

SILENCE = DEATH: THEN & NOW

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A scene of anonymous, makeshift corpses marked with poster-board tombstones that are delineated with each person's cause of death lie in front of FDA headquarters. The use of the theme of death and the naming of the many perpetrators speaks to a sense that for this assemblage of people, an already shamed and marginalized community, death is just another form of discrimination. In the messages on these tombstones, we see that inaction and slowness cause death. This is also signified by the imagery of red handprints which allude to how organizations, such as the FDA, have blood on their hands. It is this kind of dramatic expression often used by LGBTQ+ activists to continually call out a government, a society, and the pharmaceutical corporations for their lack of humanity and the systematic killing off of their community.



ACT UP demonstrators gathered in front of the FDA headquarters in Rockville, Maryland (October 11, 1988)

Although the demonstrators are pretending to be dead, many of their community are lying six feet under as a result of AIDS and the government's inaction towards finding a cure. The protest is an expression of how powerless it is for them to be abandoned by their government and society. Their plight is actually a matter of life and death. At the same time, it emanates the actuality of them being attacked from many sides and illustrates the enormity of the problem. We see images that reference the sins of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the Burroughs Wellcome pharmaceutical company's profits from an epidemic, the sick and dying who were given a placebo, and Nancy Reagan, the former First Lady of the United States, being given the middle finger as a result of her inaction. According to the ACT UP advocate group and many other allies, the government, its agencies, and the pharmaceutical company's slow and stagnant response to the AIDS epidemic were akin to genocide. The small pink triangle in the background seems to be the only indication as to what group these activists are representing; this was the 1980s insignia for



Stonewall Inn 1960's

the LGBTQ+ community. Thousands of LGBTQ+ individuals were dying and millions were infected with an incurable disease. However, it took the FDA years to release a toxic drug that was unaffordable for the majority of the infected.

Wherever we go, we are not wanted. No matter where we are, there will always be someone who is praying for our downfall. This lifelong annihilation of our identity, something we cannot change, carries great weight on our shoulders. This systemic discrimination directed at the LGBTQ+ community leads members of the community to question whether we deserve life. “Why can’t I be “normal?” is a question that has continually haunted most of the minds of this community. This universal experience speaks to the plight of the community as we question if we even have a place to thrive in this world.

Men of different races stand peacefully and socialize with one another. Some are in button-down shirts, while others are in jeans and t-shirts. What is not apparent is that the club is a symbol of resistance to oppression. The LGBTQ+ bar was raided by police. Biased laws at the time set a minimum distance between those of the same sex, thus making it difficult for them to socialize. One must also point out the subtlety of the social grouping, needing to be approved and known by security to enter, which speaks to the hidden and underground nature of this community. NYC is commonly thought of as the most progressive city of our time, however, the raid that ensued thereafter and the uprising that followed marked the beginning of resistance to the intolerance and shaming of a peaceful minority group. The old 1950’s car present at the scene represents the old and narrow-minded way of thinking of the previous two decades and shows how pervasive this bigotry still remains looming over a more modern time.

What do all of these political figures have in common? They were all guilty, as is written on their foreheads. President Reagan is depicted here due to his purposeful inaction that caused the death of hundreds of thousands. He is next to Hitler who needs no



Members of the ACT UP activist group outside of the Food and Drug Administration headquarters (October 11, 1988, Rockville, Maryland).

introduction, giving Reagan and all the other figures an apropos association with the genocide of an innocent community. The overwhelming number of signs of politicians projects the political wall of solidarity that these lawmakers created to purposefully ignore and ostracize the LGBTQ+ community that was dying. The signs of politicians physically being above the protesters depicts the looming power over them. Jesse Helms in the foreground was at the helm of this by purposefully blocking funding for HIV research and constantly slandering the LGBTQ+ community. My gay father experienced these political events firsthand. The policies created forced him and many others to live in a world where the government that was supposed to protect them, chose instead to inflame society to seek further violence and discriminate against the LGBTQIA+ community. Our shared legacy and the way I, too, witness the same kinds of discrimination, deepens my understanding of the disenfranchised LGTQIA+ community. Even today, with so many rights granted, the same shameful identity is propagated. This is prevalent to such an extent that young LGBTQ+

suicide rates have grown astronomically. “The Trevor Project estimates that more than 1.8 million LGBTQ youth (13-24) seriously consider suicide each year in the U.S. — and at least one attempts suicide every 45 seconds” (“Facts About LGBTQ Youth Suicide”).



AIDS protest at the FDA building in Washington, DC, October 1988

One of the biggest perpetrators of allowing people to die in the name of bigotry was the FDA. Orange and black target-like posters symbolize how an entire community was under constant fire. Hundreds of thousands were left to die due to the lack of urgency of the FDA to approve a potentially life-saving treatment. The FDA was in no rush to finally approve a treatment for those that many didn't want to be saved. Today, it only took less than a year to approve a vaccine for COVID-19. These are similar crises; however, COVID-19 affected everyone, not just the LGBTQ+ community. It is evident through the photo that this desperate community must continue to shockingly point out the gravity of the situation to those that were to blame.

This similar type of targeting of a community is still prevalent today, as medical organizations subtly brand the Monkeypox

outbreak as an LGBTQ+ disease. Although one might argue that being able to get a vaccine is better than not having one at all, the underlying discrimination that is still perpetuated demonstrates a more current attempt to villainize the LGBTQ+ community.

Our identity — something that makes us who we are — cannot be sustained with the constant barrage of hate from parts of the world. With homosexuality being criminalized in 69 countries (Reality Check Team), it is hard to seek refuge and find a place that accepts who we are. Although there are parts of the world that may accept our identity, there will always be someone challenging our right to thrive. Not giving people a face or a name invalidates their existence, making it easier to incite division and prejudice.

What seems to be a celebratory festival at the US Capital Mall in Washington, DC, is actually a memorial mourning for the more



AIDS quilt memorial in Washington D.C., 1996

than 100,000 individuals that perished during the first years of the AIDS epidemic. Although this memorial celebrates and names all those who perished, it shows the somber tragedy of thousands of loved ones lost because of purposeful inaction. The large colorful rectangular quilts project a feeling of comfort and warmth while also marking the enormity of death that caught a nation by storm. Even though this memorial was grand in nature, it was only a temporary exhibit and memorial. This lack of permanence allows people to forget, which speaks to the anonymity that is often given to marginalized populations even after the initial attention is given.

There is a long list of ways in which the LGBTQIA+ community's identity has been diminished and its right to exist has been challenged. From the first resistance at Stonewall in 1969, the Matthew Shepard & James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009, the Executive order of President Obama in 2014, to the most recent Supreme Court ruling of 2015, granting LGBTQ+ marriages as constitutional, the LGBTQ+ community has fought unstoppably for its identity. Though many rights have been granted, we are currently seeing an unprecedented backlash resurgence of discrimination laws toward the LGBTQ+ community, diminishing protections and adding new limitations. Whether it's banning books, preventing teachers from talking about LGBTQ+ issues in the classroom, or legally being able to refuse to make a wedding cake for a queer couple, we must be careful not to allow this already-diminished community to lose any of its rights. This resurgence only serves to demonstrate that community members will never be safe enough to stop looking over their shoulders.

The impermanence of LGBTQ+ rights fills my heart with sorrow and anger. A new path, represented by the viewpoint of the photograph, brings hope for a movement towards achieving a better life. As we walk down this path towards the capitol building and remember the significance of this quilt, we will demand equal rights.

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