



WALKER



FIRE ESCAPE

this is just the beginning?



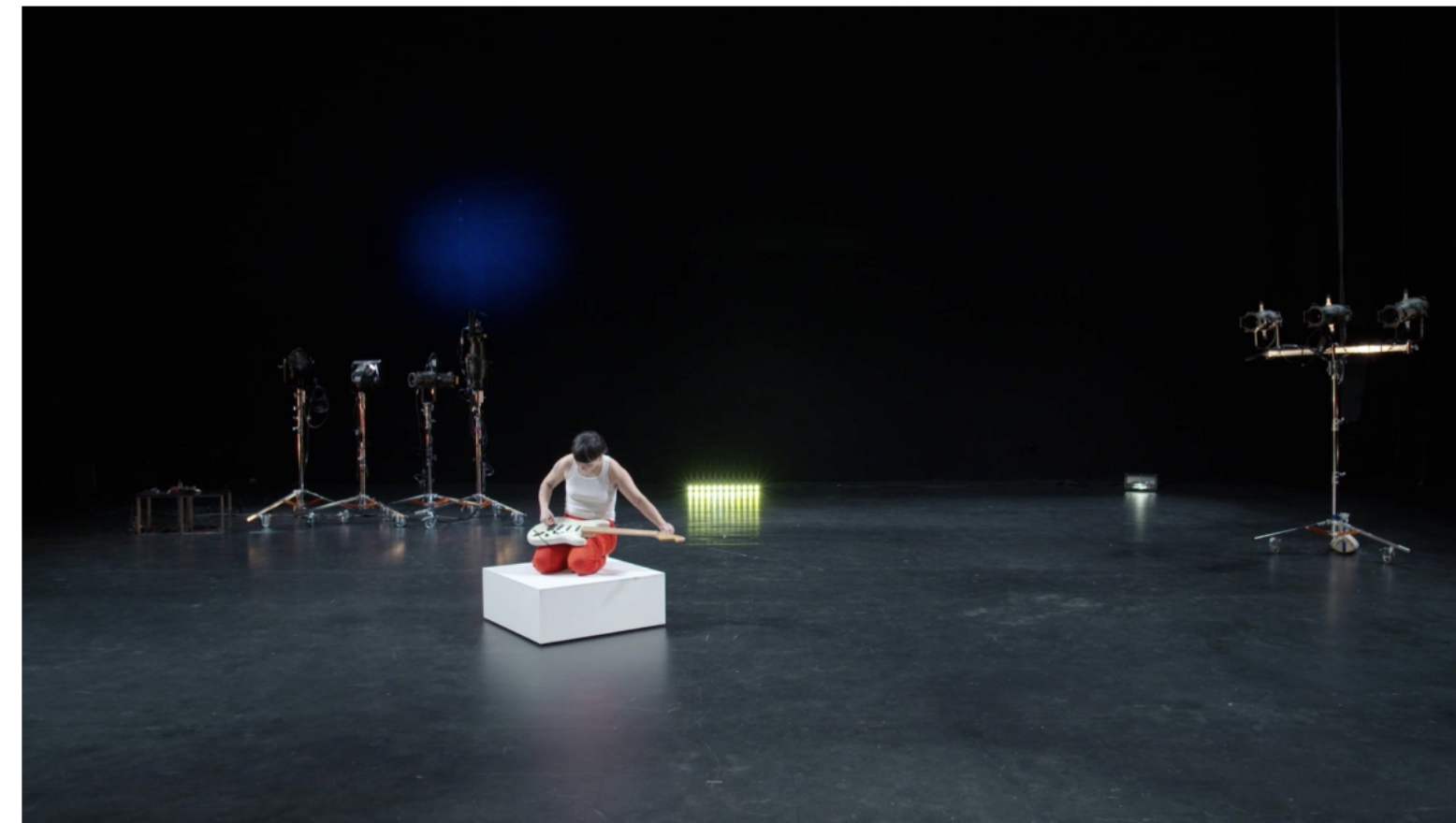


# Morbid Symptoms

by Jon Davies

“Being alive in a knife-edge moment like this, being forced to be complicit in it, while our so-called leaders fail so miserably to act, unavoidably generates all kinds of morbid symptoms.” —Naomi Klein <sup>1</sup>

I often feel like a shadow, there but not fully there. I moved back to my hometown of Montreal after 20 years for no particular reason—no job, no relationship, no set plan—only the comfort of familiarity and confidence that I could live more cheaply here if a stable income was not in my future. I reconnect with old friends—including several professors—many of whom have known me since adolescence, and I recover my modest vinyl collection from storage: an affective time capsule of the late 1990s–early 2000s. Also recovered: my archive—all the photographs, letters, and paper ephemera and detritus that one accumulated so easily in the former world. I fell in love with this city as a youth and easily fold back into who I was then, as if the past two decades were just a dream.



Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz, *Telepathic Improvisation*, 2017. Image courtesy the Ruben/Bentson Moving Image Collection.

I have always felt drawn into the wellspring of history, but really disappeared into it during my PhD. Halfway through my studies, the pandemic added a new dimension, a new desperation: queer history became not merely a field of study, but a means of escape from a blank present and an impossible-to-believe-in future. What better time to delve into the thriving sexual subcultures of 1970s San Francisco, for example, than in 2020, when one wasn't allowed to be within six feet of another human being? But history refuses our desirous projections and distortions as much as it fulfills them. While we seek a "usable past," it can't be fully kept at heel, tamed, or instrumentalized to suit our present-day needs. It certainly can't be canceled.



Theo Jean Cuthand, *The Lost Art of the Future*, 2022. Image courtesy the artist.

At the Cinemathèque québécoise here, every screening is prefaced by bilingual warning slides stating that certain films are transgressive or simply representative of the discourse and values of their era, and consequently that their content might upset some spectators. My ungenerous read: "The historical past is triggering." But that is not it exactly. Cinema is the artistic medium that is deceptively closest to life; it brings what is distant in time and in space viscerally close to us. And in the darkened theater we are particularly primed to receive its apparitions and porous to their effects. In the moving-image archive, the historical past dances before us, its sheer otherness disturbing and seductive at once. And because it offers a synthesized vision, the knots can't be combed out.



Twelve years ago, I curated a group exhibition that was about the experience of growing up in the shadow of the AIDS pandemic—losing not one’s immediate peers, but a generation that would have been one’s queer mentors—as well as a complex feeling of nostalgia for the political radicalism of the AIDS activist movement in light of the political turn to more assimilationist LGBTQ aspirations.<sup>2</sup> The show was shaped by a too-easy consigning of AIDS to the past; in the years after, I followed the work of friends and comrades like Theodore (ted) Kerr, Vincent Chevalier, and Alex McClelland that resists nostalgia for ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), for example—and for the familiar narratives about that era of the 1980s to the mid-1990s—and instead focuses on the ongoingness of AIDS, its continuing impact on Black, Indigenous, and other communities, as well as how AIDS activist strategies might be useful to other vital movements.<sup>3</sup> Kerr recently reflected on how the legacy of AIDS activism acted as, in theorist Pierre Nora’s words, a “breathtaking storehouse” for a group of Toronto activists who set up an overdose prevention site in the city’s gay village for World AIDS Day, December 1, 2018. Kerr concluded, “They don’t want mentorship, or a history class: they want to access *memory* through active engagement with community, accomplices, and seasoned activists who know what they are doing. AIDS activism history is not a site for them, it is a way of life.”<sup>4</sup>



Jamie Ross, *Dad Can Dance*, 2022. Image courtesy the artist.





Jamie Ross, *Dad Can Dance*, 2022. Image courtesy the artist.

When Covid-19 shook the world, I was disturbed but not surprised that few seemed to recognize this “breathtaking storehouse” of accumulated queer knowledge about how to navigate a pandemic, how to maintain—and even broaden and deepen—sociality, intimacy, and erotics in the face of a new infectious disease. This storehouse has urgent lessons about grassroots organizing, harm reduction, mutual aid, and how the systems that circumscribe our lives cannot be counted on to defend or sustain us. But perhaps most importantly, lessons in how to be close to and in solidarity with the disabled, dying, and dead. The legacy of AIDS care and activism felt particularly remote around “social distancing” (a chilling phrase) rules that reified the domestic sphere of the monogamous couple or family unit and cast more promiscuous, fleeting, and queer intimacies as unclean. Recalling widespread fears of touching HIV-positive people, efforts to control their movement, or quarantine them away from the “general population,” not to mention the ongoing criminalization of HIV transmission, it was impossible not to cast a jaundiced eye on the anxious hygiene theater that marked that strange time. Then the monkeypox—or rather the rebrand, mpox, because diseases now have brand identities, too—outbreak hit us in 2022–23 with its excruciatingly painful symptoms and lackluster official response, amplifying further all the historical echoes.

The Covid-19 lockdowns felt like self-erasure, not only due to the evaporation of sociality and to being treated as biopolitical populations rather than human beings, but something equally disorienting: a disrupted temporality. It became difficult to imagine any future at all. Initial hopes of a radically transformed society arising from the ashes of the old quickly vanished, and it began to feel like a state of crisis would be our eternal present. The fast-revolving news cycle and the instantaneity and reactivity of social media feeds helped trap us in a cacophonous *now* unmoored from any lessons from the past or from being able to work toward a better future.



These ruminations are taking form almost three months into the daily bombardment of Gaza. It is highly demoralizing to watch video after video documenting people's bodies being blown or crushed to pieces and to be told that your feelings of empathy and horror are in fact evidence of antisemitism. In the current conversation, Israel being accused of genocide is treated as a worse indiscretion than actually committing genocide because we are trapped in a discursive echo chamber that cannot adequately distinguish words from deeds, fiery rhetoric from torn flesh. Again, we have a trove of accumulated queer knowledge that should make us wary of both the dehumanization of Palestinians and of the widespread censorship of the resulting dissent—to understand what the violence of empire looks like, and to see through the desperate obfuscation taking place. Each of these videos documents crimes against humanity, but no one in them wants a camera in their faces as they pull their child or fragments of their child from the rubble. This is a genre of moving images no one should have to produce or watch. The unbearable pain of their production makes an ethical—and not only political—demand on the world. As a spectator, watching videos of children being blown apart every day does something to one's psyche; any residual belief in the West's commitment to much-abused terms like "human rights," "free speech," and "democracy" deflates real quick. It is heartening, however, to see all the activism and education that refuses the framing that this all began on October 7, 2023. To provide historical context is nothing less than heroic when it is so easily erased to suit the ideologies and narratives of those in power. We have to ensure these videos endure and stay part of the historical record, rather than losing them to the ephemerality of the feed.

Yes, we have seen this movie before. However, when it was revealed that an AI program perversely called The Gospel is generating hundreds of potential targets in Gaza for the Israel Defense Forces—going for quantity over quality, and able to calculate in advance how many civilians would likely be killed—I thought to myself, "I don't want to live on a planet where this is possible." <sup>5</sup> The twinning of brutal war on a long-occupied, trapped population with AI technology creates a dehumanization vortex: the dehumanization of maligned, casually murdered victims, and the soul-suicidal self-dehumanization of perpetrators who brook no responsibility for their crimes. In this death culture, the limits of how much dehumanization we are willing to tolerate are tested each day, and what is happening in Gaza is debasing all of us, cheapening life itself.





Narcissister, *Narcissister Organ Player*, 2018. Image courtesy the artist.

Dehumanization, precarity, suicide: I contemplate this triad a lot from the safety of my cloistered cocoon. I wish we were better able to talk about suicide, but it seems that the more precarious life becomes—the more people struggle just to be able to afford to continue living—the more we are prevented from openly discussing it, and especially the role of economic, political, or social causes. The balance sheet, the costs and benefits of just being alive, sometimes doesn't seem to add up. I think a lot of Wendy Coburn (1963–2015), <sup>6</sup> an extraordinarily warm and generous artist and professor, and of the sharp-tongued artist, critic and writer RM (Richard) Vaughan (1965–2020). What haunts me about Vaughan is that he left a written record of his depression, its urgency only really appreciated after his death. Vaughan's last article for *The Globe and Mail* newspaper—dated October 24, 2020, the day after he died—raises an alarm about the mental health impacts of the pandemic lockdowns and the dizzying pressures to return to normal: “many of us are dangling in the wind, uncertain where or even how to land. [. . .] See us or lose us.” <sup>7</sup> It was a shock to walk into a bookstore recently and discover a new novel by a man three years dead: *Pervatory*, billed by its publisher as “what he left for us.” It feels like a *roman à clef*: the protagonist Martin Heather is an art critic who abandons Toronto for Berlin because “I could no longer stand myself. [. . .] why not just leave? Run away to someplace where nobody knows you and drink and fuck yourself to death?” <sup>8</sup>





Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz, *Telepathic Improvisation*, 2017. Image courtesy the Ruben/Bentson Moving Image Collection.

When we were young, we were told queer/trans people had much higher suicide rates (and reminded that if we had sex without a condom, we would die of AIDS) but that “it gets better.” Our lives were often fragile, but friends, lovers, communities, movements gave us a greater shot at survival. We are now enduring a mass *desocialization*, where a public sphere has not only been emptied out by privatization, but where social bonds and nerves are frayed by the Covid-19 lockdowns and by a “social” media that thrives on conflict, which we happily feed with our potent addiction to policing and punishing each other. Governments just seem to shrug, shirking any role in the free market’s whims and the depletion of social services, including failing health systems. Those who hoard wealth, abuse power, and stoke war seem invincible, their hold too strong to shake. Naomi Klein writes, “On bad days, I feel like I might explode. Impunity can drive a person mad. Maybe it can drive a whole society mad.”<sup>2</sup> It feels like the message from on high is: “just die.” I keep trying to write about Vaughan—Richard—without making him a mirror: What was his truth, distinct from my sense that his fate might one day be my own?

From this death-drive present, perhaps the moving image—its capacity to be a “breathtaking storehouse” and a means of processing the historical past—is the medium most capable of coming to our succor, of shaking us out of our decontextualized now with its immersive erotics, its uncanny aliveness, its libidinal force. *Vibrations for a New People*, the May 2024 screening program I curated for the



force. *Vibrations for a New People*, the May 2024 screening program I curated for the Walker's Moving Image department, looks to the queer past for radical roads not taken, potential strategies and tactics, or simply the feelings, figures, rituals, and scenes that call out to us. (The title is drawn from a cable access TV show produced by Glide,<sup>10</sup> a radical San Francisco church that threw itself into the country's liberation movements starting in the mid-1960s while ministering to the Tenderloin neighborhood with an ethos of unconditional love.) Some of the films/videos on view look back to iconoclastic queer/trans and feminist activity or imagining from the 1980s–90s, while more recent works contend with what is lost and gained from those who came before us, from inheritances of all kinds.



Glenn Belverio, *The Brenda and Glenda Show: Glenda and Bruce Do Times Square*, 1994. Image courtesy the artist.

An opening up to history is also an opening up to collaboration and collectivity: every look back forges a relationship with those who came before, one that is fragile, ungovernable, and multi-directional. What does it mean to be part of longer queer continuities and timeframes that we cannot conceive from the horizon of a single life? I think of figures like Harry Smith and Jack Spicer, who saw their art not as individually authored but as maps of interconnected knowledges and cosmologies—transmissions from the great beyond. This is a vision of the artist as receiver and transmitter. The self is not a curated, customizable, known entity but the

transmitter. The self is not a curated, customizable, known entity but the agglomeration of everything that came before, whether conscious or not. Through this lens, the individual freedoms that are so lauded in the U.S., for example, look like an impoverished, lonely husk of what liberation can be.

Shuffled in among the apocalyptic social media videos of civilian bombing victims in Gaza are videos of demonstrations, of people around the world putting their “bodies upon the gears” of the odious war machine. <sup>11</sup> This movement is being led by Palestinians and by Jews who refuse to allow the genocide to be signed with their names: bridges are being closed, ports and ships blocked, weapons manufacturers’ offices occupied. They are engaged in a deeply committed, embodied citation of the direct-action activism of the past. For example, Jewish Voices for Peace (JVP) shut down New York’s Grand Central Station on October 27, 2023, to call for a ceasefire, an homage to ACT UP’s own 1991 protest there against the U.S. war in Iraq. This movement takes up slogans used by ACT UP like “Mourn the Dead and Fight Like Hell for the Living” and “Fund Healthcare Not Warfare” to advance their abiding goal of universal health care, demanding the defunding of the defense industry to make it possible. Another action, at Lincoln Center on World AIDS Day, joined the historical legacies and ongoing movement even more explicitly. Organizer Morgan Bassichis writes, “All of our struggles are connected. We honor the activists and movements that made us possible. [. . .] We call for a permanent, lasting ceasefire, now.” <sup>12</sup>

At a time when we are ensorcelled by short-sighted identity politics of all stripes, these moving images represent a desperately needed solidarity, one that eschews the exploitation of identity as a form of currency or a cudgel to wield against others. “Queer” to me will always represent a line of flight from identity, a refusal of all binaries and ideologies, and of the occlusion of critical thinking, the possibility of an ethical engagement with difference, and the indispensable care for the other that goes with them. While the relationship between queer and a truly liberatory vision is not a given, I can’t help believe in the powerful original potential of the word—despite all—when I see actions like this. Is it nostalgia, or genuine hope? Is there a difference? Maybe the turning backward of nostalgia is the only way of imagining what a just future could feel like. ■





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Amina Ross, *Man's Country*, 2021. Image courtesy the artist.

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*Experience Vibrations for a New People, guest curated by Jon Davies, at the Walker this May. [Explore the full line up and get tickets here.](#)*

#### ENDNOTES

1. Naomi Klein, *Doppelganger: A Trip into the Mirror World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023), 166–67. ↩
2. Jon Davies, ed., *Coming After* (Toronto: The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, 2012). <https://www.thepowerplant.org/whats-on/exhibitions/coming-after> ↩
3. See, for example, <https://postervirus.tumblr.com/post/67569099579/your-nostalgia-is-killing-me-vincent-chevalier>, <https://visualaids.org/events/detail/your-nostalgia-is-killing-me-a-catalyst-for-conversation-about-aids-and-vis>, and <https://www.alexandermcclelland.ca/> ↩
4. Theodore (ted) Kerr, “What is World AIDS Day? (or, What is the difference between memory and history?),” email to mailing list, November 30, 2023. Also see <https://www.tedkerr.club>. ↩
5. Harry Davies, Bethan McKernan and Dan Sabbagh, “‘The Gospel’: How Israel Uses AI to Select Bombing Targets in Gaza,” *The Guardian*, December 1, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/01/the-gospel-how-israel-uses-ai-to-select-bombing-targets> ↩
6. <https://www.ocadu.ca/event/fable-tomorrow-survey-works-wendy-coburn> ↩
7. RM Vaughan, “How Do We ‘Get Back to Work’ When the Trauma of COVID-19 Still Lingers?” *The Globe and Mail* (online), October 24, 2020. ↩
8. RM Vaughan, *Pervatory* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2023), 49–50. ↩
9. Klein, *Doppelganger*, 239. ↩
10. <https://www.glide.org/about/#mission-vision> ↩
11. “There’s a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart that you can’t take part! You can’t even passively take part! And you’ve got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus—and you’ve got to make it stop! And you’ve got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it—that unless you’re free, the machine will be prevented from working at all!!” Mario Savio, address at UC Berkeley, December 2, 1964, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mariosaviosproulhallsitin.htm> ↩
12. Morgan Bassichis (@morgankindof), Instagram post, December 2, 2023. ↩