

## Ruminations on the AIDS crisis

Both anthologies combine highly theoretical articles with more direct and personal reflections by PWAs and AIDS activists

B Y E D S C H I F F E R

**AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism.**  
Edited by Douglas Crimp. MIT Press, 1988.  
\$10.95.

**Taking Liberties: AIDS and Cultural Politics.**  
Edited by Simon Watney. Serpent's Tail, 1989.  
\$13.95.

As the last international AIDS conference made clear, the epidemic is more than a medical event. Sadly, it has become the occasion for much speculation about late 20th century society. Two recent and somewhat overlapping anthologies suggest that the greatest health crisis in recent history exposes much in our culture that was already far from healthy.

## Books

In his introduction to *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, editor Douglas Crimp confronts the long prevalent assumption that the scientific explanation and management of AIDS can be taken for granted and that therefore "cultural producers can respond to the epidemic in only two ways: by raising money for scientific research and service organizations or by creating works that express the human suffering and loss."

The volume that follows (which began as an issue of the art journal *October*) is not a collection of artists' personal musings, but a tough-minded series of reflections on the AIDS crisis. Jan Zita Grover's "AIDS: Keywords" offers a glossary of terms (such as "victim") that prove to be symptomatic of rampant misunderstanding. Paula A. Treichler, an historian of medicine, shows in her essay on "biomedical discourse" that there has been an "epidemic of signification" in the scientific literature on AIDS that researchers have sought to contain by clinging to a single-virus hypothesis that might not be warranted. And Sander L. Gilman approaches medical history from a different angle to show how much the iconography of AIDS recalls 19th century depictions of syphilis.

The collection's most trenchant essays, however, go well beyond the "facts" of the epidemic. Leo Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave?" is a far-ranging meditation on sexual politics that relates modern discomfort with male homosexuality to the speculations of feminists like Catherine MacKinnon and

Andrea Dworkin. Simon Watney's "The Spectacle of AIDS" covers similar ground as it situates the presentation of the male homosexual body ravaged by AIDS in a larger campaign to promote "family values."

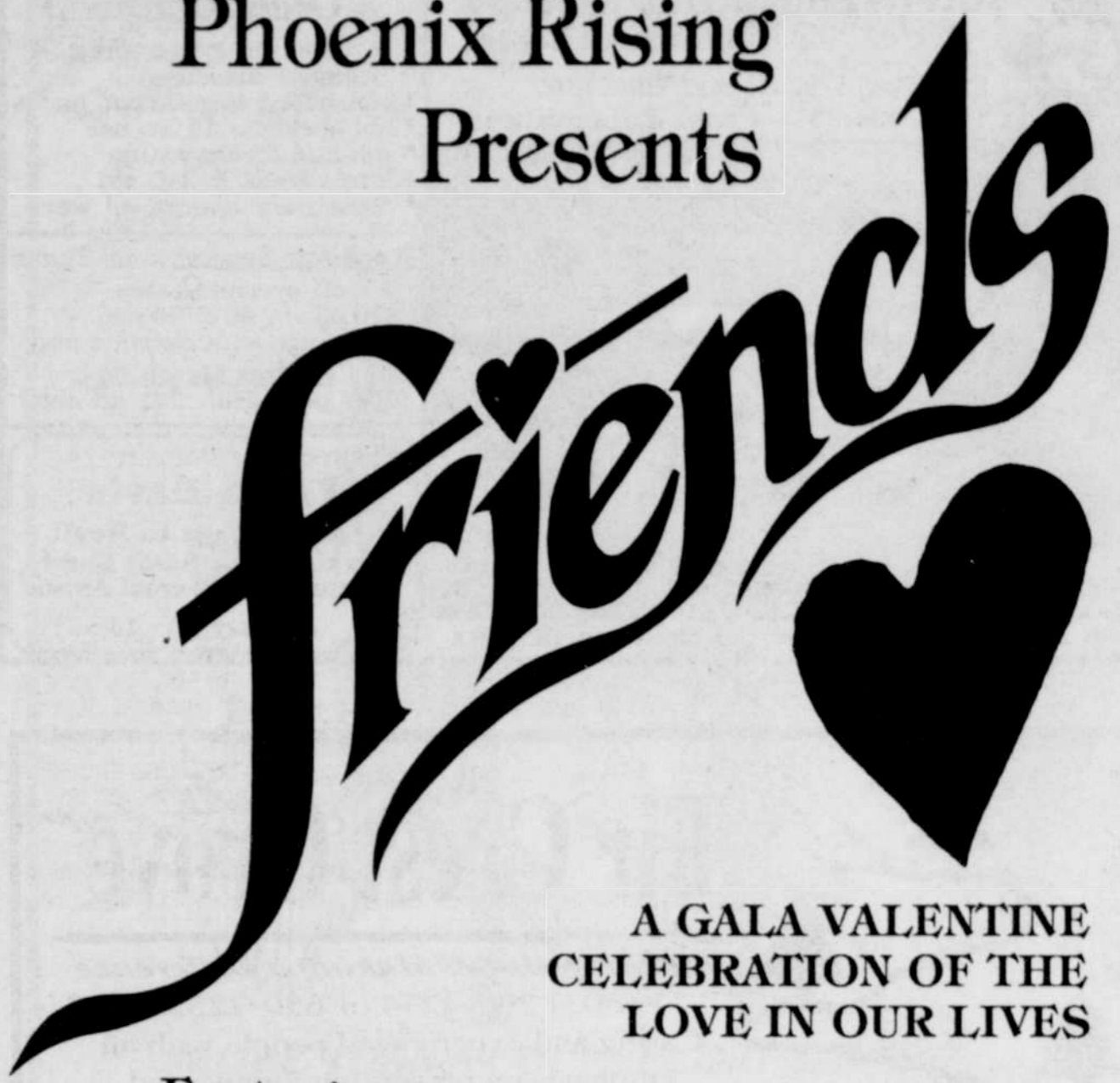
Watney, a film critic who is also an administrator for Britain's oldest AIDS service organization, has emerged as a preeminent voice in the cultural analysis of the epidemic. His groundbreaking book, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the Media* (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), was among the first to show how the societal response to AIDS was part of a larger conservative assault on freedom, sexual and otherwise. With compelling, eloquent rage, Watney continues this line of analysis in the introductory essay to *Taking Liberties: AIDS and Cultural Politics*.

Edited by Watney and Erica Carter, this collection grew out of a conference at England's Institute of Contemporary Arts, and it complements the *October* volume offering a primarily British perspective. Carter explains how British artists, tired of an apolitical postmodernism, have rallied around the issue of AIDS, and Keith Alcorn offers a comprehensive critique of the BBC's self-congratulatory "AIDS Television Week."

Some might suggest that the cultural critics themselves are a tad too self-congratulatory, but it is to the editors' credit that many of the essays in *Taking Liberties* seem to be in dialogue with one another. Cindy Patton's scathing indictment of a newly constituted "AIDS Industry" in which women and gay men assume their traditional roles as caregivers while straight men cast themselves as "experts" is answered by Jan Zita Grover's warnings against a dangerous "nostalgia" for the early days of the crisis.

An equally impressive accomplishment of both the English and American anthologies is that both combine highly theoretical articles with more direct and personal reflections by PWAs and AIDS activists. Occasionally the two perspectives merge, as in Meurig Horton's "Bugs, Drugs and Placebos" (in *Taking Liberties*), which details the contradictions in the assumptions behind drug trials in the context of his own search for treatment. Indeed, the most profound intellectual consequence of AIDS may lie in a rethinking of the relationship of social theory to social practice. As difficult and jargon-laden as some of the essays in these anthologies may be, they manage to convince us that it is a matter of life and death how we choose to theorize about the AIDS crisis and its continuing causes. ▼

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