

RENNY PRITIKIN STATEMENT ABOUT AIDS

I was asked this morning to correct, via this short statement, the accidental oversight which left the AIDS epidemic off our agenda.

Our generation is being marked by this epidemic as our parents' was by the great Depression. Living in San Francisco one learns very quickly that it is incorrect to become hysterical on the one hand, nor sentimental on the other, when loved ones and friends become sick with AIDS. The reason why is that these reactions are not productive. There is a great deal of work to do, and such indulgences just get in the way. Direct action as shown by ACT UP has been exemplary. The community-building activities now taking place among concerned people, health care workers and many others could have significant impact in the long term for our society, as well as ease the short-term crisis.

New Langton Arts, as one very small example, has made itself available as a forum for issues of art and AIDS this summer. In an exhibition titled *Monument and Memorial*, we considered models for such a function in the current situation, a unique concern. Much more has been accomplished, of course, on a grander scale, in New York City and elsewhere, to raise funds supply services, and educate the public.

On the way to Orcas I learned that a friend has lost the sight in one eye. For John, for all the artists and others we've lost, for all of us who will get sick, and those of us who will not, but will some day soon face our last days with or without the support of a compassionate and loving society, I ask for a moment of silence.

DAVID MENDOZA

We began this conference with the notion of *gifts* eloquently presented by Lewis Hyde.

Somewhere in the crisis and tragedy that is AIDS we must try to find some gift from all the pain and sadness. This is difficult. Yet I am becoming aware of some *gifts*, like tiny candles, that brighten the dark and profound loss.

One is a nobler sense of love and compassion. Another is an elevated level of thought and discussion.

These gifts have become manifest in our behavior and now are becoming evident in our art. While we are still reeling from the shocking reality of AIDS and the pall it has cast over our daily lives, now, slowly its stories and its lessons are infusing art. This haunted muse will eventually inspire a body of works — choreography, poetry, fiction, paintings, plays, performances, music, films — that are both scarred and sanctified by these times. Artists will utilize whatever their media to cry or sing out, remember and record, and perhaps maybe even — hopefully — manage a wistful smile.

AIDS is very close — too close — to all of us here tonight. We have too many friends, lovers, and colleagues who have died or are battling illness right now. In order for us to survive so that we will be there when needed we must learn to speak out to each other about our own pain and sadness. We must not try to be both valiant *and* silent, denying that we, though alive and well, suffer as loved ones and care givers, our names written in one more memorial service guest book.

Finally, we must remember that before our friends, lovers and colleagues became PWA's (people with AIDS/ARC) or in death, a statistic — some were artists, those in whose name we have gathered on this island in the Pacific Northwest. For them I would like to close by reading two excerpts from a piece written by Michael Feingold for the *Village Voice*. This piece was written after he attended yet another memorial for an artist/friend whose life and career ended too soon. His piece is called *Death, or the Theater* and I recommend it to you.

In our looking-glass country, where words are used so regularly to say the opposite of what they mean, the alert sensibilities of artists are urgently needed, like laser beams, to slice through the euphemistic dreck. This is probably one of the chief reasons why artists, like the plague that's killing so many of them, have an ambiguous position in our society. Heroic figures when they're marketed ingeniously enough, if they don't become millionaire superstars they half-vanish, moving in and out of our TV-conditioned consciousness like shadow figures on a set with bad reception. The cruel old joke about people with AIDS trying to convince their parents they're Haitian — how long ago that seems — doesn't apply. For most Americans, artists are the equivalent of Haitians, people living in America but not wholly of it, speaking their own distinctive patois, practicing some incomprehensible magic that fascinates and threatens at the same time...

If American theaters existed as something other than dubious commercial ventures, or shaky semisubsidized operations always staving off their impending collapse by making nice — if they were permanent institutions with a company and a repertoire, a credo and a vision and a set of standards to uphold — if they occupied a recognized place in the community, and offered artists a standard of living that could curb the endless temptation to give up and sell out — if all this were true, the loss of artists I mourn wouldn't have this indefinable larger loss hanging over it. The tragedy of their early deaths would at least be offset a little if their own country had been wise enough to offer them a decent place to live and create while they were here.