



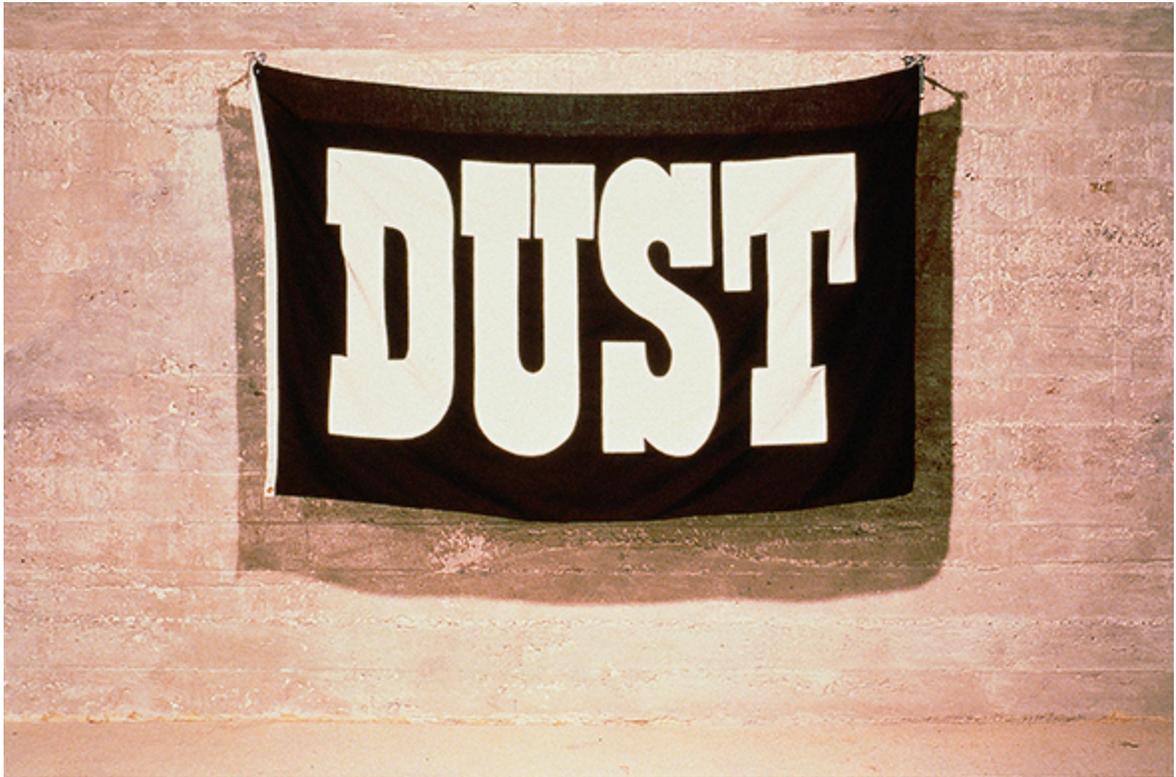
Arnold Fern, *Desperate Heaven*, 1988

“Against Nature. A Group Show of Work by Homosexual Men” installation view at LACE—Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles, 1989. Courtesy: ONE Archives, Los Angeles

## AGAINST MESSAGE

by Richard Hawkins and Andrew Durbin

Earlier this March, I made a long trip to California, beginning in San Francisco, where I taught for a day at the novelist and poet Dodie Bellamy’s class at San Francisco State University, and ending in Los Angeles, where I stayed for several days with the artist and writer Richard Hawkins at his home in Silver Lake. Hawkins is a friend of mine, and we share an interest in some of the same things, which are usually gay, messy, research based, feisty, hot, and made in California. Richard’s house sits at the top of a hill near the Laurel and Hardy staircase and is full of this kind of art, a lot of it his own, a lot of it the work of Tony Greene, the late Los Angeles-based painter who died of AIDS in 1990 and whose work Richard has recuperated through a series of curatorial projects, including a Tumblr called *The Grain of His Skin* and a retrospective (curated by Monica Majoli and Judie Bamber) at the Hammer Museum in L.A., which lived on, in part, at the 2014 Whitney Biennial. Richard, whose current body of painted ceramics is based on drawings Antonin Artaud made at his asylum (they have already showed at Jenny’s and Richard Telles in L.A. and will also appear at Greene Naftali in New York in the fall), likes to work en plein air, on his canopied deck that overlooks a hilly drop-off and L.A.’s uninspired skyline, the whole wash of the city’s neighborhoods spread out below him. We spent our mornings sitting under a bougainvillea tree, surrounded by his unfinished work, smoking, drinking coffee, and looking out toward the surrounding hills under the haze of a powder-blue sky. For whatever reason, we talked a lot about the artist Nayland Blake, who’s an old friend of Richard’s. We also talked about the 1989 exhibition at LACE that Richard co-curated with the novelist Dennis Cooper called “Against Nature.” That exhibition sparked a controversy about what one could do and say about AIDS in art that reverberated from coast to coast. The critic Douglas Crimp “got pretty damn angry”<sup>1</sup> (his words) about the show, which John Greyson wrote “insisted on the relevance of a particular fag sensibility in combating the AIDS crisis.”<sup>2</sup> This sensibility, not so clearly defined but clear enough for Crimp to reject it outright, was based on ambivalence, ambiguity, desire, confusion, the mess of feeling, the glut of the personal that did not fit with the “gay-politico/ACT-UPish line”<sup>3</sup> cast by Crimp. Dennis Cooper responded by calling Crimp a Stalinist. I’d been thinking about Nayland Blake a lot because of my trip to San Francisco, where Blake got his start as an artist, and because I spent one evening at the Stud in the Mission, a well-known gay bar that’s hung on through the rise of the tech industry. Blake made a piece about the bar that Richard and I discuss in the following conversation, which is just a short moment—conducted on the Ides of March—from the hours-long discussion we had over the course of many days. (Andrew Durbin)



Nayland Blake, *DUST*, 1988

© Nayland Blake. Courtesy: Matthew Marks Gallery, New York / Los Angeles

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Richard Hawkins: I don't know if Nayland Blake would appreciate us characterizing him as no longer making work. That's a bit unfair. It might just be my idea that he got fed up with the complications of the art world and—even for me, European shows can be not much fun. I never understood that Ed Ruscha piece *I Don't Want No Retrospective* (1982) until I had one. It takes a year out of your life, and during that time you're not making any new work. You become an archivist of yourself because you know your work best. I'd much rather be in the studio, and I think most artists are like that.

Andrew Durbin: I think so, too. I was thinking about Nayland's piece that we were talking about yesterday, the *STUD* gay bar flag from San Francisco that he rearranged into *DUST* as a trajectory for art making. It's been sitting with me all day now that I'm back from San Francisco and thinking about the evolution of that city, that gay city, from stud to dust.

RH: It was ominous. hilariously ominous. And Nayland was really good at that. Still is, of course. Any artist is going to have a problem with us talking about their early work and not what they did last week, but I must mention *Restraint Chair* (1989), his Breuer chair with ankle cuffs and handcuffs and a mirror at the bottom. It's a self-articulation torture chair for a queer that's equally into midcentury design.

AD: This is a Nayland piece?

RH: Yes. This stuff was fucking brilliant—and apt.

AD: Can we talk about what you and Dennis Cooper were doing in 1989 with “Against Nature” at LACE?

RH: It was so difficult for me to describe any position during that moment. Dennis always had the ability to write something fictionally analogous, something parallel to the show, but I thought it fell on me—because I was a young artist, a young CalArts-ian—to confront the issues. It took me recouping all of Tony Greene’s work to realize what my position was. Being friends with primarily fiction writers, there weren’t that many peers except Catherine Opie, whom I graduated with and whom I kept in contact with, so as far as community it was more like Cathy and the beginnings of—what would you call it—Modern Primitives or Club Fuck partiers. That was the community at the time. But it was finally getting through Tony’s stuff that I realized that a lot of us out here on the West Coast—even though someone like Gary Indiana would be on the East Coast, reading Gary’s book and seeing AIDS integrated into the semiautobiographical fictional narrative—were doing things you couldn’t do for someone like Douglas Crimp, who was writing for October. The pressure wasn’t on the art world to confront anything, to bear the brunt...

AD: To visualize this kind of mourning.

RH: Not mourning. The opposite. But Nayland, that was brave. It wasn’t anti-Crimp, but you’d be relatively sure that this kind of thing wouldn’t get any attention from a New York crowd.

AD: I always think that ambivalence and ambiguity, which is so present in Gary and Dennis’s work, is totally absent in Crimp. This came up for me recently when a student at San Francisco State asked me, “What is your message?” I told him that I don’t have a message that I could report to him. He didn’t believe it.

RH: Or, “let’s think of a new message” is the message.

AD: Exactly! And sometimes, on the East Coast, there is a drive to say something definitively. I don’t know if that makes sense.

RH: Maybe. I don’t know enough about the East Coast. I do know some more about the West Coast. It’s a different world now. New York was once the center and if you were in Atlanta or Des Moines or Dallas or Los Angeles or San Francisco, you would look to New York publications as the last word. A New York gallery show was real legitimization.

AD: That has changed so dramatically.

RH: It’s decentered. It’s much more European now. There are opportunities for artists that were unimaginable when “Against Nature” took place in 1989. It wasn’t that we were small-minded, but it was a small world. That changed partly when Mike Kelley jumped the

pond and people like Lari Pittman put L.A. on the map. Pittman is another one. I think the work was about—and Lari would hate it put this way—effeteness and fancifulness and old queenliness with some shooting cocks in the middle of it with a Mastercard or a Visa logo in the corner. There were these allusions to hustler worlds. But Lari wasn't expected to walk down from the Federal Building in an ACT UP march. There were allowances made here. Some of it's geographic. Geographically, in pre-cellphone New York, you could turn a corner and see a die-in and it really seemed like the revolution. Here's everyone in Silence = Death T-shirts, black leather jackets, and it feels like empowerment. In L.A. you never get that kind of "this is the revolution" talk.



Ross Bleckner, *Falling Birds*, 1994

© Ross Bleckner. Courtesy: Mary Boone Gallery, New York

AD: Thinking about this with a slightly earlier, pre-AIDS issue here, with a group like Asco, which tried to approach the public spectacle of mass death, state violence, the Chicano experience in East L.A. They staged photographs of gang shooting victims and distributed those images as a media event that could then be sent to local news outlets, but then finally one of those images ended up on the cover of *Artforum* .

RH: That's great, but I wouldn't consider that art. The Gran Fury window in the New

Museum was the worst piece of plastic crap.

AD: Totally.

RH: A well-intentioned piece of plastic crap, but Crimp made it into a masterpiece.

AD: I wouldn't say that Asco is necessarily making an argument that this is art in the same sense that Crimp is saying Gran Fury is. I'm saying that there is a difference of space between these two cities and how activists approach protest and its representation spatially. Asco were artists, but their work seemed to operate in another world apart from East Coast art in the 1970s. And if you look at a lot of the activists in New York, they didn't think of themselves as artists; didn't want to make their protest into art. People in ACT UP, like Peter Staley, wanted their protest to have political consequences.

RH: It was the writing that incorporated them.

AD: It's funny, then, this impulse on the part of someone like Crimp to fold the protest into the field of art, which isn't to say that art can't protest or protests can't be art, but it's like he needed to legitimize the activism within art for it to matter.

RH: It could have been opportunistic. He has a voice box, a platform, so why not be adamant about your position knowing that you're not going to get this on the network news. There were lots of misunderstandings over time, but it made me fear what perceived itself as radicality and fear what perceived itself as leftist. We now know a few decades into identity politics that we're still under a dominant patriarchy. This whole idea about naming is just the phallus. It's the name of the Father. This insistence that we not be called by a certain name is a Freudian problem rather than a cultural problem. The AIDS crisis was the first time that I saw the left being incredibly conservative and prohibitive. It's never saying no, it's strongly suggesting that one might want to look for another option. Such as, there was never a big thing against painting at CalArts, but you got a lot more thumbs-up if you did something like painted your dead corpse on the sidewalk in front of the Federal Building and took a photograph. I wasn't interested in making that kind of work.

AD: Someone like Larry Johnson circles that conversation in an interesting way.



Lari Pittman, *Untitled #15 (A Decorated Chronology of Insistence and Resignation)*, 1993  
© Lari Pittman. Courtesy: Regen Projects, Los Angeles

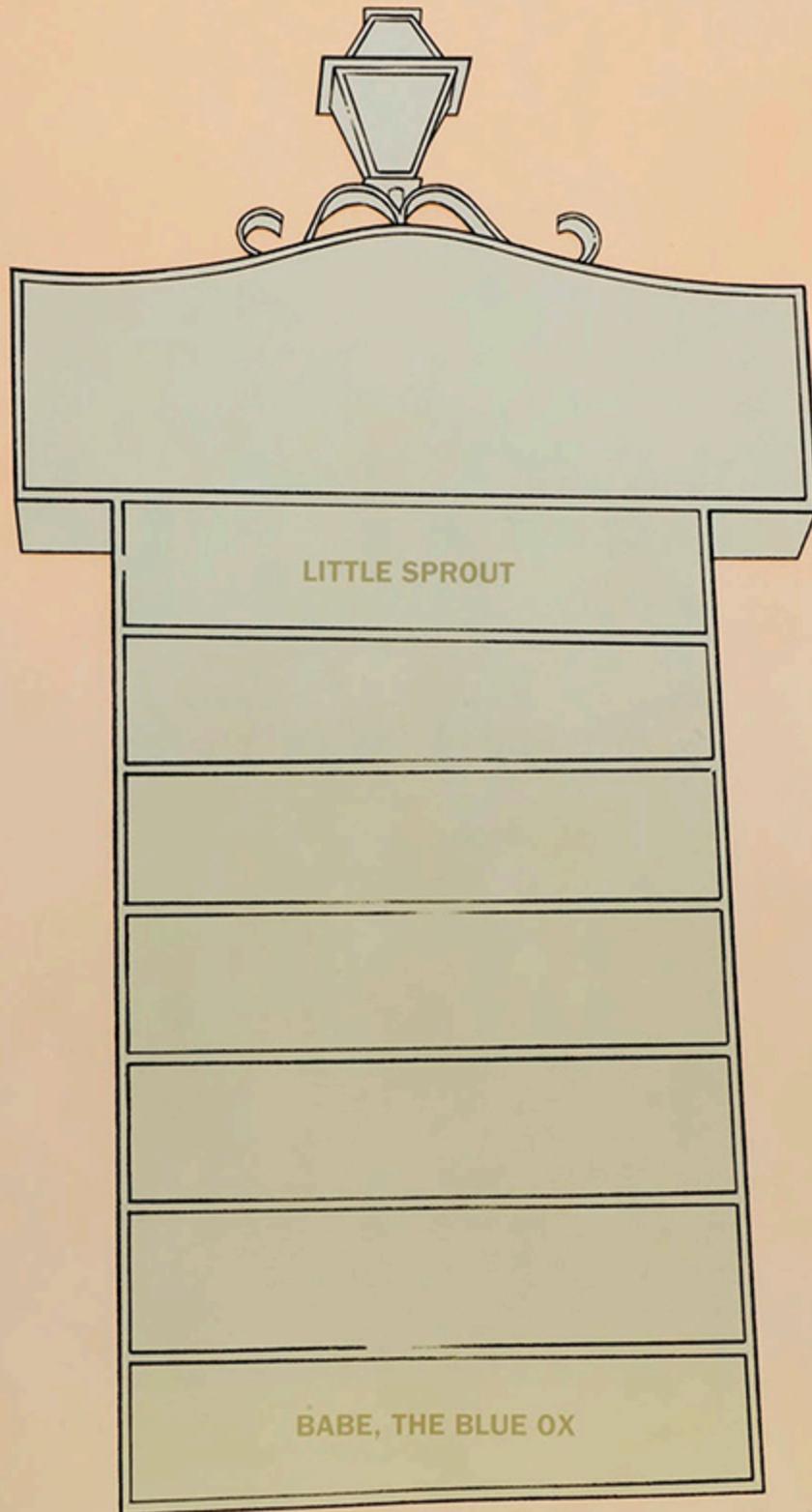
RH: I think he'd already had a career before the AIDS epidemic. You could compare him to—and both of them would hate it—Ross Bleckner. As a part of the practice, you could begin to put in the middle of a painting of a chandelier the number of AIDS deaths. You will not see that in a show with Felix Gonzalez-Torres and a bunch of other shit that Julie Ault put in there. You wouldn't see the Ross Bleckner, the work that was really important to us and that wanted to retain our agency. Which was digging into materials and making work.

AD: But this is the problem I have with the narrative of art that's emerged "after AIDS". There do seem to be people who are invested in controlling or clarifying that narrative and editing what appears in it and what doesn't. Douglas Crimp, in his reaction to "Against Nature" for example, or Julie Ault's own version of that history that she promotes around the world, which extends to Danh Vo, of course—I don't want to say it's a sanitization...

RH: I don't know if it's as paranoid as that. They talk about what they know best and I talk about what I know best, but their voices have been prominent and their voices are the ones that are always looked to, to put a fine point on it.

AD: That's what I mean. I don't mean to suggest an actual conspiracy.

RH: What is a conspiracy, though, and I guarantee you Felix Gonzalez-Torres is spinning in his grave about this, is that any time a well-meaning museum wants to nod to gayness or AIDS they string a line of lights up and say they've done a great job. That way you don't have a dick, or any sign of butt-fucking, involved, because it's the easy way out. It's the established narrative. Whether Danh Vo is interested in that or not, I don't know.



LITTLE SPROUT

BABE, THE BLUE OX

Larry Johnson, *Untitled (Extended Family)*, 1998  
© Larry Johnson. Courtesy: 303 Gallery, New York

AD: No, and whether he means to or not, I think he ends up a part of that institutional approach to this period, which in many ways tries to clean up the mess. They'll throw a Peter Hujar photograph of a naked guy in there, and that's it. That's the extent. But there were a lot of different kinds of art being made that weren't included, maybe because it's ugly or not conceptual or sentimental or what, I don't know, and I'm interested in how that narrative formed and how it can be challenged.

RH: It's set.

AD: And younger artists don't respond to AIDS, though they romanticize the artists who were working at that point—at least the artists who fit that narrative.

RH: They don't know it. There's no real way to look it up. Arnold Fern is an example of an artist I've tried to look up. You've probably never heard of him. He was Dennis Cooper's roommate. When Dennis moved to New York from Amsterdam, that's when he was living with him, and he was showing at Feature. To some extent, Hudson was an important voice who would prefer complex—even, say, “regressive”—art, as Douglas Crimp might call it, to illness and sexuality. Literally, Hudson came to town and did a performance the night “Against Nature” opened. But all this narrativizing allowed us to passively let a canon in. Who are the artists we talk about who are associated with the AIDS epidemic? It's the left that's allowed the canon in—when you'd think we'd be the ones who'd want to critique this.



Asco, *Decoy Gang War Victim*, 1974

“Asco and Friends: Exiled Portraits” installation view at Triangle France, Marseille, 2014.  
Courtesy: Harry Gamboa, Jr.. Photo: Aurélien Mole

AD: We spent decades breaking it down and moving toward this idea that there could be multiple canons, but it still circles back—especially in European institutions—to the “primary” canon: white straight men, stud to dust. And that canon resists complexity. And expression of difference—so the one person of color or woman who has a retrospective after nine straight white men—becomes the exception that proves the rule. This all came up for me last year with the Tom of Finland show at Artists Space, which everyone seemed to love.

RH: I was expecting a bit of a negative backlash.

AD: There wasn’t much of one, that I saw.

RH: I’ve seen a little bit, especially from people your age and younger. They said I don’t get it, Tom of Finland’s not hot to me. For me, doing a show at MOCA was about acknowledging this very specific L.A. history, and someone who was a watershed moment for the city and for gay art. For me, he’s somebody whose practice is an inspiration. He’d take public images and gayify them. And worked every day without anybody paying attention.

AD: I have a lot of issues with Tom of Finland, but for me what you’re describing is a

healthy relationship with an artist's work. His work forces you to sit with some uncomfortable complexities. There's this impulse now to make everything, even things that happened in the distant past, fit as neatly and cleanly into your contemporary politics as possible. This idea that if it doesn't fit with your politics, it shouldn't be there.

#### Notes

[1] Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

[2] Gabriele Griffin, *Representations of HIV and AIDS: Visibility Blue/s* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000).

[3] Douglas Crimp, 2002.



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