AIDS infrastructures, queer networks: Architecting the critical path
by Joan Lubin and Jeanne Vaccaro

Abstract
This essay pursues how HIV/AIDS and digital media transform one another’s historiographies. Working with the archive of activist Kiyoshi Kuromiya (1943–2000), the essay considers the role of AIDS organizing in the history of the Internet, and in establishing recursive relations between media formats. Kuromiya’s early adoption of Internet technology centered the needs of people living with HIV/AIDS, incarcerated people, and people of color to access vital information for community formation and survival. Tracing the unlikely collaboration between Kuromiya and technofuturist architect R. Buckminster Fuller (1885–1983), which culminated in Kuromiya’s founding of the Critical Path AIDS Project, this essay interrogates the term “adjuvant,” which Fuller borrowed from immunological discourse to describe their co-authorship. Anchored in a critical engagement with the metaphor of the adjuvant — an agent aiding immunological response — this essay elaborates the digital infrastructures underwriting a blueprint for community building, offering a prehistory of digital queer care networks. In conclusion, the essay meditates on the role of curation in theorizing the temporality of AIDS and its ongoing histories.

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Introduction
On 15 March 1983, Tommi Mecca recorded an oral history with AIDS activist Kiyoshi Kuromiya (1943–2000). Kuromiya and Mecca were both prominent in Philadelphia’s gay activist scene and countercultural press, and the interview veers into a conversational register, touching on shared memories of protest, defunct publications, and the city’s evolving gay geography. The recording opens with Mecca declaring, “I’m not a fan of technology.” The cassette tape captures a sigh of frustration and the rustling of papers before he poses his first question to Kuromiya: “Well, ok, maybe you should start by talking about when you first came out, and did you come out in Philadelphia?” Curiously, Kuromiya immediately begins describing his relationship to library and information systems.

I guess I first came out when I was about eight or nine years old in California, at least came out in terms of my parents. I was fairly active sexually ... And there was not very much literature at the time. I think it was about ’52, ’53, ’54, the early ’50s. There wasn’t much literature. The only thing I could find, because I didn’t have access to the adult section at the Monrovia Public Library in Monrovia, California, I’d go to the county library and Kinsey’s report on sexual behavior in the human male had just come out, and so at about nine years old I
Presented with an opportunity to articulate an origin story of his sexual subjectivity, Kuromiya responds with a memory of the (in)accessibility of information, narrating his movements through and out of his hometown organized by a search for gay knowledge. Barred from the “adult section” of his local library at age nine, he notes “there wasn’t much literature at the time” and goes on to find a copy of the Kinsey report on the “open shelves” of the county library. While this might appear to be a conventional narrative of gay liberation walking apace with gay urban migration, Kuromiya was chasing the research trail more than the metropole. Mecca animates a structuring trope of identity politics by asking Kuromiya to begin his self-narration with “when you first came out,” implicitly inviting his interview subject to affirm the wisdom that sexual politics depend upon publicizing your sexuality to those who have known you otherwise. But the public Kuromiya names in his own narrative of becoming is not his family or social scene, but the public library.

Searching for literature about sex, Kuromiya immediately confronted the prohibitions on the circulation of sexual knowledge at the local level that led him to the county, where the Kinsey report caught his eye. But even on the “open shelves” the Kinsey report remained opaque to him, its popularity notwithstanding, because its discourse of sex was a specialist one. Kuromiya’s encounter with the media systems of sexual knowledge shows fundamental links between and among the sociality of sex, the politics of access to sexual knowledge, and the apparatus of power sustained by specialized terminology. A few minutes later in the interview, when Mecca asks Kuromiya who he was having sex with at that time, Kuromiya recounts being arrested at age 10 for having sex with a 16-year-old boy in a local park, charged with “lewd and immoral behavior.” In the oral history he describes searching in vain to decode the meaning of the word lewd, stymied in his research by his ignorance of its spelling. In that moment Kuromiya confronted the way specialized languages of the sexual sciences and the state converge to disempower and criminalize people. This nexus of power-knowledge and criminality signified strongly for him from the first moments of his sexual consciousness, experientially informing what would become his intersectional humanist political activism.

When asked about his motivation to move to Philadelphia, Kuromiya tells Mecca, “Just because of the name City of Brotherly Love.” He continues to give an account of his awakening political consciousness, instigated by the homophobia of the university in which he had enrolled to study architecture with Louis Kahn:

I found the University of Pennsylvania very closeted. I became involved in a lot of human rights activities, which all stemmed from my sexual orientation as much as anything. I consider that the love of my life and the driving force behind what I was doing at the time in terms of human rights. And so in the fall of ’61, though I’d had some quote political unquote activities on the west coast, I became more politically involved although I had no interest at all in politics. My interest was in humanism and in making it possible to enjoy a full life — something that I’d assumed was possible in this country, although I was born in a concentration camp during WWII, a place called Heart Mountain, Wyoming, behind barbed wire fences, machine gun towers, the works ... Our family had been there for three years.

Kuromiya was born in 1943 in the Heart Mountain Concentration Camp and grew up in Monrovia, California, before moving to Philadelphia in 1961, where he would spend the rest of his life. His political activities began in earnest in the 1960s, when he got involved in civil rights organizing. He was assaulted by the police while facilitating black voter registration in Montgomery, served as the gay delegate to the Black Panther Party, stood front and center at Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I have a dream” speech, and went to dinner with James Baldwin afterwards. He protested the Vietnam War, including an infamous demonstration at Penn in which he threatened to napalm a dog, only to then congratulate the angry crowd for caring more about the well-being of a dog than the well-being of the Vietnamese. Under the name Dirty Linen Corporation, he made a poster emblazoned with the words “FUCK THE DRAFT” (Figure 1) for distribution by mail order, which precipitated an obscenity trial as well as ongoing surveillance by the FBI. He wrote for the Philadelphia Free Press, Collegiate Guide, Distant Drummer, Plain Dealer, and Yerostocks, among other underground press and activist outlets. He participated in the first “Annual Reminder Day” for gay rights at Philadelphia city hall in 1965, and co-founded the East Coast Homophile Organization (ECHO) and the Gay Liberation Front — Philadelphia. He edited the ACT UP Standards of Care, the first document of its kind for people
with HIV/AIDS, and was inspired by his work with techno-futurist Buckminster Fuller to found the Critical Path AIDS Project in Philadelphia (https://critpath.org). He ran a marijuana buyers’ club and fought for the legalization of medical marijuana all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. He also went to the Supreme Court to extend First Amendment protections to the online circulation of sexually explicit information about AIDS prevention, successfully striking down the Communications Decency Act in 1996 [1]. The biographical sketch of Kuromiya that emerges from a chronology of his activism prompts us to inquire after the status of the individual in a collective history, and to question the ways movement historiography silos these activities into distinct narratives.
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Figure 1: “Fuck the Draft” (1968) poster created by Kiyoshi Kuromiya under the name Dirty Linen Corporation, courtesy of the John J. Wilcox Jr. Archive at the William Way LGBT Community Center.

Across Kuromiya’s activist practice, information systems emerge as political instruments, tools for liberation struggles, and ways of facilitating community care networks — making media history and the history of sexuality coterminous. We see this in particular in the Critical Path AIDS Project’s evolving philosophy and practice of developing and implementing media systems for community organizing. What began in 1989 as a newsletter eventually became a treatment hotline, pager system, computer bulletin board ('92), electronic mailing list platform ('93), AIDS information Web directory ('94), and an independent Internet Service Provider offering free dial-up, e-mail, and Web hosting on a advertisement-free server for more than 10,000 people in the Philadelphia metro area (1995–2008). The range of Kuromiya’s activist practice encodes a set of relations between decriminalization, anti-racism, civil rights, gay liberation, and anti-war action — and by extension between civil disobedience, non-violent protest, confrontational provocation, legal action, and underground press publishing — all of which inform his response to the AIDS crisis. In this essay, we draw upon the archive consolidated by and around Kuromiya to consider the history, form, and politics of queer community infrastructure. The role of media and early computing technologies in developing that community infrastructure is instructive methodologically for thinking about how media history and the history of sexuality comport with each other. Through Kuromiya’s range of political commitments, we can see a much longer history and broader context for thinking about AIDS and its media, and consider how these terms inflect one another’s histories, definitions, and potentials in the present and future (Figure 2).
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Kuromiya’s interest in the politics and aesthetics of sexual information started much earlier than his AIDS organizing, constituting a throughline in his thinking about himself, homosexuality, and the information systems to which he and others did and did not have access. Kuromiya came across the Kinsey report circa 1952, many years before AIDS emerged into public consciousness; our conventional histories of sexuality suggest this moment belonged to a different paradigm altogether than that which took shape in the 1980s and beyond. But the Critical Path AIDS Project and Kuromiya’s activism more broadly point us toward a different kind of historiographic reckoning with HIV/AIDS and the digital media of sexuality. The ongoingness of AIDS should make us wary more broadly of distinctions like before and after. As we organize our thought around the ways in which the AIDS crisis is not over, perhaps is “still beginning” [2] as Gregg Bordowitz has said, we should also be live to the ways it started before it ever officially happened.

The topic of this special issue, “AIDS and digital media,” in its conjunction of terms, invites us to think outside of the conventional chronologies of the AIDS crisis and link it to the long history of the digital media of sexuality. This conjunction of terms is also an opportunity to think outside of the conventional chronologies of digital media, joining the history of computing into the history of sexuality, as much as the reverse. In this light, Kuromiya’s contribution to the proliferation of media technologies around the AIDS crisis is galvanized by an impulse toward social organizing, rather than toward “early adopter” computerization or techno-utopianism, as his link to Fuller might otherwise imply. Thinking across the various temporalities of the histories of sexuality and media brings connections to light across seemingly distinct epistemes. When we return to our archive with this in mind, counterintuitive links rise to our attention. Kuromiya, best remembered now for his AIDS activism, begins his account of his sexuality with an

Figure 2: Photograph of Kiyoshi Kuromiya at his computer, courtesy of the John J. Wilcox Jr. Archive at the William Way LGBT Community Center.
unprompted reminiscence about the Kinsey report. Kuromiya’s later work disseminating information to people living with HIV/AIDS comes into focus as an extension of his lifelong interest in the informatics of sexuality, which precedes the AIDS epidemic — and is transformed by it.

In Kuromiya’s archive and political organizing, computers come to signify as medical instruments, and Internet access as a medical intervention. This is a very different vision of the politics of computing than we might find if we were to read this archive as a backformation of the contemporary queer studies interest in “big data” and computational surveillance, constituting neither a hacker-style computer anarchism nor a technoutopian project but rather an instance of computers being implemented for ground-up community organizing and resource sharing [3]. Kuromiya’s use of technology highlights relations between communications networks and community building in a way that begs a few questions, which we will pursue: how does AIDS organize relationships between informatic and aesthetic communication, between networks of information and networks of people, between past(s) and present(s) and future(s), between what we can and cannot know in the archive? How do we write histories without implying that the objects of investigation are merely historical?

Queer remediations: Critical path as an AIDS media project

For Kuromiya, AIDS activism was itself therapeutic, not only for the information that is its subject but for the practices of engagement and collectivity that it requires and enables. “I really believe that activism is therapeutic,” he says in the 1997 oral history he recorded with Marc Stein, recasting his comment of a few years earlier, “I think my activism does a lot to keep me healthy” [4]. The therapeutic activism of the kind Kuromiya practiced aimed to enrich the conditions of quotidian life with access to community and shared resources. Generating communities through information sharing and print culture was a crucial component of this.

Kuromiya’s work and archive attest to his commitment to sharing information as a way of building community. Kuromiya is most remembered and celebrated now for founding the Critical Path AIDS Project, which emphasized access to information for people with AIDS through a variety of media strategies including Internet access, a newsletter, and a telephone line, among other information and social services. The Critical Path ethic of “living with” as opposed to “dying from” AIDS was anchored in the philosophies of techno-utopian inventor, architect, and systems theorist R. Buckminster Fuller (1895–1983), who Kuromiya met in Philadelphia (Figure 3). Kuromiya moved to Philadelphia in the fall of 1961 to study architecture and explore the homoerotic implications of the “city of brotherly love.” Although he did not become a practicing architect, his architectural training manifested as a material practice in his community organizing. Kuromiya’s most consequential architectural education commenced not in the classroom but through his relationship with Fuller, one of the city’s most significant architectural theorists. Famous for coining the term “spaceship Earth” and designing the geodesic dome, Fuller espoused principles of modularity and habitability while seeking to minimize ecological damage and destructive human impact. He literalized his utopian vision in blueprints and patterns for spaces both practical and intimate, and of great interest to contemporary queer living: modular bathrooms, as well as domiciles built using the grammar of the triangle, which Fuller demonstrated could become all kinds of three-dimensional space. When a spherical carbon molecule was discovered that promised a new avenue of HIV/AIDS treatment research, Kuromiya dubbed it the “Bucky Ball,” for its resemblance to Fuller’s signature dome (Figures Figure 4a and Figure 4b).
Figure 3: Photograph of Buckminster Fuller and Kiyoshi Kuromiya holding Critical path, courtesy of the John J. Wilcox Jr. Archive at the William Way LGBT Community Center.
THE BUCKYBALL: A NOVEL NEW STRATEGY TO STOP THE VIRUS
by Kiyoshi Kurumiya

R. Buckminster Fuller (1895-1983), humanist, New Age polymath, inventor of the geodesic dome and synergetic geometry, was the inspiration for Critical Path Project.

A number of posthumous developments have been attributed to his ideas and his novel design and "critical path" planning strategies which he codified.

He had a life-long interest in carbon and often described how J. H. van't Hoff, after years of being scoffed at, was awarded the first Nobel Prize in Chemistry when his theory of the tetrahedral configuration of the carbon molecule was proven. Even though carbon was subject to more study than all of the other elements of nature combined and forms the basis of all life forms, in 1985, two years after Bucky Fuller's death, buckminsterfullerene a new third form of pure carbon was discovered—the others, diamonds and graphite. It was affectionately nicknamed the "Buckyball" because it is the most nearly spherical of all molecules found in nature.

On August 2nd, researchers announced development of a buckminsterfullerene to block reproduction of the HIV virus.

Perhaps the most novel of recent attempts to develop protease inhibitors was announced in Journal of the American Chemical Society and Antimicrobial Agents and Chemotherapy (August 1993). Buckminsterfullerene was discovered in 1985 and was honored as Science's "Molecule of the Year" in 1991. It has been called by scientists, the Foundation for Integrative Research (29 W. 15th St., New York, NY 10011, (212) 229-9374).

I. MAJOR THEMES

A. The Concorde Study

Zidovudine's (AZT) failure to exhibit long-lasting clinical benefit attracted considerable comment when the Concorde trial results were recently published. Since much has been written on the results of this study and its implications, we will touch on it only briefly, focusing particularly on its implications for future treatment and research approaches.

The Concorde study was a French-English collaboration. This was a placebo-controlled trial of AZT in 1749 asymptomatic patients with HIV infection and a wide range of CD4 levels. Each patient was on drug or placebo for 3 years with nearly 2 years follow-up.
Figure 4a: Critical Path AIDS Project Newsletter cover story about the buckminsterfullerene molecule, also known as the “Bucky Ball”.
BUCKYBALL ANALOG, schematically illustrated by D.L.D. Caspar, shows strict equivalence in a shell with icosahedral symmetry constructed from sixty identical left-handed units. The three classes of connections in this surface lattice are represented by specific bonding relations: thumb-to-pinky = pentamer bond; ring finger-to-middle finger = trimer bond; index finger-to-index finger = dimer bond. Any two of these classes of bonds would stabilize the structure together. The triangles drawn under the hands define equivalent subdivisions defined by the three- and fivefold axes at their intersections.
Kuromiya and Fuller collaborated on a number of shared publications on which Kuromiya is credited not as co-author but as “adjuvant,” an immunological term we discuss below. Kuromiya and Fuller borrowed the title of their book Critical path (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1981) from project planning, where the term refers to the time to completion of a given project estimated by sequencing all of the small tasks that compose it. In Cosmography: A posthumous scenario for the future of humanity (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992), Kuromiya and Fuller stretched this borrowed concept into a “geometry of thinking” that would, they boldly proposed, enable human beings to orient themselves towards one another in caring pursuit of the common project of better life on Earth. Kuromiya adopted Fuller’s philosophy for the betterment of human existence, “applying anticipatory critical path planning techniques” to his political organizing.

Kuromiya and Fuller’s unlikely collaboration has been much remarked upon, but there is relatively thin documentation of their relationship in the historical record [5]. The archival collections of Kuromiya are held at the John J. Wilcox, Jr., Archives at The William Way LGBT Community Center in Philadelphia, while Fuller’s are housed at Stanford University. Access and institutional privilege vary widely across these two archives. Importantly, while the Wilcox archive is the official home of the Kiyoshi Kuromiya Papers, many of Kuromiya’s papers in fact persist in a box of “miscellaneous” Fuller ephemera at Stanford. Even at the level of archiving, the nature of their relationship has confounded classification. What we do know is that Fuller hired Kuromiya to assist with manuscript preparations for his publications in the late 1970s through his death in 1983, and that Kuromiya prepared Fuller’s final manuscript for posthumous publication. They described this collaborative textual production not as co-authorship but rather as a relationship operating under the sign of the “adjuvant.” In their archives, it can be difficult to say which is more peculiar — what is missing or what is present. Working through the presences and absences in their archives offers a historical context to sustain ongoing conversations about manipulating architecture towards building communities of care and networks of survival for marginalized people.

How do we understand a relationship that unfolds under the sign of the immunological? Kuromiya is credited in Fuller’s texts as “Adjuvant.” Adjuvants are pharmacological agents added to vaccines to enhance their efficacy; they prompt the body into an immunological response to the antigens in the vaccine, but they do not themselves provide immunity. They help bodies respond to agents against which they would otherwise be defenseless, animating inert pathologies in order to provoke life. In other words, adjuvants make things happen relationally that are not possible otherwise.

Adjuvant is a curious term. We have some questions about what it does and does not map relationally, interpersonally, with respect to positionalality, agency, and power. It sounds like a metaphor, and yet what we know about the deep materialism of both Fuller and Kuromiya’s thought and practice advises against such a reading. However, if adjuvant is not a metaphor, how is it functioning? What is it that it names? The peculiarity of the term invites us to attend to the transactional, relational, and affective components of collaboration which are largely opaque to the historical record, intimated but not explained by this biomedical language. The term adjuvant mystifies the role Kuromiya actually played. His imprint on the text is as indeterminate as the agency of the inert bio-matter that “adjuvant” names. The situation is hardly clarified by consulting Fuller’s politics, which he articulates only as a strenuous disavowal of the political as such. The very first sentence, for example, of Grunch of giants (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983), is: “It is essential that anyone reading this book know at the outset that the author is apolitical.”

Cosmography (1992) begins with a short “Note from the adjuvant,” in which Kuromiya describes his role:

All of the vocabulary and concepts originate in Fuller’s mind, and the way they are phrased is his. I have served as adjuvant, a term Fuller borrowed from medicine (specifically immunology) in 1980 to designate my role in the writing of Critical path — that of a “helper” in transcribing and editorially refining for publication his ideas, words, and extemporaneous ‘thinking out loud.’ In Cosmography, as in Critical path, I have served in this Fuller-designated role to preserve the idiosyncratic concepts, tone, syntax, and phraseology of Fuller in preparing the manuscript for publication. If it has strayed at all from his original
conception, the blame is mine. If it is a faithful representation of his methodology and thought, the credit goes to him.

In this note, we learn that Kuromiya is the adjuvant and that Fuller named him; everything he does in that role is in service of Fuller, even though he goes on to define adjuvant much more capacious when he lists its particular functions. He offers as its closest synonym the term “helper” and elaborates that this means “transcribing and editorially refining for publication his ideas, words, and extemporaneous ‘thinking out loud’” [5]. Transcription seems like the lowliest of the functions Kuromiya describes, and yet we know transcription is an active and interpretive process, not merely an administrative task. While one might mistake transcription for a rote function, “editorially refining ... extemporaneous thinking out loud” hardly sounds like “helping” in any narrow sense of the term, and rather would appear to approach a more fulsome collaborative venture, such as, for example, co-authorship.

Adjuvant opens a lot of questions, and largely leaves us with them. Looking back on the historical record, some crucial aspects of Fuller and Kuromiya’s relationship remain opaque. How are we to understand their connection enough to make it a part of the usable past? These are two men who avow a relationship of mutual respect and inspiration and yet who were in no straightforward way collaborators, and there is something disturbing about reconstructing a historically productive relationship without knowing how to stabilize its interpersonal tenor. Adjuvant modifies a relational category while simultaneously maintaining the subjectivity of the author function, potentially narrowing the plurality that has been opened up in and by the term adjuvant into a singular locus of enunciation. “Thinking out loud,” in particular, is structurally unsound, covering over the alchemical process by which Fuller becomes the author again.

The adjuvant holds in tension a structure that cannot be easily resolved into the relational form of collaboration, co-authorship, or even something more straightforwardly transactional or subordinating like “editorial assistant.” The synonym that Kuromiya offers, “helper,” requires keeping all the messiness of ambiguously hierarchical and ambivalently affectionate servitude in view, while “adjuvant” naturalizes these modes by describing them in terms of biological processes. This combination of mystifying rhetorics — of affection and of biology — is a familiar mode of obfuscating racialized power dynamics. The way Kuromiya describes the adjuvant role conjures the figure of the amanuensis, simultaneously indexing and obscuring the long history of textual production that has denied authorship to racialized subjects. At the same time, the language of the adjuvant, cribbing from the expert discourse of subhuman biomatter, has the potential to reduce the scope of Kuromiya’s subjectivity and agency to the scale of the infra-human.

What do solidarity and allyship look like that bypass, or simply remain indifferent to, the relational, psychic, and affective? Fuller insisted that he was “apolitical,” avowing instead a broad-based humanism. Kuromiya likewise self-described as a “humanist” above all else, and yet it hardly seems as if the two meant the same thing by the term. Does collaboration require solidarity? Does solidarity require mutual personal recognition? Fuller and Kuromiya had a shared sense of structural precarity at the level of the cellular and the planetary, but it is not clear that they shared much on any of the consequential intervening scales — the scales on which life unfolds.

While the premise for their shared project was a mutual commitment to humanism, their respective comments on their politics suggest that this term operated between them largely as catchphrase. Fuller’s and Kuromiya’s perspectives about life on Earth converged at many points, but each arrived at the particular form of what both called “humanism” from very different starting points. Fuller’s signature conceptual model of “spaceship Earth” treated the total system as its primary unit of analysis, and the meso-scale modularity of human lifeworlds as subsidiary design problems. Kuromiya’s political consciousness set out from a different point, recognizing in his sexual marginalization a potentially generalizable condition of constraint on human consciousness. As Kuromiya states in his 1983 oral history: “I became involved in a lot of human rights activities, which all stemmed from my sexual orientation as much as anything.”

Recasting Kuromiya’s politics in our contemporary vocabularies, his commitments seem most clearly like a powerful antecedent of intersectionality. Kuromiya’s focus on activism as a life practice and a way of engaging with the world and self also anticipates the discourse of “self-care,” which has in the interim been taken up not only by leftist movement politics but also as a cornerstone of the wellness industry. The deployment of self-optimization across the supposedly antagonistic realms of liberation and late capitalism activates an uncomfortable proximity. The co-incidence of self-care discourse across domains of liberation and exploitation can make it troubling to parse the politics of the optimization fantasy that animated Kuromiya and Fuller’s thinking. It can make outliers like Kuromiya unassimilable, or subject to counter-factual romanticization — and neither is good. While the ensuing historical trajectory has polarized the frameworks for making sense of how something like self-care and something like computing might come into productive contact, circa 1980 these things had not quite been worked out sufficiently to be so divergent. Yet, even at the time of Kuromiya and Fuller’s meeting, one can already see how each had a slightly
different thought in the back of his mind.

Fuller’s conscription into the neoliberal techno-utopianism of Silicon Valley and the like makes his humanism most legible now as having laid the groundwork for the broader transformation of counter-culture into cyber-culture, as Fred Turner (2006) has argued. This historical trajectory makes it hard to make sense of Kuromiya and Fuller’s affinities. Part of our project is to consider the ways centering HIV/AIDS necessitates alternate genealogies of computing. A genealogy of computing, as opposed to a history of it, requires excavating the conditions of possibility for the corporate uptake of Fullerian synergetics, and in the process it therefore also brings to light alternate and counter-histories of what computing was and might have been. Thinking through the conjuncture that brought Kuromiya and Fuller into alignment begs the question of what might have been if, instead of counter-culture becoming cyber-culture, counter-culture became the occasion for a wellspring of care-based networks and thriving microcultures. The consolidation of heterogeneous visions of human thriving into capitalist monoculture happens at the level of discourse and historiography, as well as at the level of actual historical unfolding. While it may seem strange now to contemplate the connection between Fuller and Kuromiya, given the divergent trajectories in which their respective work has become consequential, that strangeness is an effect of the way history has separated them. We want to animate the moment when it could have made sense for them to be connected and attend to the historical conjuncture in which the relationship between disruptive innovation in the technological sector and the transformative effects of emergent cultural formations had yet to be consolidated.

While their respective interest in computers may have come to divergent ends, perhaps the most conspicuous connection between Kuromiya and Fuller is their shared interest in architecture. Kuromiya moved to Philadelphia to study architecture long before he met Fuller. When asked about his pursuit of this field of study in 1997, he reflected on his choice in Fullerian terms:

I was interested at that time, probably because I didn’t want to make a decision about a career, and this is the same reason Buckminster Fuller says a lot of people go into architecture. It’s an area for comprehensivists, people that are interested in the arts and technology and history and humanities. So I was interested in architecture, but my view of architecture had this kind of mystical cast. Almost Masonic. The idea that encoded into the architecture was more than just a place to dwell or a place to hold meetings. It was more the culture itself was encoded into the proportions and into the decor, the decorations. So I came to Philadelphia because in 1961 there was a movement happening that, at that time, they referred to as the biggest movement in architecture since the Chicago School in the 1890s.

While their shared commitment to “humanism” seems to dissolve into catachresis under scrutiny, it finds its material expression in their joint commitment to architecture as “more than just a place to dwell or a place to hold meetings.” As a way of approaching networked forms of social organization, architecture subordinates questions of representation while foregrounding questions of access. It is an applied science as much as an aesthetic and cultural endeavor and, as Kuromiya notes, it is the ideal field for the “comprehensivist,” for those who refuse to specialize their knowledge in favor of interdisciplinary thought and design. Architecture is preoccupied with the human form, its motion and size and repose and orientation, without having a representational relationship to human bodies. It is a way of materially intervening on the organization of the world. Architecture as a comprehensive domain for considering the world gives form to Kuromiya and Fuller’s politics, resolving the apparent binary between the aesthetic and the informatic in the applied science of design. In consultation with Kuromiya and Fuller’s theory of architecture, we are proposing a methodology that takes as premise the dynamic interaction between media and social movements, foregrounding the relays between print culture,
community meetings, and digital transmission over and above medium-specific or movement-specific histories. There are significant ways in which communications networks and communities co-constitute and mutually inform one another. As Holmes notes, for example, “physical publication [can be used] as a means to attenuate the isolation of illness” [8]. This is borne out explicitly by the Critical Path AIDS Project Newsletter, which recognized that illness can be isolating for many reasons, especially for those who are already isolated from community care and resources by incarceration. By disseminating information across multiple formats — a computer bulletin board, print newsletter, 24-hour telephone hotline, and ultimately a Web site and online database — the Critical Path AIDS Project generated relays across media formats to combat the uneven distribution of resources.

Centering incarcerated people in a history of computation and digital media should instruct us to consider how media has context-dependent affordances. E-mail is not necessarily faster than so-called “snail mail,” and the World Wide Web does not have a wider reach than a newsletter, if one does not have access to it. Digital only supersedes print for some, some of the time. The media systems that Critical Path activated to meet the needs of its community are queer forms that compel us to reorganize some of what we think media is and does. The Critical Path AIDS Project was a multimedia outfit from the start, not out of a verve for new technological innovations but rather born of a recognition that differentially empowered users have diverse needs for and limitations on technological access and literacy. The Critical Path AIDS Project is ongoing, and its trajectory over the years has increasingly been towards digital formats, but only as their strategies for community outreach have likewise shifted increasingly toward low-income digital literacy programs. One might think of print as having a limited audience or ephemeral nature by dint of its material form, but the Internet, as expansive as it is, remains useless for those who do not have access to it.

In an era in which many see the Internet as largely synonymous with commerce and anonymity, the history of Critical Path and its early and enthusiastic adoption of digital communications technology demonstrates the potential for utilizing mixed media to sustain intimate queer networks [9]. As this example suggests, the history of AIDS and the history of digital media cannot simply be conjoined in an additive model. What is the interpretive weight of the “and” that links them, and how else might they be conjoined? What does their relation do to each term? The relays between digital, print, and analog that Critical Path activated open an inquiry into what the history of computing was, is, and what it still may be — an inquiry perhaps never more pressing than now. As corporate response to the COVID-19 pandemic promotes the digital as panacea, a simultaneous activist response asks us to exploit the affordances of this digital frenzy with caution. Resisting the analogical thinking that would consign AIDS to the past, contemporary artist-activists have named the collective reflex to compare AIDS and COVID as dangerously ahistorical to the extent that it erases the specificity of the ongoing AIDS crisis (Figure 5).
While AIDS and COVID might be different, what they hold in common is the need for collective response that is live to structural inequalities that differentially compound the consequences of illness. One salient site for thinking how AIDS and COVID might inform one another is the way communities respond to them, and the forms of communication and collectivity we generate around them. For example, while it might not be useful to read Critical Path newsletters now for their health information, given the medical and scientific advances of the ensuing decades, Critical Path’s dual emphasis on the distribution of resources and the distribution of information remains instructive. The content may be less salient now than the form.

Thinking about how our responses to COVID are informed by the AIDS crisis, both ongoing and unresolved, can not only offer a provocative reframing of the history and historiography of AIDS, but also enable us to engage with its signal forms, making the information networks devised to organize around the AIDS crisis into an occasion for a telecommunications formalism. What does a historiographic AIDS formalism look like and why might one want such a thing? How might one take up the significance of AIDS formalism without evacuating its history and ignoring the specific form and content of its ongoingness? As Alex Juhasz notes her in introduction to the ’zine What does a COVID-19 doula do? (2020):
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Technologies change, but our needs to be heard and seen, to better our conditions, to demand dignity and justice in the face of ill-health and indifference, do not; these needs — and our responses to them — are what keep us human. We are lucky that in a time where intentional distancing may be a form of care that helps, we have technologies that can aid us in staying close. And, we are luckier still that we can learn from what our forebears did with the technologies, practices, and viruses of their time and place.

This insight has instructed us to engage the relationship between Kuromiya and Fuller in terms of the communicative forms that emerged from the synthesis of Fuller’s philosophy with Kuromiya’s activism. The fact that these forms remain salient despite the increasing obsolescence of their content has led us to consider the politics of their aesthetics, dissolving some of the polarity between the aesthetic and informatic.

Adjuvant: Curating crisis

AIDS is epidemiologically consequential, but this hardly covers its significance. Efforts to name the domain where we might register its cultural and political significance have tended to nominate either representation or information as the site to undertake this evaluation, and the corollary modes of engagement have been variously curatorial and media historical. Engaging AIDS in its continuity requires a historiographic method that does not imply that AIDS is over, but also accounts for the ways that, despite being ongoing, the crisis is meaningfully different in different moments. There have been a number of important critiques identifying how an overemphasis on AIDS activism of the 1980s (in, for example, art historical discourse and exhibition making) has falsely given the impression that AIDS is over while simultaneously diverting critical and activist resources away from the present. Artist Demian DineYazhi’s digital print Poz since 1492 (2016) speaks to the need for non-nostalgic but deeply historical perspectives on HIV/AIDS and its representation (Figure 6). The piece overlays bold, white text on a painting of the first Thanksgiving, manipulating both the image and canonizing efforts of America’s colonial history. The work’s alternate title, “The first infection,” renders the AIDS crisis in a long and ongoing history of settler colonialism, casting discourses of racialized criminality and disease in terms of White supremacy. Poz since 1492, rather than suggesting a new origin narrative for AIDS, sheds light on the violent ideology of origins, and invites us to see how over-emphasis on the 1980s forecloses intersectional analysis of the structural conditions that make an illness into a crisis.
Origin narratives have consequences. One of the most fundamental consequences of an origin narrative is that its beginning entails an ending to come. But history hardly obeys the mandates of narrative closure in the course of its unfolding. In our work with the archives of Kuromiya and Fuller, both origins and endings seem to dissolve into the multiple and competing narratives that organize them. As wary as we might be about turning our critical attention to the AIDS archives of the 1980s in light of the ongoing and contemporary AIDS crisis, periodizing the crisis is not tantamount to rendering it a relic. Periodizing may actually sharpen our sense of its continuity, and mitigate against the sense of an ending. We are put in mind of Theodore Kerr’s (2019) provocation, in his introduction to “What you don’t know about AIDS could fill a museum” ([https://www.on-curating.org/issue-42.html#X10-9C2z3_R](https://www.on-curating.org/issue-42.html#X10-9C2z3_R)): “I am invested in thinking about how liberating it may be for AIDS movements to consider how it is too late, too complicated — and stigmatizing even — to ‘end AIDS’” [10]. The long duree of AIDS makes it much less salient to think about nominating a “before” or “after,” and obviates the question of “ending” AIDS without forsaking the idea of better health, better treatment, better access, and whatever else a cure might mean without positing an end.

The continuity of the AIDS crisis requires an attention to the temporalities of historiography. Working with the Kuromiya and Fuller archives in particular demands this, and also presents some special concerns for thinking about history and crisis. The particular content of these archives is not only historical but also constitutively mired in irrelevancy and planned obsolescence — the outdated technologies, the superseded research, the up-to-the minute
information of days long gone communicated in ephemeral newsletters and defunct Web sites. The archive is overflowing with the seemingly unusable, compelling us to ask what usable pasts can be animated from the archive of the outmoded. What, then, are the stakes for excavating the strange collaboration between Kuromiya and Fuller, which has been remarked upon without being analyzed? It has proved difficult to make meaning of the fact of their relationship — and perhaps we cannot know what their relationship meant to either of them — but the fact of it need not refer us back to them, indexng instead the links between the movements and ideas in which each was involved as a result of, and also in excess of, their relationship with one another. Their relationship points to the connected histories of civil rights, New Left, techno-utopian, anti-war, drug decriminalization, and gay liberation movements — not to mention the history of the underground press, computing, telecommunications networks, immunological research, and much else besides. We undertake the work of archival recovery as a contribution to the activism, art, and scholarship committed to countering the white-washing of AIDS history. Doing so allows us to recognize Kuromiya’s vital role in AIDS activism, while also taking on his insight that oppression and liberation are not reducible to single issues or single vectors of identity — and that they are multimedia affairs.

Archives are polysemous, far from inert repositories one might consult for historical fact. Archives require interpretation and activation to be meaningful, and both of those processes of engagement entail political choices and consequences. Engaging the archives of AIDS, one is faced with the ambivalences of AIDS history, its continuity, its silences and institutional politics, as well as its utility and vitality. We have approached this complicated terrain by entering into it askance, centering an unlikely link between two people and their respective worlds which have seemed worlds apart. In this essay, we have attempted to animate this complex history dialogically by locating a pair of curious interlocutors in the archives; simultaneously, we are curating an exhibition in an effort to animate this history spatially by populating a gallery space with interlocutors actual and speculative, in real time, across time, and out of time. Adjuvant: AIDS architectures, opening at the Leslie Lohman Museum (https://www.leslielohman.org) in 2021, presents materials from the archives of Kuromiya and Fuller in conjunction with the work of two artist-activists, Chloe Dzubilo (https://www.poz.com/article/tim-murphy-23464-1787) and Bryn Kelly (https://www.lambdaliterary.org/2016/01/in-remembrance-bryn-kelly), who inherited the notion of building a “critical path.” Set against the backdrop of archival materials exploring utopian planning and early AIDS organizing, the exhibition interrogates the logic by which origins imply endings and diagnoses imply cures. In fact, both histories and diseases are multifactorial, demanding mixed methods and coalitional networks in order to expand the genealogies of AIDS and the imaginaries of cure.

Extending the concept-metaphor of the adjuvant, the exhibition elaborates a prehistory of digital queer care networks and proposes aesthetic interventions as inoculations against disenfranchisement. Chloe Faith Dzubilo (1960–2011) [11] and Bryn Kelly (1980–2016) [12] were two HIV+ transwomen who died of what artist Jessica Whitbread calls “suicide AIDS related death.” Dzubilo was the songwriter and singer for the punk rock band Transisters. Diagnosed with HIV in 1987, she did critical advocacy work with organizations like ACT UP and the Transsexual Menace, and as the director of a federally funded HIV prevention program for transgender sex workers. The administration of Dzubilo’s gender felt inextricable from her surveillance by the social security office and at the homeless shelter. Her drawings consider the intersectionality of diagnosis as a logic, elaborating transgender as a dizzying bureaucracy of sex alongside housing insecurity, policing, disability, illness, and the AIDS crisis. Appalachia born and Brooklyn based, Kelly was an author, activist, performer, and hair stylist whose storytelling about the welfare state, gentrification, and dating as an HIV+ transwoman took place on theatrical stages, in queer bars, and through song as part of the queer country music scene. Her pseudonymous online writing, first as Dear Hussy, and later with “Partybottom: the *sexy* HIV+ transgender blog” [13], functioned as a viral community resource. Her manifesto-like poem, “Tiger Blood Litany,” was written as a response to a question she received on Partybottom.tumblr.com, a solicitation for advice about depression and how to stay motivated to take HIV treatment medication (Figure 7).
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Figure 7: Bryn Kelly, “Tiger Blood Litany,” posted on Partybottom.tumblr.com on 17 November 2015.

Across two generations of downtown New York, Dzubilo and Kelly mobilized queer community through performance, storytelling, visual art, and direct action. Correspondence functions across their work as an organizing tool and an
intimate practice of self-care, expanding the purview of correspondence from archival documentation of queer networks and relationships to forms of community action and modes of disseminating information. Often indistinguishable from their community organizing, Dzubilo and Kelly’s work took the shape of diary entries, digital advice columns, correspondence, broadsides, and other forms of community outreach, reflecting their sensibility that world-making is a political and aesthetic undertaking. Together, their aesthetic and activist practices envision a cure for HIV/AIDS that is not only pharmacological but entails no less than a radical transformation of the social conditions that differentially expose people to risk, disease, precariousness, racism, transphobia, and housing insecurity. This intersectional thinking is founded in a recognition that living with AIDS requires infrastructures of support which are material, digital, technological, and affective, as well as medico-scientific.

Our exhibition, prompted by the concept-metaphor of the adjuvant to think about communication immunologically, opens onto a conceptual space in which “HIV/AIDS and digital media” hardly needs the “and” — they become coterminous in a way that draws out links between different kinds of thinkers, activists, artists, cultural producers, and community organizers in terms of the communication networks they build, activate, manipulate, and reconfigure. Such a strategy allows us, for example, to conceive of the genealogy that links Kelly’s “Partybottom” and Kuromiya’s Critical Path Newsletter, while at the same time recognizing the ways in which each project rescripts normative histories of media and computing that would chart a trajectory from the analog to the digital. In Kelly’s case, this takes the form of a campy online “Dear Abby” column rendered in newspaper styling, and in Kuromiya’s case, printing out the online news in paper copy for circulation to those without access, especially incarcerated people with HIV/AIDS, as Cait McKinney (2018) has described. Newsletters are all content, in some sense, but artist-activists like Kelly mobilize the form as a near abstraction, which does not for all that eliminate its capacity to communicate vital information. On the one hand, a genealogy that relates Kelly to Kuromiya is hardly counter-intuitive — both were queer AIDS activists who mobilized print culture as a crucial practice of their organizing. However, by focusing on the conjunction of HIV/AIDS and digital media we can see not only the clear links between their lived experiences and politics but also relate them across longer and multiple connected histories. Like all concept-metaphors, the meaning of adjuvant is ambivalent. As unsettling as that ambivalence may be, it constitutes an occasion for reckoning with the ambivalence of the archive, shaped by structural oppression and uneven resources, to which we nonetheless appeal as scholars, activists, and curators. In our research and curatorial practice we have made an effort to think with the difficulty of this figure. Its difficulty is in part the difficulty of writing minoritarian histories of major historical moments — but we also wager that staying with that difficulty might enable us to elaborate the digital infrastructures underwriting a blueprint for community building.

AIDS is both a media-information problem, and a crisis of representation. Our work thinks across these two domains by considering the information network as an artifact of aesthetic concern, and thinking representation in conjunction with media infrastructures. Another way to say this is that we employ a curatorial methodology to apprehend the material, historical, and aesthetic remit of the ongoing AIDS crisis. What does a curatorial disposition achieve or afford, especially when the artifacts in question are not, properly speaking, “art” at all? While our curatorial approach takes the relationship between AIDS and art seriously, we have chosen to organize and express this relationship at the level of method rather than as a representational problem so as not to shore up divisions between the aesthetic and the informative. Curation is a spatializing epistemology that makes historical time available for multiple forms of engagement and presentation. Giving an idea dimension allows you to play a little looser with duration, enabling promiscuous relations with normative historiography. AIDS art as a category is a brightly lit nodal point in the history of sexuality. Thinking formally and aesthetically about epistemologies of the body highlights counterintuitive genealogies. When focusing on discourse and ideology, one picture of the history of sexuality emerges; the errant, aesthetic formalisms that are the necessary consequences and byproducts of knowledge systems generate another. The material infrastructures that sustain historiography require that certain things be housed in certain places, installing artificial divisions that were not operative in real time.

What does curatorial method do that historical methods do not? Approaching these materials curatorially allows us to consider how the affective, aesthetic, and ephemeral impinge on the historical record without actually being captured by it. It lets us hold different kinds of historical artifacts and discourses in contact with one another without having to minimize or relativize the evidentiary status of any over the others. This issue’s focus on the digital media of HIV/AIDS invites such a speculative methodology, which makes visible the material imprint of the discourse networks of sexual science whose long history is the context and product of the AIDS crisis.

What happens when you make an idea dimensional? Curatorial method engages this inquiry, which is also, not incidentally, an organizing question of architecture itself. Thinking dimensionally, we have tried to elaborate the social circuitry of correspondence and architecture emerging out of the aesthetics and activisms of the AIDS crisis. This essay has turned to the archive to engage the past and its ongoing aesthetic, historical, and political consequences,
reverberations, and openings. But this is also a speculative, non-catalogue essay for an exhibition not yet in existence. As such, we hope it gives the queer history of communication a shape.

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Notes

1. See McKinney (2020) for a detailed account of this case and the role of both Kuromiya and Critical Path AIDS Project in its unfolding.


5. We express our gratitude to Kiyoshi Kuromiya’s friend Chris Bartlett for granting us an interview about Kuromiya’s life and work. Kuromiya recorded two oral histories, with Marc Stein (1997) and Tommi Mecca (1983), both of which touch upon his relationship with Fuller only in passing. Published accounts of Kuromiya’s life, both scholarly and popular, are invaluable resources, but also largely cursory in their recounting of his long list of activist projects and relationships. See Gossett (2014), Highleyman (2009), and Emmer (2012).


7. Martin Meeker’s (2006) work on precisely this question in terms of mid-twentieth century print culture and the emergence of queer communities through correspondence is instructive here.


9. For work in this vein, see Kara Keeling (2014), and Barnett, et al. (2016).


References


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