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## LABOR OF LOVE

LAUREN O'NEILL-BUTLER ON THE ART OF FIERCE PUSSY

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**ANGELA DAVIS IS RIGHT:** Freedom is a constant struggle.

George Michael, expatiating on freedom, had another good point: You've got to give for what you take.

When the core members of fierce pussy give talks about their art, they usually begin by thanking Condé Nast. Joy Episalla and Carrie Yamaoka, who cofounded the New York-based collective with Nancy Brooks Brody and Zoe Leonard in 1991, were respectively working in the design departments at *GQ* and *Traveler* magazines in the group's early days. During quieter moments around the office, they ran off hundreds of fierce pussy posters on the copy machines. No one seemed to mind.



Carrie Yamaoka, Joy Episalla, Nancy Brooks Brody, and Zoe Leonard, New York, 2014. Photo: Alice O'Malley.

Perhaps that was because Episalla and Yamaoka weren't alone. In *Adjusted Margin: Xerography, Art, and Activism in the Late Twentieth Century* (2016), Kate Eichhorn offers an account of some of the most vital urban activism of the 1990s: Employees stayed late at their corporate gigs at NBC, Microsoft, etc., to “churn out all this political stuff,” as Marion Banzhaf, a former member of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power—better known as ACT UP—put it.<sup>1</sup> It turns out these corporations played a large part in disseminating incendiary thoughts and words, unwittingly providing capital goods for the common good.

Originally members of ACT UP, the women of fierce pussy at first wanted to create a ladies-only affinity group. As Brody recalled (though typically the group asks that all their words be attributed collectively) during a [video interview](#) for artforum.com, the first announcement happened during an ACT UP assembly at Cooper Union's Great Hall. “We made an open call . . . on the floor that we would be meeting at Zoe's house at such a night, and come one, come all.” Episalla and Yamaoka had already caught wind of the gathering during a demonstration at a Hell's Kitchen police station. Yet the group's story ultimately diverges from those of parallel initiatives such as Gran Fury (the propaganda arm of ACT UP), Queer Nation, and the Lesbian Avengers. For one thing, fierce pussy strongly encouraged its public to take, copy, and distribute its pieces, and so its production



can be placed squarely in the genealogy of the multiple while also anticipating the logic of the self-propagating digital meme. What also distinguishes fierce pussy is that, like a pop star, it has morphed, remixed, and rewritten itself. After an almost twenty-year hiatus, it resumed its activities in 2008 and is still going strong today. Its members sometimes say that these days they feel like the Rolling Stones of queer activism. (Though the Stones have done little to destabilize heteronormativity through political speech.) They also tend to talk about fierce pussy as if the collective were a person: “fierce pussy is her own artist.” “She’s got a lot of opinions.” Akin to most millennials, she’s pissed at abuses of power and ready for a better tomorrow.

**THE MOMENT** of fierce pussy’s emergence always bears repeating because the trauma endures—and in many ways seems to be recurring. The damage of that era was embodied in the institutionalized homophobia that so greatly intensified the AIDS crisis; in the ravages of years of conservative rule in the US; in increasing violence against queer people; in Anita Hill being interrogated after having been sexually harassed by Clarence Thomas, and Thomas being confirmed anyway; and in a housing crisis going on all over the country and particularly in New York (where, in June 1991, Mayor David Dinkins evicted the homeless from Tompkins Square Park).



fierce pussy members wheat-pasting “List remix” posters, 2008–, at Printed Matter, New York, 2008.



But the '90s were also a time in the city when many abandoned buildings and ubiquitous construction projects were covered in graffiti, announcements, and flyers, and when artists such as Jenny Holzer and the Guerrilla Girls seized on the opportunity to add their own responses to the decaying mix. Enter fierce pussy. During the collective's first meeting, at Leonard's East Village apartment, its members adopted Robert's Rules of Order and produced a no-frills poster on the spot using paper, scissors, a typewriter—whatever was near at hand and cheap if not outright free. "I AM A / lezzie / butch / pervert / girlfriend / bulldagger / sister / dyke / AND PROUD!" This was one of the first of the "List" posters, 1991–, each of which sandwiches a jagged litany of pejoratives between the phrases "I AM A" and "AND PROUD." The group decided that at every meeting a work would be made then and there, fast and dirty. Imperfections and visual noise were embraced from start to finish. fierce pussy's members also decided to speak as one, as *her*, with intimacy, humor, and rage. At various points, the membership roster has included Pam Brandt, Jean Carlomusto, Donna Evans, Alison Froling, and Suzanne Wright, to name a few, but the group has continually employed that single, strong voice, that direct first-person address, always looking inward to project outward.



View of "fierce pussy: AND SO ARE YOU," 2018–19, Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art, New York. Photo: Kristine Eudey.

A redeployment of language plays a crucial role in nearly all of fierce pussy's art. The collective's work reminds us that it was in feminist consciousness-raising groups, and not in the arena of legal scholarship, that many of the most important feminist re-descriptions

were generated: *sexism, sexual harassment, marital rape*, etc. fierce pussy's speech is always excitable, its politics always performative and ahead of the curve—or, as its members joked in our interview: Judith Butler “was reading us.” She likely was. In the wee hours of the night, walking around the city with buckets of water—no one had cars—the group's members wheat-pasted posters in strategic locations, more *sight* specific than site-specific. They knew their art could be used as evidence against them, having learned from David Wojnarowicz's lawsuit against Reverend Donald Wildmon and the American Family Association in 1990—but they were never deterred. The collective's initial campaigns focused on raising lesbian visibility (before capitalism found a solid market for that) and speaking directly to its community (before social media found a market for that).

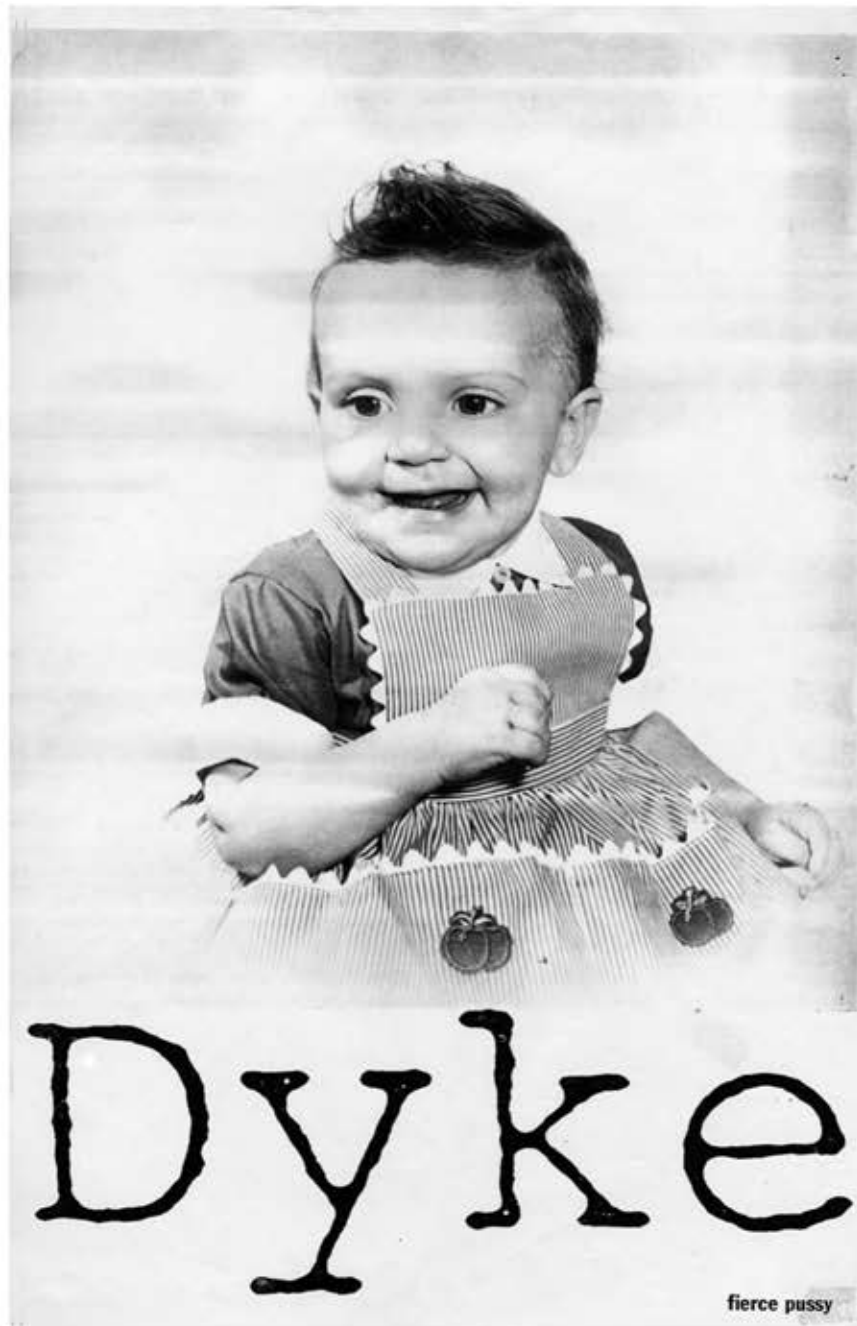
**fierce pussy's speech is always excitable, its politics always performative and ahead of the curve.**

fierce pussy's identity remains relational and unfixed yet situated—“fierce pussy crafts ‘queer identity’ as a continuum experienced in historical time,” notes Tara Burk. Its mission, too, has evolved in a dynamic yet coherent way. One of the group's earliest objectives was to claim territory. The women wanted to leave a noticeable trace, but not by using money, power, prestige, or any of the other forms of capital that art accrues as it moves through its normative contexts and markets. And they wanted to do it *fiercely*, with desire and pleasure, as in that word's Latin roots, *ferus*, feral. Maybe the point was not to overthink it. This wasn't about making or having an art career. This was life or death.

I AM A  
lezzie  
butch  
pervert  
feminist  
amazon  
bulldagger  
dyke  
AND SO ARE YOU

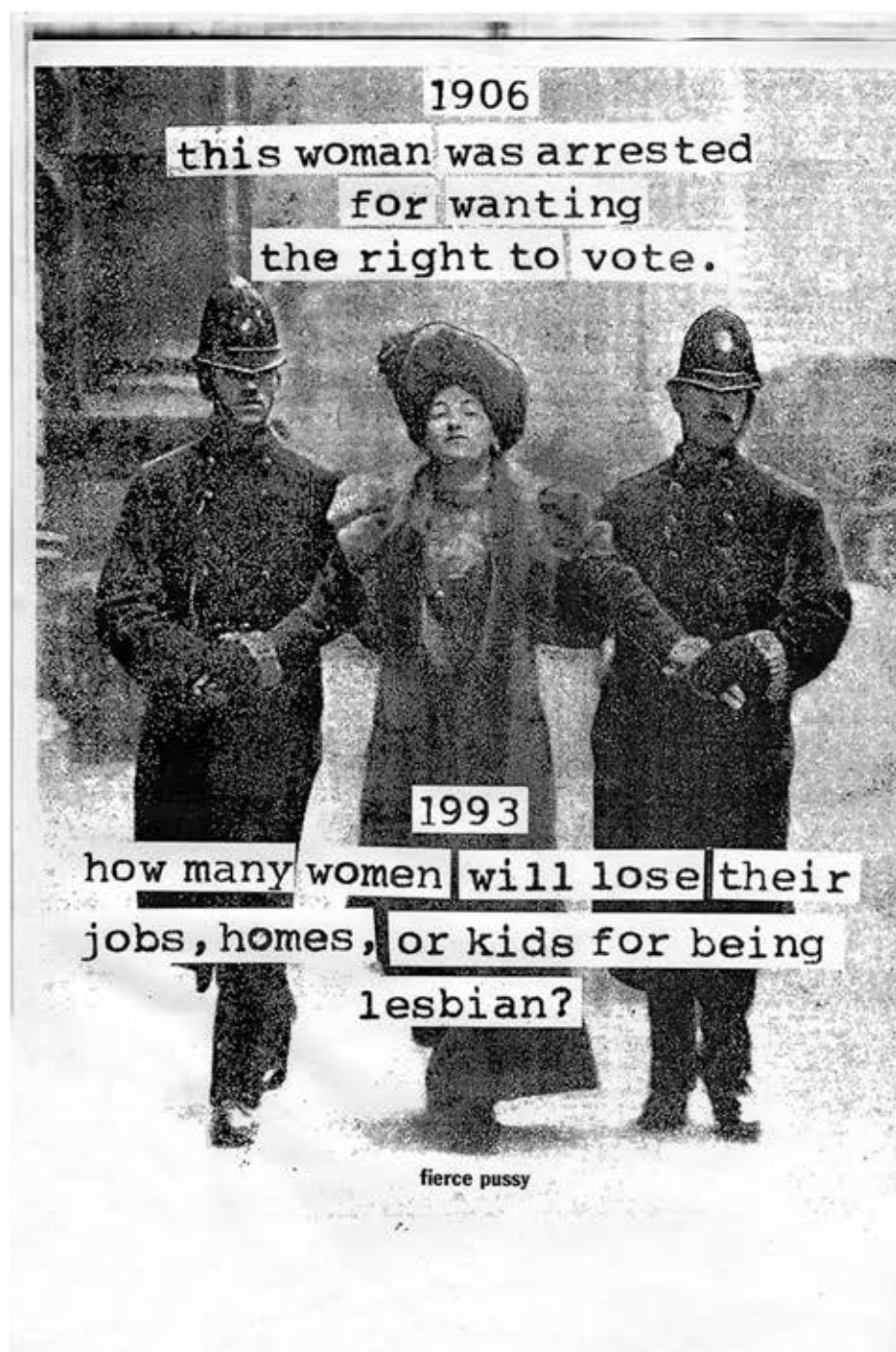


As time plodded on, as overt homophobia became increasingly stigmatized and words like *dyke* became integrated into mainstream parlance, fierce pussy tested whether seemingly positive changes actually constituted substantive progress. Retooling older posters became a habit—the reunited group’s meetings were often, as its members say, “writing sessions [that] became editing sessions, refining sessions, expanding sessions.” In 2008, on the occasion of the group’s retrospective at New York’s Printed Matter, it updated the “List” posters, replacing “AND PROUD” with the teasing provocation “AND SO ARE YOU.” The new posters covered the storefront window of the venerable nonprofit. Moments after they went up, police arrived to relay concerns expressed by neighbors and passersby—demonstrating that the processes of language reclamation and of redescription are far from passé.



Poster from fierce pussy's "Family and Found Photographs," 1991, black-and-white photocopy, 17 × 11".

For another early poster, in 1991, fierce pussy took on the homophobic Christian right and its allies by pairing family and childhood photos with text; a prominent example shows a beaming baby with the word *dyke* in large type set at the hem of her striped apron. Twenty-seven years later and not far from where the work debuted on the streets of SoHo, it's one of several pieces now engulfing the windows of the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art. It also represents fierce pussy's most unnerving campaign—where vulnerability meets the insidious ways language can cut to the bone and scar, sometimes for life. "Oh, this is hilarious," I recently overheard someone saying as they entered the museum. I'm not so sure.



Poster from fierce pussy's "Boycott Colorado" project, 1993, black-and-white photocopy, 17 × 11".



In 1992, fierce pussy used stencil lettering and spray paint on cardboard to rename streets along a gay-pride-parade route in Manhattan, recasting Christopher Street as Tomboy Turnpike, Hudson Street as Audre Lorde Lane, and Sheridan Square as fierce pussy Plaza. In 1993, the group paired an image of a suffragette held by two cops with the text “1906: this woman was arrested for wanting the right to vote. 1993: how many women will lose their jobs, homes, or kids for being lesbian?” This past October, before the midterm elections, fierce pussy updated that second line to “2018: do not take democracy for granted. VOTE!” The new version, as grainy and unkempt as the original, made the rounds on social media with emoji embellishments. It was a sight for sore eyes.



fierce pussy, *Vote*, 2018, poster, 17 × 11".

From its initial phase of by-any-means-necessary mimeography and wheat-pasting, fierce pussy went on to produce stickers, billboards, mail-art campaigns, and a permanent installation in the bathroom of the New York LGBT Community Center. These have been



pragmatic projects on freedom, and not just because they deal so deeply with language. The group has always formatted its art for the most efficient mode of distribution in order to make the biggest splash, even though its members are well aware that they are trading impact for durability. The typical ephemerality of fierce pussy's primary material—paper—stood out when I visited its archive at the New York Public Library last fall. The only item I found there that wasn't a photocopy was a picture of the members with the activist Barbara Gittings from 1994. An accompanying letter to her read: "You are a heroine to us all," and then: "Enjoy the posters."

**RICHARD RORTY**, an indispensable bad object for feminism, tried, and failed, to pragmatize theorizations of gender parity in the early '90s. In 1993, he contributed an essay to the journal *Hypatia* in which he claimed that pragmatists such as himself and deconstructionists could only offer feminists "bits of ad hoc advice—advice about how to reply when masculinists attempt to make present practices seem inevitable." Three years earlier, Rorty and Nancy Fraser had engaged in a heated dispute about feminism, and his light touch in the *Hypatia* piece—"advice"—may have stemmed from a desire to avoid being seen as overbearing, since he had not won the earlier debate. He argues:

The most effective way to criticize current descriptions of a given instance of the oppression of the weak as "a necessary evil" (the political equivalent of "a negligible anomaly") is to explain just why it is not in fact necessary, by explaining how a specific institutional change would eliminate it. That means sketching an alternative future and a scenario of political action that might take us from the present to that future.<sup>2</sup>

But sometimes you don't need to explain too much.



fierce pussy, *fierce pussy truck*, 1994, three color-Xerox posters, wheat-pasted on truck.



A fierce pussy billboard that was driven on the side of a van through Manhattan and into a West Village pride march in 1994 read:

DYKE  
THE FINAL FRONTIER  
To Explore Strange New Worlds  
To Seek Out New Life & New Civilizations  
TO BOLDLY GO WHERE NO MAN HAS GONE BEFORE

With the letters in *DYKE* rendered in dramatic one-point perspective, the sign played with the tropes of commercial advertisement and campy sci-fi; there's an inevitable association not only with *Star Trek* but also with the famous *Star Wars* opening crawl. The billboard seems like a precursor to "Transmission," an ongoing series of comically inflected Rortyesque visions of an alternative future. (The second work in the series appeared in the Summer 2016 issue of this magazine.) Written as open letters from a century yet to come and employing the squared-off font that in the '80s was used to suggest advanced technology, the "Transmission" texts ingenuously question the barbarism of the present: "What is this word 'rape'?" The letter is revised and updated between iterations; most recently, it was produced as a poster, free for the taking. This latest version of the communiqué from our unearthly "descendants in the free state of Transplendency" begins:

Dearest beings of 2018, we are re-transending our transmission wave across time. /Our transscholars, translators and transcribers continue to transmonitor your data. There is still much / we wish to understand—please reply all.

As in the collective's previous projects, the wish to understand and the desire for individual freedom are presented with caustic wit. But despite the satirical edge, a genuine liberatory impulse finds expression in these missives, which do, after all, optimistically envision a new society and a higher mode of consciousness. "Do you need . . . sustainable farming transniques and energy-harnessing?" our progeny inquire. "We can send right away! Of course telepathic communication is easiest~~or do you prefer dropbox?"

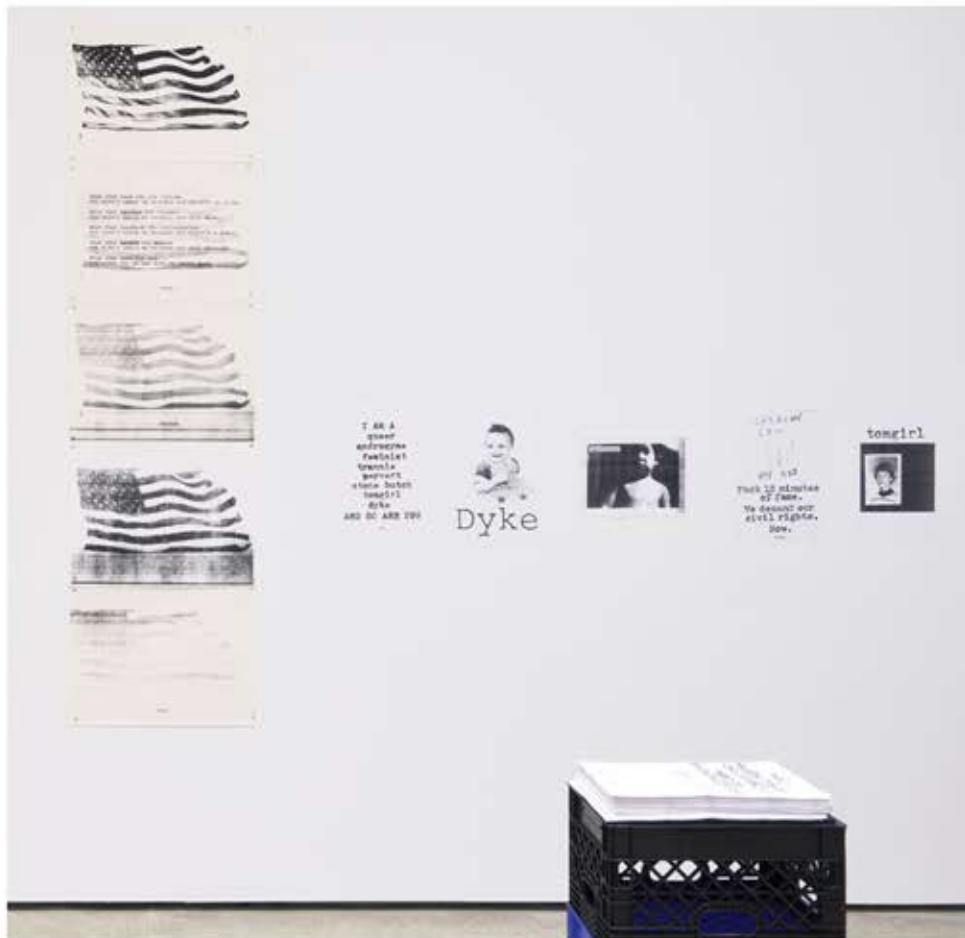
**Despite the satirical edge, a genuine liberatory impulse finds expression in this work.**

Contingency, irony, and solidarity: If you dare to envision a future, you might as well do so with panache. And if you're going to imagine radical structural change, you should—like the young Simone Weil—also acknowledge that such change can never be known in advance. You might also acknowledge that such ideals are still a dream: We don't know what equality, equity, or even dignity is, because it hasn't happened for all humans yet.

In your earlier transmissions you described a civil rights movement. We noticed an increased breakdown in social relations. We know you call yourselves human—is there an 'e' on the end of that?



The poster version of the queer futurism and “time travel tactics” (per Jill H. Casid) proposed by *Transmission III*, 2018, was created for fierce pussy’s six-month-long exhibition at the Beeler Gallery at Columbus College of Art & Design, Columbus, Ohio, which opened in October. Curated by Jo-ey Tang, the “season” changes every five weeks or so, ultimately offering four different “chapters.” This blessedly slow programming allows for leisurely presentations of individual work from each of the groups’s four pragmatic prophetesses in addition to presenting their collective output. Surprisingly, it’s the first time fierce pussy’s practices have been put into conversation in public. The show’s title, “arms ache avid aeon,” references a quietly political work by Yamaoka. When asked about it, Tang said: “From intimacy, resistance (arms), through grief and desire (ache), light and activism (avid), and time (aeon). The missing *A* word—AIDS—that which brought them together in the first place, hovers.”



View of “arms ache avid aeon: Nancy Brooks Brody / Joy Episalla / Zoe Leonard / Carrie Yamaoka: fierce pussy amplified,” 2018–19, Beeler Gallery at Columbus College of Art & Design, Columbus, OH. Photo: Stephen Takacs.

The timely celebration of these artists’ impact and of their robust and sustaining mode of direct action documents how far we’ve come, but also how far we need to go. At the moment, simply resisting atrocity seems challenging enough, let alone making progress. Yet effective activism requires that we think in terms of forward motion. “The mindset of ‘the resistance’ is slippery and dangerous,” as Michelle Alexander recently put it.<sup>3</sup> “There’s a reason marchers in the black freedom struggle sang ‘We Shall Overcome’ rather than chanting ‘We Shall Resist.’ Their goal was to overcome a racial caste system—to end it.”

if he were alive today he would be at this  
opening if she were alive today you'd be  
texting her right now if he were alive today  
he would be going gray if they were alive  
today they could tell you about getting  
arrested at City Hall if she were alive today  
you'd be so her type if he were alive today  
you would have met him by now if she were  
alive today she would have finished writing  
that book if he were alive today he would  
have you on your knees if he were alive today  
you'd still be arguing about that if he were  
alive today he'd still be living with **AIDS** if  
they were alive today they'd be outside  
smoking if he were alive today he'd be  
going dancing later if he were alive today  
you'd still be sharing an office if she were  
alive today she'd never let you get away  
with that if she were alive today maybe she'd  
have a gallery by now if he were alive today he'd  
have his arm around you if she were alive today  
she still wouldn't have health insurance  
if she were alive today she'd know exactly  
what to say if he were alive today he'd laugh at  
that if he were alive today he'd be in this picture

fierce pussy for Visual AIDS, 2013

Page from fierce pussy's *For The Record*, 2013, digital broadside.



Effective activism also requires knowing when to memorialize and when not to. In 2009, after participating in the landmark traveling exhibition “ACT UP New York: Activism, Art, and the AIDS Crisis, 1987–1993,” the founders of fierce pussy felt that a large part of their lives had been historicized even though in reality the art, and the mourning, went on. The loss is ongoing. They wanted to produce something that foregrounded the kind of desire that makes the past present, the longing that will not consign the past to history. The result was the poster *For the Record*, 2013, which was originally made as a project for Visual AIDS and the annual Day With(out) Art, and was also featured in “Greater New York” at MoMA PS1, New York, in 2015–16. “If they were alive today they could tell you about getting arrested at City Hall. . . . if they were alive today they’d be outside smoking. . . . if she were alive today she’d never let you get away with that. . . . if he were alive today he’d still be living with AIDS.”



We don't know what equality, equity, or even dignity is, because it hasn't happened for all humans yet.

It goes on, each *if* followed by a statement in the present conditional, conjuring up the glancing specificities of human lives that were so enragingly contingent. The text gives voice to a group of people trying to survive against all odds, against their deeply homophobic and prejudiced government, by saying to readers—to us: You didn't get to know them, but you might have really liked them. You might have loved them, even. The piece tethers a responsibility to witness to a refusal to forget. Personal grief becomes a public proclamation. Underwriting that announcement, and the art of the collective that produced it, are urgent wishes for survival and overcoming, anchored by radical camaraderie.

*“arms ache avid aeon: Nancy Brooks Brody / Joy Episalla / Zoe Leonard / Carrie Yamaoka: fierce pussy amplified” is on view at the Beeler Gallery at Columbus College of Art & Design, Columbus, OH, through March 17; a condensed version of the show travels to the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, September 13–December 22; “And So Are You,” fierce pussy’s yearlong project at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art, New York, is on view through June.*

*Lauren O’Neill-Butler is senior editor at Artforum.*

#### NOTES

1. Kate Eichhorn, *Adjusted Margin: Xerography, Art, and Activism in the Late Twentieth Century* (MIT Press, 2016), 144. Eichhorn takes this quote from Jim Hubbard and Sarah Schulman’s act up Oral History project, 144.
2. Richard Rorty, “Feminism, Ideology, and Deconstruction: A Pragmatist View,” *Hypatia* 8, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 96.
3. Michelle Alexander, “We Are Not the Resistance,” *New York Times*, September 23, 2018, SR1.

— Lauren O’Neill-Butler