

Art Agency, Partners

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A Lost Generation

A massive unfulfilled potential



The AIDS Memorial Quilt—the most powerful, monumental sculpture of the past three decades. Here, volunteers spread the quilt along the National Mall in October of 1996

By Allan Schwartzman

Published 27 June 2019 in [Allan's Intro](#)

Before the AIDS crisis reached critical mass in the 1980s, innovation in Modern art had long been synonymous with youth. It was associated with young mavericks rebelling against an older generation that had inevitably matured into some version of the establishment. With the devastating impact of AIDS—which [has killed an estimated 658,500 people in the United States](#)—youth, instead of being associated with a sense of invincibility, became better acquainted with death. Indeed, our lens for viewing innovation in art has changed substantially since then.

I recently looked at [a registry of artists](#) who died of AIDS and remembered the shocking realization I felt 25 years ago: hardly

a dozen of them have been remembered for their art historical contributions. Most artists who died of AIDS were young, which meant that their work had not yet reached the stage of maturity whereby they might have a sense of who they would become as artists and where their art could go. And so, when I look back on the AIDS crisis and its impact on art, what I see is massive unfulfilled potential. Many of these artists became ill in the early days of the disease, when they were looked upon with scorn, fear and derision. Many artists (like so many other, mostly gay men living with and dying from AIDS) were rejected by their families. Many families of those who died had no idea what to do with the art. Many simply destroyed it.

What I see is massive unfulfilled potential

In looking at the artists who came to greatest prominence in the wake of the AIDS crisis, I think about [Robert Gober](#), [Doris Salcedo](#), [Félix González-Torres](#), [Charles Ray](#), [Kiki Smith](#), [Marlene Dumas](#): all artists whose work took on issues of mortality, the fragility of life, the political in the personal, and who created a far more introspective art, often intentionally flawed, materially, in stark contrast to the unshakeable bravado of the Neo-Expressionist painters who had preceded them.

And at the same time—with the exception of the few artists who died of AIDS who did have the time to make mature and great work—I am certain that most of this work which addressed mortality (prematurely, for contemporary art) has still not been adequately represented. Museums and art history have not found adequate ways to represent those thousands of vital artists who never had the opportunity to fulfill their potential.

It occurred to me that one unexplored way to pointedly and poignantly represent the impact of the AIDS crisis on art would be for museums to each identify a single artist and to represent them—their lives and creativity—by displaying all the work that remains as a mass representation, however fulfilled or fragmentary. These displays might stand as living markers of a brutal, premature mortality on a scale that the world perhaps has not seen since the plagues of the Middle Ages.