

VISUAL AIDS PRESENTS  
MYKKI BLANCO  
REINA GOSSETT  
KIA LABEIJIA  
BRONTEZ PURNELL



THOMAS ALLEN HARRIS  
TIONA NEKKIA MCCLODDEN  
CHERYL DUNYEE + ELLEN SPIRO  
AL'TERNA'TE E'ND IN'GS  
RADICAL BEG IN'GS  
DAY WITH (O U T) A R T  
D E C E M B E R 2 0 1 7

# ALTERNATE ENDINGS, RADICAL BEGINNINGS

For Day With(out) Art 2017, Visual AIDS presents *ALTERNATE ENDINGS, RADICAL BEGINNINGS*, featuring seven new and innovative short videos that prioritize Black narratives within the ongoing AIDS epidemic.

Featuring **Mykki Blanco, Cheryl Dunye & Ellen Spiro, Reina Gossett, Thomas Allen Harris, Kia LaBeija, Tiona Nekkia McClodden** and **Brontez Purnell**.

Curated by **Erin Christovale** and **Vivian Crockett** for Visual AIDS.

In 2016 African Americans represented 44% of all new HIV diagnoses in the United States. In spite of the impact of HIV/AIDS within Black communities, these stories and experiences are constantly excluded from larger artistic and historical narratives. Given this context, it is increasingly urgent to feature a myriad of stories that consider and represent the lives of those housed within this statistic. *ALTERNATE ENDINGS, RADICAL BEGINNINGS* seeks to highlight the voices of those that are marginalized within broader Black communities nationwide, including queer and trans people.

The commissioned projects include intimate meditations of young HIV positive protagonists; a consideration of community-based HIV/AIDS activism in the South; explorations of the legacies and contemporary resonances within AIDS archives; a poetic journey through New York exploring historical traces of queer and trans life, and more. Together, the videos provide a platform centering voices deeply impacted by the ongoing epidemic.

Visual AIDS presents *ALTERNATE ENDINGS, RADICAL BEGINNINGS* to mark the 28th anniversary of Day With(out) Art. On December 1, 1989, the first Day With(out) Art was created by Visual AIDS as a national day of action and mourning in response to the AIDS crisis.

View and share these videos online starting December 8:  
**[www.vimeo.com/visualAIDSnyc](http://www.vimeo.com/visualAIDSnyc)**

#AlternateEndingsRadicalBeginnings  
#VisualAIDS #DayWithoutArt2017

# Curatorial Statement

Erin Christovale and Vivian Crockett

**ALTERNATE ENDINGS, RADICAL BEGINNINGS as a title came from a conversation we had around the idea of radicality and its roots in a black art tradition.** The word 'radical' for us is tied to the Angela Davis quote: "Radical simply means 'grasping things at the root.'" The concept of roots speaks to enduring histories, in both negative and positive terms. Sometimes we use radical when we talk about things that are systemic, that we need to change or that are connected to histories of oppression. But radical also evokes a sense of resistance and forms of creation that have been around for a long time, and new possibilities that can sprout from the past and the present.

An ongoing project that Erin has been curating is *Black Radical Imagination*, a traveling film project that looks at experimental moving image by filmmakers and visual artists within the African diaspora. In Robin D.G. Kelley's book *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, he writes about black liberation movements around the world, particularly in America, and how these major movements wouldn't have been possible if someone didn't imagine a new future outside of an oppressive present. We've been thinking about what it means to practice radical imagination and what that does for those who are usually marginalized. That notion really speaks to all the filmmakers and visual artists that we commissioned for this program. The artists are radically thinking about the HIV/AIDS epidemic as Black people in this country, asserting themselves and their creative narratives amidst an ongoing discourse around who is invited into institutions.

Through her academic and museum work, Vivian thinks a lot about what gets historicized and what gets written into and out of artistic narratives. We were drawn to how powerful it could be to preserve a legacy that is usually fractured or not prioritized in a larger art historical canon. As an initial point, we were both coming off of working on a project together with Cheryl Dunye, celebrating the 20th anniversary of her groundbreaking film *The Watermelon Woman* (1996). A lot of our conversations around *The Watermelon Woman* were about the absences and the exclusions in archives and the (il)legibility of Black queerness in a historical sense. In trying to coordinate contemporary responses to the film 20 years later, it became about finding themes that resonate in a long-term capacity, intergenerationally, and the way history is transmitted by the relationships that we forward with people that have been in our communities.

In curating *ALTERNATE ENDINGS, RADICAL BEGINNINGS*, it was important for us to consider filmmakers and artists like Cheryl Dunye, Ellen Spiro and Thomas Allen Harris who were reflecting on the epidemic at the time when it came to the fore in the 1980s and 1990s. Thomas was actively producing work then about the HIV/AIDS epidemic for a television show called *The Eleventh Hour*. Cheryl was thinking about her personal narrative, as a Black queer woman, and how archives are honored and preserved. Ellen created a documentary called *DiAna's Hair Ego* (1991) about DiAna DiAna, a Black woman in the South who took it upon herself to teach safe sex in her salon at the onset of the epidemic. They were enmeshed in their

communities in ways that felt foundational for this program. From there, it became about projecting into the future and thinking about artists and filmmakers who are also considering these narratives.

What's striking is that many of the projects by the younger generation of filmmakers are grappling with archive and legacy. Tiona Nekkia McClodden's broader *The Brad Johnson Project* comes out of her trilogy that looks at three Black gay male figures: Essex Hemphill, Julius Eastman and Brad Johnson. Tiona is considering how her position as a queer, Black woman relates to these histories and is in dialogue with how these figures have been remembered or have failed to be remembered. Simultaneously, she is thinking critically about her own legacy, negotiating her own presence within the art world in how she structures her projects in reflective, deeply spiritual and highly personal ways. Reina Gossett is a long-term activist and archivist and the way that she approaches filmmaking is very much part of impulses as an archivist, activist and artist. In particular, she is activating personal history in dialogue with longer sociopolitical histories of a place like New York City and the histories of trans people of color through these spaces. Kia LaBeija is also thinking through the way that she is remembered and how her artistic practice is interfacing with broader artistic discourses while also often in dialogue with her mother's history in long-term political organizing and activism.

A point of intersection for Brontez Purnell and Mykki Blanco is that they are both grappling with their intimate relationships and what has come up for them in trying to love and fuck as young HIV+ people today. Brontez has taken on so many different points of creativity in a way that is very bold, not only as a filmmaker, but also as a writer and a musician coming from the DIY punk scene in the Bay Area. As a highly public music persona, Mykki has really used that platform to have conversations about living with HIV more frequently in the public eye, and Mykki's video utilizes endurance and performativity to highlight strength and resilience.

Centering the intersections of blackness, HIV/AIDS and cultural production opens up to a lot of plurality. There is something really powerful about taking up space in this explicit way and having that space to tell multiple stories at once. The myriad of ways in which the artists are creating their films is vastly different and not necessarily from the foundation of shared identity. It considers this idea of diaspora as always evolving. The films assert how expansive diaspora and queerness are.

Black folks are 44% of those newly diagnosed with HIV in this nation, yet there is little discourse and conversation around the urgency of this matter. We witnessed the critiques of whitewashing that were happening around the exhibition *Art AIDS America*. As curators of a program like this, it's absolutely our responsibility to intervene in that conversation, which remains very much dominated by white men. Our varied histories are not being sufficiently honored, historicized and remembered. In spite of these exclusions and the fact that this program somewhat responds to that reality, it is very much centered on telling our stories without needing affirmation from mainstream, normative systems and structures. We are asserting that these artists have been doing this work and that these histories have existed, whether or not they are recognized. *ALTERNATE ENDINGS, RADICAL BEGINNINGS* is a reclamation and affirmation of what has always been here.



## Thomas Allen Harris

*About Face: The Evolution of a Black Producer*

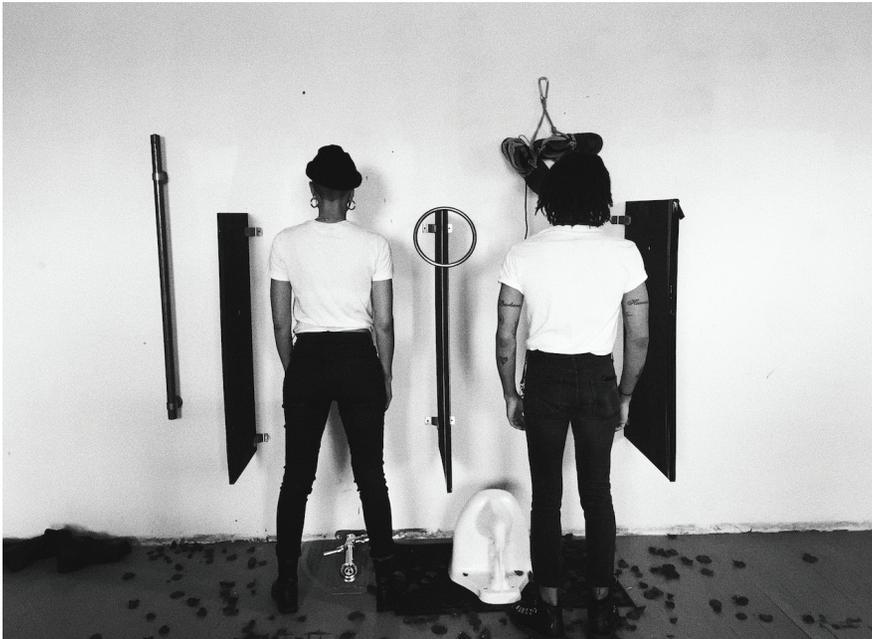
As the AIDS epidemic in New York escalated during the '80s, a young, out, Black producer was fighting to get information about the crisis on screen. Thomas Allen Harris, raised by activists in the Bronx and East Africa, produced a series of public television programs focused on HIV/AIDS, bringing folks who were previously ignored by mainstream media to the core of public discussion. Despite the program's success in breaking open the narrative of the crisis, the pushback Harris received from the channel's executives and constraints of corporate media ultimately led the artist to suspend work in public television. 28 years later, Harris draws from these resurfaced tapes and an essay he'd written at the time: "About Face: The Evolution of a Black Producer."



## Mykki Blanco

*STONES & WATER WEIGHT*

*STONES & WATER WEIGHT* responds to the need for new interpretations of HIV+ people. Mykki Blanco is portrayed in tasks that test the limits of the body and physical stress and the boundaries of normative health. *STONES & WATER WEIGHT* is an exercise in how societies perceive the fragilities of those who survive with the virus. In this era of globalized fitness culture through the use of social media, "looking healthy" matters much more than actually being healthy. Using endurance as the motivation for the performance, the video creates a new perception of HIV+ people as strong and resilient. Research references include the Atlas myth, the god of endurance that holds the earth and the skies over his shoulders, as well as the never ending climb of the Sisyphus myth.



## Tiona Nekkia McClodden

### *The Labyrinth, 1.0*

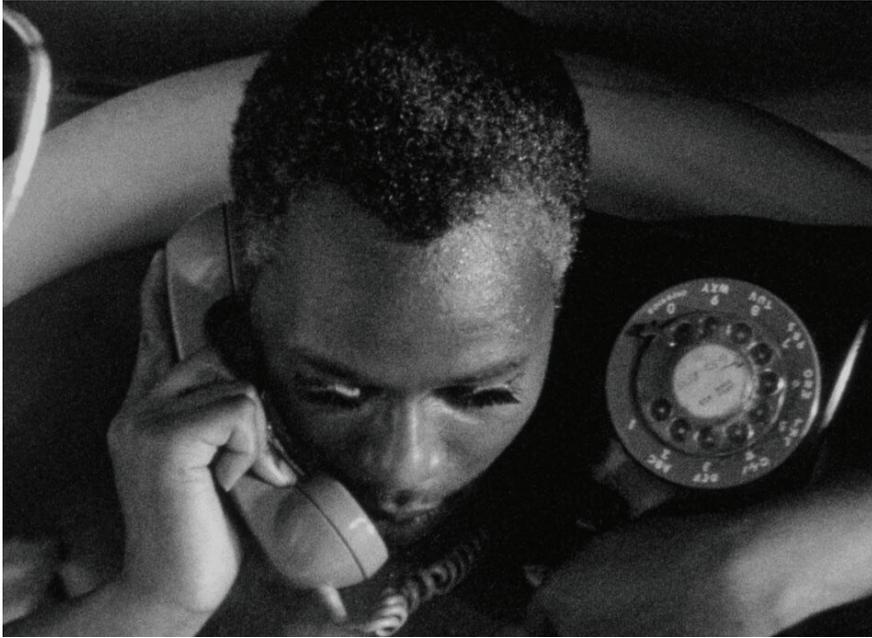
*The Labyrinth 1.0* is a poetic film essay that cites writer and poet Brad Johnson's poem "The Labyrinth," published in 1995 in the anthology *Milking Black Bull*. Sourcing 16mm surveillance footage, 16mm 1970s tearoom porn, and structuralist film footage shot in North Philadelphia, the work visually explores the concept of the labyrinth space as a site for cruising and gestural based desire.



## Kia LaBeija

### *Goodnight, Kia*

Over the duration of the ongoing AIDS epidemic, an estimated 17 million children have lost one or both parents to an AIDS-related illness. Many of these children living with the virus themselves have ended up displaced or forced out of their homes. In *Goodnight, Kia*, Kia LaBeija processes a reoccurring dream of the home she shared with her mother Kwan Bennett. Bennett died of an AIDS-related illness in October of 2004, resulting in an unanticipated move that reshaped the course of her teenage daughter's life.



## Brontez Purnell

*100 Boyfriends Mixtape (The Demo)*

Set in an urban fairytale, DeShawn (an unlikely anti-hero) is smack dabbing in the middle of a peculiar crossroads. He is haunted by the ghosts of 100 men (ex-“boyfriends” for one and also the ghosts of everyone they dated too.) His days are filled with spiraling epiphanies and lucid reckless Bohemianism fueled by systemic poverty and HIV ennui. In this particular sketch he is relating his philosophy of the world to an unknown caller on his land line telephone whilst magically shrink fitting his new Levi’s jeans that he recently shoplifted from Macy’s...



## Cheryl Dunye & Ellen Spiro

*DiAna’s Hair Ego REMIX*

30 years after Ellen Spiro made *DiAna’s Hair Ego: AIDS Info Up Front*, the AIDS crisis is still raging in the deep South where the film was shot. Director Cheryl Dunye, after reading about the ongoing AIDS crisis in the South, visits DiAna DiAna and Dr. Bambi Gaddist in the hair salon in Columbia, South Carolina where they first began their innovative safe sex education work. *DiAna’s Hair Ego REMIX* is the beginning of a new story and new hope in the face of an ongoing tragedy.



## Reina Gossett

### *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones*

*Atlantic is a Sea of Bones* is a short film drawing from the Lucille Clifton poem of the same name that follows Egypt LaBejia, an NYC-based performer through the 80s, 90s, and 2000's in NYC. The haunting and otherworldly film set to an original score features small every day acts of refusal, resistance, and existence—such as performance and self expression—that have a tremendous impact on the world. The film reveals how the historical and systemic violence, like the killing and policing of Black queer and trans life, continue to haunt our contemporary landscapes and is inextricably linked to the ongoing AIDS epidemic and the black queer/trans spaces shaped so intimately by HIV/AIDS, including the spaces where we come together and make life together: public spaces and nightlife spaces.

## Further Context

The Center for Disease Control's initial report on the HIV/AIDS epidemic on June 5, 1981 stated that "five young men, all active homosexuals" in Los Angeles had contracted a rare form of pneumonia that would later be linked to immunodeficiency caused by HIV. The report did not mention the race of these men, who were all white, and neglected to mention two additional documented cases—one gay African-American man and one heterosexual man from Haiti living in Los Angeles. "The story of AIDS currently begins with white suffering... and this has largely informed our ethics and actions ever since," writes Ted Kerr.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the omission of race continues to characterize discussions of HIV/AIDS today, despite the fact that nearly half of the 1.2 million people living with HIV in the United States are Black.<sup>2</sup> While antiretroviral treatment has rendered HIV a "manageable disease" for some, access to these medications remains mediated along lines of race, class, and geography. The disparities are stark: the CDC predicts that one in two Black gay and bisexual men will seroconvert in their lifetime, compared to one in 11 for their white counterparts. In cities like Jackson, Mississippi, 40% of gay and bisexual men are living with HIV, with an HIV-related death rate seven times higher than the country as a whole. These discrepancies aren't just about gay men, either—the number of new diagnoses among Black women is 16 times higher than those of white women.<sup>3</sup> Trans women are the fastest-growing population of HIV-positive people in the United States, but only 11% of HIV-positive trans women are white.<sup>4</sup>

In her recent account of the dire state of HIV services in the South, "America's Hidden HIV Epidemic," Linda Villarosa explains how these statistics speak to a myriad of barriers around healthcare that disproportionately affect people of color and those in the South. Many southern states refused the Medicaid expansion that accompanied the Affordable Care Act in 2010, making healthcare unaffordable to populations that are already facing structural barriers around lack of employment, education, and transportation.

Even though funding for the United States government's global HIV initiative (PEPFAR) continues to receive billions of dollars of bipartisan funding, there is little federal strategy or funding for addressing the domestic epidemic. In fact, the website for the Office of National AIDS Policy has remained disabled since President Trump's inauguration. The President has proposed slashing \$186 million from the CDC's funding for HIV/AIDS prevention, testing and support services while attempting to dismantle the Affordable Care Act.

Given this context, it is increasingly urgent to represent the complex relationships between race, class, geography and healthcare that characterize the contemporary HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States.

1. Kerr, Theodore (ed). "AIDS 1969: HIV, History, and Race." *Drain Magazine*, [drainmag.com/aids-1969-hiv-history-and-race/](https://drainmag.com/aids-1969-hiv-history-and-race/).
2. "HIV in the United States: At A Glance," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/statistics/overview/ataglance.html>.
3. Statistics drawn from: Villarosa, Linda. "America's Hidden H.I.V. Epidemic." *The New York Times Magazine*, 6 June 2017, [www.nytimes.com/2017/06/06/magazine/americas-hidden-hiv-epidemic.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/06/magazine/americas-hidden-hiv-epidemic.html).
4. "HIV among Transgender People," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/group/gender/transgender/index.html>.

# **ALTERNATE ENDINGS, RADICAL BEGINNINGS**

*Day With(out) Art 2017*

Curated by Erin Christovale and Vivian Crockett for Visual AIDS

Visual AIDS thanks all of the participating artists:

Mykki Blanco  
Cheryl Dunye & Ellen Spiro  
Reina Gossett  
Thomas Allen Harris  
Kia LaBeija  
Tiona Nekkia McClodden  
Brontez Purnell

All artwork © the artists.

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Programs Director: Alex Fialho  
Day With(out) Art Project Manager: Kyle Croft  
Video Editing: Kaz Senju



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# Day With(out) Art

In 1989, to make the public aware that AIDS can touch everyone, and to inspire positive action, Visual AIDS presented the first Day Without Art — organizing museums and art institutions nationwide to cover up their artwork, darken their galleries, and even close for the day — to symbolically represent the chilling possibility of a future without art or artists. Since then, Day With(out) Art has grown into a collaborative project in which organizations worldwide present exhibitions, screenings and public programs to highlight work by HIV+ artists and artwork addressing current issues around the ongoing AIDS pandemic.

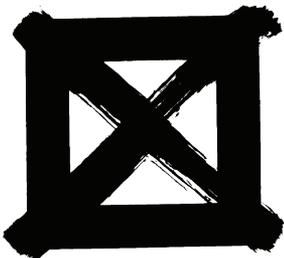
## Visual AIDS

Founded in 1988, Visual AIDS is the only contemporary arts organization fully committed to HIV prevention and AIDS awareness through producing and presenting visual art projects, while assisting artists living with HIV/AIDS, and preserving the work of artists with HIV/AIDS and the artistic contributions of the AIDS movement.

#AlternateEndingsRadicalBeginnings  
#VisualAIDS #DayWithoutArt2017

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