Art, 2015). Other institutions that were searched had just closed an exhibition. For example, the Bronx Museum of the Arts exhibition *¡Presente! The Young Lords in New York*, which closed in October 2015, was an exhibition focused on the 1960’s Puerto Rican activist group The Young Lords where their “activities, community-focused initiatives, and their affirmation of Puerto Rican identity inspired artists from the 1960s to the present day, and had a major impact on the City and the social history of the United States” (Bronx Museum of the Arts, 2015).

These institutions and others were considered for the site selection, but it was important for the exhibition to be currently on display so I could visit the exhibition in person. Therefore, in order for a museum to be selected they had to have an exhibition on display that transparently addressed a social issue, the social issue was the theme of the exhibition not a singular artist working in social issues, and the museum had to have had at least three exhibitions that transparently discussed a social issue or topic within the last five-seven years. Based on this criteria, *Art AIDS America* was chosen as the site for this research project.

The research included unstructured interviews with museum staff and museum visitors and document analysis of press releases and reviews. The interviews were conducted either in person or via telephone. The interviews conducted in person were recorded on the iTalk application on a password protected iPhone 6s before being transferred to a password protected external hard drive. The interviews conducted via telephone were recorded on a tape recorder and then transferred to a password protected external hard drive.

Seven unstructured interviews were conducted for this research study. I interviewed the co-curators of *Art AIDS America* along with the Director and the Director of Curatorial Affairs from the Zuckerman Museum of Art, the second site for *Art AIDS America*. Members of the Tacoma community who attended the exhibition were also interviewed, and a local art critic from Seattle, Washington was interviewed. The interviews ranged from 25-40 minutes depending on the type of questions asked (Appendix A). Each interview had tailored questions for each interviewee depending on their role. For example, the questions asked to the co-curators focused on the intent and planning process behind the creation of the exhibition. The staff at the Zuckerman Museum of Art's questions focused on the museum's decision to add additional material to the exhibition and how that process happened. The members of the community's questions were focused on their experiences of seeing the exhibition and what kinds of takeaways they had.

Once the interviews were recorded, they were uploaded to a computer. The program NVivo (version 11) was then used to transcribed the interviews. Additionally, 31 reviews were read and analyzed from local, regional, and national publications. Reviews from publications like the Huffington Post, The Seattle Times, Hyperallergic, Atlanta Magazine, and The Stranger discussed the social and historical context behind *Art AIDS America*, decision making statements from museum staff and the curators, descriptions of specific artwork, and finally the author's opinion on the exhibition.

Data Analysis

After the completion of the transcription of the interviews, they were coded based on the three research goals. A Priori coding method was used to code the interviews. A Priori, or pre-set

coding, is a method of coding the categories are determined prior to analyzing the data (Center for Evaluation and Research, 2012). Three pre-set codes were decided and were based on the research goals: describe the social, institutional and community context behind the decision in creating *Art AIDS America*; describe the expectations and reactions from museum staff and/or the local communities; describe the range of ways the exhibition impacted or influenced the institutions and local communities (Appendix B).

The exhibition reviews were also analyzed and coded around the categories for opinions and reactions of the exhibition, facts or statistics about the exhibition, historical or social context behind the exhibition, and artwork description (Appendix C). These themes and findings from both the interviews and the exhibition reviews are discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

Limitations

A few limitations occurred throughout the data collection process. To begin, like the subject of the exhibition, there are many thoughts and opinions to obtain but due to a strict timeline some opinions and thoughts were not collected. Therefore, the data collection from these seven interviews can give a glimpse into the process behind the exhibition and opinions and reactions of the exhibition, but it is hard to convey the entirety of it. It is important to note that the purpose of these interviews were to not put assumptions as to what art museums should or should not be doing, but simply to describe a phenomenon that happened and what the reactions were to that phenomenon. Additionally, the tour of the exhibition has not yet completed. Therefore, only two sites were examined.

Chapter Four: Results and Discussion

Introduction

Art has an unspoken power that can bring about happiness, sorrow, guilt, and love. Through the brushstrokes and chisel marks each piece tells a story. And that story is what brings people together from different communities to heal and talk together as one community. *Art AIDS America* is an exhibition that tells such a story. This exhibit tells the story of loss, grief, and pain, but it also tells the story of hope, change, and love. As an art historian I originally approached this topic eager to tackle the social importance of the AIDS crisis in the art world and how it is important for art museums to discuss such issues. However, as a researcher this was the hardest and most difficult chapter to write. I was humbled by the stories that this exhibition tells. As an individual who was not alive during the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, I do not know what it is like to live through what has been called a plague. I do not know what it is like to know someone who has died from this disease. However, as my research progressed I heard what it is like to live with the disease.

Summary of Findings

The research process followed three research goals. The first goal was to describe the social, community and institutional context behind *Art AIDS America*. The second goal was to describe the expectations and reactions from Tacoma Art Museum, Zuckerman Museum of Art and the communities they serve. The third research goal was to describe the range of ways *Art AIDS America* has impacted or influenced the museums and the local communities. Through the interviews and document analysis brought four main themes emerged. The first main theme was the social, community, and institutional context behind the creation of Art AIDS America. The

second, and biggest theme was how the AIDS crisis has impacted the art world. The third theme was the reactions to Art AIDS America and the impact it has created thus far and the final theme was importance of community involvement when it comes to addressing social issues in art museums. The following sections explain each theme in detail.

Social, Institutional, and Community Context

This section focused mainly on how and why the exhibition was created. The interviews with the co-curators of *Art AIDS America* brought insight to the planning process of the exhibition and what obstacles they faced during that process. *Art AIDS America* was co-curated by Tacoma Art Museum's chief curator Rock Hushka and Jonathan Katz, Interim Chair and Director of History of Art/Visual Studies PhD Program and at the University of Buffalo. The exhibition included 127 artworks by 103 major American artists and lesser known artists (Ponnekanti, 2015). For example, artworks by Jasper Johns, Keith Haring, Robert Mapplethorpe, Cindy Sherman, Gran Fury, and Jenny Holzer are some of the major artists included in *Art AIDS America*. The exhibition included 28 female artists and 87 men. Out of the 103 artists represented, 23 have died of AIDS-related causes (Ponnekanti, 2015). The exhibition took 10 years to complete for a variety of reasons but the main reason was trying to get institutional partners due to the topic of the exhibition. Hushka explained, "the idea of doing an exhibition about disease, death, sexuality, and politics was an enormously complicated program. We were also told that the topic of AIDS was either not contemporary enough or not historical enough." Katz and Hushka contacted 102 museums but only two signed on to become institutional partners: The Bronx Museum of the Arts in New York, and the Zuckerman Museum of Art in Kennesaw, Georgia.

The Bronx Museum of the Arts was the first museum to agree to become a site and a partner due to the historical connection of artists working in the Bronx during the AIDS crisis. The Zuckerman Museum of Art was chosen as a site and a partner institution for a couple of reasons. The first, is that the museum is fairly new—about two years old—and was in the middle of an expansion. They were interested in hosting their first traveling exhibition and had a connection to the artist and Kennesaw State University professor, Robert Sherer, who was featured in the exhibition. Finally, Atlanta is home to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the Carter Center, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and the NAMES Project Foundation and the Zuckerman staff believed that the exhibition was a perfect fit.

Art AIDS America not only includes art by artists that suffered from AIDs, who lost loved ones to AIDS, and big name artists such as Jasper Johns, Keith Haring, and Barbara Krueger, but up and coming contemporary artists as well. The exhibit humanizes the disease and aims to lessen the stigmatism that is associated with the disease through the artwork. It “demonstrates the importance that art plays in giving a voice to what is still a stigmatizing and silent epidemic” (Katz and Hushka, 2015).

The emotions and activism portrayed by art activist group Gran Fury sparked the idea of *Art AIDS America* for curator Rock Hushka over 20 years ago. As an art history graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Hushka focused on AIDS activist poster art against the judgment of his professors. “I was told that AIDS poster work wasn’t important, that it didn’t have a place in the art world. I took those words and I have been trying to prove them wrong ever since,” explained Hushka (Davila, 2015). While in New York, Hushka visited the New Museum where there was an exhibition on AIDS activist art. After viewing the exhibition, he went to a bookstore and asked where the AIDS section was, “I was guided to the basement of the

bookstore in the back corner under a pile of dusty boxes. That is where the books on AIDS lived. I remember thinking, this isn't right. Someone needs to talk about this" (Davila, 2015). Since then Hushka has dedicated his life to bringing awareness to the AIDS crisis and the importance it has had for the art world.

Art AIDS America happened because of Hushka's push and drive to make sure the AIDS crisis was never silenced; that it was never forgotten. He thought back to the days of his Graduate research, of experiencing Gran Fury firsthand, the AIDS books, dusty and hidden in a bookstore basement and realized he had to speak up for the voices who could no longer speak up. With the direction of TAM Director, Stephanie Stebich, Hushka invited art historian Jonathan Katz aboard.

Why *Art AIDS America* debuted at TAM is not obvious. The people from the community who were interviewed said time and time again that Tacoma was not the expected place to have this exhibition. Instead, they expected to see an exhibition of this nature in Seattle or even Portland, but not Tacoma. The reason behind the exhibition debuting in Tacoma over cities like Seattle or Portland does not have one answer. It could simply be the case of being in the right place at the right time. Hushka serves as the Chief Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at TAM and had institutional support from the Director Stephanie Stebich, who encouraged him to begin the process of planning *Art AIDS America*, and introduced him to Jonathan Katz. One of the most interesting findings to come up was in 1988 Tacoma resident David Purchase established the Point Defiance needle-exchange program, which was the "first governmentally sanctioned program in the nation to adopt needle exchange in an effort to reduce HIV infection by intravenous drug users" (Stebich, 14).

In the 1990s, medication called HART (highly active antiretroviral therapy) or “the cocktail” was introduced and HIV, for some artists the experience moved from a very public display to a more private one (Hushka, 2015). People were no longer dying from Kaposi’s sarcoma wasting away or obtaining “blindness from cytomegalovirus, deformed fingers from fungal infections or suffering from lipodystrophy,” which was an unusual high concentration of “fat due to side effects of medications” (Hushka,131). Therefore, the public tended to forget about the disease, and forgot art and culture “have always been part of the response to HIV/AIDS” (Kerr, Sadao, Santos, 63). Dr. Jefferey Schouten, director of the Office of HIV/AIDS Network Coordination located at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle, Washington stated, “HIV/AIDS is still a major health issue...art plays a unique role in highlighting some of the social issues below the radar screen of people who think AIDS is over” (Engel, 2015). In 2014, there were 45,000 new cases of HIV, and 15% of people living with HIV in Washington are unaware they had it (Ponnekanti, 2015).

President of Pierce County AIDS Foundation Duane Wilkerson said the real importance of *Art AIDS America* is for Americans themselves. He explains, “It’s important for artists because HIV hit the arts community as hard as any. This was their ability to express grief, loss, and rage.” He further describes the impact of *Art AIDS America* by saying, “art has such a wonderful ability to cut through to the heart of the human condition. This exhibition is important because it will remind people of the tremendous loss from AIDS over the years, and I’m excited to see what it will do for people here in Pierce County.” Wilkerson said Tacoma Art Museum was very brave to tell what is really going on (Ponnekanti, 2015).

With the advancement of medicine, HIV still shows no signs of slowing down anytime soon. The CDC has estimated about 658,507 people in the United States have died due to AIDS

related causes since the epidemic began. There are currently 1.2 million people in the United States living with HIV, and 50,000 new cases are expected to happen annually. (CDC, 2015) Breaking it down even further, an “average of 137 people every day, or nearly one person every 10 and a half minutes becomes infected” (Hushka, 131).

It is important that the AIDS epidemic never be forgotten, which is what the curators of *Art AIDS America* wanted visitors to understand. “I get that people are tired. I get that it’s a hard topic to think about, but the present has to be acknowledged and the history. If you don’t remember this activist and painful history, then you can’t really understand why the art looks the way it does,” explained *Art AIDS America* co-curator Rock Hushka. Both curators believe that the American art movement would not be the same today if the AIDS epidemic did not happen.

Impact of AIDS on the Art World

The thesis of *Art AIDS America* is how the AIDS crisis has impacted and forever changed the American Art movement. The curators discussed in an interview with Seattle’s KUOW that they wanted visitors to understand the “AIDS crisis shaped the way American artists make art” and that it could be “directly or through a series of influences, but you cannot talk about American Art today without thinking about the legacy of the AIDS crisis” (Reynolds, 2015). Katz states, “AIDS fundamentally changed American art, remaking its communicative strategies, its market, its emotional pitch and – not least – its political possibilities. But we’ve repressed the role of AIDS in the making of contemporary American culture, as we’ve repressed the role of AIDS in every other aspect of our lives. This exhibition underscores how powerfully a plague that is still with us has changed us.”

The art world was going through an interesting time when the AIDS epidemic started. It was oversaturated by the “isms” and art for art’s sake was one of the main driving forces of the art world. One could say the art world’s soul had died and was being taken over by commodification. And then artists started dying and all of a sudden the art world was flipped on its side. The primary outlet artists had was their art, and so they pulled from the second wave feminist artists a decade earlier, and art was transformed to the ‘personal is political’ again. Since the AIDS epidemic, the art world has never lost the personal or political touch. More artists are discussing social issues and making political statements across different disciplines than ever before. If the AIDS crisis did not happen we would still have artists such as Keith Haring, Robert Mapplethorpe, Felix Gonzalez- Torres, and David Wojnarowicz. Artist Kia LeBeija would still have her mother and not have had HIV transferred to her by her mother. Robert Sherer, an artist and professor at Kennesaw State University, would have never made *Sweet Williams*, a dedication to all the “Williams, Wills, and Willys” he has lost through his life. The art world would look completely different as to what it is today if the AIDS epidemic did not happen.

Kennesaw State University faculty member and artist Robert Sherer, confronts the stigma around blood contamination by painting with HIV Negative and HIV Positive blood collected from friends. His painting, entitled *Sweet Williams* is featured in *Art AIDS America*. He explained the inspiration came from something his grandmother used to tell him about harvesting the Sweet Williams from her garden. She would say, “now Robert, cut down the most beautiful ones first.” Sherer remembers thinking, “it hurt to harvest them because of all of the Williams, Bills, Wills, and Willys I lost in my life.” He couldn’t help but notice the correlation between harvesting the Sweet Williams and AIDS, “there is of course, a direct relationship between attractiveness and HIV transmission. AIDS always cuts down the most beautiful ones first”

(West, 2016). In interviews with various Atlanta based newspapers and magazines, Sherer discussed how the AIDS epidemic has affected him as an artist and how his love for art saved his life

When I moved to Atlanta in the early 1980s, a group of guys all came out in my art school, and then they started to get sick. And the dumb luck of it all, was when the AIDS crisis first happened, I turned into a total art nerd and stayed home and painted. So I never got infected. Art literally saved my life. I'm one of the only ones who survived that out of my group of friends and mentors. I'm one of the people who witnessed a massive die off, and I'm never going to get over it. (Malone, 2016; Watts, 2016; West, 2016).

Impact and Reactions to *Art AIDS America*

The research suggests three main reactions to the exhibition. The first two reactions are opinions of real gratitude and admiration for the exhibition and its curators and then the emotions the exhibition brought up. Words used in reviews and the interviews to describe the exhibition were words such as harrowing, sorrow, melancholy, grief, pain. But also words and phrases like a place to heal, to let go, and to feel lost feelings. The impact of the exhibition can be quantified by the plethora of reviews written by various news outlets such as The Huffington Post, The Stranger, ArtForum, Hyperallergic, The Seattle Times, and Atlanta Magazine. Individuals who have visited the exhibition have had the desire to learn more about the AIDS crisis and have since began their own research. The exhibition has been discussed endlessly by visitors with their friends or families. Some for the first time ever, and some for the first time in years.

One of the most impactful stories emerged from an interview interview with Tom Diehm. Dr. Tom Diehm, Director of Field Education and Principal Lecturer at the University of Washington Tacoma Masters of Social Work program, visited the museum with his husband

shortly before the exhibition closed in Tacoma. His husband had broken his ankle had to use a wheelchair while viewing the exhibition. Diehm explained that watching his husband as a temporarily disabled person looking at this exhibition that was all about enormous disability, which ultimately took a lot of life was hurtful. “It brought back a lot of really awful memories of many friends who spent months of their life in wheelchairs. I was open to these feelings and everything else that went along with the exhibition. It was much more powerful than I expected it to be.” Diehm stated.

For some, it was an eye opening lesson. University of Washington Tacoma social work graduate student, Kent, visited *Art AIDS America* with his family. Being part of the generational gap, Kent knew as a gay man he should feel a connection to the AIDS crisis, but felt disconnected. “I was aware that I was supposed to have a connection with HIV/AIDS because of historical purposes, but I didn’t really feel a connection until I saw the exhibition. I was able to understand what it was like to be a gay man living in the 1980s,” stated Kent. The biggest impact of the exhibition for him was not seeing the exhibition through his eyes, but watching his family walk through the galleries, “It was really impactful to be there with my family and see the exhibition through their eyes wondering ‘what if that were me?’” he stated.

Since visiting the exhibition, Kent decided it was important to learn more about the AIDS crisis and has started his own research. His reaction illustrates the purpose of *Art AIDS America* and how Hushka and Katz wanted people to react. One of the reasons why the exhibition catalog contains 15 essays at about 300 pages is because Hushka and Katz wanted people to feel “empowered to agree or disagree with them...and to jump into their own research. They intended it to be both a primer and a reflection on the last 30 years” (Ponnekanti, 2015). They wanted people to question and to learn while visiting the exhibition, but they specifically

wanted to spark people into delving into research of their own. “My fiancé and I have started to read books, talk about the exhibition, and watch documentaries about HIV/AIDS. I think it’s easier for us to talk about it historically, but currently I feel like that is something I need and should know more about because AIDS currently affects a lot of people,” stated Kent.

The third reaction was the protest by the Tacoma Action Collective, an activist group from Tacoma, Washington. In late 2015, weeks before the exhibition closed at the TAM, members from the Tacoma Action Collective staged a ‘die-in’ protest. The protesters believed *Art AIDS America* did not represent who is affected by AIDS today, and therefore wanted TAM and future exhibition sites to address this issue. All of the interviews discussed the protest in some way or another. Some agreed that the protest needed to happen while others believed it could have been avoided. In his interview Katz explained, “The one mistake we made was not making clearer in text was work by black artists at the moment of the worse decade and a half of the AIDS crisis was very thin on the ground.”

The protest brought up a larger issue than AIDS representation in the exhibition. It brought up issues of oppression that art museums have long struggled with. “The protest brought up problems surrounding the exhibition and the lack of representation, but it also brought up the long standing issues of racism in art museums,” stated TAM curator Rock Hushka. Visual arts writer for *The Stranger*, Jen Graves, stated that museums need to understand and remember that if a community that is used to being underrepresented still holds the burden of going underrepresented in museums, then museums are not yet acting like allies. Until the museums realize this and act like an ally, it is unlikely that change will happen. The artists represented in *Art AIDS America* were not concerned about whether or not their painting, photograph, or sculpture was going to be placed in an art museum or gallery. They were responding to an

epidemic that was killing them and their loved ones. “Museums need to look at these artists and what these artists were doing and follow their lead,” stated Graves.

The protestors’ expectations became a key issue for the exhibition. The Zuckerman Museum of Art had the challenge of addressing the issues brought up by the protestors, and trying to make the exhibition tailored more towards the Atlanta Community all the while not losing the exhibition’s original intent or thesis in a two-month window. The checklist for the exhibition was finalized a year and a half before the exhibition opened, so the Zuckerman had to get creative on how they were going to address these concerns.

To display an exhibition about the AIDS crisis in the conservative South where most of the lawmakers who favored the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) defunding came from, was a big risk for a museum. It was an exceptionally big risk for a small art museum on a university campus. However, that did not deter the Zuckerman Museum of Art. “We are being told that we are brave for discussing a topic that is critical to the Atlanta community,” stated Director of the Zuckerman Museum of Art Justin Rabideau. The Zuckerman Museum of Art is located at Kennesaw State University, in Kennesaw, Georgia, which is a suburb of Atlanta. Atlanta is currently ranked fifth in the country for new HIV diagnoses with the majority of new cases being diagnosed in 13-28 year olds, which is the majority of the demographic for the Zuckerman being on a university campus (Watts, 2016; Relya, 2016). The museum understood the importance of educating their community about current AIDS demographics. They believed it was vital for their community.

From the interviews with the museum staff it was learned that the museum added several community projects including a project they called *Art AIDS Atlanta*. This project highlighted some of the individuals and groups that have “worked through advocacy and activism to enact

positive change for HIV/AIDS causes in Atlanta.” The museum borrowed material on AIDS and AIDS activism in the Atlanta area from a local archives and added footage of an early ACT UP! event from Andy Ditzler that happened in Atlanta in 1995. *From the Beginning...African American Heroes and the AIDS Epidemic in Atlanta 1981-1991* included a “collection of portraits and quotes from activists, caregivers, health professionals, community leaders, families, and people living with HIV throughout the first ten years of the epidemic.” These materials were added between the two major galleries in the museum where *Art AIDS America* was featured. Finally, a display of crafts created by SisterLove, an Atlanta organization dedicated to educating women on HIV/AIDS. SisterLove works in “craftivism,” or craft-based activism.

The museum invited Kia LeBeija and Sur Rodney (Sur), who wrote one of the essays in the exhibition catalog, to have a conversation with some of the staff around the idea of exclusion and lack of representation in the exhibition. The conversation was recorded and added to the exhibition along with a notebook that included printouts of all of the articles and essays that were written about the controversy, so if someone wanted to find out more information around the controversy the information was readily available. From the discussion with the museum staff and some of the reviews written about the exhibition, the interview with LeBeija and Rodney was well received with the community and has been added as a permanent addition to the exhibition. Finally, the museum decided to add eight additional artworks from seven African American artists throughout the exhibition. The additional artworks were added where they would be represented contextually and their labels were made with a plus sign border to let visitors know they were an addition to the original idea.

Community Importance

All interviewees expressed the importance of community. Some of the interviewees expressed that if museums are serious about addressing a social issue in their institution then they need to reach out to their community and determine what the community's need is. Fred, a social work graduate student at the University of Washington Tacoma stated, "they [the museums] need to go out and listen to their community and see what's important to them." He added, "if you're really trying to build something, then you really need to listen to what your community is saying. Go out and outreach the community...be courageous...I think TAM was really courageous here," Tom Diehm stated. Rock Hushka commented by saying museums should "add a lot of time with this work for the community and be prepared to move resources around to address these vital community concerns, and then be willing to find the expertise that is already in the community." The staff from the Zuckerman Museum of Art expressed in their interview how the focus of art museums need to change, "art museums can no longer be these static institutions that people flock to because whatever is put in this white box has value because we're telling you it has value. Instead, the museum needs to shift to something more dynamic and more fluid and more in dialogue with the community it serves."

The Stranger's Jen Graves explained what she believes museums need to do in terms of addressing social issues, "the key is, is getting used to being uncomfortable. Stop waiting for things to resolve. You're going to have to actually work at it, and it's not going to feel great, and you're not going to feel like a great big hero. It's going to be hard and frustrating and there's always going to be people who won't get it." She explained museum professionals are used to being comfortable and "are incredibly unhappy being uncomfortable." As scholars "they are authoritative people, and that's lovely, all scholars are like that." Graves stated that even scholars

do not know everything, and that's okay, you are "not any less smart or wonderful if you are steeped in the culture you were raised in." However, in Graves opinion you are "less smart and less wonderful if you ignore these issues."

Rock Hushka, co-curator of *Art AIDS America* hopes the community is "proud that TAM put together a project of this ambition and helped rewrite the history of American Art."

Secondly, he hopes the community understands "the museum took the concerns that the protest brought to us and that we responded with the community to address these issues." Finally, he hopes the community understands that the "museum wants to be a better place where these kinds of conversation can happen and people can come together to take collective action to affect meaningful change."

Conclusion

Today there is a generation gap where people do not know first-hand what it is like to live through this epidemic. You read about it, see it through movies or television, or hear about it through passing. It has been over 30 years since the AIDS crisis began, and yet to some it still feels like yesterday. The evidence of the research suggests that *Art AIDS America* has achieved its purpose that Hushka and Katz wanted. The exhibition has sparked a conversation that they believed was overdue. They wanted visitors to talk and discuss with each other but then be inspired to start their own research to learn what they can do now. Some of the individuals interviewed have since read books, talked to others, or watched films about the AIDS crisis.

The protest was a learning opportunity for Tacoma Art Museum and the Zuckerman Museum of Art. Both institutions expressed that in the future community involvement will be their first priority. Hushka explained in his interview that he had time to reflect on the protest and

stated, “I’ve become really comfortable with the notion that this response to *Art AIDS America* almost by definition had to do this. This subject is so important to so many people and this critical analysis of what we did or did not do opens up space for some really important conversations about the ongoing impact of HIV.”

The importance of *Art AIDS America* is simply indescribable. It is no secret that sex education in the United States school systems are severely in need of a change. With students not properly being educated on proper sex education it is no wonder that newest HIV diagnoses occur in people ages 13-28 (CDC, 2015). The Zuckerman Museum of Art were shocked at what they discovered by meetings with students. They discovered some students believed that nobody contracted HIV anymore or that it was a genetic disorder, not a sexually transmitted disorder. The thought of future generations not knowing the basic facts about HIV and AIDS is both heartbreaking and disturbing (Terrell, 2016).

It is impossible to cover every single story, every single artwork, and every single person affected by this disease, but that does not mean they should stay silent according to Jonathan Katz, “art museums need to do it already, we live in an art world that is so timid that we have almost no relevance to the lives of people and I find that reprehensible. But beyond that what I want to say is where the hell are you big, wealthy private museums? Why are you still in the 1920s?”

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Conclusion

As the art museum has moved into the 21st century, it has tried to become more responsive to different social challenges of the public. Curators have designed more exhibitions that require visitors to engage both cognitively and psychologically with the artwork. (Mortaki, 2012) Tacoma Art Museum's *Art AIDS America* is an example of a museum not shying away from a controversial topic. Curated by Tacoma Art Museum's Chief Curator Rock Hushka and Art Historian Jonathan Katz, *Art AIDS America* discussed the political context surrounding HIV/AIDS, the issues of sexuality, and the context around the disease itself and the staggering number of lives lost due to the disease.

The purpose of this research was to understand the impact, social context and expectations and reactions when an art museum transparently addresses a social issue through an exhibition. The specific goals of this research were to describe the social, institutional and community context behind the decision in creating the exhibition; describe the expectations and reactions from museum staff and/or the local communities; and describe the range of ways the exhibition impacted or influenced the institutions and local communities. From the interviews four main themes emerged. They included the social, institutional and community context behind the creation of the exhibition, the impact of the AIDS epidemic on the art world, the impact and reactions to the exhibition, and community importance. Every person I interviewed stressed the importance of community involvement when it comes to addressing social issues in museums. To them it is vitally important for museums who are serious about addressing social issues to reach out and listen to their community.

With the advancement of medicine, HIV still shows no signs of slowing down anytime soon. We might have advanced medicine, and maybe people are not dying off at an alarming rate anymore, but it is still here. The CDC has estimated about 658,507 people in the United States have died due to AIDS related causes since the epidemic began. There are currently 1.2 million people in the United States living with HIV, and 50,000 new cases are expected to happen annually (CDC, 2015). Breaking it down even further, an “average of 137 people every day, or nearly one person every 10 and a half minutes becomes infected” (Hushka, 2015).

It is important to remember that it is impossible to cover every single story, every single artwork, and every single person affected by this disease, but that does not mean an art museum or any museum should sit idly by and stay silent. According to the Executive Director of the NAMES Project and AIDS Memorial Quilt in Atlanta, Georgia, “We need to have the conversation shift from statistics and the other, to people and their souls and their lives” (Tacoma Art Museum, 2015). Rock Hushka and Jonathan Katz want to remind people that the fight is not over and that it might never be over, and therefore must be remembered and must be given the respect that it deserves. The exhibition humanized the disease and aimed to lessen the stigmatism that is associated with the disease through artwork. It “demonstrates the importance that art plays in giving a voice to what is still a stigmatizing and silent epidemic” (Hushka and Katz, 2015).

Art AIDS America conveys a message where each piece is considered “a prayer, one of hope, memory, and forgiveness” to share “the ongoing impact and how artists have become the architects of change” (Olivo, 2015). Rock Hushka and Jonathan Katz have achieved a fine balance between “provocation and calm, between sickness and hope, between horror and the human strength that overcomes it” with *Art AIDS America*. This is not an “art show about a

1980s crisis—it is a show about the human condition framed through the lens of AIDS, and anyone who cares about humanity needs to see it” (Ponnekanti, 2015).

Implications

The topic of AIDS is extremely complex and affects a lot of different communities of people. The data collection from the seven interviews can give only a glimpse into the process behind the exhibition and opinions and reactions of the exhibition. If there were more time, there would have been more interviews conducted to obtain a better perspective of reactions towards the exhibition. The purpose of the interviews was to not put assumptions as to what art museums should or should not be doing, but simply to describe a phenomenon that happened and what the reactions were to that phenomenon. At the conclusion of this study the Zuckerman Museum of Art was in the news for potentially losing some of their funding for hosting *Art AIDS America*.

Recommendations

If an art museum is serious about discussing a social issue and making it meaningful, then they need to come from an angle of transparency and realize what they do and do not know. As Jen Graves puts it: Museum staff need to “Get used to being uncomfortable. Stop waiting for things to resolve. You're going to have to actually work at it, and it's not going to feel great, it's going to be messy, and you're not going to feel like a great big hero. It's going to be hard and frustrating and there's always going to be people who won't get it. But when someone can come to you and say I have this issue going on and you get it, then that is when it's worth it.”

Finally, if you are addressing an issue that involves the community you serve, then it only makes sense to involve the community through the planning process, and continue that dialogue

through the entirety of the process. Discussing a social issue or issues might seem overwhelming to some institutions and might make them hesitant to discuss a social issue. However, if they first start small and then work their way out, they will not only get a better foundation of the issue, but gain better partnerships, and become a better ally to their community.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Interview Questions – Jen Graves

1. What do you think are the key issues surrounding *Art AIDS America*?
2. How is this exhibition similar or different than other art exhibitions you have covered?
3. As a professional associated with, but not part of the museum community, what advice or insight would you share with museums that are trying to create social change?

Interview Questions – Rock Hushka

1. What would you say is the intent behind Art AIDS America?
2. How did the planning process begin of Art AIDS America? What was your role as curator in the planning and implementation of this exhibit?
3. Can you describe the range of reactions to the exhibit?
4. In your opinion what are the exhibit's strengths and weaknesses?
5. What advice would you give other museums that would like to create an exhibit on a social issue, but are hesitant?
6. How do you hope your community looks back on *Art AIDS America*?
7. Anything else you'd like to share about your experience with this exhibit?

Interview Questions – Johnathan Katz

1. How did the planning process begin of Art AIDS America? Can you describe your role in the planning and implementation of this exhibit?
2. What would you say is the intent of Art AIDS America?
3. How is this exhibit different from Hide/Seek or other projects you have been involved with?
4. In your opinion how is the exhibit effective or not effective?
5. What advice would you give other art museums that would like to create an exhibit on a social issue, but are hesitant?

Interview Questions – Zuckerman Museum of Art

1. Can you describe the range of reactions to *Art AIDS America*?
2. What kind of opportunities did you have as an institution to add to the exhibition?
3. What advice would you give other art museums that would like to create an exhibition on a social issue, but are hesitant?
4. How do you think the museum staff and your community will look back on this exhibition?

Interview Questions – Tom Diehm, Fred Flores, and Kent Silver

1. How would you describe your experience of *Art AIDS America*?
2. In your opinion, in what ways was *Art AIDS America* effective or not effective?
3. Do you think Tacoma Art Museum could have approached this exhibition differently? If so, in what ways?
4. What advice would you share with museums that are trying to create social change?

Appendix B: Sample of Interview Coding

| A Priori Codes | Definition | Examples |
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| <p>Purpose/Intention of <i>Art AIDS America</i></p> | <p>why the curator or museum did the exhibition</p> | <p>“we wanted to return people’s awareness about how the AIDS crisis fundamentally changed American Art.”</p> <p>“we wanted to get people to stop thinking about the AIDS crisis as a particular moment in American Art and as a one of primary motors of American creativity.”</p> <p>“The intent was to underscore the degree to which the vast majority of the production of art about AIDS didn’t look like art about AIDS.”</p> <p>“We were thinking about ways we could have a conversation around this exhibition that would be relevant to our community both in the sense of age and also with the idea of bringing a diverse voice to programming.”</p> |
| <p>How <i>Art AIDS America</i> was done</p> | <p>the planning process of what the museum or curators did to prepare for the exhibition</p> | <p>“the encouragement to work on <i>Art AIDS America</i> came from Stephanie Stebich, who encouraged me to think about taking my Master’s thesis and creating an exhibition.”</p> <p>“We conducted a community roundtable discussion shortly after the controversy in Tacoma with artists, curators, and other individuals we have partnered with in the past.”</p> <p>“One of the things that was immediately identified from the exhibition was the lack of graphics and specific demographic information relating to the disproportion effect of AIDS on the African American population in America. We added graphic elements to the already existing graphic material that was originally produced for the exhibition.”</p> <p>“When we started the topic of AIDS was in this funny region where the subject was not historical enough to be a concern to some curators and it wasn’t contemporary enough to be of interest to other curators.”</p> |

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| <p>Reactions to <i>Art AIDS America</i></p> | <p>Opinions from visitors after seeing the exhibition, opinions from museum staff about visitor's reactions</p> | <p>"We are hearing that it is incredibly moving and people are responding the way we hoped they would."</p> <p>"the additional material we added seemed to have hit a cord with people where they felt there was a real voice added to the show."</p> <p>"I think it's strengths revealed its faults."</p> <p>"I was open to those kind of feelings and everything else that went along with it. It was much more powerful than I expected it to be."</p> <p>"Whatever small complaints I may have had about the exhibit, they did it and nobody else did and for that I have all the admiration for them."</p> <p>"I enjoyed the exhibition. I thought it was tastefully done."</p> |
| <p>Impact of <i>Art AIDS America</i></p> | <p>Opinions about TAM after the exhibition opened, how the exhibition has affected the visitors</p> | <p>"TAM has done more I would say than a lot of other places. It's entirely possible for TAM to be sleepy, but nobody would pay attention to it. There have been a couple of ways that TAM has tried to conduct conversations that are difficult, that other museums haven't even jumped into."</p> <p>"My fiancé and I have started to read books, talk about the exhibition, and watch documentaries about HIV/AIDS. I think it's easier for us to talk about it historically, but currently I feel like that is something I need and should know more about because AIDS currently affects a lot of people."</p> |

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| | | <p>“Seeing the exhibition gave me an internal desire to learn more about HIV/AIDS, and what it mane to be a gay person in the 1980s.”</p> <p>“If TAM keeps doing exhibitions like <i>Art AIDS America</i> I am much more likely to revisit them.”</p> <p>“When the exhibit was here I don’t remember a time where the exhibit did not come up with my friends. People were talking about either specific works, the exhibit itself, or the curators. So it certainly served its purpose of getting people to talk about things again that maybe we haven’t talked about in a long time.”</p> <p>“There is a lot of ability to have a rich and meaningful dialogue with your community, and from what I’ve learned from doing this exhibition is that it’s vitally important.”</p> |
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| Emergent Codes | Definition | Examples |
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| Community Importance | Community outreach by museums and staff, museum’s responsibility when addressing social issues. | <p>“The public dialogue we had were really meaningful for us and we were excited by the conversations we had and are going to make that a regular and permanent part of our work.”</p> <p>“We realized the value of reaching out to our community and that is something we as an institution have sought to do since our opening day.”</p> <p>“If you’re really trying to build something, hone in on a specific social issue in a specific area and then go out into that community and see what is interesting, what is going on, and what they want to see.”</p> <p>“Museums can no longer be these static institutions that people flock to because whatever is put in this white box has value because we’re telling you it has value. Instead, the museum needs to shift to something more dynamic and</p> |

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| | | <p>more fluid and more in dialogue with the community it serves.”</p> |
| <p>Historical and social context</p> | <p>Historical/social context of the AIDS crisis, and how it influenced the curators or museum staff when creating the exhibition</p> | <p>“This was a highly fraught and aggressive political moment in American life. If you were a black artist looking for circulation and representation in the larger art world, if you were talking about your queerness, if you were talking about AIDS in addition to talking about or addressing the fact of the African American experience, then you were doubling the codes of your exclusion.”</p> <p>“AIDS was of course, perhaps the single most potent social and political issue to affect the art world in the 1980s and 1990s, and it was therefore the dominant mode of engaged or political art making at that moment.”</p> <p>“Atlanta has been pretty high on the list of annual statistics of the city with the newest cases of HIV, we’re currently fifth. It’s a big topic that is relevant particularly to our community, and the age group that is hit the hardest is the 13-28 range, where most of our university campus falls in.”</p> |
| <p>Issues of representation</p> | | <p>“This is going to be an ongoing conversation for the museum, from the board level down to volunteers. We’re not shying away from these conversations.”</p> <p>“These conversations although challenging, are ultimately important to help the museum become a better part of the community, and listening to the collective expertise and experiences of the community will only help strengthen the institution.”</p> <p>“It’s important to remember that when the burden of representation is still on the community that is hurt by not being represented, then the museum is not yet behaving like as an ally.”</p> |

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| | | “the real fruit of the protest is going to be the long term, not the exhibit, but how TAM now thinks about communities of color and how they interact with them.” |
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Appendix C: Categories of Document Analysis

1. Opinions and Reactions of *Art AIDS America*
 - a. “Is it worth it? Yes. Not just because *Art AIDS America* deals with one of the biggest social issues of our time, but because the very things in this art that make the hype necessary—the blood, sex, death and raw emotion—are also what makes it powerful. This show is hard to look at, and that is why it’s so important to look.”
 - b. “The exhibition refutes the narrative that AIDS is only a tragic tangent in American art, exploring how artists’ responses to the crisis and its legacy continue to inform contemporary American art.”
 - c. “*Art AIDS America* is unapologetically raw, sexually provocative and not for the pearl-clutching prone.”
 - d. “Bottom line: Outstanding work and a profound treatment of death and discrimination make this survey show about AIDS in art a must-see.”
2. Facts/Statistics about *Art AIDS America*
 - a. “*Art AIDS America* includes 28 female artists and 87 men.”
 - b. “On December 17, 2015 activists from the Tacoma Action Collective staged a die in protest to protest both the lack of black of representation in the exhibition and the anti-black racism that was being felt by the Tacoma Art Museum.”
 - c. “Approximately 100 museums turned down the exhibition.”
 - d. “Out of the 103 artists represented, 23 have died from AIDS-related causes, while others are living with HIV.”
3. Historical or Social Context behind *Art AIDS America*
 - a. “Artworks with homosexual and AIDS-related content are still viewed throughout the art world as something of a ‘third-rail,’ with exhibitions, artists, and works still restricted in terms of funding and venues.”
 - b. “Before the virus that caused AIDS was isolated in 1984 and evidence confirmed that it was transmitted through body fluids, this group was know as the four H’s—homosexuals, herion users, hemophiliacs and Haitians. They became prime targets for stigmatization and objects of fear—balmed for their alleged bad behaviors or outsider status.”
 - c. “Coded art was common during the AIDS crisis because that was the only way to get art into museums.”
 - d. “Even though the stigma around AIDS extended to art museums and institutions, art was one of the ways that kept human conversation about AIDS alive during the crisis.”
4. Analysis of artworks
 - a. “*Let the Record Show*...replication for the exhibition was made as a gesture, rather than artwork in the traditional sense, highlighting the tension between art and activism.”
 - b. Keith Haring’s *Altarpiece* features dancing figures carved along the base of the triptych. Above them, a many-armed being cradles Haring’s iconic radiant baby

figure, taking him back up to heaven. The altarpiece embodies Haring's ability to create exuberant, emotive characters out of simple seamless shapes."

- c. Daniel Goldstein's *Icarian I Incline* resembles the Shroud of Turin—a leather sheet stretched inside a frame, marks of wear from the shape of a man. The piece is actually the covering from a workout bench at "Muscle Sisters," a gay gym in San Francisco, and the ghostly imprint is the trace of thousands of men, many of whom probably died of AIDS."