



*Happiness is... "Freedom. Friendship. Disco parties.*

## The aesthetic of AIDS.

Text Mark Jacobs.



Sometimes tupperware." [Trannyshack, San Francisco](#)

I once went to a '90s theme party. It was 2003, the last moment when one could attend such a thing with any self-satisfaction, and I hoped for a cluster of Moschino teddy bear dresses. My contribution was less sublime, particularly at that moment in style and politics: a shirt from 1990 found at a New York City flea market with the word 'Pride' spelled out in illustrated sign language, below a large inverted pink triangle. It was perfectly wrong, recalling a dialogue many were relieved to have put behind them. Of course AIDS continued to affect communities including our own, no matter how its immediacy was lessened by the retroviral cocktails that allowed people with HIV to live longer and look healthier. Trey Parker and Matt Stone articulated this AIDS fatigue in 2004's *Team America: World Police* using 22-inch puppets to satirise the earnestness of the musical *Rent* in a song called *Everyone Has AIDS*: "C'mon everybody we got quilting to do! We gotta break down these barricades! Everyone has AIDS!" I arrived at the event with a stylist friend who accompanied me in a tight, sheer, cap sleeve rainbow top and a dog tag necklace that read 'Party Boy'. Another friend wearing Kansai Yamamoto greeted us and nodded politely.

In the United States, 2006 marks 25 years since the Centers for Disease Control first mentioned the nameless virus to be known as HIV. What began as a gay disease has since claimed over 25 million people. As global warming is more appealing than local warming, AIDS is more comfortable as a macro concern rather than one to be addressed in the bedroom. Even today, people prefer to engage sexually with a partner whose status is unknown to them than with someone who is openly HIV-positive. It's as if there is something retro about openly discussing safety, as if we might be accused of being amateurs who play by rules taught by grade schools and an antiseptic Surgeon General. We are a generation that has never experienced sex without fear of death. And we are lucky, and hopefully grateful, that the urgency of the fighters who came before us is not ours. We were not in their trenches. They had to be loud, while we have been expected to be careful. It is because of their hard work that many gay people feel that they don't have to be proud, they just have to be - a mindset reflected in the style choices of the assimilated gay man since the late '90s. The inconvenient truth is that AIDS continues to kill, just as all of the simplistic sloganeering of our youth promised it would.

AIDS activism has always been image-driven. The Silence = Death logo was professionally art directed, a re-appropriation of the pink triangle that had already come to stand for gay liberation paired with painstakingly selected Gill Sans Bold Extra Condensed type. A collective of activist artists called Gran Fury was among an accomplished number who further defined the visual sensibility of the movement, achieving an incendiary crescendo with a Pope-skewering installation unleashed at the 1990 Venice Biennale. "AIDS made its debut among a very cultured group of people," wrote Jesse Green, in a 2003 story titled *When Political Art Mattered* that ran in *The New York Times Magazine*. "I sometimes wonder what would have happened if instead of emerging among urban gay men, AIDS had first burrowed its way into the sexual lives of, say, accountants."

The twin imperatives of the original movement, gay visibility and saving their own lives, predicated a hard style; ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, even defines itself as a group united in anger. Protestors incorporated punk and military into wardrobes of fitted denim shorts, aggressive footwear and slogan T-shirts. Gregg Araki, the filmmaker responsible for *Nowhere*, *The Doom Generation* and the more restrained *Mysterious Skin*, created a noteworthy vision of this angst in *The Living End*, a gay HIV-positive road movie from 1992. Its nihilistic pop heroes were good looking, twenty-something, listened to Dead Can Dance, drove a car with a "Choose Death" bumper sticker and had AIDS. Luke, a muscular, tanned hustler disposed to bashing gay bashers,

wears a uniform of black sunglasses, a black leather jacket, jeans torn at the knees and a sleeveless Jesus and Mary Chain T-shirt, when he wears a shirt at all. He delivers the film's thesis over a bowl of Barbie cereal in front of a Smiths popsicle boy tour poster. "Fuck work, fuck the system, fuck everything," he says. When his sensitive counterpart Jon tries to walk out on their doomed trip, Luke forces sex on him while holding a gun in his mouth, a vivid assessment of the state of gay affairs before the Federal Drug Administration approved the first protease inhibitor in 1995. Araki dedicates the movie to "the hundreds of thousands who've died and the hundreds of thousands more who will die because of a big White House full of Republican fuckheads." Class dismissed.

As a reference, Araki's alternative vision is dark and contrary, stylishly dovetailing with the current taste for the last decade. A safe sex message can also be camp, as the mainstream preferred it, like early Lisa Left Eye Lopes, who liked to wear colorful condoms over one eye. Or it can be uncomfortably recent, like a Katharine Hamnett sheer midriff-baring halter-top from Spring/Summer 2004 that spells out 'Use a Condom' in diamante studs. Or you might just feel like dancing to the socially aware lyrics of the 1991 club track *People Are Still Having Sex* by LaTour. (Its soft-core acid house music party video can be seen at [latourmusic.com](http://latourmusic.com).) Dover Street Market is already ahead of the curve, having recently collaborated with *Butt* magazine on a T-shirt printed with a truly massive inverted pink triangle. It might be the official start of

something impassioned or cleverly depoliticised, or both. The point is that we talk about AIDS with our lovers and friends and refuse to be embarrassed by the outspokenness of the men and women who afforded many of us the better lives we now lead. It's called pride and not only gay people have it.

As the epidemic diversifies so do the aesthetics employed to communicate an activist message. Consider the gentrified new face of AIDS, a straight white professional woman like someone from a disconcerting episode of *Sex and the City*. The media is inclined to depict her in pastoral settings with well-maintained hair pulled cleanly away from her face, like Jennifer Jako, who has lived with AIDS for nine years and was seven months pregnant when she posed for the cover of *Newsweek*. Inside she appears nude in an open field bathed in sunlight, a world away from the AIDS victim spotted with lesions wearing a paper gown on a hospital bed. Regan Hofmann, the new editor-in-chief of *Poz*, a magazine for people with HIV and AIDS, a photogenic blonde, was deemed appropriate enough to be profiled in *Vogue*. Her story even received a cover line, "An HIV Positive Woman Speaks Out," next to a sexier than ever Uma Thurman in a silver Maison Martin Margiela mesh top and a white Eres bikini, and below a tease for a 30-day detox workout. Hofmann, who rides Thoroughbreds, has been photographed by two publications including *Vogue* - jacket by Dolce & Gabbana, sweater from Agnona - leading a horse on the serene grounds of a farm.

Photography Jesse Chehak. Co-ordination Mark Jacobs.



Happiness is... "A state of mind." *The Mr Black Family, New York*

Back row, left to right; Sam, John McNulty, Mark, Alex Birts, Deen Dioria, Rocco. Seated, left to right; Drew Elliott, Mack Dugan, Russell S. Smith, Jr. Jessica, Mr. Black, Max Rishoj, Eddie Dillard. On floor, left to right; Daniel K, Mac, Aimee Phillips, Luke Nero.

Maybe Hoffmann is just repositioning the mammal after a controversial 1999 "Boys Who Bareback" Poz cover that featured an HIV-positive porn star draped naked over the back of a horse. Whatever the case, she can reach the women who need to hear her story. "I am no longer afraid to say 'I have HIV'. I believe our stories can change the world," she announced from the April cover, hair pulled cleanly away from her face. Meanwhile in Provincetown, a moneyed but historically bohemian, predominantly gay beach enclave six hours northeast of New York City, a performer named Ryan Landry hosts *Showgirls*, a weekly talent competition as off-color as it is absurdly brilliant - like Landry himself who invents costumes throughout the night that bring to mind the upside-down successes of Patti Wilson. Typical of the evening are the acts by a repeat performer called Steamy Brown who once rapped about peanut butter while naked and covered in peanut butter to *Pull Up To The Bumper*, which was adapted for Grace Jones from a song called *Peanut Butter*. Another time he rapped about cappuccino to *Cappuccino* by MC Lyte, while naked and covered up to his neck in chocolate frosting with marshmallow fluff piled on his head as foam. But at the first *Showgirls* of this year's summer season, Steamy stormed the stage merely shirtless. He had written HIV+ on his bare chest and SAFE on his back, and rapped about AIDS to *Justify My Love* and *I've Got You Under My Skin* as recorded by Neneh Cherry for the 1990 *Red Hot + Blue* AIDS benefit album. Then he exploded into an aggressive rendition

of the gospel hymn *Do Not Pass Me By* by MC Hammer. Steamy, 29, tested positive in November and had decided to publicly out his status on stage that night. He was followed by Kay Hole, who wore pearls and a crocheted pullover and de-wigged while lip-synching *Don't Rain On My Parade*, an incidental choice that was not meant as a comment on his lead-in performance. Landry, wearing an old maillot with a pair of rubber breasts on his head, later dictated that Steamy would have to arm wrestle a drag queen named Della Catessan who delivered a manic *I'm Every Woman* for the £250 in prize money. "The real guilt of it now is that I could have prevented it," he admits. "There's a certain amount of shame that goes with it in this day and age because this isn't the '80s and there's no excuse for not protecting yourself." He says that he was very strict about his sexual behavior until about three years ago when he began renegotiating the boundaries dictated to him as an adolescent. His story is that of like many others who continue to assume that every partner is a risk, but have reclaimed formerly unacceptable sexual behavior as their risk to take as discerning adults. "All my life I've been kind of waiting for it," he says, expressing the chronic dread typical of his generation. "And for some reason I was thinking that if I did get it, how would I deal with it? The only thing I could think of was to do something artistic. To make sure that people see me, know that I'm positive, see that I'm young and still healthy and that I look a certain way." Is that retro or is it now?

Photography Dean Sameshima.



Happiness is... "Confidence." *Aids Foundation, Tokyo*

Back left to right; DJ Hideo, Pa-ko, WataRu, Butio, DJ YUME, Takejiro. Front, left to right; Yajiko&Kitako, Akira the Hustler, Madame Bonjour JohnJ, Masato.