

Assessment of Significance

'I wanted to do something which would still be pro-sex, especially gay sex...when you are doing a safe sex promotion there isn't room for ambiguity. Your message has to be crystal clear' - David McDiarmid on his poster series commissioned by the AIDS Action Council of New South Wales, 1992.

This statement of significance has been prepared to accompany an application by the AIDS Action Council of the ACT Inc. for a Community Heritage Grant (in the funding program administered by the National Library of Australia). The grant is sought to support the development of a preservation and conservation management project in respect of the AIDS Action Council's large collection of educational materials (principally posters, T-shirts and related ephemera) developed over more than twenty years to promote community awareness of HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted infections, safe sex education, gender identity issues, sexuality, gay men's health, discrimination and related issues.

Background:

The AIDS Action Council was established formally in March 1985. It emerged out of the ACT AIDS Action Committee which met first in 1983. That Committee was formed when a group of gay men living in the ACT met to respond to the then looming AIDS crisis.

Within a year of its establishment, the AIDS Action Council recognised the need to work closely with communities affected by AIDS/HIV. Specific projects were established for gay men, injecting drug users, sex workers and people with haemophilia. Care teams were established and information about treatments and counselling were provided to people with HIV and AIDS and to those closely associated with them – partners, friends and to family members. From the beginning, general community awareness, information and advocacy became a vital part of the Council's work.

These programs were both particular to the ACT and part of a larger and highly effective Australian response to HIV/AIDS. It has been remarked that from the outset in the early 1980s, Australian educators of gay and bisexual men developed 'significant expertise' in devising and delivering educational programs on HIV/AIDS. Indeed, since their establishment in 1985 and funding by government, AIDS agencies managed and run by the gay community have delivered almost all the educational programs delivered to gay and bisexual men in Australia. In the foundation years, some of these programs were developed on the shoulders of radical protest by direct action groups such as ACT UP seeking especially to speed the testing of new drugs and treatments. While educational programs generally adopted traditional health promotion techniques such as the distribution of pamphlets and the development of poster campaigns, they did so in radical and arresting ways. Education messages were delivered in image, style, language and

meaning which offered immediate recognition to men identified with the gay community or in related 'at risk' communities.¹

The Collection:

In the course of its community and advocacy work over a period of almost twenty years, the AIDS Action Council of the ACT Inc. has accumulated a large and important collection of educational materials comprising principally posters and T-shirts but including also badges, car stickers, refrigerator magnets, tea towels, photographs and a substantial body of pamphlet literature. Much of this material has been generated by the local organisation itself but many of the posters stand as fine archival examples of individual and well-known campaigns developed nationally or in the various states and territories of Australia. In addition, the collection includes representative posters from other countries such as New Zealand, the United States, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden. The collection is estimated to stand at approximately 1,200 posters. Some 300 T-shirts are present also.

The importance of the collection is fully understood and appreciated by the Council which has taken preliminary steps to safeguard it and to arrange it methodically. Considerable further work remains to be done to consolidate the collection into appropriate storage and to safeguard it against loss or damage.

Historical significance:

The collection represents the major phases in the shaping of community education responses to HIV/AIDS from the first primitive efforts by the protest group ACT UP to the glossy and sophisticated campaigns of the late 1980s and 1990s. At the beginning it was often the case that protest messages were delivered to the wider community in messages screen-printed onto T-shirts which therefore carried direct statements of community anger, protest and solidarity. T-shirts surviving from the early years of protest now have considerable interest as the only surviving carriers of the generally spontaneous messages which were later refined into more formally planned campaigns of education and awareness raising.

The AIDS Action Council's collection of posters and related materials is historically important in several ways. Principally it stands as an archival record of the Council's own approach to the development and refinement of education programs in the ACT. These programs often broke new ground, leading the way for campaigns later taken up nationally or in other Australian states and territories. Beyond the ACT, the collection highlights major phases in Australian approaches to awareness-raising and education in the field of HIV/AIDS and related fields. These include the controversial 'Grim Reaper' campaign, the highly successful 'Condoman' series of 1987 produced by the Commonwealth Department of Health, Housing and Community Services in association with Aboriginal Health Workers of Australia (Qld.) and the series of posters produced by

¹ Eric Timewell, Victor Minichiello and David Plummer (eds.), *AIDS in Australia*, New York: Prentice Hall, 1992, pp.98-9.

the Sydney artist David McDiarmid in 1992 for the AIDS Council of New South Wales. Where the 'Grim Reaper' promoted a campaign of fear and anxiety, 'Condoman' with its distinctive and accessible cartoon figure dressed in Aboriginal colours was notable for its directness and lightness of touch. McDiarmid's 'extravagant pro-gay and pro-sex images' are now recognised as Australian classics and collector's items. The five posters in this series placed their focus on community, drugs, discrimination, relationships and safer sex. They suggested that safer sex messages should have a broader community appeal beyond gays who were HIV-negative since the virus posed a threat to 'everyman'.

Aesthetic significance:

Confronting or dramatic as many of the posters are, the collection held by the AIDS Action Council of the ACT Inc. offers some outstanding examples of the art of advertising – a demonstration of the skills associated with the selection of images and the development of slogans which in combination take effective messages to target audiences. The collection includes examples of the posters based on the series of paintings commissioned by the National AIDS Campaign from the Aboriginal artist Bronwyn Bancroft in 1992. Copies of several of the posters held in this AIDS Action Council's collection were included in the highly successful National Gallery of Australia exhibition (1994) *Don't Leave Me This Way: Art in the Age of AIDS*. More recently (2002), Raymond Donovan and Leong Chan curated *One Risk, Diverse Responses: Australian HIV/AIDS Campaigns 1985-1999* at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney. Their catalogue reproduces 18 'landmark' posters which are representative of the various Australian campaigns. These include the 'Condoman' and McDiarmid images referred to above and the controversial but in its day highly effective 'When you say yes...' poster produced in 1990 by the Victorian AIDS Council Men's Health Centre.

Scientific, research or technical significance:

As noted, the collection held by the AIDS Action Council of the ACT Inc. is a near to comprehensive record of local and national responses to HIV/AIDS in Australia from its inception to the present. While this collection is not unique (posters are held in other ACT and archival collections elsewhere in Australia), it is a notable resource which highlights an evolving community and educational response to HIV/AIDS during the entire period in which it has been present in Australia. Such material constitutes an important record of the innovative work of Council itself. In addition, it provides researchers and social historians with a body of materials which offers systematic documentation of the various efforts made in Australia to deal with a significant public health problem overshadowed by the additional difficulties of fear, prejudice and discrimination. While in the first instance, the target of educational campaigns was HIV/AIDS, it is notable that these campaigns did much to challenge wider community prejudices against homosexuality and issues of gender identity and discrimination while also boosting the self-esteem of gay and bi-sexual men both in the mainstream community and amongst ethnic and cultural minorities. Properly organized and preserved for future use, the collection held by the AIDS Action Council of the ACT Inc. will constitute a significant research resource for historians.

Social or spiritual significance:

The HIV/AIDS epidemic in Australia has largely been confined to gay and bisexual men. The first Australian case was diagnosed in Sydney in November 1982 with a second appearing in Melbourne shortly afterwards. By the mid-1980s, over 3000 HIV infections were occurring each year. By 2001 there were less than 700 infections. Education and community awareness campaigns leading directly to the modification of sexual practices in the primary target community had made a significant contribution to Australia's outstanding record in dealing with HIV/AIDS. Even so, gay communities in Australia sustained terrible and shocking losses of life, especially in the early years. Many of those deaths came prematurely. The 1994-95 exhibition *Don't Leave Me This Way: Art in the Age of AIDS* mounted at the National Gallery of Australia offered a glimpse of the extraordinarily gifted and passionate artistic statements which had been produced in Australia and overseas, by artists 'attempting at once to work through their reactions to the direct and searing impact of AIDS on their own diverse lives'. Some part of the purpose of many of those artists was also to create visual images that would 'speak to, empower and educate their audiences in the widest sense'.²

By definition, many of the educational posters produced in Canberra and elsewhere in Australia and overseas did exactly the same thing: they spoke directly to their target communities in their vernacular language; they empowered those communities; and they educated them. Many (the majority?) of those posters were designed and created by gay men and many represented known members of Australian gay communities. Many of those men made this contribution while they themselves had become infected with the virus or were suffering already the onset of AIDS. It is a sad truth that many of the men represented in these posters or who were active in the campaigns which produced them or who initiated the original protests are no longer living. In this sense, the posters and associated protest materials have acquired a social and spiritual significance which is potent and palpable when viewed collectively and with the perspective of time.

Additional Reading:

Eric Timewell, Victor Minichiello and David Plummer (eds.), *AIDS in Australia*, New York: Prentice Hall, 1992.

Ted Gott (comp.), *Don't Leave Me This Way: Art in the Age of AIDS*, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 1994.

Hugh Rigby & Susan Leibtag (eds.), *HardWear: The Art of Prevention*, Edmonton: Quon Editions, 1994.

² Ted Gott (comp.) *Don't Leave Me This Way: Art in the Age of AIDS*, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 1994, p.viii.

William Leonard and Anne Mitchell, *The Use of Sexually Explicit Materials in HIV/AIDS Initiatives Targeted at Gay Men: A Guide for Educators*, Canberra: Australian National Council on AIDS, Hepatitis C and Related Diseases, 2000.

AIDS Action Council of the ACT Inc., *Annual Reports*, 2000-2001 and 2001-2002.

Raymond Donovan and Leong K. Chan, *HIV/AIDS Imaginaries*, Sydney: UTS Gallery, University of Technology, 2001.

Raymond Donovan and Leong K. Chan, *One Risk, Diverse Responses: Australian HIV/AIDS Campaigns 1985-1999*, Sydney: Powerhouse Museum, 2002.

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