

Healing From What We Can

An exhibition by
Guillaume Brisson-Darveau

January 17 to March 29, 2025

Foreword

*What is the legacy of the AIDS years?
How have they marked our current era? [...]
Are they like an old black and white film reel,
worn and scratched by the lurching passage of time,
but with no new meaning?*
— Catherine Mavrikakis

In her essay published in the magazine *Spirale*,¹ from which I reference some of the questions she raises, Mavrikakis looks back at the HIV/AIDS crisis and what was once, and still is, a fatal disease. It's worth remembering that the virus wasn't just a moment in recent world history; it is still prevalent today, claiming countless lives. In fact, an article in *Le Devoir* revealed an increase in cases in Montréal, from 141 in 2021 to 310 in 2022.² Despite this cause for alarm, the context of current social and economic issues have left most people relatively indifferent to HIV/AIDS, as evidenced by the lack of public discussion around the disease. To counter this lack of social and media awareness, Guillaume Brisson-Darveau set out to revisit how HIV/AIDS is reflected in our collection. In 1992, Artexpte addressed the subject in its publication *A Leap in the Dark: AIDS, Art and Contemporary Cultures*. In an interview with Ryan Conrad, Allan Klusaček describes the challenge of finding a publisher willing to deal with what was then a fairly unknown subject: "I had no clue what I was doing and an AIDS book at that time was not the most popular thing to print."³ The book goes on to discuss an art event titled *sidart*, organized by Klusaček and Ken Morrison, that featured artists' responses to the epidemic during the Fifth International AIDS Conference, which took place in Montréal in the summer of 1989.

1 Catherine Mavrikakis, "Le sida... À tous les temps," *Spirale* No. 271, winter 2020, 33. [Our translation]

2 Marie-Eve Cousineau, "Hausse de 120 % des cas de VIH à Montréal," *Le Devoir*, December 1, 2023. Accessed November 7, 2024. <<https://bit.ly/49K2YRy>>

3 Ryan Conrad, "Revisiting A Leap in the Dark After Thirty Years," interview on the Artexpte blog. Accessed November 12, 2024. <<https://bit.ly/42x1Kb9>>

Alex Noël's essay⁴, based on research he conducted at the Quebec Gay Archives, helped me pinpoint my thoughts about the virus and its effects. I noted some of the words that seemed to embody AIDS for those who were living with it: oblivion, silence, marginalization, social stigma, anonymity, erasure, rejection, shame, drama, death, mourning, solitude, invisibility... It's a rather devastating text because it highlights the lives of artists who died of the virus and who have since been forgotten. The boxes Noël looked through were like urns that held stories just waiting to be shared. It made me realize that Artex's collection functions much the same way. Each box, each dossier, contains moments from an artist's life. This is also how Brisson-Darveau conducted his research, by collecting bits of texts, words, expressions (slogans), and images by artists who had lived with the disease, among others. The exercise allowed him to revisit memories of a recent past. I witnessed this process during our meetings at Artex and at his studio, where he showed me the images that interested him, as well as the text excerpts and stories that other people with HIV/AIDS have shared over the past few decades. From this text-based material,

Brisson-Darveau meticulously applied quotations to articles of clothing, which are on view in his exhibition *Healing From What We Can*. Most of the clothes are from 1980s and 1990s and reflect the styles of that era, and each carries a sentence that is prominently featured so that it may finally be seen and heard. Words, quotes, and expressions are embroidered or sometimes heat-transferred in vinyl directly onto the clothes, essentially fusing them with the fabric. The use of bright colours, sometimes tone-on-tone, demand closer inspection in order to read what's written.

By using clothing as a carrier for multiple voices, Guillaume Brisson-Darveau invites us into the intimate lives of the people whose words he has borrowed, where we become first-hand witnesses to their devastating and touching statements. Furthermore, he reminds us that we can no longer silence the deep stigma that AIDS sufferers have lived with since the disease first appeared in 1981,

4 Alex Noël, "Les boîtes noires," *Liberté*, No. 341, winter 2024, 33-41.

and continue to experience to this day. Is there a safe space to say you're a carrier without fear of being singled out or ignored? May this project open conversations and minds to the fact that these men and women have rights and a rightful place in society.

– Manon Tourigny

Translated from the French by Jo-Anne Balcaen

Healing From What We Can

As part of my research project in Artexte's collection, I focused on art projects and any other documents that reflect experiences associated with HIV/AIDS. This research led me to examine how artists, writers, and activists contend with cultural images of the virus to create their own representations of the disease, and how this approach constitutes an act of agency.

Faced with attitudes of relative indifference towards current HIV/AIDS issues, I wanted to reactivate a collective memory; to examine the silence around it and the factors that contribute to this silence, be it grief, fear, guilt, or the fact that the disease is no longer fatal, at least in wealthy countries. My research resulted in a collection of text excerpts, fragments of which I later printed onto second-hand clothes. This created a kind of wearable archive, like a skin, a body, or a memory that one can slip into. The process as a whole is a way for me to become part of a broader lineage by wearing the marks that others have left behind.

To be a carrier also means carrying the memory and history of others.

Until now, I could never find the words to talk about my own experience of the disease, out of fear that it might work against me, even though I've often tried to use my work as a way to express my inner turmoil. Over the course of this project, I felt the need to associate words with a way of working, with gestures, and a particular relationship to materials.

What first caught my attention were very located, personal, and often committed "I" statements that together formed a kind of subjective, polyphonic narrative of HIV/AIDS. This collection of words, which I later transferred to carefully selected clothes, became a way to make connections or to link stories and bodies through time. Over the past few months I've learned to make

these words mine by living alongside them in my studio and by gradually letting my own words mesh with the language that's part of the experience of this disease and of being HIV positive, because this is also my story. As a hemophiliac who contracted HIV as a child, I also carry this memory in my body. But it's through other people's words that I finally found my own.

As my collection of clothing-archives gradually took shape, the narrative that emerged on the walls of my studio began to change my personal narrative and my relationship to it. Rediscovering these people's stories gave me images and metaphors that differed from those conveyed by the medical community or the media when I was growing up. Out of this months-long exploration of text and textiles in my studio, other readings emerged that carried the potential to transform a traumatic story into something brighter: the power to act.

— Guillaume Brisson-Darveau

Translated from the French by Jo-Anne Balcaen

A Wearable Archive

*I've often thought that there is beauty
beneath every wound.*

– Esther Valiquette, *Le singe bleu*

As I walk into Guillaume BD's studio, I see the words "high risk group" emblazoned on the back of pair of leather pants. Suddenly, there's something strange about the clothes hanging on the walls, about the scraps of fabric on the floor, and the multicoloured letters waiting to be glued. These tacky '80s and '90s clothes are just like mine, like those of so many other people. As Guillaume BD embroiders quotes from books onto these garments, he transforms them into a piece about the AIDS era.

Looking at them, I wonder: what are we wearing when we wear them?

A black leather biker jacket with hearts and stars that reads "where are you?" looks meant for someone else. The question goes out to an absent body, to a decimated generation, but remains unanswered. Diverted from its purpose, it speaks to us of catastrophe.

On a brightly coloured blazer, Guillaume has written "nous revendiquons le droit à une histoire inquiète" (we reclaim our right to a troubled history). My eye is drawn to a neon yellow crop top that says "de-stigmatised," a brown coat with the inscription "I remember sex before AIDS," and I think to myself: these clothes are slogans brandished on the walls like posters.

On a loose piece of paper I read a sentence that has yet to find its garment: “guérir de ce que l’ont peut,” (healing from what we can).

When Guillaume greets me at the door, he seems out of sorts. That day, it was as if he was trying to describe something ancient, something inside of him, something he had no words for. Standing in front of me, he speaks quietly, barely finishing his sentences. I keep interrupting him. I spill my coffee on his work. We find it funny. He laughs like a kid, as if his laugh had never grown up. His entire voice gathered in one fell swoop.

Orange letters are pinned to a shirt with flames on it, waiting to be stitched into place. I read them aloud: “j’ai grandi avec une colère immense,” (I grew up with a lot of rage). Guillaume stands next to me, laughing.

When he finally talks to me about his past anger, there’s something about the contrast between the figure and ground of his voice that moves me. His voice is soft, as if, barely out of its hiding place, it tip-toes forward, ready to turn back at any moment, not too sure what direction to take, losing speed the more it advances, stopping long before it falls. That day in his studio, that was the voice he used to evoke his anger. That was the voice that told me: “I’ve been HIV positive since I was seven.” He tells me all of this knowing that I’m recording him.

His eyes fixate on my phone as it records his voice. He tells me that he contracted HIV in the early eighties during a blood transfusion. When he was diagnosed, his CD4 cell count was so low that he wasn’t expected to reach adulthood. Then, against all odds, after being very ill, he cheated death. He hung on just long enough to qualify for antiretroviral therapy, which became available in 1996. He lived a decade, then another one. But along

the way he saw other people die, people like him, thousands of them disappearing one after another. Without a trace.

He mentions them that day, but doesn't elaborate.

And yet, he survived. Guillaume BD is here. He tells me he's made peace with his disease and is now coming around to it again. He goes to thrift stores to find clothes from the AIDS era. He sews them and embroiders onto them. It's a reconstitution.

He is reviving the grave.

That day in his studio, rain beats against the window panes. In the audio recording of our conversation, it sounds like it's shredding his voice.

Each hung garment on the wall is like a bag of donated blood.

The piece is like hemophilia. This is a transfusion site.

A hemophiliac carries the blood of others within his own. And now his writing, his cells spill out onto other people's clothes. He sticks his needles in an AIDS-era jacket and injects a sentence drawn from a book. Written in a register, the quoted person's name, the "donor" name, is then erased from every lamé vest or hooded sweatshirt that receives it. Like a blood donation, the text is anonymized.

When he tells me that he draws words from his own notebook and mixes them with other quotes, I think: there's a kind of inversion at play here. Now the hemophiliac's words blend into those of others, like other people's blood flows into his. The phrases coagulate anonymously with themselves.

In doing so, the hemophiliac becomes a donor as well. He gives a second life to the clothes he finds, to those from the "AIDS years" that wanted to be saved.

Donating is also a way of unburdening oneself.

In their agony, the ghosts left their clothes behind; tiny little stones of panic. He's the one who embroiders them. Onto each he writes an epitaph and lines them up on the wall.

In a notebook it says: "being a carrier also means carrying the memory and history of others."

This memory is what he transfuses. What he unburdens himself of.

Seeing these nightlife outfits, these skins emptied of their bodies, reminds us of the AIDS sufferers who planned their own post-death parties, it reminds us of funerals held in dance clubs in the 1990s, of the grieving gays who danced their pain away to throbbing pop music, of the grieving gays that families refused to invite to funerals, and who at the behest of the dead would flock to night clubs like temples, of gays in tears who danced under glittering disco balls and shouted out their pain in the chorus of their favourite songs as if they were at Mass, of all the grieving gays who poured vodka on their tongues like it was the Eucharist, who raised their glass in a toast to the death that would surely decimate them too, before finally crying out "silence = death." Perhaps these are their mourning clothes. Now they are transformed into thombstones.

What's left of them are the clothes that hang on the walls of the gallery. Inanimate. Bodiless. Like bedsheets

that hide ghosts underneath. The very image of emptiness. These are the clothes of the dead. The clothes that survived them. Out of the closet and out of the grave. Shrouds that come back into style.

This is a wearable archive.

— Alex Noël

Translated from the French by Jo-Anne Balcaen

Biographies

Guillaume Brisson-Darveau is an artist and researcher living in Tiohtià:ke/Mooniyang/Montréal. His most recent projects have been strongly influenced by reflection on the body, the hybrid body, and representations of the body transformed by contemporary society. The works that emerge from this research are situated at the intersection of sculpture, performance, and fashion. Through his images and forms, Brisson-Darveau attempts to describe a human condition and its complexity, and to bring to light a world filled with possibilities, desires, and fears.

Brisson-Darveau's work has been presented in Canada and internationally, including at the Biennale CONTEXTILE (Guimarães, 2024), the MACBA (Buenos Aires, 2023), the Biennale nationale de sculpture contemporaine in Trois-Rivières (2022), Engramme (2021), and the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo – Parque Forestal (Santiago, 2018). He has attended numerous artist residencies, including at the La Ira de Dios and the cheLA Centro Hipermediático Experimental Latinoamericano (Buenos Aires, 2023 and 2019), the NARS Foundation (New York, 2021), and the Atelier Mondial (Basel, 2018). He is currently a doctoral student in art studies and practices at UQAM; his research is articulated around accounts of the experience of "trouble" through a material practice.

Alex Noël (he/they) has published a variety of creative texts, mainly literary journalism and poetry, in magazines and as part of collectives. His literary journalism investigates historical gaps, cultural blind spots, and things that are long-forgotten. His essays have covered subjects such as former Fruit of the Loom factory seamstresses, women painters who were excluded from permanent exhibitions at the Musée des beaux-arts du Québec, and Montréal artists and intellectuals who have died of AIDS. Alex Noël has also taught Québec literature at the Université de Montréal since 2022. His research focuses primarily on the Québec novel and queer memory.

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