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Museum Of Design Atlanta's World AIDS Day Exhibit

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GALLERY BY [JEREMY HELTON](#) ON DECEMBER 1, 2011

A Museum of Design visitor looks at a portion of posters from the *Graphic Intervention: 25 Years of International AIDS Posters* exhibit
Photo: MOD

Established in 1988 by the World Health Organization, World AIDS Day — celebrated on December 1 each year around the world — serves as a yearly observation of the millions of lives lost to, and affected by, HIV/AIDS across the globe.

Recognized internationally by governments, faith-based organizations, community organizations and individuals, World AIDS Day serves as an opportunity to raise awareness, to commemorate those who have passed on, and to celebrate victories such as increased access to treatment and prevention services. This year marks 30 years since the epidemic was initially reported, and many communities and institutions are going the extra mile to make the day even more memorable.

The Museum of Design Atlanta (MODA) has been gearing up for the anniversary with two AIDS-related exhibitions: *Graphic Intervention: 25 Years of International AIDS Posters* and *The AIDS Memorial Quilt*. Both exhibitions opened October 2 and will continue through January 1. Before the exhibitions close MODA will open its doors for 24 hours on December 1 and host a marathon of screenings, performances and lectures. Other events on the schedule include a 3 AM dance party, an afternoon quilting workshop, and a candle light vigil in the final hour of this daylong event.

After checking out the impressive collection of 153 posters from around the globe, we learned more about the show from Associate

Director of MODA, Laura Flusche and Elizabeth Resnick, one of the curators of Graphic Intervention: 25 Years of International AIDS Posters.

Turnstyle: What are the origins of Graphic Intervention?

Elizabeth Resnick: Graphic Intervention: International AIDS Awareness Posters 1985–2005 is my fifth design exhibition curated for Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Boston where, I am a tenured full professor and the current Chair of Graphic Design.

I proposed Graphic Intervention: 25 Years of AIDS Awareness Posters 1985–2010 to the MassArt exhibitions committee in the spring 2008 and it was approved. I needed to find a co-curator as two heads are better than one. It took me a year, but I finally found the right partner in Javier Cortés, a graphic designer and partner Korn Design, Boston. We began the project in the fall 2009 looking through Jim Lapides archive of international AIDS awareness posters. It took several months to go through this massive collection. There were several iconic posters I knew had to be in the exhibit but Javier and I needed to go through all 3200 posters in the archive first. By January 2010 we knew what posters were missing from the archive. I made a list and located the posters utilizing the internet. Of the 153 posters in Graphic Intervention, 99 are borrowed from Jim's archive and 54 were acquired from the designers Javier and I contacted.



Turnstyle: What inspired your interest in the posters?

Elizabeth Resnick: Pre late 1980s, the idea of developing exhibitions never crossed my mind because graphic design was not considered an art form that could or should be exhibited in a gallery setting. This was the prevailing notion and practice of all U.S. academic exhibition committees in the 1960s through the 1980s including Massachusetts College of Art and Design. Then something marvelous happened! In September 1989, Mildred Friedman, who was then the curator at the Walker Art Center, opened a game changer of an exhibition titled Graphic Design in America: A Visual Language History. Two months later, while attending a design education conference, The Core of Understanding, held at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, one of the evening events was to visit the Walker to see this exhibition. I remember this was the first of my “ah-ha” moments, as it proved without a shadow of a doubt that graphic design was indeed an art form suitable for exhibition. I returned to my college and volunteered to serve on the academic exhibitions committee, which, at the time, was completely peopled by fine artists, administrators with degrees in fine art, and students studying fine art. I became the faculty advocate for design. It was up to me to bring proposals to the table where the case could be made for a design exhibition. It was a steep hill to climb.

For years, I had been collecting sociopolitical posters. I would use them in the classroom to illustrate the elements and principles of composition, color and design in my sophomore level classes. I would also show this work in upper level design classes as great examples of how one can use metaphor and symbolism in design work. I would invite designers who also made sociopolitical work to give talks to our students. From 1989 to 2007 I served on the board of AIGA Boston, and about 12 of those years I was the lead organizer of their lecture and events, so I became very aware of designers doing ‘cutting-edge’ work, ‘authorial’ work and sociopolitical work.

Turnstyle: Was it the medium or the message that brought you to gather this collection?

Elizabeth Resnick: I would say it is both the medium and the message. The HIV/AIDS epidemic isn't just happening in faraway places. HIV is still a threat across the United States. Before we can stop any epidemic, we first have to recognize the magnitude of the disease. People here in the United States become infected with HIV on the average of every 9.5 minutes. And it changes not only the lives of those who become infected, but also the lives of their families and friends. Even though there are treatments to help people with HIV live longer than ever before, AIDS is still a significant public health issue.

Turnstyle: To what degree, if at all, do you think posters about HIV/AIDS are distinctly different than posters and media about other health crisis?

Elizabeth Resnick: Each person entering the gallery will respond differently to this exhibition based on their own experience and their pathway in life. The whole point of this exhibition is to visually demonstrate that the people respond to different visual language strategies in different ways based on their own cultural context. That is the bottom line, but the exhibition also happens to be on a topic that is very important and touches everyone in the world.

Javier Cortés and I are not HIV/AIDS scholars or researchers, but we understand, as concerned citizens, how important it is to encourage a continuing dialogue about HIV/AIDS in our own communities. In today's society, there are so many vital and important issues. Designers and artists are in a unique position to use their visual language skills to educate and promote important messages for society. When I ask myself, “Do I walk the walk? If I ask my students to do these types of things, what do I do it as well?” My answer is, “This is what I do.” I could make posters, but I do not. Instead I use my role as a curator to plant ‘seeds of thought and action’ in our young people. If we expose our students to this kind of thinking and doing early in their formative growth and development, they will become comfortable when given the task of using their skills for the greater good.

Turnstyle: Both *The AIDS Memorial Quilt* and *Graphic Intervention: 25 Years of International AIDS Posters* go well beyond the typical fare one expects at a design museum. What prompted MODA to present two such powerful groups of work?

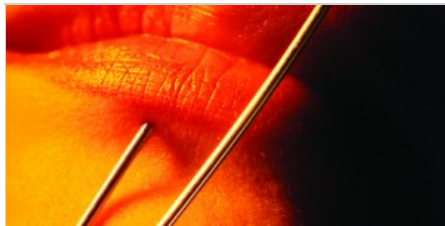
Laura Flusche: We've worked with [Elizabeth Resnick] before and so we knew that the exhibition would be an extraordinary one. The topic is of great importance locally — AIDS has had a huge impact on the city of Atlanta over the past decades, both in terms of lives lost and the efforts to find a cure. The poster (and the graphic design efforts used to create the posters) has played a special role in promoting AIDS awareness and safe sex education across cultures. We wanted to spotlight this form of design that allows messages to successfully reach specific targeted groups because the poster as a medium is cheap and easy to produce locally.

Turnstyle: Were there critical or conceptual considerations for MODA in deciding to present both shows? What were they?

Laura Flusche: Graphic Intervention and The AIDS Memorial Quilt work together beautifully as they are both design responses to a crisis that affects a very broad segment of the population both locally and globally. Because they are meant to inform mass audiences about HIV/AIDS prevention, the designs of the posters in Graphic Intervention frequently draw on images from popular culture. On the other hand, The AIDS Memorial Quilt panels draws on the long tradition of quilting as a folk art, using it as collective memory, as therapeutic device, and as political tool.

Turnstyle: Are these exhibitions part of a larger event or program? If so, can you give me some details about that event/program?

Laura Flusche: The posters and the AIDS Quilt went on display on October 1, 2011 and will remain on exhibit until January 1, 2012 — they are part of MODA's regular cycle of exhibitions. That said, MODA is particularly interested in the ways that design affects everyday life and so we try to bring exhibitions to Atlanta that demonstrate the intersection between design and social consciousness.



To learn more about MODA and their ongoing exhibitions and events go to <http://www.museumofdesign.org/>

To learn more about *Graphic Intervention: 25 Years of International AIDS Posters* and see the entire collection go to <http://www.graphicintervention.org/>

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